

The GM Public Debate: Lessons learned from the process

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THE GM PUBLIC DEBATE: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PROCESS

1. In May 2002 the Government accepted a recommendation by the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBEC) to hold a public debate on GM. The debate was jointly sponsored and co-funded by Defra and the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with additional funding from DTI. An independent Steering Board was set up to carry out the further work that was then needed to design and deliver the debate programme. The main debate activities were finally held during June and July 2003, and the Steering Board submitted its report to Government in September. The debate was one strand of a wider 'GM Dialogue', which also included a science review and a study of the costs and benefits of GM crops.
2. Feedback from those who took part suggests that the debate was welcomed and valued by the public. Over a thousand people attended the six regional launch meetings and it has been estimated that a further 675 local meetings were organised across the UK. The 'GM Nation?' website received 2.9 million hits or nearly 25,000 unique visitors. Over 35,000 feedback forms and 1,200 letters or emails were received by the Steering Board. The *Understanding Risk* team¹ which conducted an independent evaluation found that the debate generated 'unprecedented levels of interest, participation and considered discussion about complex matters of science and policy amongst a relatively large number of the general public.'
3. The GM public debate also needs to be seen in the context of wider efforts by Government to engage the public in the issues raised by scientific and technological development. The debate engaged far more people and generated greater public awareness than traditional forms of public consultation, and it has contributed to our understanding of the complex range of issues and concerns which have shaped public opinion on GM.
4. The Government intends to publish a written response to the report of the debate, explaining how it has influenced Government policy. But it is also important to consider what lessons can be learned from the debate process, to help inform future public engagement activities.
5. The debate was also a learning experience for all involved – Government, the independent Steering Board, and COI. This 'lessons learned' note has been prepared by Defra, taking into account the views of the Steering Board², COI, and the Devolved Administrations. We have considered the conclusions and

¹ Understanding Risk is an academic research programme supported by the Leverhulme Trust, conducting research on the social dynamics of contemporary risk issues with relevance to NGOs, government and business.

² As set out in their reflections on 'lessons learned' agreed at the final Steering Board meeting in October 2003

recommendations of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, who conducted a brief inquiry into the conduct of the debate. We have also consulted the *Understanding Risk* team, who have published their own independent evaluation report.

Purpose and scope

6. One of the criticisms of the GM public debate has been that it was not entirely clear what its purpose was, despite reassurances from Ministers that it would help to inform Government policy on GM issues, including on the possible commercialisation of GM crops. The Secretary of State gave a commitment to make a written response to the report of the debate in order to demonstrate that it would be taken seriously by Government. A key lesson for the future is that it is important to set out as clearly as possible at the outset the relationship between any public engagement exercise and the policy-making process.

Funding

7. Government provided a substantial amount of money for the debate. The initial budget of £250,000 was later increased to £500,000, and the final budget was around £650,000 taking into account additional support costs. Our view remains that this was more than sufficient to run a credible and effective public debate.
8. With hindsight it is clear that the initial budget of £250,000 was insufficient for the level of public engagement that both Government and the Steering Board were hoping to achieve. The formal advice from the AEBC outlined a structure and programme for the public debate, and the initial budget was based on an estimate by COI of the funds needed to implement this programme. Once the Steering Board had agreed their detailed aims and objectives, COI submitted revised budget estimates based on costed options for a programme of debate activities. When a strong case was made that it was inadequate the funding was doubled. We do not in fact accept that the final budget was insufficient.
9. The Steering Board succeeded in using the available funding to leverage considerable publicity and large numbers of local meetings. With more time and effective planning it would almost certainly have been possible to generate even more media coverage and local activity, without the need for additional core funding. The Steering Board has also acknowledged that some of the budget could have been used more wisely. For example, too much money was spent on the information 'toolkit' provided to participants, particularly on a CD-ROM which was hardly used, and not enough on supporting public meetings.

10. The appropriate level of funding which might be required for similar public engagement activities in future will need to be decided on a case-by-case basis.

Timetable

11. The debate was first announced on 31 May 2002, following which work took place to develop the detailed terms of reference, leading to a further announcement on 26 July. Discussions also took place with the Devolved Administrations regarding their involvement, and the Steering Board met for the first time on 13 September 2002. The original timetable envisaged that the Steering Board would submit its report to Government in June 2003, but this deadline was subsequently extended to September at the Steering Board's request.

12. The preparatory phase in particular took longer than anyone had anticipated. This was partly due to the Steering Board's decision to commission a series of Foundation Workshops to allow the public to frame the issues, and partly due to delays in agreeing the content of the information toolkit. Further delays arose from the need to secure additional funding once the process was already under way, and difficulties with regard to the timing of elections to the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales.

13. All of these factors contributed to the main public phase of the debate being compressed into a six-week period during June and July 2003. While this was shorter than had originally been envisaged, it was still long enough to enable thousands of people to participate. A period of two to three months would probably have been ideal, bearing in mind that it might be difficult to sustain public interest over a longer period.

14. The Steering Board concluded that the whole process probably needed 18 months – and that the debate would have benefited hugely from an additional 6 months prior to that to clarify objectives and tender for a managing agent. It would be preferable to allow a longer planning period for similar public engagement activities in future, subject to any external time constraints. It is important to ensure that clear objectives and adequate funding are in place at the outset, in order to avoid delays at a later stage. On sensitive and difficult policy issues it is also important to allow plenty of time to resolve disagreements, in order to keep all stakeholders on board.

Detailed design

Independent steering board

15. Government took a risk by accepting the AEBC's advice that an independent steering board should be appointed to run the debate. Defra's Director of Communications was appointed as a member of the Steering Board to ensure that public money was being spent properly,

but the Steering Board was responsible for all operational decisions regarding the public debate.

16. There are clearly advantages and disadvantages in appointing an independent steering board. The fact that the debate was conducted at arm's length from Government helped to make it more credible in the eyes of the public and stakeholders. The Steering Board was composed of members whose views reflected the full spectrum of opinion on GM issues. Although this meant that at times it was difficult for the Steering Board to reach agreement, it was also necessary in order to secure stakeholder support throughout the process. Nevertheless the relationship between Government and an independent steering board can be frustrating for both parties.
17. On balance we believe that appointing an independent steering board for the GM public debate was the right decision. Whether or not a similar arrangement would be appropriate in future will depend on the nature and content of the public engagement activity. In any event it is important to ensure that the members of any steering board have the right mix of skills, or that the steering board is able to draw on appropriate expertise as necessary.

Appointing a managing agent

18. The Steering Board appointed COI as their prime contractor to design and deliver the debate programme, through their existing contract with Defra and in compliance with public procurement rules. This meant that it was possible for COI to start work quickly, which was necessary in view of the debate timetable. COI also had access to rosters of companies with expertise in public engagement activities. For similar public engagement activities in future it would generally be preferable to invite tenders from prospective contractors, where time permits.
19. Throughout the debate there were tensions between the Steering Board and COI. This may in part have been due to the innovative nature of the process, and the fact that both parties were learning as they went along. It was also due to the fact that mutual expectations were not clear. There was an element of 'chicken and egg', in that COI were looking to the Steering Board for direction, while the Steering Board were looking to COI to generate ideas and to provide professional advice and support. These problems inevitably led to further delays in deciding the elements of the debate programme.
20. COI have also recognised that there were management shortcomings on their side and that they did not spend enough time managing their relationship with the Steering Board. One clear lesson is that there is a need for a single, dedicated project manager to coordinate the debate programme and provide a consistent point of reference for the Steering Board.

Issues framed by the public

21. The Steering Board commissioned a series of foundation discussion workshops, which were intended to allow members of the public the opportunity to frame the issues for the debate. These workshops were an important component of the debate and the results were used both in developing the stimulus content material and to inform the science review and the Strategy Unit study.

Providing the public with information

22. One of the aims of the debate was to provide the public with the information they needed to enable them to make up their own minds about GM issues. Everybody attending the open public meetings was offered an information toolkit including a CD-ROM, video, and booklet. The information in the toolkit was based on agreed 'stimulus content' material. It proved very difficult for the Steering Board to agree how this content material should be presented. In the end the decision was taken to use information without attributing it to its source. It is generally accepted by all involved that the end result was rather unsatisfactory. It is clear that the public like to know who is advancing a particular view, and whether it is supported by evidence. It would therefore have been preferable to offer attributed material and allow the public to draw their own conclusions. Nevertheless it is clear that the debate helped to raise awareness and improve understanding of GM issues.

'Narrow but deep'

23. The debate process combined 'open' and 'closed' elements. Members of the public were able to participate in the open element by attending a public meeting, or by visiting the debate website. There was also a so-called 'narrow but deep' component, consisting of a series of closed discussion groups involving a representative cross-section of members of the general public. These enabled the debate process to take account of the views of those members of the public who might not normally have chosen to take part, in contrast to the 'self-selecting' participants in the debate. The 'narrow but deep' element is generally regarded as one of the more successful features of the debate, serving as an important 'control' on the findings of the open process.

Engaging people at 'grass roots' level

24. One of the most interesting aspects of the debate was that it encouraged individuals and organisations to arrange their own meetings at local level. The six regional launch events succeeded in generating considerable publicity and interest, though it is clear that most of the participants were already engaged in GM issues. It is likely that the debate could have been more successful in reaching more people at the 'grass roots' level had there been more advance publicity

(see below), and if local networks had been engaged at an earlier stage. Insufficient resources of the right kind were devoted by COI to working with local networks early on in the process, though part of the reason for this was that the debate programme was not finalised until fairly late in the day. The compression of the debate into a six-week period also inevitably had an impact on the number of local meetings which could be organised in the time available. In future, consideration needs to be given at an early stage to different methods of engaging people at the 'grass roots' level, given that large public meetings may not be the best way of doing this.

Publicity

25. The Steering Board were responsible for deciding how best to make use of the available funding, and concluded that even the increased budget was insufficient to pay for publicity. Nevertheless the debate attracted considerable national and local media coverage - COI estimated that the debate generated the equivalent of about £1 million worth of paid publicity. This demonstrates that it is possible to achieve a considerable amount of publicity without necessarily having to use taxpayers' money to pay for it.
26. An important lesson from the GM public debate is that an effective communications strategy needs to be in place early on, in order to maximise any opportunities for publicity. This needs to embrace all media channels – national and local radio, TV and press – in order to reach all sections of the population. A tie-in with a TV programme would have enabled the debate to reach many more people, but this idea was not pursued early enough. It is also important to ensure adequate advance publicity for any public meetings.
27. Consideration also needs to be given to managing publicity following publication of the final report. While the Steering Board stressed that the debate was a qualitative rather than a quantitative exercise, much of the media and other coverage did not take this point on board fully, and reported the debate as if it were a survey or opinion poll.

Openness and transparency

28. The Steering Board deserves credit for conducting the debate in an open and transparent manner, holding its meetings in public and publishing minutes promptly on its website. This helped to secure broad support for the process from stakeholders, given the range of conflicting views on GM. The Steering Board also provided full access to the *Understanding Risk* team to facilitate their independent evaluation of the debate. Independent evaluation was not, however, built in to the debate programme at the start, and we would recommend that provision should be made for this in future.

Interaction between the three strands

29. It was always intended that the three strands of the GM dialogue - the public debate, the science review, and the costs and benefits study - would proceed in parallel, and that the results of all three would inform the policy-making process. There was limited interaction between the three strands, though strenuous efforts were made and a statement of relationships was agreed. The results of the Foundation Workshops commissioned by the Steering Board helped to frame the issues for all three strands. Cross-membership between the Steering Board, the science review panel and the Strategy Unit's expert advisory groups also helped to strengthen links.
30. From Defra's perspective the multi-strand approach has been extremely valuable, and we believe that it is worth considering as a model for the future. Whether or not it would always be appropriate to take forward different strands in parallel would need to be decided in the light of any time constraints. It is also important to ensure that interactions between the different strands are agreed at an early stage and that they are effectively managed.

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