RSA

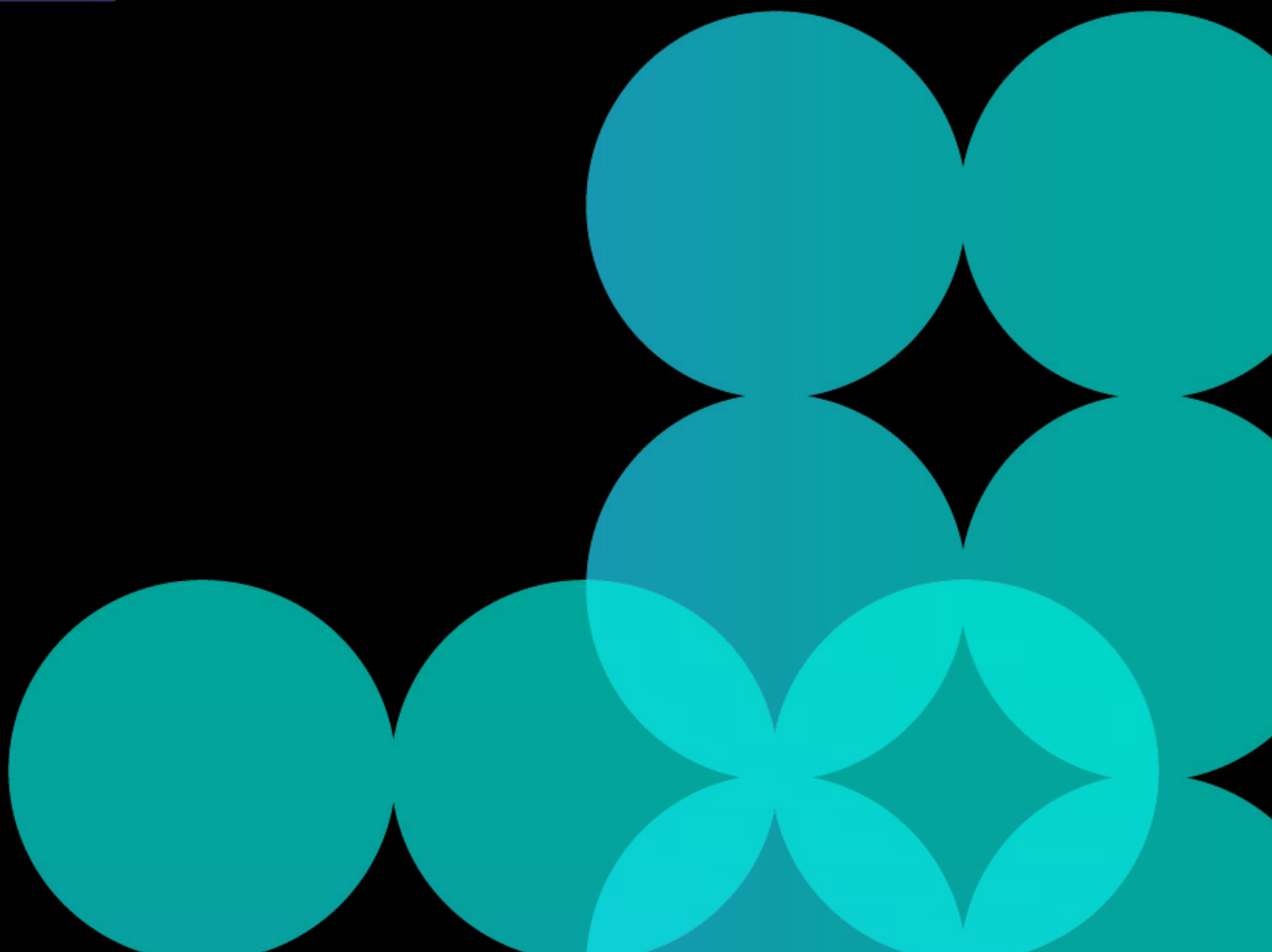# Re-Thinking Public Dialogue:
Learning from experimental pilots.

RSA

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Background & Rationale

UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) commits to engaging with diverse views in research and policymaking, and there is a growing consensus that public dialogue makes for more informed, representative, and effective research and policy. However, established approaches to public dialogue demonstrate many practical and methodological shortcomings: they are often costly, small in scale, limited and inflexible in scope, and can struggle to engage key population groups.

There is therefore evident need for innovation in this vein. However, where new approaches have been trialled, these have not always been rigorously evaluated; resulting in uncertainty around their practical use and value which has prevented researchers and policymakers from adopting them in practice.

To this end, Rethinking Public Dialogue funded nine pilot projects – administered and evaluated by the RSA – to test innovative forms of public engagement, and to improve our understanding of these techniques and the contexts in which they are effective. Pilot programmes were required to demonstrate at least one of the following:

- **Scaled engagement** to reach a wider/larger audience than is typically possible through public dialogue

- **Novel approaches to understanding online debate**

- **Informal engagement** to reach new audiences outside of formal processes and institutions

- **Bottom-up engagement** that grants participants greater control over the agenda

- **Inclusive engagement** approaches that better engage hard-to-reach groups

Key Findings

These novel forms of public dialogue proved effective in eliciting informed input based on participants' lived experiences, surfacing novel perspectives, and granting insight into participants' underlying beliefs, values, and concerns. They also enhanced participants' skills and confidence and allowed them to contribute in a meaningful, nuanced, and informed manner on complex issues. There is therefore evident scope for these methods to add value in policymaking and service design, either directly, by soliciting and generating recommendations informed by deliberation, evidence, and lived experience, or indirectly, by improving policymakers' understanding of people's latent preferences.

We identify two broad models in novel forms of public dialogue. Innovative methods build on established models by accelerating, creating efficiencies in, or otherwise distilling lengthy processes while still generating valuable insights. Critical models, in contrast, challenge hierarchies between researchers and participants, and are characterised by networking, longer-term capacity building, and co-productive outcomes. Strand-specific findings included:

- **Novel approaches to understanding online debate** successfully harvested a wealth of naturalistic data. However, such methods do require specific technical and methodological skills, and online debates are subject to specific rules, norms, biases, and algorithms that may impact both users' conduct and research findings, necessitating balance with other forms of public dialogue.

- **Scaled engagement** proved successful in engaging a larger number of participants more quickly and/or flexibly than might be affordable or feasible under traditional mechanisms. Such efficiencies open the possibility of integrating public opinion into the policy cycle in a far timelier fashion. However, there were evident trade-offs, with a larger number of participants corresponding to shorter involvement and/or reduced control over recruitment and facilitation.

- **Bottom-up engagement** surfaced new perspectives and secured greater buy-in from participants by granting them greater control over the agenda and parameters. However, this approach may necessitate longer timeframes and greater flexibility from convenors/commissioners.

- **Informal engagement** in everyday/trusted settings, rather than formal or academic environments, made participants more comfortable, safe, and candid in their contributions and helped to attract a broader range of participants who may not be comfortable attending a formal setting.

- **Inclusive engagement** ensured the active inclusion of hard-to-reach groups and/or individuals with specific experiences of relevance and value to the topic at hand. All pilots involved a degree of inclusive engagement, and synergies were observed with other strands; informal and bottom-up engagement, for instance, instilled greater confidence and comfort in participants, helping to attract a wider pool of participants.

Reflections & Recommendations

The pilot projects have demonstrated the considerable potential behind innovative forms of public dialogue and speak directly to the shortcomings in established approaches. However, no approach is foolproof; certain trade-offs remain, and gaps in the knowledge base persist. While these pilot projects have, to a considerable degree, demonstrated proof of concept, their practical uptake will still require further research, as well as investment in an improved understanding of necessary new processes, skills, and competencies. We advance a series of recommendations to build on this evaluation and momentum, putting learnings into practice and remedying emerging evidence gaps.

Methodological Innovation

1. Make triangulation the new methodological norm in public dialogue: Pilot projects showcased the value of hybrid approaches that combine different forms of engagement. This should be supported by further research into the strengths and trade-offs in competing approaches to public dialogue.

2. Explore automation trade-offs and spillovers in scaled engagement: Scaling engagement is possible through automation, though with certain trade-offs in terms of recruitment, facilitation, and/or analysis. We advocate for specific studies which compare the results of automated and manual approaches in various dialogue contexts to better understand these.

Funding Critical Public Dialogue

3. Fund delivery partnerships and coalitions: Relationship building emerged as a key tactic in bottom-up/informal forms of engagement seeking to make public engagement more collaborative and less extractive. Specific capacity-building grants and/or longer-term funding horizons with a greater focus on more experimental-oriented funding and more inter-project networking may help to support these forms of innovation.

4. Fund communities to lead and set the agenda: Where projects developed critical approaches to Public Dialogue they were inevitably partnered with community organisations. We encourage funders of public dialogue to be more ambitious in engaging communities directly to deliver the work which is often predicated on their lived experiences.

Introduction

This report outlines the findings from an evaluation of nine pilot projects aimed at exploring novel approaches to public dialogue. We begin by outlining the rationale and need for such a programme, before reflecting on each of the five engagement strands under which the pilots were commissioned. Finally, we reflect on the potential value and use of such approaches, flagging areas for further research, and advance recommendations to funders, practitioners, and stakeholders to continue this learning process.

Background & Rationale

As a public funder of research and innovation, UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) is committed to engaging with diverse views in research and policymaking with the goal of co-creating a responsive and inclusive research and innovation ecosystem.

Public dialogue ensures that diverse perspectives and needs are directly integrated into the decision-making process, and thus makes for more informed, representative, and effective research and policy. A central feature of traditional public dialogue is deliberation, in professionally facilitated face-to-face workshops, between members of the public, subject-matter experts, policymakers, and other stakeholders. This allows for deep understanding of and reflection on the topic in question to reach a considered viewpoint.

However, established approaches to public dialogue demonstrate many practical and methodological shortcomings: they are often costly (owing to the need for extended deliberation and facilitation)small in scale and unrepresentative, limited and inflexible in scope (typically pre-determined by researchers), and can struggle to engage key population groups who are routinely marginalised from decision-making processes.

There is therefore evident need for innovation in this vein. In light of these shortcomings, various groups have urged the need for greater flexibility, innovation, and understanding of novel approaches.[1][2][3]

However, where new approaches have been trialled, these have not always been rigorously evaluated, resulting in uncertainty around their practical use and value. Such uncertainty discourages researchers and policymakers from adopting them in practice[4], necessitating better piloting and evaluation of these approaches.[5]

1 https://sciencewise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/SOIF-Report.pdf
2 https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2020-10/towards_innovation_in_online_public_deliberation.pdf
3 https://involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/methods-methods-everywhere%E2%80%A6-engage2020-action-catalogue

4 'The Use of Public Engagement for Technological Innovation', n.d.)
5 https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2020-10/towards_innovation_in_online_public_deliberation.pdf

The Programme

To this end, Rethinking Public Dialogue funded nine pilot projects – administered and evaluated by the RSA – to test innovative forms of public engagement, to improve our understanding of these techniques and the contexts in which they are effective, and promote them to research funders, policymakers, and public engagement practitioners. Pilot programmes were required to demonstrate at least one of the following:

- **Scaled engagement** to reach a wider/larger audience than is typically possible through public dialogue

- **Novel approaches to understanding online debate**

- **Informal engagement** to reach new audiences outside of formal processes and institutions

- **Bottom-up engagement** that grants participants greater control over the agenda

- **Inclusive engagement** approaches that better engage hard-to-reach groups

From the 193 applications, the RSA managed the tender process and selected nine pilots, each of which received £60k of funding (in certain cases supplemented by match-funding and/or in-kind support). Projects ran between August 2022 to July 2023, including planning, recruitment, delivery, and evaluation, with the RSA providing support to generate insights about the effectiveness of innovative engagement.

The Pilot Projects

Nine pilot programmes were selected, covering a range of themes and modes of engagement. The table below summarises the focus, content, and outputs of each pilot, with the relevant engagement strand(s) highlighted in blue. Further information can be found in Appendix 1.

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
DICEY	Building a Green Future		■		■	

The DiCEY project, led by the University of York and University College London, engaged 85 young people in discussions about climate interventions and the government's climate response. Participants created their own questions and interact-ed with scientists and policymakers through workshops using 'public switching' and 'climate question' cards. These work-shops focused on broad social and ethical concerns, emphasising how climate action can foster a more equitable world. DiCEY successfully empowered young people, promoting inclusive dialogue, with the climate question cards becoming a key tool for ongoing education and engagement in climate science communication.

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
FUTURE FRIDGE	Building a Green Future	■	■		■	

The Future Fridge project, led by Imperial College London, created an interactive fridge model to engage 180 participants in informal dialogues about eco-friendly food choices. Developed with The Liminal Space and Nourish Hub, the prototype helped participants understand the link between food choices, energy demand, and climate change. Discussions revealed priorities and trade-offs, including those between nutrition, cost, and convenience. By embedding these conversations with-in social activities and meals, the project fostered an inclusive, non-hierarchical atmosphere, enabling accessible, non-technical discussions, especially for non-English speakers and those less confident in public speaking.

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
LEVERAGING THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM	Securing Better Health, Ageing and Wellbeing	■	■		■	

The University of Bath's Leveraging the Neurodiversity Paradigm project explored public perceptions of neurodiversity using data scraping and machine learning on over 10,000 participants' online dialogues from Twitter and Prolific. This approach captured organic and structured perspectives, providing insights for developing policies aligned with neurodivergent peo-ple's preferences. Neurodivergent researchers played a crucial role, enriching the project's analysis and communication. By comparing dialogues across platforms, the project achieved a comprehensive understanding of public sentiment, setting a new standard for inclusive research on complex topics like neurodiversity.

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
MEK WI TALK	Creating Opportunities and Improving Outcomes		■	■	■	

The Mek Wi Talk project, led by Ubele, used art to inspire public discussions about the future of Black leadership. Through painting, sculpture, and participatory art, the initiative engaged Black leaders, community members, activists, and artists in envisioning diverse possibilities for Black leadership. By fostering dialogue across cultural and political di-vides, the project showcased art's power to spark thought and inspire action. Mek Wi Talk highlighted the potential of art as an inclusive and transformative tool for creating new narratives and driving meaningful discussions about leadership.

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
MINDSET REVOLUTION	Securing Better Health, Ageing and Wellbeing		■	■	■	

Mindset Revolution, led by the University of Birmingham, engaged 22 young co-designers in reshaping youth mental health dialogue through creative, community-driven methods. A highlight was Legislative Theatre, where youths developed a play to facilitate discussions with policymakers. Digital participation was encouraged via the Decidim platform, allowing youths to contribute to its development. Discussions centred on improving access to mental health services, integrating them into schools, and ensuring youth-specific needs are addressed in training. The project's focus on autonomy and inclusivity empowered participants and fostered dynamic, youth-led contributions to mental health policy.

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
REBOOTING ONLINE PUBLIC DIALOGUE	Creating Opportunities and Improving Outcomes	■			■	

The Rebooting Online Public Dialogue project, led by Involve and the University of Southampton, explored innovative meth-ods for public discussion on sentencing policy with 28 participants. Key tools included collaborative argument mapping, topic modelling, and gamification, which helped depersonalize debates and reduce confrontational aspects. This approach fostered scaled, inclusive dialogue and offered insights into balancing rational and emotional responses in public opinion. Participants supported public input into criminal justice policy, though not directly into sentencing, and provided recom-mendations to enhance public engagement and understanding of the system.

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
SEND INCLUSION CITIZEN PANEL	Securing Better Health, Ageing and Wellbeing/ Creating Opportunities				■	

The SEND Inclusion Citizen Panel, led by the University of Exeter and the University of Portsmouth, aimed to improve school inclusivity for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The project involved 28 partici-pants in a two-phase process: online co-production workshops with SEND students and their families, followed by a citi-zen panel including peers without SEND and education professionals. This approach generated practical ideas, such as better teacher training in neurodiversity and creating wellbeing spaces in schools, demonstrating the value of combining co-production and citizen panels to foster effective public dialogue on inclusive education.

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
TALKING TRIALS	Securing Better Health, Ageing and Wellbeing		■	■	■	

The Talking Trials project, led by Cardiff University, aimed to address health inequalities in minority ethnic communities by focusing on clinical trial inclusivity. Engaging 18 participants, the project used participatory art and deliberative de-mocracy to empower them as 'co-researchers.' Through eight co-production workshops, participants, including those with limited English, expressed complex ideas and identified barriers to research inclusivity. Their recommendations included creating community advisory panels, providing cultural awareness training, and adapting consent processes. The project's success sparked interest in forming a long-term community-based health research advisory group for ongoing public dia-logue.

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
TIME IS ON MY SIDE	Creating Opportunities and Improving Outcomes	■				■

The Time is on My Side project, led by the National Centre for Social Research with King's College London and Stanford University, explored the impact of dialogue length on participant experience and opinion change. Focusing on the UK in-come gap, 200 participants engaged in AI-moderated discussions lasting 75 to 165 minutes on the Stanford Online De-liberation Platform. Post-dialogue surveys and AI analysis revealed that longer discussions led to greater opinion changes and increased uncertainty, though all groups effectively engaged with evidence. Participants appreciated AI moderation, demonstrating its potential for facilitating structured online discussions on complex topics.

Findings

In this section, each engagement strand is taken in turn, describing how each relates to and extends more traditional dialogue approaches. We share key learnings and outcomes that emerged from projects within the strand, as well as any new challenges that were identified in the process of trialling the innovation. A key purported benefit of public dialogue is its positive impact on research and policymaking; for each strand, we therefore briefly demonstrate how its novelty helped to surface new perspectives, insights and/or solutions on relevant policy challenges.[6]

Novel approaches to understanding online debate

In today's digital age, the ubiquity of online communication has transformed public discourse, making online forums key arenas for policy dialogues. Inevitably, any issue we could wish to pursue through traditional public dialogue is already being discussed in online public fora. As such, the novel approaches to understanding online debate engagement strand was established to explore ways that such existing dialogue could be examined.

Such approaches, however, do require specific technical and methodological skill in natural language processing techniques. The Leveraging the Neurodiversity Paradigm project was the only project to develop an approach to interpreting existing online dialogue, by unobtrusively capturing and analysing social media data.

However, the project team noted that the user population, functionality, and overall 'feel' of social media platforms have a profound effect on the tone and civility of dialogue, with multiple issues around Twitter/X as a means of public dialogue, it is not optimised for accessibility, uses algorithms that reinforce biases (e.g. is more likely to suggest

content that aligns with a user's views/beliefs), and impedes deliberation with character limits. Although such social media platforms can provide a window into existing dialogues about particular topics, they are not necessarily developed in such a way as to promote high-quality dialogue between different actors on complex issues. As the project lead put it:

"When neurodiversity and more generally EDI are concerned, where you're looking at that diversity of views, then I think it would be challenging to achieve that with a single online tool." - Leveraging the Neurodiversity Paradigm Project Lead.

Nevertheless, public dialogue must move with the times and we live in a world where opinions on various topics are posted to social media sites with increasing frequency. In light of these trends, public dialogue practitioners should seek to triangulate the results of traditional public dialogue with social media data and other data scraping techniques (e.g. newspaper data) to embed an understanding of the wider discourses surrounding a topic at a given time. This kind of approach follows the example set by Rebooting Online Public Dialogue which integrated social media topic modelling with an online public dialogue to show the range of other perspectives being expressed (see Appendix 1).

POLICY INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Leveraging the Neurodiversity Paradigm approach proved effective in reaching a group that may face particular barriers to participation in public dialogue processes and may otherwise be excluded from policy discussions. 86% of neurodivergent participants preferred online to in-person dialogue methods and general participation in research studies.

This approach helped to surface and better understand new perspectives to inform decision-making and service delivery. The analysis found, for instance, that while much of the discourse around neurodiversity treats it as a social phenomenon, biological differences relating to neurodiversity should

not be shied away from in policy and/or clinical discourse, despite an understandable reluctance to invoke these. The project hypothesised that this is partly due to practitioners lacking knowledge of neurodiversity. The project team has used their work as part of Rethinking Public Dialogue to secure an ESRC grant to explore these issues further.

"It's [seen as] more of a socially constructed sort of concept. But actually, when you look at what people are saying, […] a lot of people do want to brand neurodiversity [in terms of] neurological differences [and] brain differences. You know, people talk about the brain, and they see they want to ground their experiences in the brain and within biology." - Leveraging the Neurodiversity Paradigm Project Lead

Scaled Engagement

One of the primary drawbacks of traditional public dialogue is that it is resource-intensive and thus it is difficult to reach large numbers of participants cost-effectively. As such, several funded projects used different approaches to explore how it might be possible to expand public dialogue engagements to larger audiences to generate more data with less input from practitioners (whether before, during, or after the dialogue). Such methods might mitigate against policymakers' aversion to small sample sizes and open the possibility of integrating public dialogue into the policy cycle within shorter timescales.

Time is on My Side demonstrated the benefits of scaled engagement in two distinct ways: firstly, it used a scaled-up form of short, sharp public dialogue and, secondly, it demonstrated the efficacy of AI moderation, which was viewed positively by participants.

Scaled engagements also demonstrated great adaptability. Rebooting Online Public Dialogue, for example, aimed to test its platform and did not have a theme in mind at the beginning of the pilot. Instead, the project team took direction from the Justice Select Committee as to the theme of their dialogue - in this case sentencing of offenders. As

such, the pilot acted as a proof of concept and as a chance to research the efficacy of the platform, but, more than that, it demonstrated the ability of the project team to respond quickly to identified gaps by working collaboratively with partners with different but complementary agendas:

"We put together a team of practitioners, researchers, developers that generally are three groups of people that speak different languages. Rebooting Democracy [the Southampton project which dovetailed with this one] is actually a project that would like to merge this type of knowledge and languages. This was one of the first times that we did it, in a time-stressed situation, and it worked!" - (Rebooting Online Public Dialogue Project Lead)

Delivering scaled engagement does not necessarily mean, however, that remote methods must be used. For example, the Future Fridge project used an interactive installation that allowed project teams to showcase research to almost 200 members of the public. This sample was comparatively very large amongst other non-remote Rethinking Public Dialogue projects.

One way to consider what underpinned the success of scaled engagements was the relative trade-off between time spent on facilitation, participant recruitment, and analysis. In scaled projects, some aspect of one or more of these is made significantly more efficient.

POLICY INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This strand aimed primarily to overcome perceived shortcomings of traditional public dialogue approaches concerning representativeness and the diversity of voices that could be engaged at any one time. Examples like Future Fridge and Time is on My Side successfully engaged upwards of 180 participants — far in excess of what traditional public dialogue approaches might manage. However, there is a potential trade-off between the number of people engaged and the depth of their input; it may therefore be prudent to couple such approaches with more deliberative elements. These findings open up a larger conversation

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6   As most pilots cut across different strands, policy insights and recommendations are attributed to each strand at the discretion of the evaluators, where they (and/or pilot teams) have judged that a novel insight can be attributed to a feature of the relevant strand.

about the relative value of large-scale survey methodologies and smaller public dialogue approaches. In the case of Rebooting Online Public Dialogue the process of deliberation helped to develop new insights and policy proposals. This kind of outcome is simply not possible through survey methods because of the necessity of limiting respondents to differentiating and/or showing strength of agreement between a range of predefined answers.

Bottom-Up Engagement

In traditional public dialogue approaches, the topic of deliberation is typically determined by the organisers or sponsors of the dialogue, such as government bodies, research institutions, or other entities with specific interests. These organisations set the agenda, frame the issues for discussion, and guide the dialogue process. In contrast, a bottom-up approach to public dialogue shifts the power dynamics by giving participants themselves a significant role in determining the topics of deliberation. This approach is more participant-driven, allowing for a broader range of issues to be brought to the table, often reflecting the participants' direct interests, concerns, and lived experiences.

Projects delivering against the bottom-up strand worked within communities with the primary goal of building capacity so that future policy agendas could be led by communities. Projects were not necessarily fixated on delivering immediate policy-focused outputs or outcomes, but rather aimed to work towards developing mechanisms for participants to set the policy agenda over much longer timeframes. Mindset Revolution is an example of how this work achieves outcomes and impacts across a much broader timeframe than the programme evaluation could capture. Outcomes such as learning new skills in media production may seem only peripherally related to a policy agenda, but are outcomes that will facilitate future dialogue with 'harder-to-engage' groups:

"…we're following where young people lead and giving our results a clearer foundation. This has

also allowed for new scope – for example, our podcast came out of the research group's discussions on why youth voice mattered and was not part of the original planning. Working on that podcast has led to some valuable discussions (which were highlighted by many members of the research group as one of the more valued aspects of the work, allowing for learning from and connecting with people of different experiences) and some developing skills – the editing, scripting, and recording was all done by us." - Mindset Revolution Organisational Participant

This "embedded" approach seeks to effect lasting change by going beyond engaging individuals and instead attempting to build capacity in advocacy organisations that have greater reach and scope for sustained engagement with relevant issues across multiple policy cycles:

"It's the relationships - it doesn't matter how shiny the project is, it's the relationships that keep people coming back" - Mindset Revolution Partner

Project participants were enthusiastic about being able to inform the research and policy decisions that were relevant to their personal circumstances. The result was better engagement and motivation:

"I really enjoy working with people who have like a similar vision, as to what I want to change in mental health and policymaking around mental health […] We've made some really significant and important pieces and reflections which reflect a range of different marginalized voices. And I hope that we can continue to advocate for everybody's mental health measures in place, policies." - Mindset Revolution Participant

DiCEY used methods that allowed young people to develop the questions that they wished climate experts to interact with and answer. Participants felt enriched by the chance to converse on an equal footing with subject-

matter experts and policymakers involved in the dialogue. This approach – stimulating open discussion between peers, experts, and policymakers – also appeared to avoid polarising participants with opposing views and helped to build understanding and consensus:

"I feel like if I can like have more conversation with people from different aspects like science and policymakers it would be better to help me understand this topic in the more detailed way." - DiCEY Participant

Traditional public dialogues are necessarily limited by the imaginations of those who can afford to fund such exercises and indeed what often goes unquestioned is whether the policy issues they present matter to 'real' people. Bottom-up approaches like the ones described 'flip the script' and force policymakers and scientists to attend to issues that matter to people. This marks a significant shift in how policy dialogues are conceived and executed. DiCEY Participants appreciated this sense of control and specifically recommended greater democratisation of research and decision-making so that science and policy are better informed by the needs of society.

POLICY INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Bottom-up engagement afforded participants' views and experiences parity of esteem with the technical knowledge of subject-matter experts. By giving the affected group a greater degree of agenda-setting power, conversations focused on the areas they deemed most pressing.

In the case of DiCEY, this helped to surface novel perspectives and latent concerns that may otherwise not have emerged. This included concerns that young people held around climate intervention technologies, and surfaced common themes like the role of education and campaigns, considerations relating to climate justice and climate conflict, and how climate action could be geared towards building a better world. Mindset Revolution, similarly, used a survey of young people across Greater Manchester to identify the most urgent challenges in youth

mental health and to propose solutions. This raised new perspectives such as scepticism shown by young people towards mindfulness and challenges faced by specific groups, including a perceived lack of understanding of, and sensitivity to, different cultural and religious backgrounds in the support provided by mental health services. These issues were then discussed and refined through online dialogues, resulting in practical recommendations including improving access to young people's mental health services through a greater and more varied provision in schools, ensuring access without a formal diagnosis, and integrating delivery; a greater role for young people in co-developing training for service providers; and foregrounding mental health in schools (and wider public services including the police) through wider training for teachers and staff.

Consequently, these discussions were judged by practitioners and evaluators to be informed, detailed, and specific. This control over framing also allowed participants to widen the scope of discussion, and to identify systemic – rather than technical – fixes to challenges (such as wider changes to improve wellbeing in schools, rather than actions targeted at specific groups).

"I've been really happy and impressed by the appreciation of the complexity of the issue. It's not that there is a silver bullet and that's right across the room; everybody really gets that these are difficult decisions and there are trade-offs to make in actions we choose to take, there are risks. But as long as we're having these conversations we can help to get to the decision." – Climate Scientist Who Took Part in DiCEY

Informal Engagement

Unlike traditional methods, informal engagement seeks to take conversations into everyday spaces, where people naturally find themselves, to make dialogue more accessible and relatable. Such a shift promises to capture diverse voices and perspectives, bridging the gap between policymakers and the public dynamically and inclusively.

Importantly, informal engagement often employed more creative methods as opposed to verbal

argumentation or opinion sharing. For instance, Talking Trials created an innovative material and social legacy: the participants' artworks serve as a material legacy and record of the dialogues, and the continuing networking and other activities act as a social one.

Similarly, by taking public dialogue outside of a formal 'academic environment' into a familiar context, participants gained and offered new insights to researchers:

"The conversation would have been different [in an academic setting]. I don't think they would have been so candid...It wouldn't have been conducive to having those very frank and open, honest, soul-searching conversations that we had where people feel relaxed from the onset because it's a familiar environment."
- Talking Trials Project Lead

Informality in the context of dialogue worked by breaking down formal roles so that participants could develop ownership over the agenda, as well as encouraging experimentation, exploration, and openness, particularly through creative activities.

"It's like there's a freedom. So there's no expectation. I find in the group, you're free to speak your thoughts and to show your artistic endeavours. It's a safe space. So you sort of control it without actually controlling it which is brilliant. So, the artistic creative way is a safe way for us to talk about something that is hard and difficult and where there are differences. It levels us"- Talking Trials Participant

Funding that supports innovation can therefore offer flexibility to programmes where informal methods directly develop new approaches to cooperation. The Future Fridge project exemplified the benefits of informality. The partnership with the local food hub allowed public engagement with research at a different pace and schedule than might have been possible in a university setting:
"We had the opportunity to be there during Nourish Hub's breakfast and lunch time

openings, when people weren't expecting us to be there and weren't necessarily interested in the science, didn't necessarily want to talk to researchers, but then had that opportunity to do so. And some of them chose not to, but some of them did." - Future Fridge Project Lead

Furthermore, the tactile and experiential nature of the project offered a novel mode of engagement, which in turn led to novel outcomes:

"It prompts conversations that you just couldn't predict. As long as you've got the content right, so that it keeps things on track and the conversation isn't becoming too broad, it's still relevant to the topic, but it can be taken in all sorts of different directions." - Future Fridge Project Lead

The power of informal engagement, as evidenced by the Talking Trials and Future Fridge projects, is in its utility to transcend traditional settings and methods. By making use of safe, familiar spaces, like cafes or community centres where participants can feel more secure, this approach fosters a more genuine, candid exchange of ideas and perspectives, often missing in formal environments — especially if those environments have been historically unwelcoming to particular groups. The success of these projects underscores the value of embedding public dialogue in community contexts and recognising the variety of what could be considered an output (e.g. physical artefacts as opposed to written text). This not only enhances participant engagement but also encourages a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the dialogue process.

POLICY INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The informal engagement strand allowed for a free-flowing discussion — mirroring the casual and/or unstructured nature of the engagement — that surfaced novel insights and perspectives of (more or less direct) relevance to policy. There is evident overlap with 'bottom-up' engagement, with both allowing (whether formally or informally) for dialogue to flow in unexpected directions. Talking Trials explicitly coupled informal and

bottom-up engagement. This exploratory, participatory art model helped minority ethnic participants who might otherwise face language barriers and generated a range of recommendations for clinical trial units (CTUs) and researcher practitioners. These included setting up community advisory panels to provide ongoing input into the research process, delivering cultural awareness training to researchers, and tailoring consent processes to participants' needs, values, and beliefs.

A degree further removed from direct policy design, Future Fridge's relaxed and discursive setting helped to surface perspectives and underlying views by which to improve policymakers' understanding of the context and/or manner in which people make decisions about food and nutrition, and around which to shape effective policy. These included perceptions of a trade-off between personal finance, nutrition/health, and climate change (in which cost was often prioritised), as well as (mis)trust of novel lab-grown meat and the profit-motive of its producers.

Inclusive Engagement

All projects involved some form of inclusive engagement which, if generally representative of public dialogue research, indicates that there are a wide range of methods available to develop a more inclusive approach to public dialogue. A core aspect of inclusive engagement emphasised by the data is that when research participants feel confident and believe that their opinion matters, they contribute more actively to public dialogue.

"It's really nice to have scientists, education, people that understand policy, and everyone in the room to discuss...I think more should be done like this...it's feeling like I'm part of a community of people doing the work; as scientists...even though you're in a research group you'll feel like you're in isolation...it's really nice to feel that people have the same sentiment and want to have the same outlook, especially young people. It made me feel a little bit more warm and like I'm not alone."
- DiCEY Participant

All but two Rethinking Public Dialogue projects focused on a specified underserved community which suggests that inclusivity was conceptualised in projects as bringing in previously excluded voices. This had two main effects. Firstly, it created a sense of shared identity which helped participants to feel relaxed and comfortable with one another, making them more open about their experiences and opinions. Secondly, the personal relevance of the topic meant participants had clear (and often strong) views about it which they were keen to share, especially as they had a sense that the dialogue would result in tangible changes which would benefit people like them.

"The day was great. I was able to have deeper conversations about what it means to be a Black person in our society, how others feel about this experience, and what we can do to improve the Black experience for the present and future day."
- Mek Wi Talk Participant

The SEND Citizen Jury pilot involved children with and without Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) as well as their parents so that they could engage directly with their regional decision-makers on education policy. The research team designed the engagement to be inclusive for all, ensuring there were no barriers to participation for people with special educational needs (and their carers). A member of the team described their approach as follows:

"If you're bringing [young people with SEND] into this kind of process, then you've got to start creating the right environment and the right tone and that feeling of being listened to and being safe." - SEND Member of Project Delivery Team

Other projects were inclusive for some, but not all, participants. For example, DiCEY engaged young people in an area (climate science) they would not usually be included in, which was appreciated by this participant:

"It was just really cool experience, like, I'm so excited to be able to share it with, like my old teachers and my friends like yeah, because it's just like, especially when we get the physical cards. It will be like, Oh, my God! I remember

talking about this. So I remember saying this, and it's me, and it's my work. And I think, you know, I'm 19. I haven't really had that sort of opportunity before." - <u>DiCEY Participant on Being Included</u>

However, participation in DiCEY required verbal communication skills and aptitude, as well as access to online platforms, meaning it did not take a similarly "inclusive for all" approach. Conversely, practitioners should note that making dialogues inclusive for some may change the experience for others:

"We had taken a standard approach to public dialogue, and we had to adapt it to make sure that it was inclusive for the people with special educational needs. But that meant that there were trade-offs, which meant that the experience of some of the participants who didn't have special educational needs might have been not what it would have been if we had just used the standard format for the panel" - <u>SEND Inclusion Citizen Panel</u>

Creative, visual, and material 'props' were used in several Rethinking Public Dialogue projects. Material outputs achieved a more inclusive dialogue by helping people to express themselves without speaking formally (or speaking at all); this was particularly valuable for participants with low confidence and/or limited English or who simply preferred other ways of expressing their views.

"For those who were a little shy, or who didn't have English as a first language, [the Future Fridge] allowed them to still be part of that conversation and part of that dialogue, but also perhaps then to develop the confidence to start talking to our researchers once they'd had a look at the fridge".
- <u>Future Fridge Project Lead</u>

"Legislative theatre was particularly good to engage young people that might not feel comfortable in a meeting. Some of them might have difficulties reading and writing but they still have a lot of things to say, a lot of really

important insights. Using your body, your emotions, it's very powerful for everyone, but it's also much more inclusive for people that might feel intimidated in a room where the means of communication is rational argument." - <u>Mindset Revolution</u>

Overall, those delivering or commissioning public dialogues will need to consider how a range of voices can be included in the policy process. In particular, there is always a need to balance having a broad cross-section of opinion and inviting in lived experience of the matter at hand. A variety of approaches will be optimal in any given context but what seems crucial from the projects discussed here is that there is a sound rationale underpinning who is included.

POLICY INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusive engagement proved effective in eliciting high-quality policy insights in light of participants' lived experiences. A key commonality across the pilots relating to this strand was an explicit awareness and appreciation among participants that they were being actively included. This signalled that their input was valued and meant that they were more proactive and confident in feeding into discussions. This was particularly pronounced in cases where a pilot specifically sought under-represented populations affected by the topic at hand. In such cases, participants' lived experience and stake gave them both the confidence and incentive to share insights and suggestions. However, it also led to a degree of frustration from some participants at the limited impact over policy that they could exert in practice.
The SEND Inclusion Citizen Jury, for instance, advanced recommendations to make schools more inclusive of and sensitive to students with SEND, including better training for teachers in neurodiversity and pupils' associated pedagogical needs. Specifically, participants advocated for general changes to schools making them smaller, more person-centred, and adaptable while also focussing on dignified specialist provision. Project teams noted that several other recommendations — including dedicated 'wellbeing spaces' in schools, teaching life skills, and making time to build better student-teacher relationships — may have wider-reaching impacts beyond the target population.

Reflections

As expected, the pilot projects appeared to enhance public engagement. These novel methods proved effective at eliciting informed input based on participants' lived experiences, surfacing novel perspectives, and granting insight into participants' underlying beliefs, values, and concerns. There is therefore evident scope for these methods to add value in policymaking and service design, either directly, by soliciting and generating recommendations informed by deliberation, evidence, and lived experience, or indirectly, by improving policymakers' understanding of people's latent preferences.

We identify two broad models in novel forms of public dialogue. Innovative methods build on established models by accelerating, creating efficiencies in, or otherwise distilling lengthy processes, and efficiently surface valuable insights and practical recommendations on specific issues. Critical models, in contrast, challenge hierarchies between researchers and participants, and are characterised by networking, longer-term capacity building, and co-productive outcomes.

Key innovations under the former model included new efficiencies in the (otherwise costly/lengthy) facilitation and analysis of discussions by adopting AI and technology. Relevant pilots saw no apparent fall in the quality of deliberations, while also establishing safe and depersonalised platforms in which to express views and reasoning about a topic. These pilots have highlighted further areas for research in relation to the efficacy of automated qualitative coding and the potential methodological trade-offs this entails.

In contrast, the critical model characterised itself very differently, aimed at building capacity within a certain cohort of people and fostering greater democratic participation. This should be viewed as representing a second strand of Public Dialogue research characterised by networking, capacity building, and co-production, and ensures a greater future appetite and capability for meaningful public dialogue as and when opportunities arise. Project teams did, however, urge caution, noting that participants could not be guaranteed any influence over policy.

Recommendations

This evaluation has demonstrated that all of the experimental approaches funded through Rethinking Public Dialogue have value in research and policymaking. A key learning is that further work is required to tackle barriers to participation in traditional public dialogue where most activities rely on physical (or synchronous) attendance and verbal argumentation, which may not be possible or appealing to many. Overall, we advocate that further attention be paid, and practitioners learn from, the widening participation through hybrid models of delivery and artistic forms of expression exemplified here. Based on the findings of the evaluation we make four high-level recommendations across two domains, namely encouraging further methodological innovation and opening up more funding for critical public dialogue.

Pilot projects have shown that these novel approaches to public dialogue were effective at eliciting practical policy recommendations, and/or surfacing new perspectives and insights by which to devise effective policy. Specific recommendations from each pilot have served as examples through this evaluation, of the value that such approaches can add, and a fuller account of these can be found in pilot projects' respective outputs. Our own recommendations aim to inform further innovation and good practice in public dialogue, reflecting our learnings from this pilot and new knowledge gaps that have become apparent in the process.

Methodological Innovation

1. Make triangulation the new methodological norm in public dialogue:

Projects in the Rethinking Public Dialogue programme have shown very clearly that bringing together a range of different kinds of data is both possible and desirable in a public dialogue i.e. bringing together social media data with in-person or online dialogues. Such triangulation makes results more robust and creates important methodological bridges across qualitative and quantitative analytical techniques which has the added benefit of furnishing greater interdisciplinary collaboration. Further research into the relative contributions and trade-offs of different approaches to public dialogue would support practitioners to find optimal combinations.

2. Explore automation trade-offs and spillovers in scaled engagement:

As has been shown here Public Dialogues can already be scaled to very large samples, but such scaling inevitably entails automating one or more of recruitment, facilitation, or analysis. It is critical to understand how automating these processes changes what we learn from public dialogues. We advocate for specific studies which compare the results of automated and manual approaches in various dialogue contexts. For instance, algorithmic coding of qualitative data may miss certain nuances such as pop culture phrases or other subject-specific language that would be easily understood by human coders. As the likelihood of automating large-scale public dialogues increases, so too should our ability to make the best use of the data and of participant time.

Funding Critical Public Dialogue

3. Fund delivery partnerships and coalitions:

Projects funded under Rethinking Public Dialogue expressed a desire to redefine public engagement away from an unethical "asset stripping" of participants in order to validate decisions largely already taken by experts, or at least where decision parameters had already been defined by experts. Relationship building emerged as a key tactic and a legitimate end in itself so that projects could demonstrate best practice. This might take the

form of specific capacity-building grants and/or longer-term funding horizons with a greater focus on more experimental-oriented funding, and more inter-project networking.

4. Fund communities to lead and set the agenda:

It is notable that in this programme of funding all but one of the lead organisations is a university. Where projects developed critical approaches to Public Dialogue they were inevitably partnered with community organisations. This provides a window into the approaches that communities themselves might develop if they were directly trusted with the relevant funding. We encourage funders of public dialogue to be more ambitious in engaging communities directly to deliver the work which is often predicated on their lived experiences.

Pilot Summaries

Applicants were asked to design their projects around one or more of five engagement strands:

- **Scaled engagement.** Testing new methods and tools that allow large numbers of people from diverse backgrounds to be involved; scaling engagement in this way means that a wider range of ideas, perspectives, and lived experiences are encompassed.

- **Novel approaches to understanding online debate.** Approaches which capture and analyse people's online behaviour and discussions, with the option of combining these with more traditional engagement methods.

- **Informal engagement.** Methods using informal and unstructured forms of engagement that take place in public spaces beyond formal institutions to reach new audiences and capture and represent their views in new and useful ways.

- **Bottom-up engagement.** Methods that give people more power to set the agenda, are sensitive to power imbalances, and are conscious of not imposing framings or ways of thinking onto participants.

- **Inclusive engagement.** Testing new ways to improve inclusion and build participation among people from different backgrounds, needs, and abilities; this reflects that many existing public dialogue methods and tools favour those with specific skills or resources, and do not take active steps to mitigate against both pre-existing inequalities and inequalities that emerge as a result of methodological decisions.

TABLE 1 PROVIDES A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECTS, A DETAILED ACCOUNT IS AVAILABLE IN APPENDIX 1

PROJECT	THEME	SCALED	INFORMAL	BOTTOM UP	INCLUSIVE	ONLINE
DICEY	Building a Green Future		■		■	
FUTURE FRIDGE	Building a Green Future	■	■		■	
MEK WI TALK	Creating Opportunities and Improving Outcomes		■	■		
MINDSET REVOLUTION	Securing Better Health, Ageing and Wellbeing		■	■	■	
REBOOTING ONLINE PUBLIC DIALOGUE	Creating Opportunities and Improving Outcomes	■				
SEND INCLUSION CITIZEN PANEL	Securing Better Health, Ageing and Wellbeing/ Creating Opportunities				■	
TALKING TRIALS	Securing Better Health, Ageing and Wellbeing		■	■	■	
TIME IS ON MY SIDE	Creating Opportunities and Improving Outcomes	■				■

Project Approaches and Outcomes in Brief

This section briefly sets non-exhaustive snapshots of each pilot project, their main focus and novelty, and their impacts on participants and the process relative to the programme's and pilot's aims. This section seeks to provide background information on each intervention to aid the reader through more analytical sections of the report.

DiCEY (Dialogue in Climate Engineering with Youth):
DiCEY, a project led by the University of York and University College London, engaged 85 young people in dialogues about climate interventions, addressing their concerns about the government's response to climate change. The project enabled participants to create their own questions and engage directly with scientists and policymakers, using 'public switching' and 'climate question' cards. Workshops facilitated question formulation, focusing on broad social and ethical issues rather than technical aspects. These surfaced underlying concerns and priorities, including how climate action can help to build a better, more equitable world, and how education and campaigns can help bring the public along on this journey. DiCEY was successful in empowering young people and promoting inclusive dialogue with experts. The climate question cards, blending art and discussion, emerged as a key legacy, aiding in further dialogue and education in climate science communication.

Future Fridge:
The Future Fridge project, spearheaded by Imperial College London, created an interactive 'future fridge' model to facilitate informal dialogues about environmentally friendly food choices among approximately 180 participants. This prototype, designed in collaboration with The Liminal Space and Nourish Hub, was a critical tool in helping participants understand the complex issue of food choice, especially in relation to energy demand and climate change. The discussions surfaced valuable perspectives by which to design an effective strategy, including the relative trade-offs and prioritisation between nutrition, cost, and convenience. By embedding the dialogue in social activities and meals, the project achieved an inclusive atmosphere, enabling non-hierarchical and non-technical discussions that were accessible to a diverse audience, including those less confident in public speaking or non-English speakers.

The partnership with the Nourish Hub was particularly beneficial, providing valuable insights into designing and delivering effective engagement strategies and contributing expert knowledge on food choices. This collaboration underscored the importance of deep, sustained relationships with community partners for meaningful engagement. The 'future fridge' itself was instrumental in breaking the ice and providing a focal point for discussions, making complex topics more approachable and structuring informal interactions. Overall, the project demonstrated the power of interactive artefacts and community partnerships in fostering engaging and accessible dialogues on critical environmental issues.

Leveraging the Neurodiversity Paradigm:
The University of Bath led the Leveraging the Neurodiversity Paradigm project, revealing insights about public perceptions of neurodiversity through innovative methods involving over 10,000 participants. The project team applied data scraping and machine learning techniques to analyse naturally occurring online public dialogues on neurodiversity from Twitter and structured input from Prolific, a platform used in research participant recruitment. This methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of public sentiment, capturing both the unfiltered discussions on social media and more structured responses. This raised novel and organic perspectives from the relevant community by which to develop interventions and policies, including on the basis of neurodivergent people's preferences and priorities.

A key strength of the project was its inclusivity, with neurodivergent researchers playing a pivotal role in the team. Their involvement not only enriched the project's perspective but also streamlined communication and analytical processes, demonstrating the value of neurodiverse teams in research. Additionally, the project's use of multiple digital platforms allowed for a robust comparison of dialogues, overcoming the limitations of any single platform. The project's success in engaging a large and diverse participant pool, coupled with its novel use of digital tools and inclusive team composition, sets a new standard for understanding and facilitating public dialogue on complex and sensitive topics like neurodiversity.

Mek Wi Talk:
The Mek Wi Talk project, led by Ubele, was designed to encourage public discussion on the future of Black leadership through art. This initiative utilized transformative scenarios and participatory art to engage Black leaders and community members in envisioning multiple possibilities for Black leadership. The project incorporated various forms of art, such as painting and sculpture, to enhance discussion processes and create new narratives about Black leadership. By engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, including community activists and artists, the project used art as a means to spark thought, inspire action, and bridge cultural and political differences. This project demonstrated the potential of art as an inclusive and impactful medium for dialogue.

Mindset Revolution:
Mindset Revolution, led by the University of Birmingham, engaged young people in reshaping dialogue on youth mental health. The project emphasised participatory scrutiny, allowing 22 young co-designers to influence mental health policies through creative and community-embedded methods. A key feature was Legislative Theatre, enabling young people to develop a play on mental health, facilitating inclusive dialogues with policymakers. Additionally, digital participation was fostered through the Decidim platform, where young people creatively contributed to platform development. Discussions focused on ways to improve young people's access to mental health services, better integrating this in schools and wider public services, and ensuring young people's specific needs are included in training. The project's focus on autonomy and capacity building empowered participants, while flexible participation methods enhanced inclusivity. Overall, Mindset Revolution stands out for its innovative combination of Legislative Theatre and digital participation, creating a dynamic and inclusive environment that empowers young voices in shaping mental health policy.

Rebooting Online Public Dialogue:
The Rebooting Online Public Dialogue project, led by Involve and the University of Southampton, tested innovative methods for public dialogue on sentencing policy in the criminal justice system with 28 participants. Key innovations included collaborative argument mapping, topic modelling, and gamification, integrated into a novel online dialogue interface. The project was notable for its effective use of argument mapping, which depersonalised discussions and reduced confrontational elements, making it easier for participants to engage with controversial topics.

The project's approach was found to be effective for scaled engagement and inclusive dialogue, with the potential for further development towards a semi-automated analytic process. This experiment provided insights into the balance between rational and emotional responses in public opinion. Participants supported public input into relevant policy, but not directly into sentencing, and advanced recommendations and insights to improve public understanding and engagement in criminal justice.

SEND Inclusion Citizen Panel:
The SEND Inclusion Citizen Panel, a joint initiative by the University of Exeter and the University of Portsmouth, focused on enhancing school inclusivity for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The project involved 28 participants in a two-phase process: online co-production workshops with young people with SEND and their parents and carers, followed by an inclusive citizen panel that included peers without SEND and education professionals. This approach fostered a comfortable environment for participants to share their views, leading to practical ideas for inclusive education, including better training for teachers in neurodiversity and

establishing wellbeing spaces in schools. The project demonstrated the value of combining coproduction and citizen panels to engage effectively in public dialogue about inclusive education.

Talking Trials: The Talking Trials project, led by Cardiff University in partnership with local community organizations, aimed to address health inequalities in minority ethnic communities by focussing on clinical trials. Engaging 18 participants from ethnic minority backgrounds, the project used participatory art and deliberative democracy to empower participants as 'co-researchers' in health inequalities. The project involved eight co-production workshops where an artist helped participants create visual art, exploring barriers and solutions to health research inclusivity.

This approach enabled participants, including those with limited English, to express complex ideas and gain confidence. As a result, the co-researchers provided valuable recommendations to clinical trial stakeholders on inclusive engagement; these included establishing community advisory panels to provide ongoing input into the research process, delivering cultural awareness training to researchers, and tailoring consent processes to participants' needs, values, and beliefs.

The project's success garnered interest from other researchers and led to the intention to establish an ongoing community-based health research advisory group and an ongoing long-term form of public dialogue. The use of art was crucial in facilitating meaningful dialogue and empowering participants to engage effectively in research discussions.

Time is on My Side: The Time is on My Side project, led by the National Centre for Social Research in partnership with King's College London and Stanford University, investigated the impact of different dialogue lengths on participant experience and opinion change. The focus was on the UK income gap, engaging 200 participants who were divided into four groups, each experiencing dialogues ranging from 75 to 165 minutes on the Stanford Online Deliberation Platform (SODP).

This AI-moderated platform was used to ensure civility and balanced participation, prompting users to consider various arguments. Post-dialogue surveys and AI analysis of dialogue transcripts provided insights into changes in attitudes and dialogue dynamics. The project found that longer dialogues tended to result in more significant opinion changes and increased participant uncertainty. However, all groups effectively engaged with the evidence and felt heard, indicating the potential effectiveness of a compact dialogue model under appropriate conditions. AI moderation was generally well-received, with evidence of participants' ability to self-moderate, suggesting a promising approach for facilitating structured online dialogues on complex policy topics.

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