

# Bioenergy dialogue

A national project to explore public views on bioenergy

## Emerging public views



### Executive Summary

#### The emerging results from a pilot event reveal:

- ◆ Improved energy security is one of the main expectations for bioenergy, and people believe that it could be an important part of the UK energy-mix
- ◆ People hope that bioenergy can create jobs and energy independence
- ◆ Bioenergy is seen as an alternative source of energy to fossil fuels, but people are concerned about its sustainability and efficiency
- ◆ People think they have low understanding of issues around bioenergy, and see this as a limiting factor in their ability to effectively contribute to discussions and decision-making
- ◆ People think the government has a role in providing information to the public to enable them to make informed decisions.

## Introduction

BBSRC is conducting a national dialogue project which aims to explore public views around environmental, social and economic issues that bioenergy raises. BBSRC wants to ensure that public views are taken into account as sustainable bioenergy solutions are developed, and that our strategy and policy development in this area can be responsive to their views and values.

## An innovative methodology

The project involves a novel approach to dialogue to engage a large number of researchers and members of the public and relies on dialogue events being run around the country by BBSRC funded bioenergy researchers and other interested groups.

Public views will be collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed at the dialogue events, and through a series of informal methods. During the events, the public is presented with plausible yet provocative scenarios set twenty years in the future. The scenarios are projections of what the future might look like if particular decisions are taken concerning the use (or non-use) of bioenergy in the UK. The scenarios use stories and scripts for short plays involving fictitious characters, and cards with factual information about bioenergy to encourage discussion. A Democs card game is also available.

As this is a qualitative study, it is not designed to be statistically representative and the sample sizes are small. Therefore, public views collected during the project cannot be generalised to the whole UK population, but should provide some illustrative insights into public views about bioenergy.

## Pilot event

A pilot event to test the dialogue approach and the future scenarios, took place in January 2013 at the Dana Centre in London. The event lasted 2 hours and was attended by around 50 members of the public who were split into six groups each comprising eight people on average. Different groups read different scenarios. Participants were self-selecting. **Box 1** shows the participants' profile for those who returned questionnaires. What follows is a preliminary analysis of respondents' views collected at the pilot event.

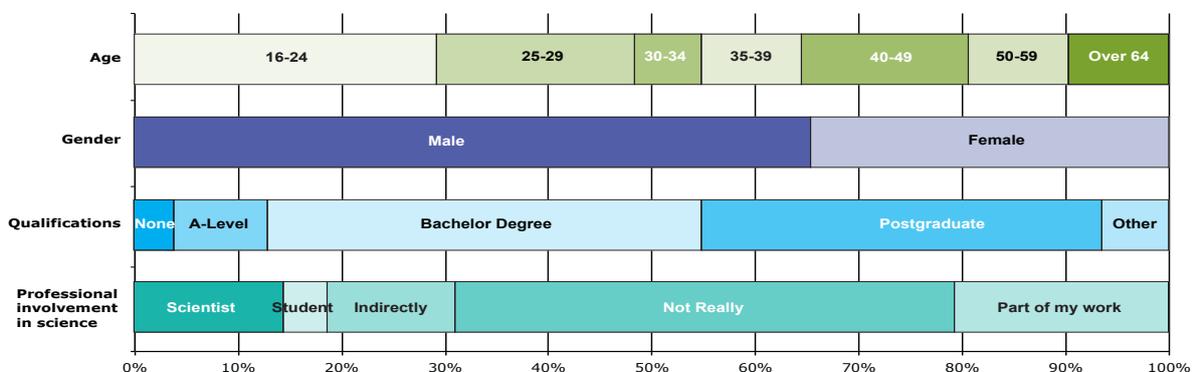
## Public hopes and expectations for bioenergy

When asked why they thought bioenergy could be useful, participants in the dialogue event could see the potential of bioenergy to:

### Secure energy needs

Energy security came out as one of the main expectations for bioenergy to help meet the demands of population growth and sustain quality

**Box 1. Attendants' profile at the bioenergy dialogue pilot event**



Total number of participants returning questionnaires: 30

Participants at the pilot event were likely to be young male, highly educated.

of life. While bioenergy was often referred to as an alternative to fossil fuels, participants seemed to see it only as a supplemental, though important part of the UK energy-mix.

Other expectations in regard to the development of bioenergy as seen by participants were that it could:

- ◆ Create new jobs
- ◆ Give countries energy independence
- ◆ Potentially be carbon neutral/environmentally friendly
- ◆ Potentially be cheap

## Public concerns

When asked about their main concerns in regard to bioenergy, participants in the discussion raised concerns about:

### Sustainability

There was a widely expressed sense of concern about sustainability. Most participants referred to the sustainability of bioenergy as its ability to contribute to the long term maintenance of the energy supply and its capacity to be produced on a renewable basis. Furthermore, efficiency was often associated with sustainability. Questioning points brought up by participants included how bioenergy can sustainably contribute to the UK's primary energy supply and how/whether it would match energy from the production of fossil fuels.

### Social attitudes/behaviour

Participants raised the point about social attitudes and behaviour needing to change. Some participants mentioned that the most important issue we need to face is consuming less energy rather than creating more energy.

### Food shortage and land use

A theme which came out strongly in the questionnaires was the conflict between bioenergy production and the food industry. The use of arable land for energy and crops for fuel was frequently associated with the need to tackle important world challenges such as population growth and food

shortages. One participant stated that "if we need to use more land for producing food, then surely we shouldn't be using that land for energy".

## Lack of public knowledge

Lack of knowledge about bioenergy issues and the research conducted by BBSRC was another theme often mentioned by participants:

- ◆ Participants frequently referred to public lack of knowledge around bioenergy.
- ◆ This lack of knowledge was seen by many as a limiting factor in their ability, and the public's ability, to effectively contribute to decision making around bioenergy. There seemed to exist a strong feeling among participants that 'the public' needs more information before having an informed discussion.
- ◆ There was a sense among some participants that it is the role of government to provide information to the public to enable them to make informed decisions.

Other concerns mentioned, were:

- ◆ International trade and the need for government regulation.
- ◆ Conflict between vested interest parties and the interests of the broader society.
- ◆ Impact on the environment, in particular the uncertainty of what the impact on environment could be.
- ◆ Energy price rises. One participant stated "how is it going to affect the future? Are prices going to rise to a point of no return? Are we ready for this possibility?"

## What researchers should be thinking about...

When asked about what they thought bioenergy researchers should be thinking about carefully when developing new bioenergy technologies, uncertainties in regard to impacts of technologies and their benefits and risks were often mentioned by participants.

## Uncertainties -- what benefits and impacts?

- ◆ Across the spectrum of views, especially on the use of land to produce energy and costs, the consensus was that there are many uncertainties concerning the potential benefits, risks and impacts on the world as a whole, biodiversity and people, and whether bioenergy is really the best solution and/or whether we really need it.

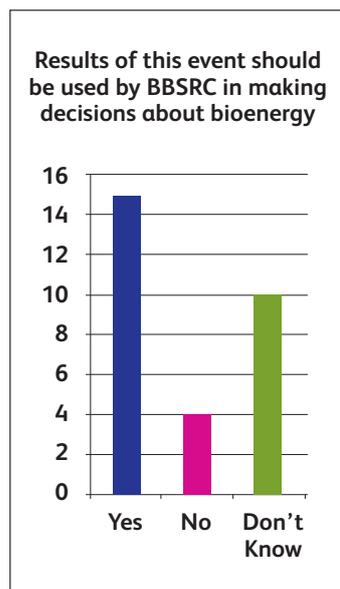
## Public participation in strategy and policy issues

When asked about whether the results of this dialogue event should be used by BBSRC to inform its strategy and policy development in bioenergy, opinions were divided among participants:

- ◆ Despite the majority thinking that the results of the discussion should be taken into consideration by BBSRC to inform its strategy and policy on bioenergy, there was a large proportion of participants who were ambivalent in their answers (Don't Know answers) (Figure 1).
- ◆ The main reasons pointed to by participants who agreed that their views should be reflected in the decisions BBSRC makes about bioenergy were that policy and bioenergy affect everyone

and there might be issues raised by the public that had not been considered before. Another point raised was that research is being done in the interest of the public and therefore policy decisions must consider public views.

- ◆ In contrast, respondents who did not agree that the results of the event should be considered by BBSRC, mentioned that their views and 'public' views are too general and misinformed to meaningfully contribute to the decisions that BBSRC makes.



**Figure 1** – Respondents' response to the question 'Do you think the results of this event should be used by BBSRC in making decisions about the future research and policy in bioenergy?'

## Future evidence

We expect that other dialogue events will take place around the country this summer where more data on people's views will be collected. This will allow us to compile stronger evidence on people's concerns, hopes and expectations for bioenergy and bring emerging issues to the attention of BBSRC strategy panels.

BBSRC (Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council) funds biological research in universities and research centres. BBSRC is committed to engaging in dialogue with the public and others around the research we fund.

This project is co-funded by Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre (Sciencewise). Sciencewise is the UK's national centre for public dialogue in policy making involving science and technology issues. It provides co-funding and specialist advice and support to Government departments and agencies to develop and commission public dialogue activities in emerging areas of science and technology.

The project is evaluated by CEP (Collingwood Environmental Planning), an independent multidisciplinary environmental and sustainability consultancy.

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