

Voices from the Sci Com Conference

The British Science Association's Science Communication Conference took place in May. Here, some of the panelists give a glimpse of their activities.



Fostering 'good' science communication

Ben Johnson has some ideas

Public engagement with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is an obligation for the research community, but should it be obligatory for individual researchers? I would hope not, but that means we should be supporting and encouraging those who get involved in every way possible, including the development of personal skills.

The great majority of public engagement activities in the UK are delivered by researchers volunteering in schools and at festivals, appearing at *cafés scientifiques*, running large-scale engagement programmes, and more.

Recently, we at Graphic Science have been working with the Science for All Expert Group, the Beacons for Public Engagement and the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement to think about the essential competencies researchers need to engage successfully with a range of publics and in a variety of roles.

The challenge for us has been to develop a framework which is applicable across all disciplines (not

just STEM), across all types of activity and all levels of commitment. In the process we have grappled with a number of issues, including the setting of levels of competence, distinguishing one-way and multi-party exchanges and considering the role of other professionals in these processes.

Questions for the framework

Opinions vary greatly over the setting of levels of competence. On the one hand we all want researchers to be as skilled as possible. On the other hand, levels imply a progression towards professional seniority that is quite misplaced in a discretionary activity like public engagement. Ultimately, a successful framework must accommodate the aspirations of researchers and the constraints under which they operate. Therefore we feel that levels are better expressed in terms of an individual's overall commitment to public engagement than in terms of some artificial appraisal scheme.

Similarly, we should guard against building in any bias towards particular forms of engagement that may be seen as 'better' than others. While we can all agree that dialogue in its purest form is an ideal, this does not

invalidate the excellent work done by many researchers in strictly one-way fora, such as lectures, expert testimony to inform deliberation in court, in public enquiries or in consultation processes.

Finally, we must recognise that there is much professional expertise available in public engagement. We feel that a model of one professional group (researchers) being mediated by another (public engagement professionals) for the benefit of distant publics is untenable. However, we must be realistic about how much can be achieved by individual researchers. An effective competency framework must include tools for identifying opportunities for collaboration between researchers and a range of other professionals which can develop and deliver public engagement activities of greater value through shared practice than can be achieved flying solo.

Ultimately the framework must be useful to researchers. It must extend practice and frame professional development. To achieve this, it must also be open to comment and change. Over to you.



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Involving the next generation

Paul Macey is optimistic

The term 'hard to reach' young people is not one that Nicole, a youth worker in south London is happy to endorse.

'The main thrust of my job is the development of participation strategies for young people in south London, particularly those from black and ethnic minority (BME) communities,' she says. 'They are typically seen as "hard to reach" by employers, educators and service providers. However in my experience this is something of a stereotype. It masks often lazy approaches to engaging a section of the community that is articulate, energetic and has a thirst for learning – given the chance.'

Despite the often negative perceptions of young people in wider society, educators, service providers, policy makers and employers are increasingly seeking ways to involve young people in issues that affect their lives.

Changes to the equalities legislation around age discrimination and the statutory Duty to Involve, plus the need to ensure future employment opportunities for young people, present a unique opportunity to ensure that this work is effective, meaningful and truly involves young people.

To date, many young people have found much of this process to be tokenistic at best and reinforcing their exclusion and alienation, at worst. However, there are examples of good practice.

Successful projects

The first project, *The Cut* newspaper, is a publication written by and for young people across London. As well as producing five editions, a website¹ and blog, *The Cut* is also involved in developing a promotional campaign for the Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust. Members of *The Cut* have created a DVD for the Trust, which formed part of a campaign to attract young people from BME communities into architecture.

The second, the Croydon Voluntary Action Xpress project, has seen young people trained in participative skills working in schools and with public services to ensure that practitioners are working meaningfully with young service users. Croydon Xpress also engages school children in various curriculum developments.

Alongside inspirational teaching, marketing and partnership, initiatives that not only engage young people but are led by young people can lead to an increase in the ethnic diversity in the UK science community at all levels.

1. www.thecutnewspaper.com



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Engaging with parliamentarians

No waffle allowed, say **Mike O'Brien** and **Sarah Bunn**

Recent debate over drug classification has highlighted some of the tricky challenges in translating science into evidence-based policy.

Working with parliamentarians is a skill that any science communicator who has an important policy message to share needs to develop. Put yourself in the shoes of a parliamentarian who has to vote on a bit of new legislation for a moment. How much will it cost? Could it save money in the long term? How could it be improved? What are the ethical implications? Are there objections and if so what are they? Are there unforeseen consequences? How will this affect my constituency? What does the scientific evidence say?

Parliamentarians are very busy people, constantly being lobbied and bombarded with information from an enormous number of sources, on a vast range of issues. To get their attention requires being realistic about their level of knowledge and the amount of time they can spare.

When preparing material for this audience, you need to be clear, concise, accurate and up to date. Absolutely no waffle allowed! You need to say why the issue is relevant now. Is there forthcoming legislation on the subject? Will the government be making policy decisions on this issue? Science alone is not enough. You need to focus on the impacts on people, especially those whose interests the politicians are likely to be particularly concerned about. And finally, you need to be objective and let the science speak for itself.

Help at hand

Most parliamentarians do not have a scientific or technical background, so the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) provides MPs and Peers with impartial information and anticipates potential legislative or scrutiny issues.

For more immediate inquiries, parliamentarians also have access to specialists in the Libraries of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. MPs and Peers on Select Committees

are briefed by policy advisers and specialists with expertise in the area the committee scrutinises, such as the Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee or the Lords Science and Technology Committee.

POST will also be offering science lessons to all MPs in the new parliament, looking into 'what is science?' and the use (and abuse) of statistics in policy making.



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