

# Creating a Transparent, Participation-encouraging Policy Process

This note seeks to break down into different elements the key components of a transparent, participation-encouraging policy process. It also mentions some of the potential implementation issues in relation to each element. The main benefits of this approach would be:

- Greater citizen understanding and involvement in the policy process;
- A more rigorous policy process with better understanding of citizens' views and preferences and more input on risks and options.

## *Key Elements:*

- 1) **Easy Policy Issue Tracking:** For any major policy issue, citizens would quickly and easily be able to find a summary statement explaining the policy issue, a brief history of what has recently happened in relation to it, an indication of the government's position in relation to it and an indication of likely next steps in relation to that issue.  
*Implementation Issues:*
  - a) Large number of policy issues makes things hard to present in a citizen-friendly way, but initially this could be tackled by focussing on a limited set of major issues per minister.
  - b) Policy issues keep splitting and interacting over time, so tracking issues will inevitably get messy, e.g. is the BBC licence fee one issue or a hundred, given possible other uses? This could be a problem eventually, but should be OK for a limited number of issues.
  - c) Comprehensive issue tracking that kept pace with events would be resource intensive. This could be a problem eventually, but should be OK for a limited number of issues. (Also see 7): could citizen volunteers assist?)
- 2) **Transparent Individual Citizen Input:** Citizens would be able to see a short summary of all recent citizen input (fax, email, letter) possibly with the ability to drill down and see the actual input minus personal details. They would be able to agree/disagree with the input and rate the detailed content if this is visible. Ideally, there would also be some capacity to see the history of citizen input on a particular issue and trends etc. Overall, this tool would provide a dashboard of citizen input, which should be of interest both to citizens and to the minister and his/her team.  
*Implementation Issues*
  - a. Would probably need to distinguish between communications from citizens that raised policy issues and communications that sought action on a particular case with the latter almost inevitably needing to be excluded for privacy reasons.

- b. May still be difficult (or inappropriate) to publish communications without permission even if personal details are excluded (and at some point a mistake will occur because someone forgets to suppress the personal details or because there are sufficient clues in the text to identify the author etc). This may not be a show stopper if only letters that focus on policy (rather than individual cases) are put online. Sensitive letters could also be excluded from the detailed drill down.
- c. There will be resource costs in summarizing and putting online all input, but this should not be a huge additional cost, since these communications need to be responded to in any event.
- d. A transparent dashboard is likely to be subject to attempted manipulation, e.g. a campaign to ensure that 90% of input is for/against a particular proposal. It may be possible to build some safeguards into the tool (e.g. it might flag up the fact that a large number of communications were in very similar formats and it might show that input was evenly divided on a certain issue and then for a month virtually all the input was of one kind and then input again became evenly divided).
- e. Whether it is due to “manipulation” or not, it is clear that the dashboard will not always show what ministers might want it to show. They will need to be prepared to accept and deal with this – “I accept that the feedback we are currently getting is against this proposal, but we still believe it is the right way forward. We need to put our case over more effectively and besides ...”.

- 3) **Transparent Non-individual Contact and Input:** Citizens would be able to see some information (duration, participants, topics discussed) about any formal meetings between ministers (and policymakers) and external organisations (industry groups, unions, companies, think-tanks, etc) and any papers/research etc submitted to ministers would be available online in an easily findable way with the ability of citizens to comment and to rate the material.

*Implementation Issues*

- a. Clearly in some circumstances even the occurrence of a meeting between ministers (and policymakers) and a certain organisation may need to be kept confidential for a period. But the system could include a right for ministers to make exceptions perhaps with a requirement to indicate that an exception had been made (“In the course of the month X meetings with external bodies were also held that have not been included on the tool for reasons of confidentiality.”) Similarly, there may be circumstances where ministers might have good reason not to publish a paper from a particular organisation, e.g. if ministers had asked an organisation for information in relation to a policy proposal which would have an immediate impact on markets or people’s behaviour if it became public knowledge that the government was planning to act in a certain way. So the government commitment might be that in general (“by default”) all external, non-individual input to the policy process would be made public in its entirety.

- b. The ability to comment on input could generate flame wars as two sides of argument rubbish each other's documents (and each other). This may require some moderation/policing, but should not be too resource-intensive and some potential flame-limiting measures could be built into the software (e.g. only allowing registered users to comment, limiting newly registered users to one comment per day, limiting the total number of comments that can be made on a document each day etc).
- 4) **A Transparent, Easy-to-understand Policy Process:** All major policy issues would be treated within a framework, consisting of a small number of easy-to-understand stages, so that citizens can understand where an issue was in the process and what that meant. For example, Stage One might be determining what the problem was and agreeing objectives. Stage Two might be agreeing the best package of policy actions that would deliver the agreed objectives. Stage Three might be exploring implementation issues in relation to an agreed package. Stage Four might be monitoring the impact of package of measures and assessing the need for further action. To give some additional flexibility to policymakers, use of this framework could be limited to major policy issues; other issues could be dealt with on a more ad hoc basis and flagged up as different (e.g. as routine policy maintenance or (contrastingly) as an emergency issue needing a quick response). There would be a commitment to publish the key submissions to ministers at each stage in the process (at least one submission per stage?) and to make public the minister's response (and ideally the key submissions would be published in draft for comments prior to submission).
- Implementation Issues*
- a. Ministers would lose the value of surprise.
  - b. Ministers would be frightened to think the unthinkable because of the risk that out-of-box ideas might be presented misleadingly as government policy.
  - c. Clashes within departments or within government would be harder to hide.
- 5) **Transparent Ministerial Dashboard:** Citizens would be able to see what issues a particular minister was focussing on (those identified as major policy issues) and where each of those issues was in the policy process. The dashboard could also use information from some of the other tools suggested here, e.g. it could indicate the % of individual citizen input the minister was receiving on the different major issues and on these major issues compared to other issues. Citizens would be able to respond to and comment on the minister's priorities, but within constraints, i.e. they would not simply be able to suggest that he/she prioritise everything.
- 6) **Transparent Impact of Engagement:** There would be engagement activities at each stage of the process and these would be structured in such a way as to enable easy aggregation of the views expressed during the engagement activities. The government would commit to publish a response to the outcome of

these activities that explicitly indicated whether or not the government agreed (and intended to act in line) with the most popular views expressed and highlighted ways in which the government's approach had changed as a result of the engagement activities.

*Implementation Issues*

- a. This suggestion is not intended about direct democracy. There would be no obligation on ministers to accept the most popular views (which may be unrepresentative or based on insufficient familiarity with the situation or limited deliberation etc). However, making it more obvious where ministers were rejecting some or all of the output from engagement activities could create media difficulties for ministers.
  - b. Contrastingly, where ministers do modify their plans on the basis of input, they risk being accused of vacillation or having inadequately prepared their initial positions.
- 7) **Volunteer Virtual Policy Adviser:** To encourage contributions to some of the above tools and to give greater weight to comments/ratings made by people who have taken a sustained interest in a particular policy or policy in a particular area, there could be a recognition system for citizen contributors. At a minimum this could simply recognise the number of contributions made (and the extent to which these have been endorsed by other etc), but achievement could also trigger increased roles, e.g. editor rights in the policy-issue tracking tool.