

Environment Group

Valuing the water environment: An investigation of environmental attitudes and values to inform implementation of the EC Water Framework Directive

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The Scottish Executive commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake qualitative research to gather and explore the opinions and priorities of the Scottish public in regard to the quality of the water environment, and to explore how the public might be effectively engaged in issues about the water environment. The research consisted of seven focus groups with members of the general public and ten in-depth, one-to-one interviews with stakeholders.

MAIN FINDINGS

- The focus group participants echoed the views of most of the stakeholders in that they thought that Scotland has good water quality and little problem with water quantity.
- The main concern of the stakeholders was the effect diffuse pollution has on the water environment. The public also thought that pollution was the biggest threat to the environment, although they focused on point source pollutants such as rubbish.
- In terms of priorities for the water environment, stakeholders highlighted the need to reduce diffuse pollution, while the public prioritised drinking water supply. Both groups felt the worst areas (heavily farmed and urban) should be prioritised.
- The public's reaction to the WFD was generally positive although some concerns were raised. These included the use of vague concepts/jargon, the level of cost involved and whether the WFD would account for local concerns.
- Stakeholders were positive regarding communication and consultation they had received on the WFD. However, views on implementation were mixed: most were positive but others felt it was unnecessary as Scotland's water quality is very good.
- During the focus group discussions, the participants were clearly engaged, interested and happy to discuss the issues for at least an hour and a half suggesting that it should be possible to generate public involvement in WFD. Lessons learnt from this research suggest that meaningful engagement would be at a local level, at an appropriate stage, i.e. when there are specific tangible issues to be discussed rather than more abstract principles, and should be representative of the whole community.

Introduction

The Water Framework Directive (WFD) was passed by the European Union in 2000 and is being implemented in Scotland through the Water Environment and Water Services Act 2003. A key aspect of the WFD is effective public participation and consultation.

The Scottish Executive commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake qualitative research to gather and explore the opinions and priorities of the Scottish public in regard to the quality of the water environment, and to explore how the public might be effectively engaged in issues about the water environment¹.

The research consisted of seven focus groups with members of the general public. To inform these focus groups, ten in-depth, one-to-one interviews were undertaken with stakeholders, who were approached as informed members of the public rather than as representatives of a particular organisation.

Topics covered in the focus groups and interviews included:

- the meanings people attach to the water environment;
- the values attached to its different attributes;
- the public's priorities for service provision, and the factors that affect these priorities;
- methods of how people have been, and should be, consulted in the implementation process.

Water quality and water quantity

The focus group participants echoed the views of most of the stakeholders interviewed in that they thought that Scotland has good water quality – the water to drink in Scotland was thought to be superior to that of other countries and many participants mentioned the quality of lochs, rivers and the coast.

The quantity of water in Scotland was also generally thought to be good by both the public and stakeholders.

¹ This project is the third phase in a programme of research to gauge public awareness and opinion in relation to the water environment. A public attitudes survey and literature review were also published by the Scottish Executive (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Research/Research/17692/SocialResearchPubs/EnvironmentGroup>).

Threats to the water environment

For the stakeholders interviewed, the biggest threat to Scotland's water environment was thought to be pollution, mainly diffuse pollution from farming. Other concerns included abstraction and point source pollution.

The public also felt that pollution was a threat to the water environment, although they rarely mentioned diffuse pollution. Instead, their focus was on point source pollutants such as rubbish. Another concern for the public was over-development, both in terms of the strain on water supply and increased sewage output.

Views on the WFD

Stakeholders were positive regarding communication and consultation on the WFD they had received from the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). However, their views on implementation plans were more mixed: most were positive and particularly welcomed the holistic management of whole river basins and the fact that broad environmental criteria would be taken into account; others felt that, as most of Scotland's water environment is very good, the WFD implementation is unnecessary.

In the focus groups, the public were read a brief description of the WFD and asked for their reaction. They were generally positive as they felt the state of the water environment is important and the WFD should help improve or maintain standards. However, there were a number of concerns:

- some of the concepts used by the WFD, such as "good ecological status", were thought to be vague.
- there were concerns about the costs of implementation.
- although they felt that the WFD was good in principle, there were doubts over how effectively it would be implemented.
- local knowledge of the water environment and local issues were thought to be more important than decisions made in Edinburgh or Brussels.
- there was scepticism over whether other countries would adhere to the legislation to the same extent as Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Priorities for the water environment

Stakeholders highlighted the need to reduce diffuse pollution and many felt that the worst areas (urban and heavily farmed) should be prioritised. When the public were asked for their priorities, two themes emerged: maintaining the drinking water supply and, again, efforts to bring the worst areas up to standard. No clear hierarchy expressing any prioritisation of economic, social or environmental considerations emerged.

A scenarios exercise was used in the focus groups to try to establish the public's priorities for the WFD. While some priorities emerged as a result of this exercise, they were not consistent. Many placed the environment first, while some prioritised other issues such as employment or domestic water supply, depending on the specifics of the scenario.

In discussing the scenarios, what did emerge were priorities for the decision-making process – questioning and clarifying, exploring the possible options, seeking compromise solutions and exploring ways to mitigate effects on disadvantaged parties (such as compensation for farmers). This can be likened to the way in which informed advisory groups decide upon priorities and has positive implications for engaging the public in WFD implementation.

Public involvement

When asked for their expectations of how the public could be engaged with WFD, the stakeholders interviewed anticipated a number of potential challenges:

- a lack of interest among the public;
- the absence of specific plans;
- the scale of current area advisory groups, which were thought to be too large, which might hinder engagement at a meaningful, local level;
- potentially off-putting terminology and a public lack of knowledge;
- how to ensure representative involvement.

Most of the stakeholders' points were borne out by the focus group work – both in terms of what people said in the discussions and the processes of trying to engage people in discussions on the key issues.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the members of the public were all able and willing to talk about the water environment for over an hour in the focus group discussions. This indicates that careful planning and consideration of how the public can be involved in WFD implementation could lead to successful consultation. Important issues regarding public involvement that have emerged during this research are:

- there is potential to build on the importance and pride felt about the quality of Scotland's water.
- there is a need to educate the public (perhaps through awareness raising campaigns) on what constitutes the broader water environment and what, in addition to pollution, can damage it.
- it may be more effective to engage people at the outset by tapping into the existing interest and concern about the environment in general – rather than specifically mentioning the 'water environment'.
- the public should be involved at an appropriate stage – when there are specific, tangible issues to be discussed rather than more abstract principles.

Finally, and most importantly, it is necessary to:

- engage people at a *local* level so that they have an interest in the issues and they can see the actual impact of any improvements.

Conclusion

One of the aims of the research was to explore whether and how the public could be engaged in the ongoing implementation of WFD. The focus group participants were clearly engaged, interested and happy to discuss the issues for at least an hour and a half – suggesting that it is possible to generate public involvement.

However, there are issues that must be considered if public engagement in the WFD is to be successful and take account of local social and economic issues. In particular, meaningful engagement would be at a local level, at an appropriate stage, i.e. when there are specific tangible issues to be discussed rather than more abstract principles, and should be representative of the whole community.

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The report, "Valuing the Water Environment: An investigation of environmental attitudes and values to inform implementation of the EC Water Framework Directive", which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the publications pages of the Scottish Executive website at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/Recent>

This document (and other Research Findings and Reports) and information about social research in the Scottish Executive may be viewed on the Internet at:

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