BBSRC response to the Bioenergy Dialogue

Background

During 2013, BBSRC with support from Sciencewise conducted a dialogue around Bioenergy. BBSRC recognises that there is potential for huge scientific and technological advancement in bioenergy as an area of research that could help meet some of the challenges that society faces to secure future energy needs. To do that it is crucial that the field remains responsive to public needs and concerns, as the science develops and BBSRC wants to ensure that contemporary public views, concerns and aspirations are taken into account as more sustainable bioenergy solutions are developed and ensure that BBSRC strategy development in bioenergy is responsive to public opinion.

Nearly 200 people, event organisers and participants, took part in the Bioenergy Dialogue and showed an enormous amount of goodwill in doing so, for which BBSRC is very grateful. We were pleased with people's response to the dialogue events and their willingness to get involved in discussion and contribute.

It is now over a year since the final reports from the dialogue were published and it is timely for BBSRC to provide this response to the dialogue findings. The dialogue reports have been considered by staff within BBSRC and by a number of our advisory bodies, including our Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel and the Stakeholder Engagement Group of the Industrial Biotechnology and Bioenergy Strategy Advisory Panel.

Two aims

The Bioenergy dialogue had two aims, one of which was about exploring public views on bioenergy and a second which was about piloting a novel approach to public dialogue:

- To explore with members of the public, their views in regard to bioenergy, and consider those views in our strategy and policy development in bioenergy.
- To pilot a novel approach to public dialogue, to develop an ongoing, informed discussion between ourselves, our research community, the public and other stakeholders, around bioenergy research.

In this response we will therefore look at each of these aims in turn to describe how BBSRC has used learnings from the project.

Exploring public views

Influence on BBSRC strategy

BBSRC has found the findings of the Bioenergy Dialogue to be both interesting and valuable, although we recognise that the participants in the dialogue did not reflect a full cross section of society. Although the findings have not revealed significant new insights into public views and values around bioenergy, it has been reassuring that what BBSRC already understood about public views and values on bioenergy has been supported.

The findings of the dialogue and the involvement of BBSRC staff in dialogue events have increased organisational awareness of the importance of emerging thinking around 'the triple bottom line' of economic, social and environmental impacts of research. This is now being applied to proposed research in this area where new, practical bioenergy applications are being developed and applicants are being asked to fully consider the wider impacts of their research.

It is also important to note here that during the lifetime of the dialogue, BBSRC's focus on bioenergy shifted from the development of potential *feedstocks* to the advancement of

biological *processes* to produce energy/fuel. This happened largely independently of the dialogue (i.e. not as a result of the dialogue) and does mean that some of the findings are less relevant than others. This is also pertinent when considering the format of the dialogue as it illustrates how quickly strategic thinking can change, and how important it is to ensure that dialogues are responsive to this.

BBSRC communications and engagement around bioenergy

In addition to informing strategy around BBSRC's funding of bioenergy research, the dialogue findings have informed our communications and engagement work around bioenergy. The findings showed that many of the public participants had a limited baseline awareness of the issues around bioenergy and showed an eagerness from those participants to learn more. This emphasised the importance of BBSRC continuing to develop science communication activities in this area.

The report has also supported the need for BBSRC to develop our wider stakeholder engagement activities to ensure that our activities and funding are best placed to meet the needs of society.

Piloting a novel approach

Perhaps the most significant impacts of the Bioenergy Dialogue will be on BBSRC's practice around public engagement and dialogue. Indeed, this influence is likely to go wider than BBSRC itself as BBSRC has already contributed to two EU projects relating to the future shape of public engagement in the EU[1].

Although the model used for the dialogue was not perfect, it has shown that there is potential for approaching public dialogue in new ways. A more distributed approach to dialogue is feasible; it can reach a similar number of (and potentially more) people, engage more researchers, happen over a longer time period and be cheaper than 'traditional' dialogue.

Of course adjustments would need to be made if this model were to be used again. For example, steps would need to be taken to ensure that a good cross section of society were engaged in the process as the perceived 'weight' of the findings, and so the influence, of this dialogue was limited by the fact that participants tended to be more highly educated than the general UK population, often with a professional interest in science. However, BBSRC will certainly consider using a similar model again.

In addition, the dialogue has provided an opportunity for embedding dialogue approaches to public engagement across BBSRC and our funded researchers. We have developed understanding across a wider number of BBSRC staff as to the value, and complexities, of public dialogue, either as a result of those people taking part in the dialogue directly or from less direct involvement in the process. The evaluation report and our own experience suggests that the dialogue was valuable as an exercise in supporting and encouraging BBSRC-funded researchers to do public engagement. The toolkit was well received because it lowered the barrier in terms of effort required to undertake public engagement and this, in parallel with providing more support for researchers to undertake activities which require a skill set outside of their usual comfort zone, could provide a useful model for tools that BBSRC could provide for engagement in other areas.

[1] Engage2020, http://engage2020.eu/ and PE2020 (Public Engagement Innovations for Horizon 2020, 2014-2017) www.pe2020.eu