

# Best Practice Framework:

## Practical lessons for public engagement in science and technology

The following guide has been written after carrying out a study of recent public engagement projects on nanotechnology. It aims to provide an easy-to-follow guide for anyone within the FRONTIERS network who is thinking of getting involved in running a public engagement project.

The 'Best Practice Framework' is taken from a study of the Nanotechnology Engagement Group in which the IRC in Nanotechnology at the University of Cambridge was a core member. The study reviewed the FRONTIERS network funded "NanoJury" and several other similar projects in reaching its conclusions. The 'Best Practice Framework' appears as appendix 2 in the report *Democratic technologies? The final report of the Nanotechnology Engagement Group*. The full report can be downloaded from [www.involve.org.uk/neg](http://www.involve.org.uk/neg)

### Best Practice Framework: practical lessons for public engagement in science and technology

#### Clarity of objective

##### Why it matters

Having a clear objective is important because it:

- Ensures the public engagement process stays focused.
- Helps manage the expectations of participants, partners, and target audiences.
- Makes it easier to evaluate the process and measure its success.

Not having a clear purpose and set of priorities carries several risks:

- Can create misunderstandings and tensions between groups involved.
- Can make the process unfocused, and can waste of time and resources.
- Confusion about objectives can lead to a loss of credibility if the activity is seen by some not to be delivering.

##### What it means in practice

Setting a clear objective involves instigators, organisers, funders, and other key stakeholders (which may or may not include participants) agreeing the answers to three questions:

1. What are the desired outcomes?
2. What will the outputs be?
3. What are the primary and secondary objectives?

**Outcomes** are the results or impacts of the process; the way it is going to make a difference (eg, informing a specific policy or decision, building learning and understanding among participants, improving future public engagement practice).

	<p><b>Outputs</b> are the activities and products that will make the outcomes happen (eg, websites, surveys, reports, and different forms of meetings and workshops).</p> <p><b>Primary objectives</b> are the minimum results and products expected to come out of the process; the reasons it is being done in the first place. <b>Secondary objectives</b> are non-essential ‘added bonuses’. Distinction between primary objectives and secondary objectives not only makes it easier to maintain the focus of the public engagement activity, but also helps organisers to foresee and justify any trade-offs that have to be made between objectives.</p>
Things to keep in mind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are <b>good and bad objectives</b>. A good objective is focused, with clearly defined outputs and outcomes. It is achievable within budget, timeframe, and other resources available. It is measurable in some form (whether qualitative or quantitative). A bad objective is poorly defined, unrealistic given the resources available, or open to conflicting interpretations.</li> <li>• Be as <b>explicit</b> as possible about <i>what or who</i> you are trying to influence and <i>how</i> it is going to happen. Avoid use of vague statements such as ‘influence policy’ or ‘improve decision-making’.</li> <li>• Avoid focusing all efforts on achievement of agreed outputs. <b>Outputs are not ends in themselves</b>; it is more helpful to think of them as the building blocks of the consumer-engagement process. The aim of the outputs is to help the process make a difference; whether through building relationships, stimulating debate, giving people new information or resources, or providing decision-makers with recommendations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Institutions and public engagement organisers working together</b></p>	
Why it matters	<p>For many initiatives on public engagement in science to succeed, there needs to be a meaningful relationship between the target institutions and the projects themselves.</p> <p>This situation is achieved when there is a commitment on the part of the relevant institution to connect with the public engagement activity and take its findings seriously. This, in turn, is more likely to happen if the organisers of the public engagement activity take care to design the activity and present its findings in a manner and at a time that enables the target institutions to make use of the findings. Importantly, public engagement organisers should be open and honest with clients and partner organisations about what public engagement can realistically deliver.</p>
What it means in practice	<p>Institutions that are involved in public engagement activities should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be open about their reasons for engagement with the public and their expectations.</li> <li>• Be clear about the constraints they face in responding to, and making use of, the findings from public engagement.</li> <li>• Set aside sufficient time and resources to connect with the public engagement activity and its outputs—before, during, and after it occurs.</li> <li>• Be prepared to be flexible: outputs may not be exactly what are expected, but that does not mean they are not useful.</li> </ul>

	<p>Independent public engagement organisers who are seeking to inform decision-making with their activities have to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be clear about which institutions or decision-makers they are targeting, and seek to involve them in the process early on.</li> <li>• Consult the relevant decision-makers about their needs, expectations, and the constraints they work under, and seek to meet their needs (eg, in terms of the timing or style of the activity and findings) as much as possible without compromising any other priority objective.</li> <li>• Be open about the objectives of their activity, particularly about any tensions that may exist between their objectives and the decision-makers' needs or expectations.</li> </ul>
<p>Things to keep in mind</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not underestimate the time it takes for civil servants to liaise with the public engagement process and respond to its outputs.</li> <li>• Timing of the engagement activity is crucial: liaise with the relevant decision-makers to ensure that it fits with their timetables.</li> <li>• Be honest with participants (public, scientist, and other) about what the process can realistically achieve.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Involvement of target audiences directly in public engagement activities</b></p>	
<p>Why it matters</p>	<p>Often, public engagement projects have a specific target audience in mind for their outputs—eg, a research council, a company, or a government department. Our research has found that it is valuable to involve the target audience directly in the engagement process because it can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help decision-makers understand what public engagement is and what it can deliver.</li> <li>• Help civil servants and other institutional staff build their own individual and organisational capacity for engagement with the public.</li> <li>• Give decision-makers insights into the nuances of discussions and the background to the discussions and findings.</li> <li>• Help create a sense of ownership of the process and the findings in the target institution, thus increasing the chances that they are responded to and taken forward.</li> </ul> <p>Involvement of the target audience in a public engagement activity is not always possible or desirable. However the option of involvement should always be considered, because not including target audiences in public engagement risks undermining the effectiveness of the activities and denies the institutions and individuals in question the opportunity to build their own capacity for public engagement.</p>
<p>What it means in practice</p>	<p>Involvement of target audiences in public engagement means that organisers of activities and the target institutions must work together to involve the relevant individuals in appropriate aspects of the public engagement process. They must find agreement on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is the involvement of target audience(s) seen as desirable, and who will benefit?</li> <li>• In what aspects of the public engagement activity will the involvement of decision-makers be appropriate and beneficial?</li> <li>• What role is the representative(s) of the institution going to have in the process?</li> <li>• What support or preparation will the individual(s) need to enable effective engagement in the process?</li> </ul>

<p>Things to keep in mind</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement of target audiences in public engagement activities is not always appropriate. Organisers and facilitators of the process must judge whether doing so is likely to add value.</li> <li>• Such involvement of target audiences does not mean allowing them to direct the process. Instead, their role should be similar to that of the scientists and other stakeholders: to listen, offer their perspectives on the discussions, and answer questions if necessary.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Clarity of roles</b></p>	
<p>Why it matters</p>	<p>Clarity about the role of every participant (public, scientist, and other) and partner or funding organisation in a public engagement activity helps to ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every participant can make an informed choice about whether they want to take part.</li> <li>• Participants can prepare for their role in advance.</li> <li>• Participants are able to gain more from the activity.</li> <li>• The public engagement process is more likely to achieve its objectives.</li> </ul> <p><i>Not</i> being clear about roles and any objectives relating to participants' own learning may lead to misunderstanding and tension among participants and between participants and organisers.</p>
<p>What it means in practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider whether there are any additional or implicit expectations on any participants or partner organisations over and above their practical role in the activity. For instance, scientists may be expected to present or contribute to discussions, but are also expected to learn from, or be influenced by, the experience.</li> <li>• Ensure that organisers, partners, and funders are in agreement about the roles of, and expectations on, every group of participants.</li> <li>• Explicitly explain to every group involved (eg, participants, partner organisations, and funders) their role and what is expected of them.</li> </ul>
<p>Things to keep in mind</p>	<p>Be explicit: do not assume that groups know what a particular form of public engagement entails. Explain what it means in terms of their personal contribution and how it may differ from events they have taken part in before.</p>
<p><b>Ensuring diversity of voices</b></p>	
<p>Why it matters</p>	<p>Public engagement is increasingly being used as a complement to traditional democratic structures. It is often perceived as a means to informing or improving policy-making and delivery, or to build public trust in government. However, few public engagement activities themselves conform to democratic principles. Many are small-scale, unrepresentative, and ad hoc; this is the nature of a field that tends to operate under financial and time-related constraints and that often prioritises depth of discussion over the scale of the exercise.</p> <p>The fact that public engagement activities take place outside of established democratic structures highlights the need to ensure that such activities are founded on principles of inclusion and diversity, so that no sections of society are excluded on the basis of ethnicity, religion, disability, gender, or age. Promotion of diversity and inclusion is important to ensure that different perspectives on new technologies are heard and can influence policy.</p>

## What it means in practice

Institutions and individuals who are involved in commissioning or organising public engagement activities must actively seek to involve a diverse range of people in their processes. This requirement may mean:

- Provision of logistical support (eg, translators, disability access, separate meetings for women, financial incentives, or income remuneration) to ensure that no group is excluded on logistical grounds.
- Striving to include a representative cross-section of the relevant population when possible and appropriate to the purpose of the exercise.
- Justification of the recruitment criteria used when a public engagement activity excludes some groups or does not represent the wider population.
- Identification of which groups are less likely to participate than others, and making special efforts to target those groups when advertising open (ie, inclusive) public engagement processes (eg, socially excluded groups).

## Things to keep in mind

Statistical representativeness is not always necessary or even desirable. Sometimes, participants are recruited justifiably on the basis of other criteria such as their interest or stake in an issue, or because people of similar background tend to engage more easily in discussions with each other. The important thing is to be able to justify how participants have been selected and why certain groups are not represented.

## Supporting members of the public to take part

### Why it matters

Motivating people to get involved and stay involved in public engagement on science and technology can be a challenge. When the activity addresses a new, highly complex and relatively low-profile subject such as nanotechnologies, participants tend not to have a pre-set agenda that motivates them to take part. Thus, public engagement in new and emerging technologies differs from many other areas of public participation, where participants already know and care about the issue at stake.

Three types of support that need to be considered:

1. Support to help people engage in discussions about scientific topics (eg, information or training).
2. Logistical support to help people who want to attend do so (eg, expenses or childcare).
3. Incentives to encourage people who are not explicitly interested in the issue to attend (eg, financial incentives).

Provision of adequate support to public participants is important for several reasons. For example, it:

- Maximises people's ability and likelihood to take part.
- Minimises the risk of people dropping out before the process ends.
- Helps public participants gain more from the experience (eg, by building skills, knowledge, or confidence).
- Can help raise the quality of the discussion.
- Ensures that public participants' needs and expectations can be taken into account in the framing of the process and discussions.

*Not* offering any support to public participants carries the following risks:

- Low uptake of participants.
- Participants dropping out before the process ends.
- Participants feeling unqualified to engage in discussions.

## What it means in practice

Consider what support or incentives people might need to enable or encourage them to take part, including:

- Financial incentives and remuneration of income lost.
- Travel expenses.
- Childcare.
- Translators.
- The event taking place at a time or in a setting that is convenient for the group that is targeted.

Also, think through what support public participants might benefit from to help them take part in discussions about science and technology. For example:

- Receiving detailed information about the event, including information about what will happen after the event and who will use the findings
- Having concepts and expectations explained in advance.
- Learning about the area of science or technology before discussions begin.
- The opportunity to talk through their views and expectations before meeting the scientists and policy-makers involved in the process.
- Training in how to participate effectively.

## Things to keep in mind

- Do not assume that the initial brief will be enough to equip the public participants for their role in the process. At a minimum, ask members of the public about their expectations and concerns, and offer appropriate clarifications and support.
- Consider: '*What is in it for the participants?*' How can the process be made as worthwhile and enjoyable as possible for public participants?

## Supporting scientists to take part

### Why it matters

Compared with the amount of time and effort spent preparing public participants for their role in public engagement, scientists tend to receive little support to help them engage effectively with the public. This situation needs to change: scientists, as well as members of the public and other participants, would benefit greatly from receiving more support to help them participate effectively. Many scientists are unfamiliar with the nuances of public engagement practice or the principles of social science that underpin it. Several scientists who were interviewed for this study found the experience different from what they were used to or had expected; some described it as 'unnerving' and 'out of their comfort zone'.

Support for participating scientists has potential benefits. For example, it:

- Minimises the risk of misunderstandings about scientists' roles in the activity.
- Enables scientists to gain more from the experience.
- Ensures that scientists' needs and expectations can be taken into account in the framing of the process and discussions.

*Not* offering any support to scientists risks:

- Causing misunderstandings and tension between organisers and participating scientists.
- Preventing participating scientists from fulfilling their role in the engagement activity.

<p>What it means in practice</p>	<p>Consider what support participating scientists might benefit from. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receiving detailed information about the event.</li> <li>• Having concepts and expectations explained in advance.</li> <li>• The opportunity to outline their own thoughts and expectations before meeting public participants.</li> </ul>
<p>Things to keep in mind</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect on how much support is offered to different groups involved in the engagement activity. Are there discrepancies, and if so, why?</li> <li>• Do not assume that the briefing given to the scientists or their professional background will be enough to equip them for the activity.</li> <li>• Show consideration for the constraints scientists work under, such as time restrictions or unsupportive colleagues.</li> <li>• At a minimum, ask participating scientists about their expectations and concerns, and offer appropriate clarifications and support.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Communications</b></p>	
<p>Why it matters</p>	<p>Good communications are a vital part of any public engagement activity. Provision of clear and continuous communication as the activity progresses and giving feedback after it is finished is necessary to ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All involved in the activity are aware of what is going to happen and what the objectives are.</li> <li>• Participants feel that their contribution is valued.</li> <li>• Participants are able to comment on, and respond to, written outputs and any formal responses generated by them.</li> </ul> <p><i>Not providing clear communication and feedback can:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create frustration and tension among partners and participants.</li> <li>• Make participants feel that their input is not valued. One public participant in an engagement project said that the lack of feedback made her feel ‘a bit like being dumped by a boyfriend. We had spent 3 days doing this and suddenly we didn’t hear anything more about it’.</li> </ul>
<p>What it means in practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform participants and partners about the project plans, objectives, and any changes that occur.</li> <li>• Ensure that websites and other sources of information about the project are up to date.</li> <li>• Give participants and partners the opportunity to read and comment on project reports and evaluation reports (if appropriate).</li> <li>• Inform participants and partners about what happens after the project ends (ie, how findings will be disseminated and received).</li> </ul>
<p>Things to keep in mind</p>	<p>Although giving direct feedback to all participants is not always possible, particularly after public engagement activities that have involved many people, there are always ways to make the information accessible to those who want it. Keeping participants and partners in the loop does not need to be more complicated than updating the project website or sending a mass email; something is usually much better than nothing.</p>

## Dissemination of learning and outputs

### Why it matters

In the end, the ability of public engagement to have an impact beyond the small group of people who are directly involved in the activity depends on the effective dissemination of the outputs and learning. Every public engagement activity involves two types of external-focused learning:

1. Learning for policy.
2. Learning for future public engagement practice.

To maximise the impact of the public engagement activity, organisers need to consider how both types of learning can be shared with as broad an audience as possible.

*Not* disseminating the learning widely can mean that:

- Project findings only reach a small audience and are quickly forgotten.
- The same efforts or mistakes are duplicated elsewhere.
- Capacity for effective engagement with the public does not increase over time because lessons are not shared between practitioners.

### What it means in practice

Disseminating learning, at a minimum, involves:

- Careful audience analysis to identify the institutions and individuals that will be, or ought to be, interested in, and affected by, the findings.
- Measures taken by project organisers to engage the priority audience in the project from the outset, to ensure that they are given opportunities to input into, and learn from, the activity other than merely reading recommendations or project report(s).
- Dissemination of project report(s) through a range of avenues, such as launch events, presentations to relevant decision-making bodies, websites, press releases, email distribution lists, and feedback to participants.

Disseminating learning for future public engagement, at a minimum, involves:

- Identification of lessons learnt. What worked particularly well? What did not work so well? What should be done differently in the future?
- Consideration of who will benefit from hearing about what has been learnt. For example, colleagues of those who organised the activity, colleagues in other organisations, the funding organisation, external contractors or facilitators, and any relevant practitioner's network.
- Dissemination of the lessons learnt as widely as possible. For instance, by circulation of the evaluation report or by sharing of learning with relevant practitioners' networks.