

UK statement at 10th meeting of Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-making under the Aarhus Convention

Good afternoon.

My name is Justine Solomons-Moat and I am the UK Focal Point for the Aarhus Convention, based in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about a case study regarding an experience of public participation on an environmental matter during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

For context, several years ago Defra began setting up a new environmental body – the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP). Its objective was to hold public authorities to account for their implementation of environmental law. Defra considered it important to involve non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the process of establishing the OEP, as stakeholder insight and expertise would help ensure that the new body was as effective as possible.

Defra was committed to making this stakeholder engagement authentic and meaningful. With this in mind, Defra began holding regular face-to-face stakeholder engagement workshops about the OEP with NGOs. These in-person workshops were designed to be as interactive as possible, providing plenty of opportunities for discussion, engagement and participation. At the workshops, Defra presented its ideas about the OEP to NGOs and invited their views. Defra subsequently used the insight gathered to refine plans for establishing the OEP.

Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a challenge to this established and effective way of working. Defra was committed to continuing to enable NGOs' participation in the development of the OEP. However, clearly this needed to be done in a way that protected the health and safety of participants.

As was the case with many events and meetings during the pandemic, the workshops were moved online. However, the most valuable element of the in-person workshops had been their dynamic nature. Participants were active and debates were lively. At the time, there was a concern about whether this culture would translate to an online format effectively.

Outcomes

It soon transpired that any initial concerns were unfounded, with the virtual workshops turning out to be successful and, in fact, providing unexpected opportunities and benefits.

Firstly, practical advantages to the online format were observed. Previously, participants had been required to travel (sometimes long distances) to attend in-person workshops. In contrast, virtual workshops removed barriers such as geography and, related to this, cost of travel. It was also noted that some participants might find it easier to make interventions in online discussions by writing a comment in a chat box or by raising their virtual hand. In these ways, virtual workshops can have a democratising and empowering effect, thereby providing greater equality of opportunity for public participation.

Secondly, it was observed that the quality of the public participation was not compromised by the move from in-person to online meetings. On the contrary, participants were more than happy to attend virtually, and continued to be very engaged, participating in debates and

discussions as actively as before. Participants commented that they were pleased that the engaging and dynamic culture of the workshops continued, despite moving online.

However, it is worth noting that this may have been due, in part, to the fact that Defra and participants had built relationships with each other prior to the swap from in-person to online workshops. Therefore, it is important not to forget the value of face-to-face engagement, when it is possible or practical to carry this out.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this case study demonstrates an overall positive experience of public participation on an environmental matter during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several advantages to virtual engagement were observed, particularly elements that can help support and enhance public participation, by making it easier to access and more equitable. Ultimately, the most important outcome was the fact that this public participation on an important environmental matter – the development of the OEP – was able to continue, despite the challenging context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to share this case study.