Public Engagement with Drought and Water Scarcity Research

Abstract This chapter makes a contribution to the discussion on public engagement with research. Hence, the focus is less on the research topic as such but more on the communication and dissemination of drought and water scarcity related research. This chapter presents public engagement with research activities: two water-related walks. First, a waterways walk through Birmingham, UK, that stopped at various places and discussed drought and water scarcity issues with participants. Second, a drought walk through St James’s Park in London used to disseminate a primer document and highlight issues of public water supply and its function in public spaces. This chapter presents these activities to frame a necessary discussion about the need for better communication of drought and water scarcity in the UK against the background that the issue is often neglected in public debates about water. At the same time water resources managers at the UK’s water companies report difficulties in communicating the issue despite having supporting data from monitoring and modelling. Hence, a public drought and water scarcity discussion is overdue and, as the examples show, can come in various shapes.

Keywords Drought • Water scarcity • Public engagement • UK • Waterways walk
The UK has a drought and water scarcity communication problem. One could say that while floods stay in the head, droughts are easily forgotten. Although the UK has experienced several droughts in the past 20 years as mentioned in the previous chapters, it is the drought of 1976 that people seem to remember. And, people in the UK tend to demonstrate feelings of nostalgia towards past, hot summers where positive feelings towards these events can foster perceptions that people feel safer than they really are (Howarth et al. 2019). Moreover, the experience of drought and water restrictions in the past affects the response to restrictions in the future (Manouseli et al. 2018). However, a drought 45 years ago is not in the memory of those born after 1976 or even those born in the years shortly before 1976. Yet, with drought and water scarcity being an issue that, according to the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment, needs more action (Committee on Climate Change Risk Assessment 2016), this should involve not only technological supply and demand side measures but also the communication of drought and water scarcity. Just like floods, it needs to stay in peoples’ heads that this is a serious issue in the UK exacerbated by climate change, urbanisation and population growth. The previous chapter already highlighted the case for a better integration of local knowledge into the generation of drought and water scarcity related knowledge and decision-making. In this chapter the aim is to demonstrate the value of public engagement with research, that is informing, disseminating, communicating and discussing research results with different publics. Public engagement goes beyond simply disseminating research results in the hope that it changes behaviour by building relationships with publics (Cook and Overpeck 2019). Public engagement with research must not necessarily mean the engagement with the general public but also with specialist publics such as those working in the water sector. This will be the case presented here. This chapter, after introducing the concept of public engagement, will present two public engagement with research activities: first, a waterways walk through Birmingham stopping at various water-related places to initiate a discussion about drought and water scarcity; second, a drought walk through St James’s Park in London to disseminate the results of a research project to stakeholders and to have a discussion about the role of public parks in water education. In both cases the hypothesis was that talking about water issues at places that are related to water, that is a canal, river, fountains, lake, and so on, inspires a more
fruitful discussion because being at these places may conjure up memories, thoughts and reflections that would otherwise not come to mind in a discussion held in a conference room or office. For example, in ethnography artefacts are used to conjure up memories.

Abbott et al. (2019) discuss the importance of water education using the example of the water cycle. This well-known tool comes with several flaws and could, according to the authors, ‘undermine efforts to promote an understanding of water and also of general scientific thinking’ (ibid., p. 533). The authors especially criticise that 85% of the analysed water cycle diagrams showed no interaction between humans and the water cycle despite the fact that humans dominate critical aspects of the hydrosphere and 80% of the world’s population facing water insecurity or severe water scarcity (ibid.). They conclude: ‘The omission of humans and associated changes from water cycle diagrams is deeply problematic because it implies that one of our most essential and threatened resources is not influenced by our actions’ (ibid. p. 539). The United Nations University’s Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability suggests the concept of water literacy. Thereby they refer to ‘appropriate knowledge about various aspects of water use and management in order to ensure safer water consumption and to contribute to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)’ (Yuto et al. 2014). Water literacy can be acquired by obtaining basic literacy competencies and a certain level of education, and they suggest, for example, to improve the water literacy of all local governments and residents through educational activities to ensure safe water use and to promote sustainable water supply. Robins et al. (2017) also want to create a more water-literate society, where UK citizens better risk and engage in decision-making about how water should be managed. ‘A more water-literate society will better enable water managers to shift from reactionary, crisis-driven approaches to long-term, agenda-driven plans in line with agreed strategic goals’ (Robins et al. 2017, p. 52).

There is work and experience available regarding floods and flood resilience in the UK. McEwen et al. (2016) speak of ‘watery senses of place’, meaning living with water and water issues such as flooding: ‘Clearly, post-flood learning needs incorporating into community flood education to increase adaptive capability’ (ibid., p. 15). The authors introduce the concept of ‘flood memorialisation’, described as the process by which ‘facts’ of the event such as high water levels are recorded and the (emotional) memory of flood impacts is honoured (ibid., p. 19; emphases in the original). The same could be introduced for post-drought learning,
and the two walks discussed in this chapter could serve as an example of that. With reference to the second walk, droughts could be ‘memorialised’ in public parks, serving as a reminder of drought and water scarcity. Also with reference to flooding, Whatmore (2009) (but also Landström et al. [2011]) introduced so-called Environmental Competency Groups (ECGs). ECGs encourage scientists and local residents to work together to create knowledge about local environmental issues. The approach therefore creates a space where those who are directly affected can question expert knowledge and bring their experiences to bear on how the problem is framed and what different courses of action are available (Grecksch and Landström 2021). Again, the two drought walks detailed below offer a possibility to do this, that is listen to expert knowledge but also question it as well as providing a space for bringing in ideas and knowledge about drought and water scarcity.

There are, of course, ample educational and water efficiency programmes across the UK carried out by water suppliers (Grecksch and Lange 2019). However, the focus is on technological devices (e.g. water meters, tap aerators and hippo bags), financial incentives and educational programmes for school children. There is less focus on drought though. Communication about drought is usually occurring when it is already happening and also occurs within the legal framework. This means that a Temporary Use Ban (TUB), that is the prohibition of certain water uses such as washing a car or watering the garden, has to be advertised in newspapers, radio and television ahead of its implementation (Lange and Cook 2015). There is no continuous conversation about drought and water scarcity though in the UK, which could raise awareness and better prepare people for actual drought events and water scarcity situations.

As mentioned before, the aim of this chapter is to raise awareness for public engagement with research, in this case for drought and water scarcity. A secondary aim is to demonstrate how important it is to involve water professionals, that is people working in water companies, water consultancies or regulatory bodies, in these exercises as they are the intermediaries and transmission belts between those who professionally care about water and citizens. Both walks, which will be discussed in this chapter, were primarily aimed at water stakeholders, that is the water professionals just mentioned. Furthermore, both walks were part of conferences aimed at researchers as well as professional stakeholders, and in this sense, they could be easily recruited for the walks. The two walks described and discussed in this chapter are only the beginning of a much-needed public
engagement with drought and water scarcity in the UK and hence provide only a snapshot instead of a representative picture of the UK. However, the participants of both walks came not only from different organisational backgrounds but also from different geographical regions of the UK. The next section briefly introduces the concept of public engagement with research followed by a detailed description and analysis of both walks.

**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Public engagement with research describes the many ways that members of the public can be involved in the design, conduct and dissemination of research (Chikoore et al. 2016 provide a history of public engagement in the UK). It is meant to inform, listen, consult, inspire and collaborate with the public. UKRI, the UK’s public body bringing together the UK’s seven research councils, describes public engagement similarly as: ‘Creating opportunities for people to discuss, create and participate in research and innovation is an important way to achieve this, because this makes research and innovation more relevant, impactful and trusted’ (UKRI 2020). This means it is a two-way process. It is not simply researchers communicating research results to the public, but it is about a meaningful discussion about research. This can create legitimacy and trust, and it could also inspire new research. Public engagement with research is now an integral part of universities, and specialist teams offer support and training in public engagement with research. Especially for early career researchers, public engagement with research is seen a key transferable skill enhancing their future employability. There are conferences specialising on public engagement, and there are prizes and awards for successful public engagement.

The possibilities for public engagement with research seem endless. Chikoore et al. (2016, p. 160) carried out a survey on public engagement activities among UK academics and ranked them accordingly. The top three are ‘presenting to a professional audience’, ‘presenting a public lecture’ and ‘writing for a non-academic publication’. However, there are countless more creative engagement activities such as podcasts, blogs, using social media, working with schools, web-documentaries, being interviewed for TV or radio, public performances, exhibitions, science slams or ‘pint of science’ events. Of course, the type of engagement activity depends on the discipline and research, and not every type of engagement activity is suitable for every type of research. In the cases presented
here I decided for walks to discuss and present research and engage with the public (see below).

‘The ‘public’ are all non-academic audiences (including the general public) that can potentially be engaged with by academics’ (Chikoore et al. 2016, p. 148). Hence, there is not ‘one’ public, but people can be members of multiple ‘publics’. For example, a water resources manager working for one of the private water supply companies in England or Wales is part of the ‘public’ consisting of professionals in the water sector, but they are also a part of the wider public using, for instance, water at home. As researchers we can make use of targeting these different ‘publics’.

**Drought Walks**

The idea to use walks to discuss research or to gather data is not entirely new. Ambrose (2020) provides a literature review in her essay on energy walks pointing out walking interviews and the importance of oral histories in this context. Although her walk focused on energy, there is a striking parallel to water when she says: ‘Citizens therefore lack the basic knowledge required to make an assessment of the ethical, environmental and economic implications of the choices made on our behalves and our contemporary relationship with energy is arguably one characterised by complete dependency and almost complete ignorance’ (ibid.). ‘Energy’ can easily be exchanged for ‘water’ in this sentence without losing any of its meaning.

The original ideas for the two water-related walks presented here are somewhat more mundane. First, it was the desire of the author to engage more in public engagement with research and, second, the ambition to take stakeholders to places where drought and water scarcity happened or places where water plays an important role either directly or indirectly. A third reason was to escape the format of presenting research in the usual setting of a conference room and take other researchers and stakeholders on a post-lunch walk. Both walks were part of drought and water scarcity conferences, and the conferences provided the framework for the walks and facilitated the recruitment of participants. The first drought walk in Birmingham was also filmed by a professional film crew and an interview was made after the walk with the author. Footage from the walk and the interview are featured in a five-minute video about the conference that is accessible to the general public. In this case one public engagement activity led to a second one. Both walks also had a positive side effect in that
participants had a chance to talk to each other while walking from one stop to another. They could introduce themselves and meet new colleagues in a way that a traditional format like a presentation would not allow.

Moreover, the context of both drought walks was a work task within the ENDOWS project on ‘Innovation, communities and corporate water’ led by the author. The aim of the work task was to analyse water efficiency in the public sector, especially the role of social norms. The final outcome is a primer document on water efficiency in the public sector aimed at stakeholders in the water sector, regulators and public sector organisations (Grecksch and Lange 2019). Because the results of the project are helpful for the understanding of the two water-related walks, they are briefly summarised in the following paragraphs.

Current water efficiency campaigns and strategies in England and Wales focus on individual households and private businesses. Water efficiency in public sector and large organisations, with a more ‘public’ dimension than private individual households, such as workplaces is only discussed in a handful of studies. And, the main tools currently used in England and Wales by water companies are water-saving devices and messages to reduce bills. But water-saving behaviour is influenced not just by individual decisions but by social and psychological drivers such as social norms, values, group behaviour and external factors (culture, family behaviour, infrastructure and regulations). The primer presents findings from academic and grey literature and previous case studies about the potential of water efficiency campaigns to contribute to water saving in the UK within public sector and large organisations—universities, schools, hospitals, council buildings, offices and housing associations. These organisations provide significant untapped potential for water saving by virtue of their size and/or their nature as public organisations. The focus is on the role of social norms, that is community standards, to promote the uptake and effectiveness of water efficiency campaigns.

The research results suggest that engaging with social norms is a key to devising and implementing successful water efficiency campaigns (Grecksch and Lange 2019). Social norms are value commitments that shape water use behaviour. Social norms have become the tool of choice for today’s behavioural policy-makers. The inclusion of a social norm in a message can be a way to encourage citizens to carry out a wide range of socially desirable acts. Social norms serve as cues, and they motivate action by providing information about what is likely to be effective and adaptive (Posner...
A good example for a social norm is the message we find in almost every hotel room about the re-use of towels. The primer develops nine key recommendations for a successful water efficiency campaign with the public sector. *Understanding why and how water is valued:* It is important to explore what values customers hold towards water and why or why not they engage in water efficient behaviour. Values are influenced and shaped by society, culture and religious belief systems (Sofoulis 2005; Corral-Verdugo et al. 2008; Hoolohan and Browne 2016; Sharma and Jha 2017; Simpkins 2018). *Narratives and stories:* Telling a story or shaping a narrative is of importance. Simple messages such as ‘Save, more water’ do not get through to water users. Instead, the bigger story must be told, that is water efficiency should be linked to the wider environmental story, for example the water-energy-food nexus (Waterwise 2018). *Framing:* How information about water efficiency is shaped and contextualised within a familiar frame of reference and meaning is of great importance. Second, it makes a difference who is conveying the message about water saving—water companies, regulators or intermediaries (McQuail 2005; Byerly et al. 2018; Whiting et al. 2019). *Setting realistic targets:* There is a limit to water conservation as we, for example, need to use water to wash ourselves or to wash clothes. People may need water for religious reasons and some people simply do not care about efficient water use (Siero et al. 1996; Steg 2008; Ek and Söderholm 2010; Mills and Schleich 2012). *Competition:* Competitions can be a useful tool in the context of social norms. They can leverage the power of social norms. People like to know where they stand compared to others and they like to be told that they are good (Siero et al. 1996; Petersen et al. 2015; Vine and Jones 2016). *Reference groups:* Our behaviour orientates itself at reference groups—group thinking. In other words, we tend to adapt our behaviour according to what is the norm within a reference group (Goldstein et al. 2008). Herein lies a huge potential for water efficiency campaigns in the public sector. *Align structural and behaviour change measures:* Water-saving devices or new plumbing and the implementation of social norms to change behaviour can go together. In addition, water-saving devices combined with very specific and targeted behaviour change messages work very well together (Goldstein et al. 2008; Steg 2008; Ek and Söderholm 2010; Russell and Fielding 2010; Mondejar-Jimenez et al. 2011; Roccaro et al. 2011; Mills and Schleich 2012). *Building water-saving messages on energy saving campaigns:* A huge factor discouraging people from
water-saving behaviour is the fact that they have less control over water infrastructure as, for example, compared to energy. However, a message that targets shorter showers could focus primarily on the fact that it saves energy (Petersen et al. 2015). Data and evaluation: Having a good data basis and regularly evaluating the effects and results of water efficiency campaigns that involve social norms are a precondition for successful water efficiency strategies and campaigns (Orr et al. 2018).

The public sector in the UK employs almost six million people. Hence, there is an opportunity for the public sector to act as a role model for other sectors, such as the private sector, the third sector, and private households. A large majority of the workforce spend their days at workplaces where they use water for washing hands, in the office kitchen, in the canteen and for showering, the latter in particular if there is an increase in cycling to work. Furthermore, there is an opportunity for the public sector to carry out a ‘multiplier’ function. If water-saving behaviour is implemented at work, this behaviour may also be applied at home, but also vice versa. People who engage privately in water-saving behaviour may have an influence upon their peers in larger organisations in which they may work.

Water saving is both a public-private sector task. Public sector organisations are well placed to start water-saving behaviour initiatives themselves, for example, as a competition among departments or in the context of staff engagement weeks or by including water efficient appliances in their procurement activities. There is also scope for water companies and the public sector to increase their cooperation on this issue.

Both walks were carefully planned and organised. The author selected the route and tested it before the actual event to make sure it is feasible and walkable within the given time limit and also to have alternative locations in case of heavy rain. Moreover, a health and safety risk analysis was carried out since both walks included crossing streets with heavy motor traffic and the walk in Birmingham included walking along a canal. In this instance the author led the group along the canal, and the co-convenor followed after the group making sure no one accidentally slips and falls into the water. The author also carried a first aid kit and a mobile phone to contact emergency services should that become necessary. All participants had to register before the event and were given detailed information about the walk, including the distance, a map and to wear appropriate clothes and shoes. Although the chosen locations were set, in the sense that they are not movable, it is important to find places where a small group can gather and talk without being a nuisance to the public and also avoiding to talk loudly or even scream because of surrounding noises.
Waterways Walk Birmingham

The waterways walk took place on 14 March 2018 in Birmingham as part of the ENDOWS Showcase event. The event was an opportunity to engage with research and outputs from the Research Councils UK (RCUK) Drought and Water Scarcity Programme and to help shape the final phase of activity. The activity offered an informal and unusual way of discussing and contributing to the question how water efficiency campaigns can promote public social norms in relation to valuing water. Stakeholders and participants had the possibility to showcase to us how they perceive water efficiency campaigns to address their concerns in relation to the water environment. Since the work task started later in 2018, the walk was also used for generating ideas and to sharpen the research questions of the work task.

The 90-minute walk covered 1.8 miles and made stops at defined points along the route and discussed ideas about water efficiency campaigns. The stops served as ‘anchor points’ to discuss certain aspects such as follows:

What is the value of water?
How do people experience water efficiency campaigns?
What role should citizens play in the management of drought and water scarcity?
What water efficiency campaigns would you be interested in contributing to?
Have you participated in water efficiency campaigns at your workplace?

Each stop was introduced followed by a discussion. Participants were free to intervene and ask questions at any time. A positive side effect of the walk was, as mentioned before, that participants were also able to talk to each other during the walking; hence, the walks also foster stakeholder relationships. Including the two convenors, ten people participated in the walk, ranging from regulatory bodies, third sector organisations to research councils.

The walk’s first stop was at a series of canal locks at the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal, one of the many canals that run through Birmingham (Fig. 5.1). We chose this location to present the oral history of a Yorkshire-based woman and keen boater who recollects her memory of an incident in the winter 1984/1985 where she was frozen in the canal in Tipton and
Fig. 5.1 Canal locks Birmingham (Source: The author)
Wolverhampton for a month each when she was moving her boat from Birmingham because the canal was due to be drained. She remembers how they coped with the situation and how it affected working boats as well. This oral history presented an unusual and unexpected aspect of water scarcity—being frozen in and not being able to navigate the canals. It was important to stress the variety at which water scarcity can affect us, and the cold spell in the UK at the beginning of March 2018 saw pipes burst and water companies distributing water bottles among its customers.

The second and third stops were at Victoria Square in Birmingham’s city centre. Against the backdrop of Birmingham’s council house and town hall, participants were briefly introduced to Birmingham’s water supply history. Birmingham is an interesting case because it was the first city to ‘municipalise’ water 1876. Then mayor Joseph Chamberlain decided to buy the water works and run it for public profit. The ‘Birmingham Corporation Water Department’ was responsible for Birmingham’s water supply from 1876 until 1974. In 1892, land was purchased in mid-Wales and work began at what was to become Elan Valley Reservoirs and the Elan aqueduct. Both still supply Birmingham with water. Built between 1896 and 1906, consisting of five lakes and a 73-mile-long aqueduct, every day 365 million litres travel to Birmingham by gravity alone. It was built because the average rainfall in mid-Wales is almost three times higher than in Birmingham. Today the reservoirs are managed by Welsh water. Cannon Hill Park in Birmingham hosts a model of the Elan Valley Reservoir, and the model was constructed as a tribute to the pioneers of the scheme and opened in 1998.

We also used this stop to introduce the Consumer Council for Water (CCW) whose offices are located at Victoria Square in Birmingham. The CCW is a public body that represents water and sewage consumers in England and Wales. It provides impartial advice and advocacy, and it takes up unresolved complaints. In a recent publication they stressed the fact that customers also have an important part to play when it comes to saving water and making the water resources more resilient. However, they also attest customers a lack of awareness of the pressures of the water system (Consumer Council for Water 2017). We used both the brief introduction into where Birmingham’s water comes from and the CCW’s role to discuss about whether we value water, whether it matters where water comes from and also if water efficiency campaigns, which usually address domestic customers, should also address the places where most of us spend our daytime—at our workplaces. In other words, do we need to widen the focus of water efficiency campaigns?
The fourth stop was planned outside Ofwat’s offices close to Birmingham’s New Street railway station. Instead, the lively discussion at Victory Square was further continued, and Ofwat’s role was briefly introduced. Ofwat is a key actor and responsible for economic regulation of water industry in England and Wales. We therefore briefly discussed the role of Ofwat as a catalyst for innovation and whether Ofwat could play a role in animating water companies to take more care of the public sector and water efficiency.

The discussion among the participants during the walk contributed to the discussion about water efficiency campaigns and can be summarised as follows. Water scarcity needs to be put into a wider context. Water scarcity is about human behaviour, technological infrastructure and weather events. It is important to emphasise and talk about water scarcity as it occurs more often than drought. Moreover, there is a challenge of positive incentives for customers to save water, especially against the background of increasing water bills. Furthermore, the question was discussed, where does water come from and is that important? Is there such a thing as ‘local’ water compared to the discussion about local food. Lastly, the fragmentation of the water governance system and how it affects water efficiency campaigns was a point of discussion. These discussion points were helpful in shaping the research project, which, as mentioned before, was only due to begin later that year. In fact, it sharpened the research question and direction of the research towards a widening of water efficiency campaigns (see summary of the research in the previous section). We did not explicitly measure feedback for this walk as we did for the second walk, but the aforementioned video of the conference, which features the walk, also contains the statement by one of the participants: ‘I really enjoyed the canal walk we did’ (About Drought 2018 Minute 1:39).

Drought Walk London

The drought walk took place on 7 November 2019 in London as part of the ENDOWS About Drought Download Event. The event marked the end of the ENDOWS project and presented the results of the various work tasks to stakeholders from water companies, regulatory bodies, consultants and researchers. The walk was organised as a lunchtime walk through St James’s Park, the closest park to the Royal Society, the conference venue. As opposed to the first walk in Birmingham, this walk was only 45 minutes long. The idea behind walking through St James’s Park was to
learn about its water features and function and to talk about water efficiency in the workplace. Hence, the walk was used as a dissemination event for the primer on ‘Water efficiency in the public sector. The role of social norms’. As explained before, the Primer discusses social norms, such as community standards, as an instrument to instigate more efficient water-saving behaviour in organisations with a public dimension—universities, schools, hospitals, and council buildings. We wanted stakeholders to share their thoughts, ideas and experiences about social norms and water efficiency in large organisations in an informal and energising format.

Out of overall 150 conference participants, 22 joined the walk ranging from representatives of regulatory bodies, water companies, water consultancies, research councils and researcher to PhD students. At the beginning of the walk, participants were briefed about health and safety, the length of the walk and what to expect. As with the first walk, it was hypothesised that visiting places related to water and water efficiency is a great opportunity to develop conversations about water efficiency that may also draw on comparisons between different practices in relation to water saving, including those in various participants’ workplaces.

The first stop was the water fountain in St James’s Park. The stop was used to introduce the convenors, to have a very quick round of introductions of the participants and to explain the purpose of the walk. As mentioned before the walk was primarily used to disseminate the primer document, but a secondary purpose was to combine this with a discussion about the role and function of public parks and their potential to be used for water education. Thus, this first stop introduced the history of St James’s Park. St James’s Park is the oldest royal park in London and surrounded by three palaces (Buckingham, St James and Westminster). The park dates back to 1532 when Henry VIII acquired the site as yet another deer park. James I improved the drainage and controlled the water supply by bringing water over from Hyde Park. He also kept a collection of animals in the park among which were camels and crocodiles. But it was Charles II (1630–1685) who made dramatic changes to the park, including a complete redesign of the lawns, trees and avenues. This was inspired by elaborate French gardens. The park became more formal. The centrepiece was a 2500-ft-long canal lined by trees. He also opened the park to the public. During the Hanoverian period, parts of the long canal where filled creating what today is Horse Guards Parade. The next complete overhaul and redesign of the park was undertaken by John Nash in a more
romantic style, that is the canal was transformed into a natural-looking lake. This is pretty much how the park still looks today.

We then combined this history of the park with the results of our research and communicating water issue in the UK in general. For instance, one of the challenges we found during the research about drought and communication about water resources is the limited visibility of the issue of periodic water scarcity in the UK. Hence, parks are natural places for starting conversations about drought and valuing water. Public parks with water features provide an opportunity to render more visible the issue of water availability for a range of citizens also in urban areas, that is by showing changes in water levels of the water features and vegetation, for example during periods of drought. During the national COVID-19 lockdown, the role of public parks and access to them was further highlighted; hence, there are possibilities of emphasising the recreational function of parks and its potential role in water education. Already media images of hot and water scarce summer periods usually show citizens congregating in parks and on beaches in the UK, with children playing in water fountains.

The second stop was at the blue bridge that crosses the pond in St James’s Park. Here we discussed first the role and function of public parks. Public parks fulfil a vital function in cities, towns, and also villages (village green). They are places to relax, to play, to rest and to eat. Public parks were created for the population’s well-being. They also provide space for wildlife and biodiversity in urban areas (‘lungs for the city’). Water features play a central role in public parks either as lakes, ponds, fountains or on children’s playgrounds. Public parks are an important feature of public life, where people, including children, meet, where we can pause and start new conversations. Hence, harnessing a public sphere for promoting water efficiency campaigns was also the starting point for our research on water efficiency in the public sector.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the focus of water efficiency campaigns in the UK is on domestic households and businesses, leaving untapped potential for engaging with the public sector in water efficiency campaigns. We concluded this stop saying that parks are natural spaces where we can also see and experience some aspects of a changing climate, for example earlier change of colours of trees during times of water scarcity, changing wild life. Hence, parks can be an opportunity to get us to think and learn about the impacts of a changing climate on the management of water resources in the UK.
The third and final stop was at a public drinking water fountain located in the park. This public water fountain was installed by the Metropolitan Drinking Fountain and Cattle Trough Association (Fig. 5.2). The association was set up in London in 1859 to provide free drinking water, and the organisation is still active, though under the name Drinking Fountain Association (The Drinking Fountain Association 2017). Public water fountains and the availability of free drinking water have somewhat come back to the centre of attention in recent years in the context of the discussion about plastic bottles and their impact on the environment (Hawkins 2017; Heathcote 2018; Tosun et al. 2020). For example, the current mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, published plans for a new drinking water fountain network in 2017 (BBC News 2017). We mainly used this stop to briefly introduce the primer and its nine key recommendations (see summary above).

A new element during this walk was to get concrete feedback from participants about the walk. For this purpose, feedback cards were
distributd at the beginning of the walk and collected at the end of the 
walk or later. The feedback cards asked for the type of organisation the 
participant represents (water company, regulator, research or other), but 
participants could also choose not to share this information. This was fol-
lowed by a question on the overall assessment of the walk ranging from 1 
(poor) to 5 (excellent). We also asked participants to describe the experi-
ence in three words before asking them how useful they found the event 
in finding out about the primer document. The last question asked how 
the primer may be relevant for their work. Out of 22 participants, 8 
returned the feedback forms. Of those eight, one participant was from a 
water company, one from a research, five were ‘other’ (communications, 
consultancy, PhD student, research council and one graduate student). 
One participant did not disclose their organisation. Regarding the overall 
experience, six participants selected ‘4’ and one participant selected ‘5’. 
One participant did not answer this question. Asked to describe the expe-
rience of the drought walk in three words or phrases, we received the fol-
lowing eight answers: ‘informative, refreshing’; ‘bright, breezy, 
informative’; ‘refreshing, stimulating, entertaining’; ‘interesting, engag-
ing, informative’; ‘interesting, unusual, networking’; ‘interactive, local, 
networking’; ‘informative, difficult to hear sometimes’ and ‘excellent, 
informative, nice’. The question on ‘how useful participants found the 
event in finding out about the primer?’ was answered by six participants; 
the overall answers were positive: two participants responded ‘good’, 
‘very/very useful’ was mentioned by two participants and other partici-
pants replied, ‘good, wasn’t previously aware of it’ and ‘useful—I down-
load a copy.’ The final question ‘How may the primer be relevant to your 
work?’ was answered by seven participants: ‘science dissemination’; ‘could 
be a story for the environment (CIWEM)’; ‘social norms will be key for 
changing water use behaviour’; ‘something our clients are very keen to 
explore’; ‘just informative’; ‘would be good to give to Estates & Facilities 
in the universities to encourage them to improve water efficiency’; ‘not 
really, but interesting nonetheless’ and ‘the literature review will be useful 
for our own on (unreadable word) piece on water’. Thus, the overall feed-
back for the walk was very positive and encouraging. It was also widely 
shared on social media on the day, and the positive response is also an 
encouragement to organise similar events in the future. The majority of 
respondents evaluated the walk and using it to disseminate research results 
as ‘very good’. It was also interesting to see that participants mentioned 
‘networking’ as an item when they described the walk. As mentioned
before, this is a positive side effect of the walks, as stakeholders have the opportunity to introduce themselves and talk to each other while walking.

Self-critically it must be said that the time for the walk, 45 minutes, was very short and we were not able to get through all we had planned. For example, we had prepared questions for the participants: Do you have any experience with water efficiency at your workplace? Who in your organisation is responsible for water efficiency? And would that person be interested in the primer? Which policy could this issue be tacked on? We were hoping for a fruitful discussion especially since the walk was very popular with conference participants. The second challenge we faced was the noise. St James’s Park is popular with tourists on their way to or from Buckingham Palace. Speaking to the walk participants was sometimes interrupted by large tourist groups speaking or crossing our paths. However, the feedback we received was nonetheless positive and encouraging to repeat these events.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented two drought and water scarcity related walks as a tool for public engagement with research. Public engagement with research offers the opportunity to engage with different publics about research and its results. It is a two-way process and can also be a useful tool to gather ideas before the start of a research project as the first walk has shown. Both walks were successful, and the feedback from participants was very positive. Walks that discuss research with the public or stakeholders need to be carefully planned and facilitated. In both cases it helped that the walks were part of conference activities, which is helpful for recruiting participants. They also require flexibility. The weather can change, a street is closed or time is running out. As convenor one must be able to adapt quickly. In this regard the second walk was, as explained, challenging. Limited time was a constraint and some discussion points had to be dropped. Nonetheless, walks are highly recommendable as they offer the combination of disseminating and discussing research, networking opportunities for participants and the sheer fact of being outside and the place that the research is about.
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