Leaving Lockdown Public Debate

Rapid, online deliberation on COVID-19 technologies

Exploring issues of privacy, trust, community, and human rights

May & June 2020

Report focus: This report outlines the learning from running rapid, online deliberation designed to involve the public in the policy decision-making process and the UK Government's response to COVID-19 with technology

Contents

Why we did it

When the UK Government responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by instituting a lockdown in March 2020 this marked one of the most abrupt changes of public policy in a generation.

In times of crisis, when decisions are being taken quickly, and the world is changing rapidly around us, public involvement is more important than ever. While it may feel more challenging to achieve in the circumstances of lockdown, it is possible, and deeply needed. As engagement practitioners and researchers, we have seen first-hand the value of involving the public in policy decision-making, yet while the country was in lockdown and traditional methods for public deliberation were not possible, the process needed a rethink.

And so four organisations - Traverse, Ada Lovelace Institute, Involve and Bang the Table - came together to trial a new model of rapid, online deliberation that would enable citizens to feed in to the development of policy for moving out of lockdown.

We called it the **#LockdownDebate** and set four ambitious objectives for the project.
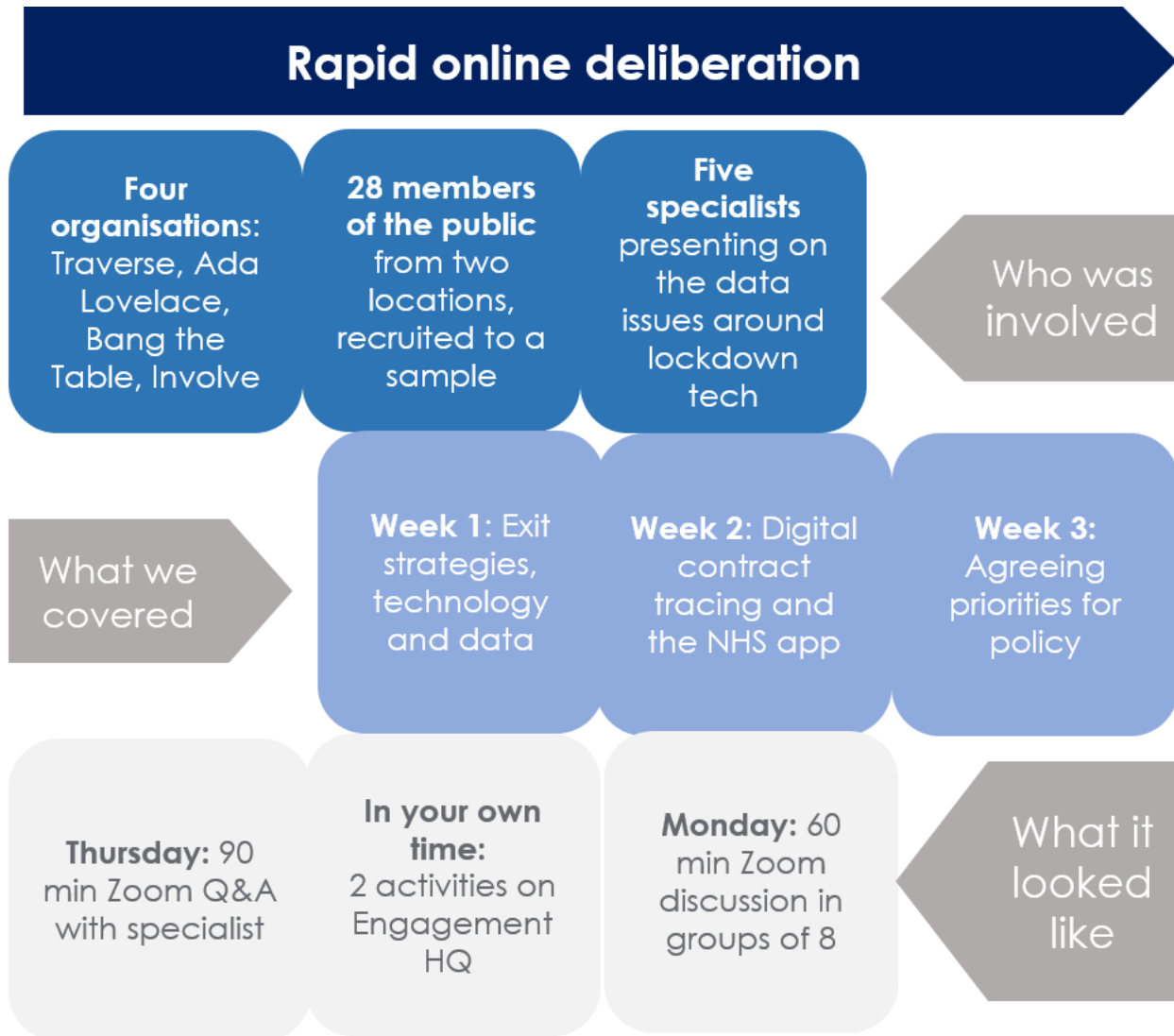
Objectives:

1. **Influencing research content** through defining the questions that need to be explored to help inform the design of policy around contact tracing
2. **Generating timely research data** and contributing to the evidence base on public perceptions and values in relation to contact tracing in time to inform policy making and design
3. **Influencing research strategy** through demonstrating to research commissioners that inclusive, deliberative research can be done online and alongside the development of policy
4. **Testing and learning** from an approach to conducting deliberation online, asynchronously, and under shorter timescales than typical deliberation.

This document focuses on objectives three and four. It captures our learning about the process and we hope it will inform practice through the remainder of the pandemic and beyond.

The Ada Lovelace Institute will be publishing more about objectives one and two, and an analysis of our findings.

What we did

Rapid online deliberation

Four organisations: Traverse, Ada Lovelace, Bang the Table, Involve

28 members of the public from two locations, recruited to a sample

Five specialists presenting on the data issues around lockdown tech

Who was involved

What we covered

Week 1: Exit strategies, technology and data

Week 2: Digital contract tracing and the NHS app

Week 3: Agreeing priorities for policy

Thursday: 90 min Zoom Q&A with specialist

In your own time: 2 activities on Engagement HQ

Monday: 60 min Zoom discussion in groups of 8

What it looked like

Ada Lovelace Institute   bangthetable.   involve   TRAVERSE

Did it work?

At the start of the project we identified that we wanted to do inclusive, public, deliberative engagement, online, as rapidly as the policy developing in response to COVID-19 during lockdown.

Our first test was simply: could be done? And our first finding was: **yes, it is possible**.

Was it inclusive?
Up to a point. We recruited members of the public from two locations, one urban and one rural, in line with a nationally reflective sample for key demographics. However, we did not have the resources to involve anyone who wasn't already online.

Was it deliberative?
While there are many limitations, caveats, lessons, and improvements for next time, overall, we were really pleased with the quality of the conversations between participants. It felt like a very different process, but still a deliberative one.

Did it work online?
At no point did any of the project team, the specialists, or the participants, meet in person. The entire dialogue was organised and conducted online using off-the-shelf tools that were inexpensive to set up and easy to use, a mix of Zoom for video calls and Engagement HQ, an online platform.

Was it as rapid as policy?
We went from idea to findings in 10 weeks. However, as you'll see below, one limitation we found was that information from Government simply wasn't available quickly enough to feed in to the discussions. By running this process independently, we were able to be completely transparent, which would not have been possible had we worked directly with Government and had access to information not in the public domain.

What did we learn?

Deliberation is an approach to research and engagement that focuses on enabling constructive discussions about a complex topic, with scope for those involved to ask questions, explore their feelings and potentially change their minds.[1]

1. A learning experience, concerned with evidence

In a deliberative process, it's crucial that participants can access accurate information about the topic at hand, presented in an accessible format without bias. The involvement of experts is a key part of this, allowing participants to directly question the information they are given.

How we did it

In each week of the project we held a 90 - minute session where one or two subject experts spoke for 10 minutes. The remainder of the time was used to answer questions from participants.

During these sessions, participants used the Zoom chat function to ask questions. One team member reviewed the questions as they came in, grouped them into themes, and then posed the questions to the guest speakers, allowing us to cover more ground with the questions.

Using the chat function also meant all participants could participate – not just those who were confident speaking aloud, and grouping questions also meant the Q&A wasn't dominated by a small number of enthusiastic individuals. It also resulted in the participants interacting with each other via the chat function, building on each other's questions and then also the answers provided by the guest speakers.

Expert speakers by week		
Week 1 – Exit strategies, technology & data	**Week 2 – Digital contract tracing & the NHS app**	**Week 3 – Agreeing priorities for policy**
Carly Kind, Director of Ada Lovelace Institute	**Professor Michael Parker** Director of the Wellcome Centre for Ethics and Humanities, and the Ethox Centre at the University of Oxford **Peter Wells** Specialist in data and technology policy	**Dr Natalie Banner** Lead for Understanding Patient Data at the Wellcome Trust **Renate Samson** Senior Policy Advisor at the Open Data Institute

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[1] For a simple overview of deliberation see: *https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/what/deliberative-public-engagement*
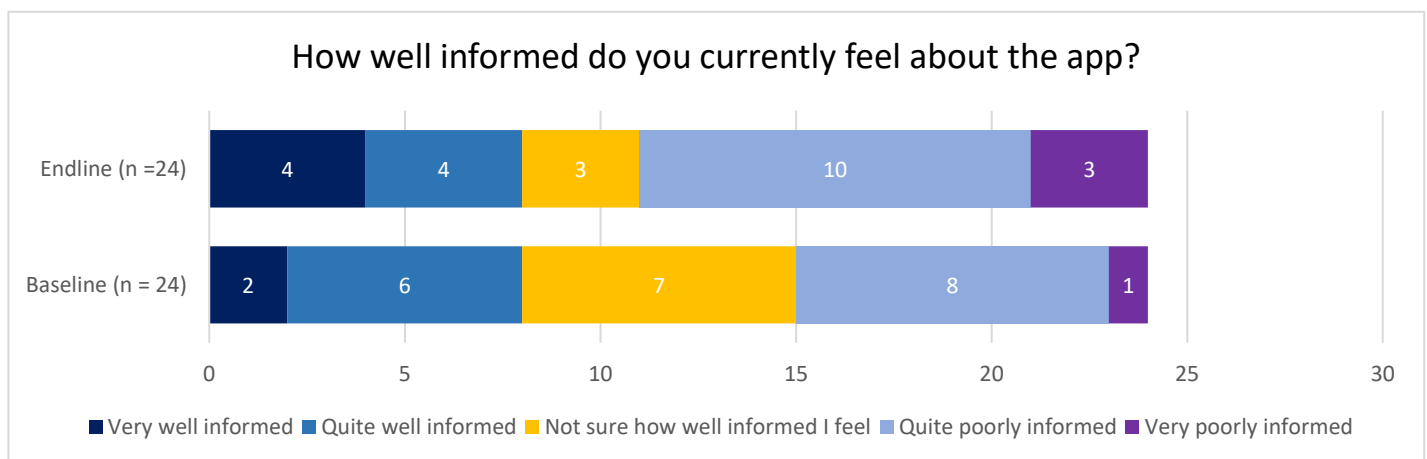
In weeks one and two participants could also post questions on the online platform (Engagement HQ – a closed platform where participants could access materials and take part in activities throughout the project), however there was limited use of this feature. This may have been improved with more timely responses from specialists via the online platform, but achieving that was outside the scope of the project. Some feedback also suggests that participants preferred the personal aspect of questioning a specialist in real time.

All slides and video recordings were made available to participants on the online platform after the session. Between sessions, 27 participants downloaded at least one document from the platform.

What happened

At the end of the project 18 of the 19 participants who gave feedback agreed that the information presented was clear and easy to understand. In comments, some participants suggested that having the information, or at least the topics, in advance would have allowed them to engage better; time to 'mull it over' as one put it.

We also asked participants at the beginning and end of the project how well informed they felt about the contact tracing app which was the subject of much of the discussion.

How well informed do you currently feel about the app?

Endline (n =24): Very well informed 4, Quite well informed 4, Not sure how well informed I feel 3, Quite poorly informed 10, Very poorly informed 3

Baseline (n = 24): Very well informed 2, Quite well informed 6, Not sure how well informed I feel 7, Quite poorly informed 8, Very poorly informed 1

Legend: ■ Very well informed ■ Quite well informed ■ Not sure how well informed I feel ■ Quite poorly informed ■ Very poorly informed

As you can see in the chart, participants tended to feel less informed after the project. In our experience, participants usually leave a deliberative process feeling more informed about the subject matter. One challenge working solely online is that it is more challenging to check participants' understanding of the information they are absorbing – in a face-to-face setting it's easier to pick up on non-verbal clues when participants aren't feeling confident. However, in this case, we think that reason behind this is also likely to be the overall uncertainty of the subject matter; the more they learned, the more they realised the questions they had couldn't be answered. This point relates to several key questions raised by participants which we were simply unable to answer due to the nature of the topic, for example the success of the contact tracing app trial on the Isle of Wight has not been made public to date.

This was a limitation of working in such a rapidly evolving policy area.

Despite this, participants felt that working on a 'live' issue was a positive:

> *"All in all, it was a really positive experience - and I think made more fascinating by the fact the response to COVID crisis evolved quite dramatically over the three weeks." Participant feedback*

What we'd do differently

- Circulate presentations in advance of plenaries, to allow participants more time to review, while recognising that not everyone will choose to do so and still covering it in the sessions.
- Dedicate more resource to responding to participant questions on the online platform.
- Create short videos with information about the subject matter, quizzes and other simple activities to check understanding. This would enable participants to undertake more self-directed learning, rather than the information only being shared via plenary sessions. It would also help monitor their level of understanding of the subject.
- With more time, we would have more fully realised the benefits of Engagement HQ, and integrated it with Zoom to give participants a more seamless technical experience.

2. Long-form and reflective

Deliberative processes involve the development of views over time, to get beyond initial, surface reactions. Our process needed to give our participants the time to reflect.

What we did

Across the three weeks, participants dedicated around 10 hours to the project, comparable with the common practice of meeting participants over two Saturdays.

4.5 hours of specialist Q&A → 4.5 hours of small group discussion → Around 1.5 hours of individual activities

We decided that we would run the seven groups sessions over Zoom, as this didn't require participants to sign up for an account, and we anticipated that at least some of the participants would have had experience of using it previously. It was also important for us to be able to see a video gallery of all participants, and to be able to use chat and polling functions.

To ensure security, we only circulated the joining link the day of the session, required a password for the meeting, and chose waiting room functionality to make sure all participants joining were those who were confirmed as participating. We had no reported security issues during the course of the project.

We used a range of tools through the project to capture views in different ways. We were particularly keen to explore the impact of a mix of synchronous (everyone participating at the same time, e.g. video chat) and asynchronous (interreacting in your own time, e.g. an online forum) activities. We wanted to understand whether a combination of these approaches would enable participants to reflect and further develop their views in their own time and result
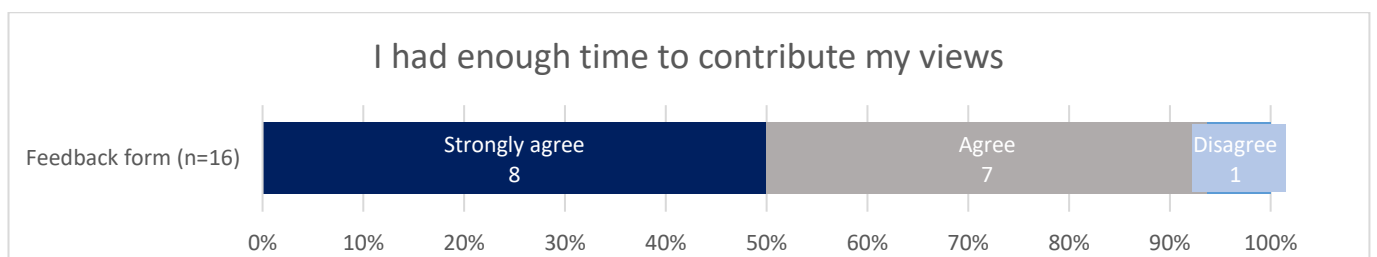
in a higher quality of deliberation. In addition, we wanted to understand the impact of conducting deliberation over a number of short sessions rather than a typical day-long event.

We used Bang The Table's platform, Engagement HQ, to build a microsite for the project. We created this as a closed platform, meaning that participants had to register to see the content and complete activities. Participants received a link and instructions to access the platform, but were not additionally incentivised to complete these activities.

Activities run via Engagement HQ		
Week 1	**Week 2**	**Week 3**
Ideas board - asking participants to share ideas for how they could see friends and family safely (31 ideas posted by 26 contributors, 20 comments and 42 likes) **Journal activity** - asking participants to share their experience of life in lockdown (14 submissions) **Baseline survey** (23 respondents)	**Poll on contact tracing app** (23 respondents) **Journal activity** - asking participants to share whether they had agreed or disagreed with the speakers in week 2 (15 submissions)	**Ideas board** - asking participants to share questions for the Isle of Wight contact tracing app trial (22 ideas in week 3) **Endline survey** (24 respondents) **Feedback survey** (19 respondents)

What happened

Overall, participants felt that they had time during the process to contribute their views.

We asked participants a series of questions in the feedback form to understand their experience of the different methods we used during the debate, and perhaps unsurprisingly we heard a variety of different perspectives. The majority expressed a preference for the group discussion sessions but others expressed preference for some of the other options - three preferred sharing their ideas via the online platform and one expressed a preference for using Zoom's chat function for Q&A during the plenary session. Four expressed no preference. We

believe that the variety helped to support participant engagement and retention, as in this response to the question:

> *"Able to use chat in a multiple of ways, able to review speakers/presentations, able to get instant feedback in the form of polls, process being transparent and inclusive." (Participant feedback)*

What we'd do differently

- **Extend the group discussion sessions from 60 to 90 minutes.** We designed the small group discussions to last for one hour, as initially we thought longer would be too much to ask of participants. However, where in-person you might have a robust conversation within 60 minutes, online you need that little bit more time for participants to start engaging with each other. Some participants also told us they would have preferred longer discussion sessions as they were only just "getting into it" when we had to end the session. We recommend a 90-minute session to cover one or two prompts, without a break. We didn't do this, but you could run two 90 minute sessions with a break in the middle. We think that just over three hours is the longest you can reasonably ask people to sit on a Zoom call.

- **Add a chat forum to the online platform.** We didn't add a chat forum to the Engagement HQ platform due to the short time-frame of the project. However, this might have been useful to build relationships between participants, further enable reflective discussion, and support retention (especially for longer running projects).

- **Run telephone interviews**. Initially we had planned to conduct telephone interviews with half of the participants to promote further reflection, and capture more in-depth views. However, time and budget didn't allow for this. In retrospect, this would have also provided a good opportunity to both test whether there were any aspects of the process which weren't working for individuals, and to ensure we had captured views from those who were less confident online.

3. Hearing a diversity of voices

Deliberative processes need to include a diverse range of people in order to ensure participants can consider and reflect upon a wide range of perspectives.

How we did it

As this project was funded entirely by the partner organisations, the recruitment approach was pragmatic. To make the most of our teams' networks we focused on two locations - one urban and one rural - where our team had connections to the local community outside of their professional relationships. These were Camden and Kent). We promoted the opportunity through mutual aid groups and local community organisations. We were clear within the advert about the timeframe of the project, the type of commitment, and incentive (£120).

Potential participants completed a short demographics form, to enable us to select the most diverse sample available. After reviewing the initial demographics we carried out a second round of more targeted recruitment, contacting additional local groups, and inviting those who had expressed an interest to share the invitations, particularly with male participants who were underrepresented.
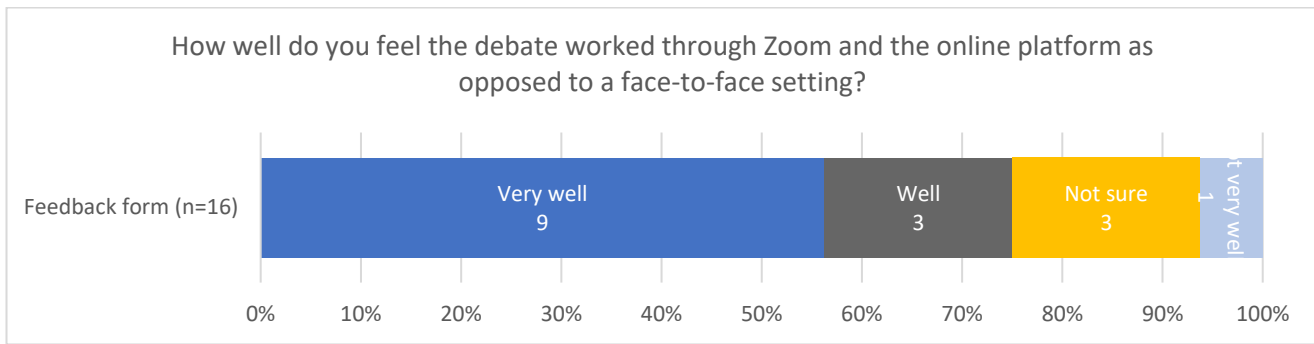
What happened

- Of a total of 54 expressions of interest we sent invitations to 31 participants, of whom 29 accepted and 1 dropped out after the second week. A total of 28 participants stayed throughout the project. This compares favourably with retention levels for face to face deliberative processes.

- The final sample was broadly representative of the population in terms of demographics, although slightly skewed towards female participants, and against the youngest/oldest age groups.

- We included a question in the feedback form asking participants if at any point during the process they had felt something was preventing them from taking part fully, to capture experiences of exclusion. Although none of the 19 respondents said they had felt excluded there were a number of comments and suggestions, including challenges with internet connections and learning new technology which they had to overcome in order to participate. Our interpretation of this is that the technology is there or thereabouts, but we need to ensure that we don't rely on any one method or session and ensure time to support those who experience issues.

"I had one of the sessions where I could not access the Zoom meeting but that was a technical hitch on that particular evening"(Participant feedback)

Face-to-face vs online

There has been much debate amongst the practitioner community about the benefits and limitations of working online since the lockdown prompted a rapid change. Our project can offer some evidence on this from the participant perspective.

How well do you feel the debate worked through Zoom and the online platform as opposed to a face-to-face setting?

Feedback form (n=16)	Very well 9	Well 3	Not sure 3 / Not very well 1

In our feedback form, we asked participants how well they felt the debate worked online vs face-to-face. Although there mixed views, 12 of 16 told us they felt it worked comparatively well. The participant who disagreed commented that the conversation would have 'flowed better' face-to-face but acknowledged that this was a good way of doing things in the circumstances. For those who were unsure one described the setting as 'artificial', another suggested it could have been smoother face-to-face and the third said:

"I would prefer to do this face-to-face, but realistically, in more normal circumstances, I may not have had time to attend a face-to-face event."
(Participant feedback form)

This was one of three participants who commented that they would have been less likely to attend a face to face equivalent due to the lack of travel. There were also two participants who suggested that they had been able to speak more freely online:

"If anything, I think people probably felt a little more free to express their feelings, I for one sometimes struggle in face to face meetings to give all my feelings across. Zoom is safe." (Participant feedback form)

It seems clear that online engagement isn't everyone's preference, but it also provides an opportunity to include people for whom face-to-face engagement is exclusionary in and of itself. Many people would not be comfortable taking place in a group discussion in a village hall no matter how carefully facilitated. Equally there are many who would not want to take part online.

In our view, the point is not to contrast these methodologies and look for a winner or loser, this is a distraction from the real work of understanding the ways in which deliberative practices, as an extension of policy making, can be exclusionary.

What we'd do differently

- Having established that the geographically focused community recruitment approach is successful, it would be relatively simple to expand the sample to more locations, allowing for representation from the four nations, for example.

- We are currently reflecting on the extent to which reflective and representative sampling does not take into account how different groups in society are disproportionately impacted by certain issues. In future, we may review our sampling practices to be guided

by ensuring voices that have been historically ignored or suppressed, and yet disproportionately impacted by the topics under discussions, are better represented than traditional representative sampling would allow.

- A key limitation of the sample was that it only included participants who were already comfortable enough online to sign up via the recruitment survey. We believe that with a small amount of additional time and budget the rapid online deliberation approach could act as a steppingstone to getting online. Using the community recruitment approach to involve people who are not currently online, providing them with simple internet enabled devices and a remote onboarding process, the three-week project could serve as an introduction to using digital communication tools.

4. Embracing complexity, while exploring consensus

Deliberation is most helpful when navigating complex and controversial topics as it provides space for participants to consider difficult trade-offs, and weigh the long-term consequences of issues or decisions. Participants need to be able to share divergent views, as well as identify areas of consensus.

Part of the point of exploring consensus is usually to arrive at decisions or recommendations that directly influence policy. As we weren't working with a pre-defined policy client, it wasn't appropriate to seek to create recommendations with participants. In addition, the subject matter meant that there wasn't enough evidence in the public domain for participants to effectively explore trade-offs together.

We were also aware that the rapidly shifting reality of COVID-19 in the UK meant that we didn't want to focus in detail on one particular area, only to find that it became irrelevant to public debate by the next news cycle.

How we did it

- We used one policy example - the COVID-19 tracing app - to explore broader questions of public value. We directly asked participants which values were important to them, and to consider how any strategy might embrace these values.

- We reviewed all the questions that participants asked during the entire process: - through the plenary Q&As with specialists, via the online platform, and also in the discussion groups - and collated those questions into thematic areas, with the main questions listed under them. We then reviewed these questions with participants, asking them to support our analysis process by clustering, editing, and prioritising.

- We collated all the ideas that participants expressed during the process – both those we had prompted via the online platform, and those that arose from discussions. We worked with participants to cluster and synthesize these ideas further.

- We did all of the above through screen-sharing PowerPoint slides on Zoom – showing participants the values, questions, and ideas, with the facilitator editing them live.

- We asked participants what their hopes are from the findings of the process to inform how we moved forward.

What happened

- Our work in this way with participants resulted in how we structured our findings (to be presented by the Ada Lovelace Institute in a separate report).

- Participants responded well to the challenge of synthesising and prioritising their values, questions, and ideas, making recommendations for changes and combinations that brought real value.

- Reflections from facilitators showed that marshalling consensus work online is particularly challenging. In face-to-face settings facilitators can "read the room", and work organically with a group to explore consensus. Online, there is more of a necessity for structure, resulting in a less dynamic process.

- Some participants told us they found some sessions repetitive and quite granular, as we were using one example of the tracing app to explore a range of different themes.

> *My only criticism is sometimes the questions explored were quite detailed and data focused - which I know is the purpose of this group discussion - but with current affairs it is hard to separate our feelings on how we view data issues, out of context with who is going to be managing the data. (Participant feedback form)*

What we'd do differently

- Share emerging findings with participants earlier in the process (potentially as the weekly activities) and ask them to work collaboratively, but asynchronously, using either the Engagement HQ platform, or something such as Google Docs or Mural to synthesize and prioritise. This would mean that the discussion sessions could review the suggestions made by participants during the course of the week, and participants could navigate a different platform in their own time, rather than at the same time as being on a video call.

- A policy client would of course change the dynamic of the outputs we would work towards with participants. However, as discussed this would also provide some disadvantages in other ways.

Final thoughts

Our experience in this project challenged some of our fundamental assumptions about engagement. As practitioners, we design deliberative engagement, and we strive to make our work inclusive. However, within the settings we found ourselves, we were challenged to really think about what those really mean. As demonstrated in this report, we looked at the component parts of deliberation, and thought about how best to achieve the same outcomes through this process, but there are other elements to deliberation that we haven't explored in as much depth. For example, we assumed that we must be in dialogue with other people as part of a deliberative process, but found ourselves wondering if can you deliberate by yourself,

and contribute to a wider conversation through asynchronous interaction. During the Lockdown Debate, there was a range of extremely significant news events, including the launch of the tracing app in the Isle of Wight, Dominic Cummings' press conference, the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests. It was clear through the discussions that the breaking news was impacting participants' views, and fed into their thinking between sessions and their interaction on the online platform. We started considering the extent to which interactions with current events form part of people's deliberation When does that stop being deliberation and start being something else? And when does that start to matter?

Considering inclusion, we know that online engagement provides challenges around digital inclusion, which we couldn't overcome within this project. However, some of our participants told us they wouldn't have joined in-person workshops, helping us understand that online practice includes people whom face-to-face excludes. In addition, while our sample was broadly representative, did that really mean we had a diversity of voices? The much-needed conversations prompted by the Black Lives Matter movement have led us to consider how the traditional engagement and participation culture and structure we are operating within exclude people – regardless of the design or the platform. To what extent can we really address or challenge systemic and structural injustices through deliberation design?

This project and report certainly doesn't have all the answers, but it did perhaps help us frame some questions we think are important to address in our work going forwards. A key reason for embarking on this project was for the conversations we hoped it would start and support. While it was a complete experience in and of itself, it was also intended to contribute to a wider discussion of how we best involve the public in decision-making in an inclusive and deliberative manner, at a time of national crisis. We look forward to hearing your views.

This report, and the research behind it, is based on a collaboration between Traverse and the Ada Lovelace Institute, with input and support from Traverse and Bang the Table.

Many thanks to contributors and readers, including all our expert speakers and public participants.

Traverse is an employee owned social research organisation that works towards inclusive decision making. We provide research, engagement, evaluation and more to clients across the public sector, helping them to include a more diverse range of voices in their work, and to act on what they hear.

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The Ada Lovelace Institute is a research institute and deliberative body dedicated to ensuring that data and AI work for people and society. Our core belief is that the benefits of data and AI must be justly and equitably distributed, and must enhance individual and social wellbeing.

adalovelaceinstitute.org | @AdaLovelaceInst | hello@adalovelaceinstitute.org

Bang the Table was founded because, no matter how well-designed the off-line consultation process, inevitably it only reaches a small segment of a community. Their mission is to enable public participation in democracy by forging constructive relationships between communities and the institutions of government.

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Involve is an independent public participation organisation with a mission to put people at the heart of decision-making, through open, participatory, and deliberative interactions.

Involve.org.uk | @involveUK | info@involve.org.uk