



## **Research Councils UK's Response to the 'Energy Research Dialogue Project'**

### **Introduction**

The Research Councils support and promote a free flow of authoritative research-informed information and exchange of views between researchers, members of the public and policy-makers. We aim to identify public attitudes to be considered in the prioritisation of research funding, and foster debate that will enable the public to contribute to Research Councils' policies and research strategies. As part of our programme of activities, Research Councils UK commissioned the Energy Research Dialogue project to add a public voice to the advice streams which influence the Research Councils' Energy Programme.

The Research Councils decided to undertake public engagement activity around energy research because this is an area of science and technology where research is addressing a significant societal challenge – reducing the extent of climate change and the secure supply and efficient use of, affordable, sustainable energy. [The Research Councils' Energy Programme](#) brings together engineers, biological, physical, environmental and social scientists from many areas to tackle the research challenges involved in developing new energy technologies, reducing energy demand and understanding the social, economic and environmental implications. EPSRC is co-ordinating the joint programme on behalf of the Research Councils, building on a substantial portfolio of activities.

The Research Councils' Energy Programme already gathers a broad spectrum of stakeholder views when making funding decisions, but does not explicitly include public views in this process. The Energy Research Dialogue was designed to trial one approach to achieving this. The learning from the report and the process is valuable in informing the Research Councils' approach to this challenge in future.

### **The Energy Dialogue Project**

The Research Councils commissioned Ipsos MORI to carry out a qualitative and deliberative project to give the Research Councils an insight into public views and priorities for evaluating energy research. The workshop process did not seek to give a representative set of public views, either demographically or regionally. Rather, it was designed to give a snapshot of public thoughts which would be of relevance to the Programme when making its priority decisions.

Ipsos MORI carried out a series of public workshops which aimed increase accountability for the direction of Research Council-funded energy research by:

- Identifying a set of initial criteria which participants used to assess energy research choices.
- identifying public priorities for energy research to inform the Research Councils' strategic decision-making
- giving participants the opportunity to meet with researchers and Research Council staff

The outputs from this public dialogue activity have been fed into the Energy Programme directly via the Programme Co-ordination Group and also through the Programme's Scientific Advisory Committee. The outputs may also go to relevant strategy boards within Research Councils.

## **Response to Findings**

[The Energy Research Dialogue Report](#) draws out a number of findings about how the participants approached both the wider issues of UK energy challenges and opportunities, and the specific topic of energy research and also suggests next steps for consideration. The report is valuable to the Research Councils in two main ways. These are:

- **Decision making**

In November 2007 the Research Councils' Energy Programme Scientific Advisory Committee discussed funding priorities for the next three years of the programme. The Ipsos MORI report on the public dialogue was used at this meeting to gauge public opinion and was welcomed as an interesting insight into public views. The criteria developed through public dialogue helped to sharpen the way issues were debated. Research Councils UK also noted that the hard choices which the Programme struggles with when deciding priorities were recognised and acknowledged by those with a fresh perspective on the area i.e. the general public.

The Research Councils agree that there is a wealth of further qualitative and quantitative work that could follow on from this initial identification of themes and frameworks. However, this piece of work was carried out at a specific time in the research programme planning cycle in order to provide a public aspect to decision-making at the start of a new three year funding period. There are a number of larger social science studies looking at similar areas which will report over the next few years and the Research Councils will continue to monitor and utilise these where appropriate.

- **Learning about public engagement**

There are valuable suggestions in relation to public engagement and communication of energy research issues in the report.

The report illustrated that the Programme needs to do more work on identifying and communicating the outcomes of the work that is funded, illustrating the impact of fields of research.

This project has highlighted the need for the research community to be more broadly aware of the wider landscape within which their work is set, and to consider the future impact of their work and how to articulate this to wider groups. The report contains some valuable information about what is important to people when discussing energy research, and this should be used by the research community to inform any public engagement work that they do. In order to facilitate this, the Research Councils intend

to create a short 'guide' based on these findings which will be of use to a broad section of the research community, thus maximising the usefulness of this project.

Many of the suggested next steps in the report are relevant for those who will be continuing to engage with the public directly on energy research issues, rather than for the Energy Programme itself. For this reason we will ensure that this report is disseminated appropriately to stakeholders such as the UK Energy Research Centre and the research community directly.

The Research Councils recognise that there are a number of important lessons that have been learnt about conducting projects such as this one. This report, and the independent evaluation (see below) will be used to inform future dialogue processes and a shared internal workspace for those carrying out this work has been created to hold these reports and those from similar projects. The Research Councils will also continue to work closely with Government's Sciencewise programme to share learning and ensure that best practice is developed.

## **Evaluation**

[The Evaluation Report](#) by Diane Warburton of Shared Practice. The evaluation report was welcomed by the Research Councils and has illustrated key pieces of learning for any future activity in this area.

The evaluation commended the early and full feedback given to the participants and noted that the value for the participants came from learning and the belief that they could influence decision-making. Value for the Research Councils UK lay in learning for those RCUK staff who took part in the process, and also in the increase in confidence with which future decisions could be taken given public input which will be taken into account by the Research Councils. By taking into account the outputs from this process, the Research Councils also increase their legitimacy and accountability.

The Research Councils were pleased that, overall, the participants were very happy with the process and felt clear about the overall purpose of the project. However, the purpose and focus of the dialogue throughout sessions, whilst clear in design, was not always communicated as effectively as possible to those taking part. A clear 'path' through the deliberations with explicit reference to how the debate develops over the workshops should be signposted in any future work.

The involvement of researchers was clearly another key strength, and careful planning to ensure a greater number of decision-makers can experience the process would be beneficial in future.

This evaluation will be shared internally as well as externally and will inform future dialogue work.