Organisational Information Behaviour in the Public Consultation Process in Scotland

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Drivers of Increased Consultation Include:-

- Previous Labour Government’s *Modernising Government* agenda, 1999-

- Devolution: e.g. Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, 1999-

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Consultation Methods

- Traditionally:
  - Written consultation

- Increasingly supplemented with additional methods, such as:
  - Public meetings;
  - Workshops;
  - Seminars;
  - Focus groups;
  - Citizens’ panels, etc.
Responses to Consultations

- Most attract modest numbers of responses (i.e. 50-60)

- But some attract great interest, e.g.
  - Climate Change Bill (2008) 21,046
Conducted between October 2006 and January 2009

Recorded over 185,000 written responses, from almost 19,000 groups and organisations (and thousands of individual citizens), to almost 1,700 Scottish Government consultation exercises, from 1982 to May 2007.

Questionnaire survey of 469 non-governmental organisations, identified as responding to at least one consultation in the post-devolution period.

ESRC Project: ‘The Mobilisation of Organised Interests in Policy Making’ (Halpin & Baxter)
Aim

- To explore the information behaviour of representative groups in responding to Scottish Government consultations.

Objectives

To investigate:

1) How groups find out about relevant consultations to which they might wish to contribute;

2) How they go about gathering information in preparation for submitting a response; and

3) How they find out about the results of consultations to which they have contributed.
Methodology

- Sample drawn from over 200 ‘volunteer’ organisations responding to the earlier postal survey;
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with individuals responsible for preparing/coordinating consultation responses;
- 52 interviews conducted, August to November 2009;
- A further two organisations responded by email.
## Sample Organisation ‘Type’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation ‘type’</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen group</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional association</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective business group</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service charity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade union</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Political and Policy Engagement

- 43 (80%) of the sample organisations described themselves as politically engaged, but with no political party affiliations;
- 49 (91%) aim to influence or affect public policy in some way;
- 14 (26%) employ a full-time or part-time policy officer;
- 14 (26%) were members of government-led fora.
## Sources of Policy and Consultation Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information source</th>
<th>General policy</th>
<th>Consultations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directly from government and parliamentary sources</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring government and parliamentary websites</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other groups, networks and umbrella bodies</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
47 (87%) had received at least one direct invitation in recent years;

25 of these were confident that they were regularly receiving invitations to all relevant consultations;

The others expressed concerns about the logic and consistency of the distribution lists system.

We would recommend that a more targeted, tailored approach to identifying consultees be adopted.
Launched in May 2004; currently has over 8,000 subscribers;

25 (46%) of the sample subscribe to seConsult;

21 of these also appear on distribution lists;

Exactly half of the sample were completely unaware of the existence of seConsult.
Monitoring the Scottish Government Website

- 15 (28%) regularly monitor the SG website;
- Lack of awareness of link with seConsult.
Only one of the 54 groups cited the media as an information source;

18 (33%) can hear about consultations via other groups, networks or umbrella bodies.

Eight organisations have been involved in a ‘pre-consultation’ stage (cf. Wyn Grant’s ‘Insider Groups’);
# Information-gathering Methods Used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information-gathering Method</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of Internal Sources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult entire membership</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult particular individuals or sub-groups within membership</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal or no consultation with membership</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult internal primary/secondary data</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of External Sources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult sources on Web</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult external subject experts</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange information with “like-minded” groups</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finding Out About Consultation Results

- 47 (87%) were aware of having seen some form of consultation feedback;
- Just 22 (41%) were confident that they are always sent, or alerted to the location of, feedback;
- 7 (13%) were adamant they had never seen feedback;
- 10 (19%) search the Scottish Government website;
- 5 (9%) usually hear via other groups and networks.
‘Types’ of Feedback Obtained

- Just 13 (24%) of the groups had encountered a ‘Consultation Report’;

- We recommend that the provision of post-consultation feedback be made *mandatory*, particularly in the form of ‘Consultation Reports’.
32 (59%) believe the Scottish Government considers their responses;

But difficult to establish because much (66%) of the feedback is presented anonymously;

39 (72%) believe that some form of weighting is applied by government officials;

We recommend that quotes and comments from respondents are not anonymised in post-consultation feedback reports.

2.2 There was widespread support for this idea: around 70 respondents, of all types, broadly welcomed the adoption of these principles.

“...The five ‘guiding principles and objectives’ upon which licensing boards should base their decisions demonstrates the intent of the committee to make licensing law an effective tool in combating alcohol misuse.”

(Church/religious organisation)

“We welcome the introduction of the Guiding Principles as tools which Licensing Boards can use as an aid to decision making. They set out clearly the factors to be taken into consideration by Boards when granting licences.”

(Licensing board)

There were few specific comments about the guiding principles.

2.3 Although the principles were generally approved, there were concerns about how they would be translated into legislation, as they were seen as being open to interpretation in their current form. It was believed that this would lead to the making of arbitrary decisions. This view was held by just 6 respondents, from licensing boards, community groups, and those...
Informedness and Insider Status

Scatterplot of Informedness against Insider Status

Pearson correlation = 0.250