



The Natural Capital Initiative

Policy briefing note

Enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment

Summary: Project experience across the UK provides an opportunity to learn how citizens and communities can bring together different forms of knowledge relating to landscape and nature. Long-term dialogue processes, designed with fairness and legitimacy in mind, have the potential to put people at the centre of decisions about land use and the natural environment. The current scientific interest in ecosystem services (benefits derived from the environment) provides a useful basis for enabling greater and more effective deliberation among citizens about the environment. While many of the actions are best addressed in partnership, there are some specific considerations for central and devolved government. This note summarises findings from a workshop hosted on 16th February 2011 by the [Natural Capital Initiative](#) and [Sciencewise-ERC](#), which brought together 35 people with experience of initiating, running and evaluating public dialogue on land use and the natural environment.

What are citizen choices about land use and the natural environment?

They are situations in which people have the opportunity to consider the benefits they and others receive from land and nature, building their capacity to be at the centre of decision making processes.

Why might this topic matter to policy makers?

The condition of the UK's natural environment and the ways in which it supports well-being are the focus for a large community of natural and social scientists¹. Alongside this research effort, citizens and communities may be considered as experts in nature and landscape that matters to them. Some, such as farmers and fishermen, have long recognised that their lifestyles and

livelihoods could not exist without nature or land and sea. They are knowledgeable about their environment. In contrast, many citizens don't express how they value nature and landscape until unwanted change occurs, such as an unpopular proposal for a new development or the adverse consequences of an extreme weather event.

Technical knowledge and expertise about the natural environment is often developed and applied without reference to local citizens and communities. Surveys conducted by researchers of public preferences and values do not empower people and communities to deliberate, express choices, make decisions and learn. Opportunities for participation and deliberation relating to land use and the natural environment are often not used. This can have negative outcomes for people and the environment, particularly in terms of enabling citizens and communities to make informed choices in line with the principles of sustainable development.

¹ Much of the expertise and knowledge base resulting from this work is reflected in the [UK National Ecosystem Assessment](#).

Enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment

Box 1 lists a selection of policy documents that give a central role to citizens and communities in developing choices and decisions about land use and the natural environment. In addition to facilitating the decision-making process, public dialogue processes are frequently seen to:

- lead to the development of new knowledge and foresight among communities;
- result in societal responses to the opportunities and challenges that a changing natural environment presents;
- avoid detrimental conflict and result in decisions that may be more acceptable to the majority of the community;
- build capacity amongst citizens for involvement in decision-making processes in the future;
- build social capital and become part of wider societal initiatives.

Box 1 – Policy documents that provide a basis for enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment.

- The Localism Bill (before the Westminster Parliament, 2011) proposes devolution of greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods in England and Wales, giving local communities more control over housing and planning decisions.
- The Aarhus Convention (1998) includes provisions on access to environmental information and public participation in decision making. Article 7 requires “...provisions for the public to participate during the preparation of plans and programmes relating to the environment...”
- The Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) puts forward the ‘ecosystem approach’ as a basis for decision making. Among the 12 principles specified for the ecosystem approach is that: “*the objectives of management of land, water and living resources are a matter of societal choices*”.

The current interest among policy makers and researchers in ecosystem services (benefits people receive from the natural environment), is prompting public dialogue about land use and the natural environment. Ecosystem services are a focal topic for many natural and social scientists. Given that ecosystem services are fundamental to society, the economy and human well being, the impetus for enabling effective public dialogue on these issues is particularly high.

What experience is available from the UK in enabling citizen choices?

Over recent years, a number of projects and initiatives have set out to find ways of enabling effective public dialogue about land use and the natural environment. These provide an opportunity to inform government considerations about how to enable citizen choices in the future. Some projects have published the lessons learned in the research literature (for example, Reed *et al.*, 2008²). In 2010, Sciencewise-ERC commissioned a number of [public dialogue projects](#). Defra has commissioned a [review](#) of participation and an ecosystems approach to decision making.



Public dialogue about ecosystem service provision in North Wales. Photo credit: Resources for Change.

² Reed, M.S. (2008) Stakeholder participation for environmental management: a literature review. *Biological Conservation* **141**: 2417-2431.



Deliberation on land use and climate change in The Machars, Scotland. Photo credit: Scottish Natural Heritage.

In February 2011, with support from Sciencewise-ERC, the Natural Capital Initiative convened 35 people with experience of initiating, running and evaluating public dialogue on land use and the natural environment. It aimed to:

1. Bring together learning from relevant project experience.
2. Identify remaining challenges and opportunities.

3. Determine the next steps for enabling citizens and communities to make choices.

The meeting is described in **Box 2**.

Challenges and opportunities

Tables 1 and 2 summarise challenges and opportunities identified during the discussions on 16th February. A public dialogue challenge of particular importance is how to allow the time for relationships of trust to be built up, for beneficial outcomes to be recognised and for participation to grow to include all the right people.

Furthermore, it is also important to engage people in a wide variety of social contexts, using different communication tools.

Most of the challenges and opportunities in **Tables 1 and 2** require joint working by those with a role in creating the conditions for more extensive, and more effective, public dialogue about land use and the natural environment. They are not for any one sector (including government) to address alone.

Box 2 – Overview of the NCI Open Forum ‘Enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment’, London, 16th February 2011.

The Natural Capital Initiative contacted organisations in the public and third sector, together with academics and consultants to identify projects that would provide relevant learning opportunities.

After short ‘framing the debate’ presentations from Diana Pound (Dialogue Matters) and Rob Fish (University of Exeter), participants heard key learning points from a selection of eight projects that had involved public dialogue about land use and the natural environment. The meeting then entered ‘Open Space’, where the participants identified specific topics needing to be addressed and held discussions to derive action points. Topics discussed were:

- Citizen choice and engagement at the strategic level.
- Ensuring engagement is mutually beneficial.
- How to start to apply the ‘ecosystem services approach’ to real decision making.
- Making ecosystem service valuations explicit.
- How to engage people in complexity.
- Fairness and legitimacy.
- Accessing ‘hard to reach groups’.
- What happens if people don’t care?
- How to continue after the consultation: legacy.
- What is the role of experts?

Further information is available on the [NCI website](#).

Table 1 – Challenges for enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment.

| | |
|--|--|
| Meeting the time demands of meaningful and effective public dialogue. | <i>Complexity is a fundamental aspect of public dialogue about ecosystem services, the natural environment and land use. Time is needed to ensure that dialogue is beneficial to all involved. Public dialogue is based on trust and progressive involvement.</i> |
| Ensuring that the right people are involved, so that public dialogue is representative. | <i>With regard to the natural environment, there are many different types of knowledge that need to be brought together. Certain social and demographic groups are hard to reach.</i> |
| Enabling dialogue about strategic issues , not just local and short term issues. | <i>People find it harder to engage with environmental issues that are less tangible, even though the cumulative effect of what happens at a local level might be significant at a larger scale. Ecosystem services provided in one location may benefit people living significant distances away.</i> |
| Communicating beneficial outcomes from participation in public dialogue. | <i>Given that public dialogue is based on trust, citizens need to see the benefits of being involved. These benefits relate to the communication of findings, but also change on the ground.</i> |
| People are sometimes unable to rationalise their ideas or preferences. | <i>Wisdom and instinct are part of many people’s expertise and preferences about the natural environment. Different types of knowledge vary in their suitability for deconstruction.</i> |

Table 2 – Opportunities for enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment.

| | |
|---|--|
| Use novel communication tools to initiate public dialogue. | <i>This includes the use of social media (web-based and mobile technologies that permit interaction), particularly to engage younger generations.</i> |
| Initiate public dialogue in social contexts that do not necessarily relate to the natural environment. | <i>Examples include youth groups, and special interest groups relating to the arts or leisure. It is not necessary to create new social groupings for effective public dialogue about land use and the natural environment.</i> |
| Make full use of existing social capital when developing dialogue processes. | <i>Third sector organisations and local authority officers are gateways to identifying established networks of where trust has been built between people.</i> |
| Use topical environment-related issues to form the basis for public dialogue, broader, long-term and strategic issues. | <i>Examples include flood alleviation, green space planning, and forest planning. Landscape issues are a useful basis for discussion about ecosystem services.</i> |
| Disagreements represent opportunities for more effective public dialogue. | <i>If managed well, dialogue that starts on the basis of polarised views can evolve into effective deliberation of issues, recognising complexity and root causes.</i> |

Enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment

Some specific considerations for policy makers in central and devolved government in the UK are listed in **Table 3**. These relate to roles in integrating dialogue at multiple scales, as well as

enabling the development and sharing of knowledge that will lead to more effective dialogue processes.

Table 3 – Suggested considerations for policy makers in central and devolved government in enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment.

| | |
|---|---|
| Integration of public dialogue associated with different geographical scales. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Much public dialogue may relate to relatively short-term, place-based issues. Linking this to deliberation of wider strategic issues is essential.• Exchange of people between the public and community sectors would help to address this.• Citizens may need to be better informed about opportunities to be involved in deliberation about national and strategic issues. |
| Funding of public dialogue projects. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure that funding is of a duration that allows for the build-up of long-term relationships of trust.• It is important for public dialogue to go beyond ready-made ‘communities of interest’ by seeking to involve those who may not initially be interested in dialogue relating to the natural environment.• Build the capacity of communities to sustain dialogue themselves, with the goal that public bodies become partners and not long-term leaders. |
| Support for further research and learning on the topic. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is scope for experimentation with the use of social media to engage with people on environment-related topics.• There is a need to determine whether opportunities for participation and deliberation about land use and the natural environment lead to ‘better’ decisions (in line with an ecosystem approach and sustainable development).• There is a need for a hub for sharing best practice in public dialogue related to land use and the natural environment |

Conclusions

Project experience in the UK provides a learning opportunity for enabling citizen choices about land use and the natural environment. It raises challenges and opportunities that are best resolved by partnership and knowledge exchange. Some conclusions are:

1. Dialogue relating to local issues can be used to form the basis for deliberation of more strategic issues.
2. The time needed for building effective public dialogue processes presents challenges for funding, co-ordination and facilitation.
3. There is a need to demonstrate how greater public dialogue can lead to ‘better’ outcomes (in line with an ecosystem approach and sustainable development).

4. Citizens and communities should be given opportunities to deliberate technical knowledge gained by scientific process alongside preferences, values and wisdom.

The [Natural Capital Initiative](#) (NCI) aims to support the development of UK science, policy and practice aligned with the ecosystem approach; a way of looking at whole ecosystems in decision making and for valuing the goods and services they provide.

NCI is a partnership between the British Ecological Society, the NERC Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and the Society of Biology.

Financial support for the preparation of this policy brief and the Citizen Choices Open Forum on 16th February was provided by [Sciencewise ERC](#).