



Reconnecting the public with food and farming: lessons from an innovative engagement experiment

What do we understand about public perceptions of food and farming?

- People are concerned about food quality and safety and are increasingly interested in transparency surrounding food production, particularly regarding the rearing of animals for human consumption.
- There is, however, a growing disconnect between how livestock are reared and processed and what the public know about these farming practices.
- Better understanding of public perceptions of food and farming are vital for informing and shaping the development of policies and practices concerning food systems and agriculture.

How can public engagement help?

- Public engagement with science and policymaking is a valuable tool, providing greater accountability, institutional trust, relevance and responsiveness. There are calls for greater dialogue between policymakers and the public and for public engagement topics to include potentially controversial issues such as the production and consumption of animals.
- Topics such as livestock farming require nuanced discussion, which is often lacking in commonly-used, large-scale online surveys. The development of the new UK Agriculture Bill and National Food Strategy provides unique opportunities for scientists and policymakers to actively engage the public on such issues.



Picture 1



Picture 2

What is this research?

- As part of a four-year project called 'FIELD' exploring farmer, adviser and consumer understandings of livestock health, welfare and disease, we designed and conducted an experiment to engage members of the public in discussions around animal health and welfare.
- We developed an innovative engagement method to find out what people understand about animal health and welfare, in a non-intimidating, accessible and inclusive format.
- The engagement event was held over two days at Newcastle's Grainger Market in May 2019.
- More than 180 members of the public participated in a sequence of activities:
 - A walk-through, multiple-choice game where participants took on the role of a farmer in making decisions relating to the care of an ill cow, resulting in trade-offs between animal health and farm productivity (see picture 1).
 - Participants were then invited to respond to a series of questions and prompts on food and farming, noting their thoughts on sticky notes which were then placed on a board (see picture 2).
 - A sub-sample of participants were interviewed to reflect on the decisions they made in the game and to expand on their sticky note comments and observations.

What are the findings?

Participants demonstrated an interest in farming and livestock health and welfare and were reflective about this:

- Several participants stated that the activity made them rethink their consumption patterns, that they did not want to continue to take farming for granted, and that some of the animal products, e.g., milk, sold by supermarkets were too cheap.
- Multiple stakeholders were viewed as responsible for animal care, with farmers and government most frequently mentioned.
- Environmental, social, ethical and economic considerations all influenced participants' choice of animal products. They preferred animal products with high welfare standards and a local provenance. British food was seen to be trusted.

Participants were able to think about complex and ethically-difficult issues around animal health and welfare:

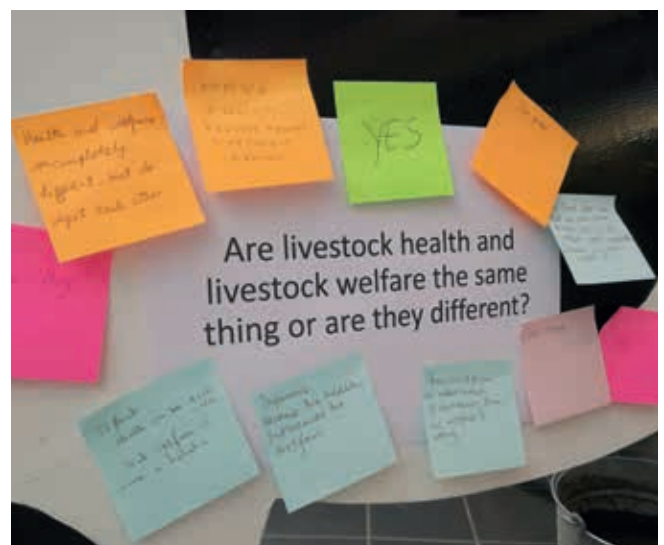
- Most participants (58%) made similar trade-offs in the choice game, prioritising cattle health and welfare over farm profitability. These choices were often made in conjunction with memories of and concerns about livestock epidemics and the spread of disease, e.g., BSE and foot and mouth disease.
- Some participants gave nuanced responses to what farmers can achieve e.g., the financial cost of a disease outbreak versus the cost of the treatment for a disease.

Participants valued opportunities to discuss and learn about food production:

- A third of participants enjoyed the activity due to its educational value, as well as the participatory and accessible format employed. Participants mentioned that the activity made them empathise with farmers and the difficult choices they had to make in relation to livestock health and welfare.

What are the conclusions?

- Findings highlight that public engagement activities have the potential to provide individuals with the space to connect/reconnect with agriculture and meaningfully engage in potentially controversial food and farming topics.
- When presented without a particular political agenda, activities like those described in this note can act as non-intimidating and inclusive public engagement tools. In this way, public engagement can be used to make policymaking more democratic and responsive to public concerns.
- The activities used in this research demonstrate the value of public engagement for increasing participation of different publics in debates surrounding food and farming and its potential for informing wider decision-making in these areas.
- The multi-stage format of the event had the benefit of triangulating and enriching findings. Its interactive nature made it less formal, potentially less intimidating and also more enjoyable.
- Using a popular inner-city market that participants were familiar with and comfortable within also made the event less intimidating – researchers entered a public space rather than the public having to enter a research space.





What are the workable recommendations for the future?

- There is a clear appetite from the public to understand and engage in food and farming topics. Researchers and policymakers should take more opportunities to engage with different publics via creative and interactive methods of engagement.
- Careful design is essential for effective engagement. The locations of engagement events should be carefully considered, e.g., the types of publics likely to be present at these locations, the time of day and day of the week the event is held, in order to gain a diversity of views and opinions from a range of publics.
- Future research should further explore whether public engagement influences what policy decisions are made, increases trust in policymaking, and whether participants feel they are in a position to make decisions related to food and farming.



FIELD is a four-year interdisciplinary project funded by the Wellcome Trust (2018-2022). It brings a team of social scientists, historians, economists and epidemiologists together to research how livestock disease is influenced by nature and culture, science and society, and the actions of humans and livestock.

This note was written by Dr Beth Clark (Centre for Rural Economy), Dr Niamh Mahon (University of Hull), Dr Amy Proctor (Centre for Rural Economy) and Professor Lewis Holloway (University of Hull).

For more information,
visit <https://field-wt.co.uk/>
or email: beth.clark@ncl.ac.uk