



Mr Ian Ascough
Cabinet Office
4th Floor
22 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2WH

Effective Consultation

Dear Mr Ascough,

The Social Enterprise Coalition (“the Coalition”) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Cabinet Office’s, *Effective Consultation* paper. The Code of Practice on Consultation is a valuable document, and we applaud the government’s decision to update its policies based on the experience and views of its stakeholders.

The Coalition was established in 2002 as the national body for social enterprise. The Coalition represents a wide range of social enterprises, umbrella bodies and networks, with a combined membership reaching over 10,500 social enterprises. These include co-operatives, development trusts, Social Firms and other social enterprises. Social enterprises are businesses with primarily social or environmental objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners.

The Coalition supports the view that consultation is an important part of the policy process, and is an essential element of developing robust policy and delivering better services. The Coalition regularly responds to government consultations, and in the process communicates with, and draws on, the expertise of our members. The Coalition was surprised however, not to be included on the original list organisations to be consulted.

In response to question two, the Coalition strongly urges the government to retain the 12 weeks consultation period. Whilst we understand that there may be a small number of instances in which 12 weeks is deemed too long, we feel that this should be dealt with on a strictly case by case basis with clearance required from the relevant minister.

The Coalition recommends that 12 weeks is the minimum period needed in which to consult with an organisations membership and then draft a considered response. We believe that the importance of the 12 week period is an opinion shared throughout the third, public and private sector. If a shorter period were to be stated within the code of practice, we would fear that the majority of consultations would conform to this duration.

The Coalition would also recommend the reintroduction of a centralised resource, indexing current government consultations. This would mean that the time and onus falls on government rather than the resources of the often small organisations.

Culture of Consultation

The overriding theme of an insufficient affirmation to a culture of consultation within government, appears to the Coalition as highlighted by the consultation document. We would suggest that a number of questions, particularly five, eight and nine, underline this issue.

The perception exists that in many cases consultation does not appear to be conducted for the input of valued expert opinion to policy development, but rather has been seen as the need to fulfil a tick box procedure. The Cabinet Office needs to ensure that departments do not just adhere to the Code of Practice, but value the necessity of consultation to the policy process.

Question nine raises the issue of 'consultation fatigue'. Whilst there is an argument to reduce the number of written consultations, the Coalition would suggest that fatigue is more likely to be caused by the perception that opinions are not being listened to and valued, rather than there being too many consultations to which to respond.

Paramount to establishment of a working culture of consultation is the development of a clear dialogue between government and the participants. Government feedback to consultation has in some cases been weak. Feedback often does not seem to reflect the time and work put in by organisations submitting a response, or give a clear indication as to how the consultation has impacted on policy thinking.

The Coalition would suggest that guidance should be produced on providing a clear indication of which policies have been changed as a result of the consultation process. We would also recommend that the link to the feedback is electronically sent to all participants.

Impact upon the policy process seems more likely to occur if consultation is carried out at an early stage. The Coalition would urge the government to adhere to both its own Code of Conduct for Consultation and the Compact code of practice, which stresses that consultation is most effective when carried out early on in the policy making process.

Such measures would hopefully help cement the value consultation within government, and provide reassurance to the diverse set of stakeholders that their views are being listened to. The Coalition would however again emphasise that a culture of consultation can not in itself be achieved through a department's compliance to a number of indicators, but requires a comprehensive commitment to an ethos of collaborative policy making.

Should you require any further information regarding this response please contact Kieran Larkin on Kieran.larkin@socialenterprise.org.uk or 0207 793 2325

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