

February 2023

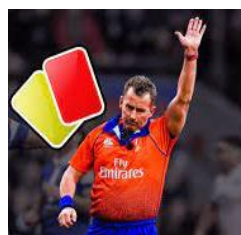
A monthly summary of consultation matters by Consultation Guru – Rhion Jones.



Best of the Blogs

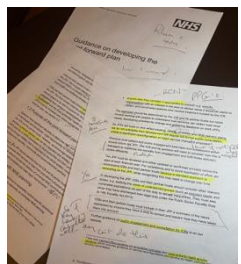
Consultation Catch-up

It has been a remarkably busy month with many public bodies announcing important consultations, and a noticeable increase in job vacancies for those with skills in engagement, consultation and stakeholder management.



Consulting on players' safety – Rugby Union's dilemma

Could some subjects be too important to consult upon? Could the English Rugby Union justify its failure to consult on the grounds that it did not want to suggest any hesitation in making the game safer by introducing a new below-the-waist tackle rule? This analysis concluded that the RFU got it wrong, and two days later it changed its mind and agreed to consult!



Can the NHS meaningfully consult on its 5-year Joint Forward Plans?

Looks at the Guidance issued just before Xmas regarding the NHS Five Year Plans that 42 Integrated Care Boards will need to engage/consult upon. It explores three key challenges – whether there is enough commitment, enough capability, and enough capacity to undertake meaningful consultation and engagement?



Required Skills & Knowledge - will 2023 be different?

A New Year analysis of the growing importance of political judgment in the skills-set of those who practice public engagement and consultation. It explains why 2023 will make different demands and add to the opportunities for proficient practitioners to turbo-charge their careers. And it repeats the golden rule that where there is political opposition, any process failures will be seized upon and exploited.

Instant insights

- The Welsh Government is surely pushing at an open door with its new consultation on [reviewing its renewable energy targets](#). It is making optimistic noises whilst trying to secure public support for more ambitious plans. They all sound good, and include a strong commitment to local ownership of new energy projects. But here's the catch. As it fairly points out, "Our targets will only be met if we have the supporting infrastructure required to support a renewables-based system." It needs what it calls 'anticipatory investment' in UK-wide networks etc and so the consultation becomes akin to asking people "If we can get this money spent by someone else, would you favour these proposals ...?" Not unlike NHS exercises which have boiled down to "If the treasury agrees to build us a new hospital, would you erect it here?" These are, in my view, **conditional consultations**. Nothing wrong, as long as you help people realise their limitations.

- Last week's High Court judgment in [R \(AQUIND\) v Sec of State for Business](#) etc was not really a law of consultation case. But the story has a strong consultation element in being the latest twist in the attempt to build a high voltage interconnector between France and Portsmouth. After some pretty confusing public consultation, some murky political funding of Parliamentarians, fears of environmental damage and social disruption, public opinion is fiercely opposed to the scheme. Which is maybe why Kwasi Kwarteng, as Business Secretary, vetoed the project a year ago. Now Aquind has won its Judicial Review and the Government rejection has been overturned. Tory high-flyer, Penny Mordaunt leads the opposition so it will be interesting to watch how the next stages of engagement and consultation pan out.
- The Devolution deal for the [North-east of England](#) has been signed with a fanfare of trumpets and a commitment to £1.4bn – shared between 2 million people. It also has a largely [pointless consultation](#) that basically describes the essential elements of the deal and asks if respondents agree or disagree! However, the truth is that it's a 'done deal' and it would be better to engage with local people about the opportunities that new powers and funding might facilitate.
- In England, there will be a flurry of public engagement in the coming months over 5-year plans to be agreed for the 42 NHS Integrated Care Boards ([See blog!](#)). Anticipate a degree of frustration as so many plans and promises are dependent upon addressing the nation's chronic workforce shortage. There is now an authoritative [Report by the King's Fund](#) which explains the political problems that have prevented Ministers from solving this issue. Good for public engagement teams to understand the dynamics, and maybe explain them to anxious patients and stakeholders. We might therefore get a more informed debate – but will we get better plans?
- Expect to hear far more of the term [Just Transition](#). As the realities of behaviour change become clearer, policy-makers and campaigners are increasingly buying into this concept which means managing change "in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned." It ought to be a statement of the obvious, but sadly the speed with which decarbonisation needs to proceed risks impacting some citizens more than others. At its heart is the idea of social dialogue – and some of that will be *consultation*. Blog coming soon.

Straws in the wind

The Reading List



Recent holiday reading included [Sebastian Payne's entertaining but disturbing account](#) of this disintegration of a PM's credibility. Its key message is that what really killed off his reputation was repeated requests from 10 Downing Street for Ministers to speak in public in his defence only to discover later that the message was untrue. In other words, lying on behalf of your boss. Timely advice for *consultors* – always to be sure that statements and assertions you make will withstand scrutiny!

Rhion Jones has one key resolution for 2023. To find audiences to convince of the continuing relevance and importance of public engagement. He believes that the last 20 years is full of valuable lessons we can all learn and seeks opportunities to disseminate key messages.

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