

## April 2023

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

# Consultation Catch-up

After over two years of COVID-19, and despite continuous high levels of infection, it really is beginning to feel 'back to normal' on the streets of London. On my several visits to the capital in March, offices have felt busier and the meetings/conference business has picked up.

There are more reports of face-to-face public meetings re-emerging as a visible form of consultation, but the well-known pitfalls of such events should make public bodies wary. Training on effective public meetings is a must!



---

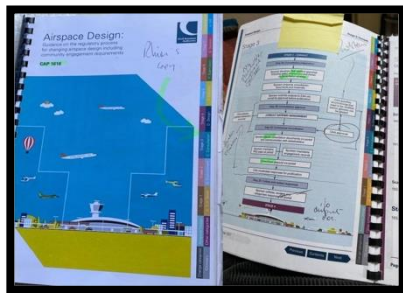
### Best of the Blogs

---



#### [Bournemouth case highlights the need for 'conscientious consideration' of consultation responses.](#)

Hundreds of respondents to Bournemouth's consultations on sexual entertainment venues (SEVs) objected because they had sex-equality-based concerns. When Councillors were advised they could disregard 'moralistic' arguments it went to the High Court! Lessons here for any public body anxious to meet the Gunning Principle Four standard of 'conscientious consideration.' It's not straightforward ...!



#### [The case for slimline consultation Guidance.](#)

In March, I responded to a consultation on the Civil Aviation Authority's Guidance on airspace change. It's a needlessly complex document and it prompted me to consider far too many OTT Guidance documents that threaten to suffocate the profession - draining it of life and stifling the imagination and innovation needed to engage and consult successfully with stakeholders and the community.



#### [Threats of Judicial Reviews for public consultations; do they work?](#)

Day-by-day, the media report threats of legal challenges to public bodies alleging they haven't consulted adequately. I've taken a handful of topical examples from Bristol, Exeter, Bournemouth and Plymouth - but it's not confined to the South and South-west. This is now a regular feature of our democratic decision-making. Here is my analysis of the current situation - something that can affect public engagement specialists, officials and elected members.

---

## Instant insights

---

- It is “Purdah” time once more. Totally inappropriate terminology, but it is in established use to describe the self-denying convention whereby public bodies avoid any controversial initiatives or announcements in the period leading to an election. My friend, Paul Parsons of [Stand](#) described the Guidance and its impact well in [an article this week](#). But, personally I have always questioned both the principle and its application. For me, the suppression of debate at the very time when politicians can be held accountable for their views in the ballot box is a negation of democracy. A fuller version of my arguments can be found in my 2019 article [Mis-using Purdah?](#)
- It’s often not the consultation itself – but what you do with it! For a first-rate example of [The Politics of Consultation](#), look no further than the [current situation in Cornwall](#), where the Council Leader has rejected the Government devolution deal (modest money over 30 years and extra powers in return for adopting the Mayoral model). She has done this citing the output of a public consultation where 69% of respondents opposed the idea. But, of course it is **not a vote**, and there is at least some polling evidence that *consultees* were not very representative of the wider Cornish community. As always, consultation data is much welcomed by politicians when it supports politically expedient positions. And the local elections are coming soon ...!

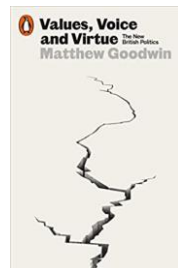



---

## Straws in the wind

---

- The case for [better regulation](#) of Government consultations grows by the hour. My attention was recently drawn to the consultation on the [Choice on units of measurement: markings and sales](#) launched ten months ago, and otherwise known as the *Bring back Imperial* exercise, assumed by most to be a sop to the more enthusiastic Brexiteers on the Conservative back-benches. It closed on 26<sup>th</sup> August, and despite the Government standard for publishing a response being within 12 weeks, there is still no word from Ministers. [The Gov.uk portal asserts there were over 100,000 responses](#) and therefore ‘analysis is still ongoing’. In the consultation profession, we know how to organise large-volume analysis and Government departments should stop peddling this patronising nonsense. If the proposals happened to be the pet project of a Minister who has now been sacked and is off the table for reasons of political embarrassment, it should admit it. In the meantime, the long weight (sic) continues!
- During March, [Tractivity](#) commissioned me to write about what’s happening to local **NHS Five year plan** engagement programmes. It is entitled [NHS Five Year Plans Will Be A Tough Test Of Stakeholder Management](#), and in it, I explain why I think there are ‘delay factors’ that have made many of these exercises barely visible in recent months. However, before the June 30<sup>th</sup> deadline, I expect increasing controversy to emerge as parts of England realise the full extent of service change that will be necessary.



Not a book I have yet read – as it was only published on Friday, but one we should all look out for. [Mathew Goodwin](#) is a politics Professor who has a controversial view of the trends of the times and is part of the ‘*Liberals don’t get it*’ school of thought. I don’t expect to agree with much of it, but feel it’s important to understand the arguments. Will review [Values, Voices and Virtue](#) for the May newsletter.

---

## The Reading List

---



To receive [Consultation Catch-Up](#), regularly, complete the SUBSCRIBE [here](#)  
To contact Rhion – email [rhion@rhion.com](mailto:rhion@rhion.com) or call 07966 446450

---

**ConsultationGuRU** is a trading name for I.H.A. Ltd. UK Company Registration No 3037502