



Response to the Cabinet Office consultation on Effective Consultation

1. Campaign for Science & Engineering is pleased to submit this response to the Cabinet Office consultation. CaSE is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by over 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers. The views of the membership are represented by an elected Executive Committee.

General Comment

2. Consultations using restrictive and sometimes leading questions should be avoided, and the inclusion of compulsory questions is not helpful (e.g., European Commission consultation on its Green Paper *The European Research Area: New Perspectives*). The option to respond to only selected questions and general issues should always be emphasised. It seems likely that a lot of work goes into writing obvious answers to repetitive questions, and analysing these responses.

Question 1: Has the Code led to an improvement in the way Government consults and to improved policy outcomes?

3. The Government is much better placed than CaSE to answer this question and would do well to commission research into the extent to which consultation actually affects policy development. Given the large number of organisations committing resources to the process, it is important to evaluate it.

Question 2: Are 12 weeks the right amount of time for consultations?

4. Twelve weeks is generally a good time period for consultation. For some of our members, particularly those involved in education, it may be worth lengthening the time over holidays, and the summer holidays in particular. Factors that might warrant shorter consultation periods are: when there is a pressing case for rapid response (in which case, the government response period should also be shortened); when the stakeholders identified need only brief consultation periods themselves; and, perhaps, when there have been multiple consultations in an area of policy with minor differences in content. (As discussed in paragraph 12, nicely illustrating the point in paragraph 2 about repetitive questions.)

Question 5: When in the policy development process should Government consult stakeholders?

5. Consultations should be early enough to affect the policy outcome and should be open enough to bring in new ideas and options. Working groups may provide a good format for early stage input before a formal consultation proceeds.

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Question 6: Should there be more supplementary approaches to consultation and what would work best for your organisation?

6. CaSE is happy to participate in written consultations but thinks that the use of other formats should be encouraged to ensure wide participation.

Question 7: How do you become aware of Government consultations and how would you like to?

7. We normally become aware of consultations through our parliamentary monitoring service. We would appreciate direct notification from Government departments. It seems strange that it is difficult to identify key stakeholders particularly as they would undoubtedly be keen to register on a database (with preferred mode of notification). It is also curious that parties that responded to a consultation in the last 12 months, say, were not automatically alerted to this one. Public notification in the media is also important.

Question 8: How do you rate feedback from consultations and how could it be improved?

8. It is appropriate, and would be polite, for Government to respond directly to all stakeholders that have taken the time to contribute to a consultation. An emailed weblink to the response would be sufficient. The feedback is frequently frustrating. When a decision has been made that deviates from many responses, its rationale should be explained and the contrary views acknowledged. Otherwise, it appears as if important points have simply been missed or ignored.

Question 9: Is 'consultation fatigue' an issue for you?

9. Yes, consultation fatigue is an issue often exacerbated by inefficient formats and consultations going over the same old ground. HEFCE, for example, seeks constant reassurance that we agree with its proposal to benchmark the costs of teaching. Fatigue could be eased by evidence that the consultation process was worthwhile, both in a formal evaluation of the process in general, and by more specific feedback being given to individual consultations.

Question 11: Which option would make a good consultation policy?

10. In an ideal world, Option 3 would be the best solution. As consultations obviously vary greatly in nature it would be sensible to have an inherently flexible process. However, in our world, the extra work in analysing the most appropriate approach and then in justifying it to all parties, some of which are more than likely to disagree, suggests that this is not a good option. Option 3 also has the most potential for misuse and should not be chosen. On point 5.23, although proposals with high potential costs should obviously be consulted upon, the impact of cheaper proposals may be greater in other areas. It would be hard to develop a safety net to make sure that these always had appropriate consultation.

11. It seems sensible to follow Option 2, as there are instances when a fast-track procedure would clearly be useful, although it would have been useful to suggest some suitable guidelines in the consultation document. Factors that might warrant shorter consultation periods are: when there is a pressing case for rapid response (in which case, the government response period should also be shortened); when the stakeholders identified need only brief consultation periods themselves; and, perhaps, when there have been multiple consultations in an area of policy with minor differences in content.

12. Unfortunately, as in Option 3, there is a real problem with Option 2 in the work involved in identifying which consultations should be fast-tracked and justifying these decisions, and the possibility that the system could be misused. It is important to improve identification of key stakeholders in order to fore-warn them of a shortened consultation. Another possible problem not included in the document is that having a shortened consultation period may increase the rate of consultations as they delay policy-making less and may be perceived to be less work (given that less time is taken over them).

13. Considering Option 1, it would be good to encourage more procedures to supplement written consultations. It may be that certain approaches are suitable to different stages of the consultation, with workshops, for example, providing early input into the consultation document. It seems unnecessary to make it (almost) compulsory, and pointless if there is the ability to depart from this procedure. Expert panels would be useful for many scientific or technical issues.

14. Overall, encouraging but not insisting upon more approaches to consultation would be beneficial, as might be the fast-tracking of more consultations.

Question 12: Are you content that the Government's options would not impose costs on respondents?

15. Clearly, if stakeholders participate in more than one approach to a consultation (Option 1) more costs would be incurred. It would be reassuring to know that the efforts are worthwhile, again, evaluating the process and providing better feedback would help.

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