



# **Evaluation of deliberative engagement on tackling road congestion**

For the National Infrastructure Commission

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## Key project facts

Commissioning body:	<b>National Infrastructure Commission</b>
Delivery contractor:	<b>Britain Thinks</b>
Public participants:	<b>67</b>
Locations:	<b>3</b> (Manchester, Nottingham, Bristol)
Workshops at each location:	<b>2 full Saturdays</b>
Duration:	<b>January – February 2020</b> (workshop window)
Financial cost: delivery and evaluation	<b>£149,700 excluding VAT</b>

## Summary of evaluation findings

### ***A successful suite of deliberative engagement workshops on tackling road congestion in cities. Well-designed and delivered.***

- The engagement undoubtedly achieved its objectives, which were clear and agreed.
- Standards of good practice were ultimately met, especially after improvements to consistency of facilitation in early workshops.
- A useful cross-section of the British public was sampled, including demographics and frequency of driving.
- The work was appropriately creative in its approach to workshop design and supporting stimulus materials.
- The design of the deliberation was well balanced and free from manipulation, having been well challenged and checked by various credible safeguards.
- A range of experts supported the public discussions to good effect.
- There was ample opportunity for Commissioners and NIC officers to hear first hand the public views expressed during the discussions, and many took advantage of this.
- The engagement was run quite early in the policy-making process given the NIC issues its next National Infrastructure Assessment in 2023. On the upside, this allowed time to explore more freely what the methodology has to offer the Commission more widely, as opposed to being overly focused on the content.
- It is too early to judge the impact of the engagement: at the time of writing this evaluation, the final findings of the project had not been formally reviewed by the whole Commission.
- Parallel focus groups on the same topic illustrated the pros and cons of the two methods, highlighting some criteria that can help commissioning bodies choose which method is most suitable.
- The cost of the engagement was comparable to previous similar projects run by analogous bodies such as Sciencewise.

### **Specific learning for future includes:**

- 1. Be ready to provide participants tangible case study evidence** of what works and what doesn't, including impacts and costs. Where data is uncertain, this can be uncomfortable for the commissioning body.
- 2. Plan for a significant workload for the commissioning body.** This resourcing pressure often spikes between the two workshops as new design choices and materials need developing in a short window.
- 3. Lower your expectations about the volume of material and coverage:** you won't get through everything you want to.
- 4. Be relaxed about supporting experts having a view (they all do).** The value of experts arises from their knowledge answering questions, as well as their ability to reflect the *range* of views out there. Emphasise this when you recruit them.
- 5. Ensure channel quotas are included in the recruitment strategy.** They protect the investment in the whole project.
- 6. Deliberative engagement is most relevant where:** the public need to learn a lot before forming views, hard trade-offs are needed, and participants are affected personally as well as citizens nationally.

# Evaluation findings

Readers are referred to the main Research Report for the results of the deliberative engagement and its detailed methodology: these are not repeated in this Evaluation Report.

The evaluation addresses eight key questions, outlined below. The evaluation was also conducted in the light of the public dialogue Quality Framework developed by Sciencewise<sup>1</sup> for this kind of deliberative engagement.

## Q1: Was the scope clear, appropriate and workable?

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**Context.** The overall context for this engagement was good. The NIC was the sole client for the work, which provided focus and clarity when choices arose. The NIC had a clear rationale as to why it needed to engage members of the public, best described by a couple of interviewees as *“our consultations often hear from the same self-selected professional stakeholders – but we need to cast our net wider too”*. The engagement had a clear ‘policy home’ in that the NIC is due to issue the next National Infrastructure Assessment in 2023.

**Governance, senior decision-makers.** The engagement was led for the NIC by two policy staff, in close liaison with a Commissioner. This Commissioner also chaired an Advisory Group composed of a range of external stakeholders and a further two Commissioners. The Advisory Group commented on a wide range of issues from the policy questions and locations, overall design, materials and recruitment strategy. Some Advisory Group members also recorded short videos to present to the public workshops, bringing a diversity of perspectives into the room for participants.

**Resourcing.** The engagement was well resourced, in that the cash funding was adequate to enable a robust process with a good number of participants and locations. The process was also very well resourced with officer time and support – see below.

### Resourcing from officers

A particularly successful aspect of this project was the resourcing that came from the officers at NIC. Support was attentive, consistently quick to respond, comprehensive and was always mindful of internal quality assurance requirements. This was an enormous asset to the project and eased the way for the delivery contractor to also perform well. The resourcing spike between the workshops was particularly marked given new scenario packages to be generated for the public and the difficulties of internal quality assurance with approximated data: but they were delivered just in time. This officer resource is a key success criteria future projects should plan for.

<sup>1</sup> The Sciencewise programme provides assistance to policy-makers to carry out public dialogue to inform their decision-making on science and technology issues. Sciencewise is funded by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

**Objectives.** The objectives of the engagement were clear and did not change significantly: the NIC wanted to understand public views on tackling congestion, as well as exploring what deliberative engagement might offer the Commission in future as a policy-development tool (see p14 for details). The boundaries to the work were well defined and justified, including not focusing on electric vehicles or connected and automated vehicles, and also not focusing on maintaining tax revenue as fuel duty decreases. The focus was reducing congestion in cities. These objectives and boundaries were logical and well received by participants.

**Locations.** The rationale for the three locations was strong: well set out and explored with the Advisory Group. The locations were chosen to provide a geographical spread as well as a range of different congestion policy measures in place across the cities: Manchester (congestion charging ruled out by referendum), Nottingham (workplace parking levy active) and Bristol (congestion charging and workplace parking levy under active consideration).

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## Q2: Well designed, balanced and free from manipulation?

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**Design.** There was a logical progression for participants from learning about congestion as a topic, to learning about policy solutions, to sharing and exploring views about these solutions. There was also a clear 'before and after' tracking of views against a set baseline of questions.

The design used a range of inputs including presentations, video pre-recordings from experts, experts in the room to answer questions, and posters and handouts to read individually or in pairs. Discussions were held mostly in small table groups of 8-9 participants, and occasionally in pairs. Data was gathered by the table facilitators making notes during conversations, individuals writing their own answers in workbooks, and individually-expressed but jointly discussed views such as giving a score out of 10 for particular policy solutions. The range of techniques used, and the way they were stitched together in the design, largely worked very well and engaged the participants in an effective and logical way.

**Balanced and free from manipulation.** The engagement appeared very balanced and free from manipulation. This is evidenced by: the range of perspectives included on the Advisory Group, the efforts the NIC officers and contractor took to address any concerns raised by Group members regarding balance, the number and range of experts invited to support discussions in the room with the public, and observations of how challenges were handled in real time. Participants also felt that the information provided was balanced and unbiased (65 out of 66, one neutral).

**Ethics, anonymity and data protection.** All norms of ethics, anonymity and data protection were adhered to. In addition, the facilitation team generated a positive and friendly atmosphere with the public that greatly supported the engagement: one participant described the facilitation team as *"knowledgeable, friendly, patient"*.

**Participant satisfaction.** 100% of the participants were satisfied with the events overall.

### Q3: Was recruitment representative?

**Attendance.** The workshops were attended<sup>2</sup> by 67 members of the public, split roughly evenly between the three locations. Only a small percentage of participants dropped out after the first wave of workshops, which is a credit to the design and organisation of the events themselves as well as the recruiters in chasing participants up.

**Representation.** A good and useful range of participants was successfully recruited and retained. A fairly complex set of recruitment quotas were agreed, including a realistic range of people that:

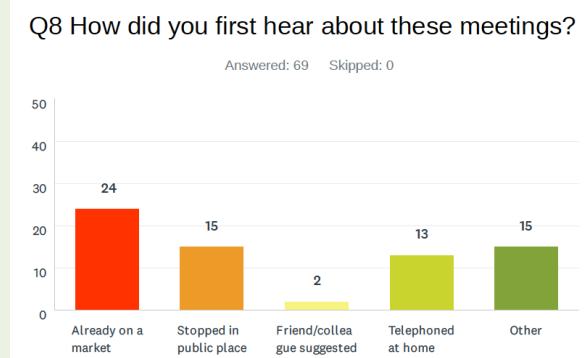
- Drove cars with heavy use, medium use or occasional use (three separate quotas).
- Did not drive cars but walked, cycled or used public transport instead.
- Had young children.

Those that drove fulltime for work (e.g. courier) were limited to two per workshop to minimise the potential bias of other participants deferring to their viewpoints. All these screening rules worked well and charted a useful route through the options available. A good balance of gender was attained, as well as age bands, broad ethnicities and socio-economic group.

#### Recruitment: the value of channel quotas

A useful addition was that recruiters were given 'channel quotas' that meant each recruiter should only obtain a third of their sample from pre-existing panels, and the rest of their sample obtained from a mix of social media and free-find options such as leafleting or door-knocking. This significantly reduced variation between locations that could have affected robustness otherwise.

For example, in Manchester one recruiter relied fairly heavily on one free-find channel: leafleting a couple of adjoining sub-urban areas. This was effective at recruiting participants but meant that there was a noticeable number in the workshop that effectively came from the same suburb.



The channel quota meant that this could be no more than 30%, so any potential bias was limited and deemed not significant. However, in the absence of the channel quota this could have been seriously problematic, for example if nearly 100% of participants all came from the same suburb, not spread across the city at random. It could have rendered the sample almost void.

Given that the findings of the whole project can only ever be as good as the recruitment strategy used, this is good learning for future: **channel quotas protect the investment in the whole project.**

<sup>2</sup> By 'attended' we mean attended *all of both workshops*, to the end. A few dropped out between the workshops due to illness or similar, and these people are not included in the figures.

## Q4: Did participants have time, support and opportunity to participate?

**Time.** Participants had an appropriate amount of time to learn, consider options, and discuss their views. 64 out of 66 participants agreed with this. The balance between breadth and depth of material and views was well managed given the inevitable constraints in play.

**Experts.** A range of 17 invited experts supported the workshops, answering questions when they arose at the request of the facilitation team. Experts were well briefed in advance by the facilitators both in writing, via conference call, and also again on the day just before the workshops started. Given the risks involved of experts leading participants, this was well managed and worked very well.

### Experts: the search for ‘objectivity’

There was an observable nervousness in the process to select experts that would not lead participants or skew their views. This is a valid concern.

However, all experts have views. This is one of the reasons their input is valuable. The essential attribute required for a useful expert in a deliberative workshop well is that they are **willing and able to talk about the *different perspectives out there, not just doggedly push their own view***. This is worth considering and emphasizing in future similar work, rather than pursuing an ill-defined and often elusive sense of objectivity.

It is also true to say that participants appreciate hearing contrasting viewpoints from experts: it reassures them that they are hearing the whole story, rather than a filtered sub-section of it. In a more controversial environment, it could even be useful to show participants how experts respond to each other’s viewpoints and information, for example where information is contested or values are different. This was done to some extent in this process where a handful of different expert perspectives were put to the group via pre-recorded videos.

**Opportunity to participate.** Workshop design used a good range of tools to ensure participants could join in throughout the two days. Tools accommodated different learning styles, personality types, as well as simply keeping things moving so attention did not stagnate. Participants were observably engaged right up to the end.

**Learning.** Experience of early workshops was clearly transposed into later workshops. Changes included small things like room layout, slide text size and guidance to experts, as well as more major things like changing the way in which questions were asked, or the mode in which answers were requested e.g. scoring out of 10, rather than ranking. Importantly, the design of the second wave of workshops directly answered common questions arising in the first wave: this was appreciated by participants and helped to re-engage them after the gap period, as well as reassure them that they were being listened to.

## Facilitation and recording: importance of consistency

**What went well.** The team of four facilitators in each workshop was organised, focussed and friendly. Their questions were open, searching, and relevant. Their listening was attentive and genuine. They managed time well in individual sessions as well as across the whole day. Recording ranged from minimal (where it maintained a flow of discussion but wasn't critical to data capture) to detailed (where it was more central to data capture).

**Even better if...** consistency of facilitation and recording was improved from the start. During the first wave of workshops there were problems with the consistency of both facilitation and recording. These can be summarised as variability in how individual table facilitators:

- **Asked and emphasized questions.** There were too many questions listed in the plan, which meant that facilitators had to make quick choices about what to prioritise: different facilitators inevitably made different choices.
- **Gathered views.** Some facilitators sought views from *all* participants on a key question, some didn't.
- **Recorded.** Different facilitators sometimes recorded in different ways (flipchart, A4 notes, not at all) in some sessions. It was often ambiguous what 'product' was being aimed at.

By addressing these issues in a consistent way, it converts what could otherwise feel like a discursive chat into a robust deliberative conversation, driving a sense of purpose, structure and clarity.

Importantly, flaws that occur with facilitation and recording would rapidly become invisible in the final report. Specifically, there would be no way for a reader to have any idea how consistently the team operated in the room with participants, even though this is the key 'contact moment' in the project from which *all* the data and value is derived.

Following feedback, **the delivery team addressed these early issues very well.** The second wave of workshops exhibited a good level of consistency on all the points above, to the satisfaction of the evaluation team observing.

## Q5: What difference/impact has the engagement made?

Judging impacts emerging from a deliberative engagement process is often difficult. It is early days at this stage to identify, define, attribute and quantify an impact before the report has been finalised. However, below is a range of impacts explicitly identified in interviews with the NIC and those that supported via the Advisory Group:

**Learning about deliberative engagement.** This was expressed by a few interviewees who were previously not familiar with qualitative research processes. They said *“I definitely feel more comfortable with deliberative engagement... I now know what it can offer and how it is delivered, for the NIC in future”*. Others derived reassurance that a qualitative research process can generate a sensible and useful outcome even though it feels ‘soft’ in nature.

**Reminder of lay perspective.** A couple of interviewees highlighted how, rather than a specific finding being particularly useful, the main benefit for them has been understanding more in general about *“how ordinary people think about congestion”*. This balances the *“regular views we hear in our consultations which are inherently self-selecting: the public views really add weight to our analysis”*. For some involved this work has acted as a reminder to not look at the NIC’s work in a purely intellectual way, but rather *“realize more clearly that there is a socio-psychological dimension to its work, namely the behaviour change of the public on some issues”*.

**Future impacts** should be sought in the National Infrastructure Assessment issued by the NIC in 2023, although it is acknowledged this is quite distant and any impacts may be hard to attribute to this deliberative process.

**Dissemination.** The results of the deliberative engagement are also expected to be shared with:

- Local Authority planners.
- Department for Transport.
- Transport Select Committee.

**Impacts on public participants.** The main impact that the public participants experienced was an increase in their realization that congestion was a real issue, with real implications for people and the economy. There were also some specific behaviour changes that a few participants declared as a direct result of participating, for example:

*“I got the bus today – last time I drove”*

*“I walk more now”*

*“Although I still drive, I try to avoid going at peak times rather than just accepting it”*

Whilst these impacts shouldn’t be over-estimated, they are clear examples of people saying they have changed their behaviour specifically as a result of discussing the issue more.

## Q6: Effectiveness and transferability?

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**Effectiveness.** The deliberative engagement was undoubtedly very effective at engaging members of the public that participated. A diverse sample of 67 people stayed engaged with the process to the end with very few dropouts. In all three locations participants were observably engaged right to the end of the last discussion, and appeared interested in learning and sharing their views throughout. The topic of congestion is familiar to everybody, and arguably everybody benefits from addressing it: this meant it was relatively easy to engage participants.

**Transferability.** Qualitative research processes like deliberative engagement offer depth of insight into a relatively small sample of the public, rather than statistically robust intelligence on what the whole country thinks about an issue on a relatively superficial level i.e. deep not broad. The remit of the NIC covers a wide range of topics that potentially suit themselves to qualitative research methods such as used here for road congestion. From discussion with interviewees, the topics that are most suitable bear the following attributes:

- Members of the public need to learn a lot before they can form well-rounded views in the eyes of the commissioning body.
- Difficult trade-offs are required, leading to variable perceptions of fairness.
- The policy choice can affect participants tangibly i.e. it is relevant to them.
- There is a personal dimension as well as a citizen dimension i.e. what is right for me, and what is right for the country.

Specific topics cited by interviewees that could be appropriate for deliberative engagement such as this included:

- Improving the energy efficiency of people's homes.
- Gas network and the transition to net zero.
- Rail networks.
- Any topic where people interact with infrastructure and make personal behavioral choices that cumulatively affect how infrastructure works on a national level e.g. electric vehicles and smart energy.

## Q7: Learning from parallel focus groups?

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In parallel with the deliberative engagement, a series of focus groups was also run in the same locations, with separate participants. Broadly the same questions were asked, with similar materials to those used in the workshops, although simpler and quicker versions were used due to the limited time constraints. Each focus group was 90 minutes long.

The aim of doing this was to learn more about what different methods of public research can deliver: what were the pros and cons of the workshops *versus* the focus groups?

Readers are directed to the main Research Report to read more about the detailed methodology used and the findings arising.

Below we set out what the focus groups were effective for, and what they were susceptible to, in comparison with the workshops.

The focus groups were an **effective and streamlined tool** to:

- Understand how participants perceived and experienced congestion directly.
- Understand the first impressions and attitudes of participants to the topic of congestion, including where these are not necessarily well founded or supported by the wider evidence.
- Understand the initial reaction of participants to a range of high-level solutions.
- Give an indication of how other members of the public will react to the same information in the absence of much deliberation or expert input. This is particularly valuable because this is likely to be roughly the amount of information many members of the public will actually have in reality - rather than the extended time and support provided in the full-day workshops.

The focus groups were however **susceptible** to a lack of time and depth, which meant that:

- Ill-founded assertions were not easily challenged, as there wasn't time or an expert in the room to do this credibly e.g. *"The London congestion charge hasn't made any difference at all, so congestion charges aren't worth it"*.
- Contradictions or unrealistic expectations being difficult to point out and unpick in the limited time available e.g. *"They just need to do more Park and Ride schemes, that would sort it out"*.
- Moderators were less able to be thorough, for example hearing from *all* participants on key questions to ensure a full data set on the questions that really mattered.

It is important to understand that in a direct comparison, the focus groups as by far the cheaper method were never going to 'measure up' directly. Indeed, that wasn't the aim. Focus groups are a tool to gather rapid views on an issue, not explore and discuss issues given their short duration.

Some interviewees felt that the experiment to run two methods in parallel was of limited value, merely confirming what they could have already guessed i.e. cheaper quicker methods provide less value and depth.

Other interviewees felt more positively about the parallel work, citing that they can now identify much more precisely what the attributes are that make a topic appropriate for focus groups rather than the more resource intensive deliberative engagement. These attributes are described in the table.

Focus Group if...	Deliberative workshop if...
Seeking high-level attitudes, knee-jerk responses	Seeking underlying values and how people make judgments leading to their views
Interested in how misconceptions and incorrect assumptions influence views	Interested in participants learning accurate balanced information <i>before</i> sharing views
Topic is fairly simple, quick to grasp, few options to explore	Topic is complex, takes time to grasp, many options to explore and consider
You are most interested in what participants think is right for <i>them</i>	You are also interested in what participants think is right for <i>wider</i> society and citizens
You <i>don't</i> have budget to pay for the extra time and depth (and you don't need it)	You <i>do</i> have budget to pay for the extra time and depth (and you do need it)
<i>"Didn't produce anywhere near the depth of engagement and detail, but did really highlight just how low peoples' tolerance is of proposed measures they aren't convinced will work"</i>	<i>"Took a significant investment of time and resource, but has given us a rich understanding of how and why people make the judgments they do about congestion"</i>

## Q8: Lessons arising for future?

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Lessons arising from this project for all bodies potentially commissioning deliberative engagement include:

**Be ready to provide participants tangible case study evidence** of what works and what doesn't, including impacts and costs. Members of the public need this to form useful views on preferences and trade-offs. Depending on what data is available, this may require the commissioning body sacrificing a little on the precision or confidence of some of the information provided. Although this can be uncomfortable for those used to precise, high-confidence data, it is necessary if conversations are to avoid becoming too abstract or not embedded in reality for participants.

**Plan for a significant workload for the commissioning body.** Even with a competent contractor on board, there is a significant amount of work for the commissioning body to do to support the process. This resourcing pressure often spikes between the two workshops as new design choices and materials need developing in a short window. Whilst the delivery contractor leads this, the commissioning body needs to advise, guide and approve the changes that can entail much internal discussion and compromise.

**Lower your expectations about the volume of material and coverage:** you won't get through everything you want to. This is partly because members of the public need to start right at the beginning of a topic, as well as needing a significant amount of time to develop their knowledge and views. Remember, the commissioning body has often had a lifetime of learning to get to where it is: members of the public are being expected to get up to speed in a couple of days.

**Be relaxed about supporting experts having a view (they all do).** The value of experts arises largely from their knowledge answering questions, as well as their ability and willingness to reflect the *range* of views out there. Emphasise this when you recruit them to help, and remind them of this again in the briefings. The public also appreciate hearing from diverse viewpoints, and can generally make up their own mind which arguments they like and don't.

**Ensure channel quotas are included in the recruitment strategy.** This worked well in this process and indicates how care during recruitment can protect the investment being made in the whole project.

Thank you to all who contributed to the evaluation throughout the project, it would not be possible without your time and honesty. Particular thanks go to Jon Chappell and Pete Burnill the NIC officers supporting the process and evaluation.

# Evaluation methodology & limitations

The aim of the evaluation was to “*assess the effectiveness of the deliberative engagement, and capture lessons learned for the NIC in future*”, and in doing so cover the key questions covered by this report.

This evaluation was conducted over the same period as the dialogue itself and included:

- 6 baseline interviews over telephone<sup>3</sup>.
- Reviewing the draft design and materials for Wave 1.
- Observation of all three locations in Wave 1 of public events.
- Exit questionnaires from 69 participants at Wave 1 events.
- Reviewing the draft design for the Focus Groups.
- Observation of two Focus Groups in Manchester on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2019.
- Analysis of pre-and-post worksheets from Focus Groups.
- Reviewing the draft design and materials for Wave 2.
- Observation of all three locations in Wave 2 of public events.
- Exit questionnaires from 66 participants at Wave 2 events.
- Analysis of pre-and-post worksheets from all public events.
- Observation by attendance at two Advisory Group meetings<sup>4</sup>.
- 6 final interviews over telephone<sup>5</sup>.
- Reviewing draft version and final version of the Dialogue Report.
- Tracking key email correspondence throughout the project, and regular ad-hoc liaison with NIC officers throughout.

There are a few limitations to the evaluation to be aware of:

- Evaluation team was not party to *all* interactions and emails amongst delivery contractor and NIC: conclusions are formed on the evidence available.
- Evaluators observed Focus Groups at one of the three locations (Manchester).
- The impacts of a dialogue like this inevitably take time to arise. In many cases it is too early to identify what impact the dialogue is likely to have: the evaluation has attempted to highlight areas for investigation in future.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewees included two NIC officers, the delivery contractor team, and a selection of Advisory Group members including one Commissioner.

<sup>4</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> November 2019 and on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2020

<sup>5</sup> Interviewees included two NIC officers, the delivery contractor team, and a selection of Advisory Group members including two Commissioners. Note that other Advisory Group members were not available for interview due to the restrictions and workload caused by the Covid-19 outbreak.

# Context & background on the dialogue

In July 2018, the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) published its first ever National Infrastructure Assessment, setting out a plan of action for the country's infrastructure over the next 10 to 30 years. The National Infrastructure Assessment noted that *“there has often been a disconnect between theoretically perfect road pricing systems suggested by policymakers and the perceived fairness and practicality of those systems by the public. Rather than propose a further technocratic recommendation the Commission will explore new ways to engage stakeholders and the public on this topic, looking at a full range of potential options in light of the major changes in road use and taxation that are inevitable”*.

In October 2019, the NIC commissioned BritainThinks to conduct deliberative engagement to develop a deeper understanding of how members of the UK public think and feel about the options for tackling congestion. Specifically, the objectives were to understand:

- How members of the public rank the acceptability of different policy scenarios.
- The reasons for views, including how participants made their judgements.
- The value of deliberative engagement as a potential tool for NIC's use in future.

The primary strand of engagement was a suite of public workshops held at three locations (Manchester, Nottingham and Bristol). Each location held a workshop on a Saturday, then a follow-up workshop 3-4 weeks later. All workshops were held in January and February 2020.

67 participants completed both workshops in total. The participants were recruited from a pre-set range of channels to include a range of demographics to reflect the UK population and capture a diversity of views. Participants received £200 for taking part.

A secondary strand of research comprised a set of six focus groups in the same locations, to test the differences between the workshops and the focus groups, for future learning.

As qualitative research, the aim of both strands of engagement was to explore participants' in-depth views and responses, rather than provide statistically representative views.

A detailed methodology, as well as the materials shown to participants, can be found in the annex of the main Findings Report, which is available upon request from NIC.

Please note that further evidence and data sets are available on request from [rhuari@3kq.co.uk](mailto:rhuari@3kq.co.uk). Some data sets run to many pages so are not included for brevity, for example the exit questionnaire results.

The author welcomes contact from readers regarding this evaluation.

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