



CONSULTATION

ACTIONS

WITH IMPACT



Consultation actions with impact

What to consider if you want to encourage your supporters to take part in public consultations. Tips, case studies, and things to think about.

Whatever the issue you campaign on, public consultations by government departments, local authorities or public bodies can offer a real opportunity to influence policy, legislation or organisational practice.

more onion is a digital mobilisation agency working exclusively with non-profits to help them deliver effective digital campaigning and fundraising. Many of more onion's clients have used our campaigning and fundraising platform, Campaignion, to create easy-to-use online actions which enable people to take part in public consultations, increasing their campaign impact, encouraging people to take part in the political and policy development process, and helping them reach new supporters.

We talked to a number of organisations, both clients and those who had used other platforms and approaches, about their experiences to draw together some learnings and tips to share more widely. Many thanks to contributors from Leonard Cheshire Disability, Mencap, Mind, Young Minds, Shelter, Stonewall, NSPCC, Woodland Trust, RSPCA Cymru, Let Toys Be Toys, the Committee on Advertising Practice and Open Rights Group.

If you have comments, feedback or additional tips to offer, or if you'd like to find out more about more onion and our Campaignion campaigning and fundraising toolkit, drop us a line at hello@more-onion.com

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Take your **TIME**

Don't be panicked by the short timescale of a consultation period into launching too soon. It's better to take the time to get your action right, even if it means losing a few weeks. Working through all the areas below, and getting the right people on board, will take time, but it will pay off.

Remember that people respond to urgency, so it's likely that most contributions will come in the last week or two before the deadline anyway.

Eg Shelter took four weeks of the 12 week period to ensure their action worked in the way they needed it to.

“Taking the time to get it right was definitely worth it. Most submissions came in the period running up to the deadline, so while it feels like you're losing precious time, refining your action is really worthwhile”

James Austin, Shelter

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Be **PREPARED**

Your organisation may or may not know about a given consultation before it's launched, but there are things you can do to prepare.

- When you do a power and influence map, identify if there are powerful actors (government or other bodies) which run consultations.
- Join their mailing lists, subscribe to alerts for bodies working in your subject area.
- Look at how they run consultations - how do they collect contributions? How do they report back?

Who does consultations? Where can you find out about them?

The UK government has a central hub for government consultation information and publications, but consultations may be hosted here, or on individual government department or committee websites, and may be presented in different formats. Some have online forms, others have only email or post options. You can find out about Scottish government and the Northern Ireland and Welsh government consultations at their relevant hubs.

The Scottish government and Northern Ireland Executive, and other bodies including some UK councils, Transport for London, Network Rail, some UK government departments including Treasury, and the Department of Health, use the 'Citizen Space' platform. This presents information on purpose, process and the sharing of outcomes of consultations in a consistent format. In Wales, there is also a consistent format for all consultations - which can be submitted via online form or Word document sent via email or post.

The screenshot shows the GOV.UK website interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text 'Search' and a magnifying glass icon. Below the search bar, the page title 'Policy papers and consultations' is displayed. To the left of the main content area, there are several filter sections: 'Search' with a search input field, 'Topic' with a dropdown menu set to 'All topics', 'Sub-topic' with a dropdown menu set to 'All sub-topics', 'Document type' with a list of checkboxes (Policy papers, Consultations (open), Consultations (closed)), 'Organisation' with a dropdown arrow, 'World location' with a dropdown arrow, and 'Updated after' with a date input field. The main content area shows '4,811 results' and a 'Sort by' dropdown set to 'Updated (newest)'. There are also links for 'Get email alerts' and 'Subscribe to feed'. The results list includes: 1. 'SSRO single source baseline profit rate methodology consultation' with a brief description and 'From: Single Source Regulations Office Updated: 1 July 2019'. 2. 'Interim measures in merger investigations' with a brief description and 'From: Competition and Markets Authority Updated: 28 June 2019'. 3. 'Reform of the Exam Procedures Review Service' with a brief description and 'From: Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Updated: 27 June 2019'. 4. 'Consultation document on the revised undertakings offered by News UK' with a brief description and 'From: Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Updated: 27 June 2019'. 5. 'Adding folic acid to flour' with a brief description and 'From: Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Updated: 27 June 2019'.

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ENGAGE FULLY

with the consultation

When a consultation is released take time to read all the documentation - the guidance and supporting materials, not just the questions - to get a full picture of what the target already knows, and what they're trying to find out. This may seem obvious, but rushing into starting to draft your response too quickly may mean you missing an important influencing opportunity.

Make sure your submission matches what they're looking for. Or if there's a good reason why not (ie you think they're looking in the wrong place, or asking the wrong question), focus your energy clearly on communicating that. Think first about what they need to hear, not what you want to say.

"Even if you have a very clear policy on the issue at the heart of the consultation it's important to focus on the questions being asked and provide a relevant response."

Ella Smillie, Committee of Advertising Practice

Eg Shelter worked with the target to ensure their action met their requirements. Taking this time ensured that all Shelter supporter contributions were individually counted, but also gave useful insight into which areas were most important to the target.

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Engage with **THE TARGET**

Behind every formal consultation process is a person or team of real people. In many cases, they'll be more than happy to engage with you, so don't hesitate to reach out.

If they don't respond, you can still research the target - how do they present consultations? What do they do with the results/outcomes? - to help tailor your response, and what you ask supporters to do.

Working with the target can help you understand their objectives, or see how you can make their analysis task easier. Eg if you're going to push high volume their way, could you provide structured data files to help them?

By working with the target to understand their requirements, Shelter were able to make sure that the 6,000 consultation responses they collected were treated as individual submissions, rather than one corporate contribution with many supporters.

Several organisations had found that working constructively with the target provided an opportunity to develop or deepen a positive relationship with a key stakeholder for their issue.

"Remember there are people at the other end of the process who will be evaluating your response, If you're unsure about anything, get in touch with them to ask how you can submit something that will meet your objectives."

Ella Smillie, CAP

"We did have an existing relationship with the target [DEFRA], but the consultation gave us a chance to develop it."

Naomi Tilley, Woodland Trust

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How will you get the information into **THE CONSULTATION**

This is, at heart, a question of data, how it is handled, and how much of it you will be able to access: the right answer will depend both on your objectives and your resources.

Promote the consultation

At the most basic level, you can publicise the consultation and encourage your supporters to contribute via the consultation's own mechanisms. You won't have access to data either on what people contributed, or even on how many of your supporters did so.

Let Toys Be Toys directed people to the Advertising Standards Authority's consultation on a new advertising rule on gender stereotypes - the questions were relatively straightforward, so people didn't need too much help to fill it in, and they didn't have a platform of their own to collect data.

"It was definitely worth doing, even though it was all a bit basic. We know anecdotally from the target that they did get useful feedback from the public, including people who were sent to the consultation from our campaign. And it helped raise awareness of the proposed new rule."

Tessa Trabue, Let Toys Be Toys

Mencap decided to direct their supporters to the public consultation website because the government's own consultation platform had a version in EasyRead - a format designed specifically for people with learning disabilities.

"It was frustrating not to have access to the data but we felt it was important not to confuse people by setting up our own page when the Government's own resources were fairly easy to use."

Eve Jackson, Mencap

Email to a consultation inbox

Most consultations will have their own online form, but will also accept contributions via a dedicated email inbox, so you can set your action up as an 'email to target' action using a platform like Campaignion.

This means you can set up a form which takes the supporter through the action step by step: the supporter will get any automated replies from the target so they know their submission has arrived, and you have the chance to ask the supporter for permission to contact them in future.

It also means that you have a copy of the submissions. Shelter found the details of the data they gathered useful to put further pressure on the target. Open Rights Group hand-delivered a printed-out copy of all submissions to the age verification consultation, giving another contact point and photo opportunity.

Email - plus structured data

It's worth working with the target to make sure they're happy with where you're sending responses - unless of course your objective is intentionally to annoy the target, or undermine the consultation!

Since most consultations nowadays have an online form, the target is likely to be getting most of their submissions as structured data files in a spreadsheet - they may well appreciate the offer of getting your supporters' responses in a format they can import and process in the same way, instead of laboriously cutting and pasting out of an email. Mind, Stonewall, Young Minds and Shelter had all agreed to securely send data files to the target - helping foster good relationships with the target.

"The [DEFRA] consultation was run on Citizen Space, which provides an online form, but they gave us a specific person's email address to send the submissions to. I'm not sure they were expecting quite so many messages though..."

Naomi Tilley, Woodland Trust

Campaignion allows you to access form data as .csv files for analysis, either via export, or as regularly updated, precompiled data files in secure shared folders, meaning you can also set up automated processes using the data. You can make sure that your form data is structured to match the target's form, even to match their column headers, making their analysis task much easier.

Submit straight into the consultation form

Depending on the platform that the target is using, it may be possible to build a form which submits directly into the target's own form. This gives you all the advantages of collecting the data yourself, while the target is able to collate and analyse the data all in one place. For example, more onion built a bespoke form to allow SumOfUs to direct supporters to contribute to the European consultation on the controversial TTIP trade agreement in this way.

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QUALITY *versus Quantity?*

A quick and easy form will likely get more completions than a long and complex form that needs a lot of personal input. You need to think carefully about your objectives to decide the right way to present your action

At one end, a simple 'petition' style action can allow people to add their voice to yours and send a standard, or lightly edited email, making it easy to take part. But in many cases the target will treat multiple responses which are the same or very similar as a single organisational response rather than individual contributions.

Eg The summary of responses to a Welsh Government consultation on dog breeding stated that 18 out of only 47 responses were in favour of their position, noting that "815 postal campaign responses were received from the public stemming from the RSPCA" which disagreed with the proposal but excluding them from calculations outlining views of respondents. (See case study for how RSPCA Cymru have challenged this approach.)

At the other extreme, you could reproduce every question in the consultation through form fields on your own platform. Submissions may be taken more seriously, but you're likely to have a much lower completion rate.

Here are a few ideas of how you can balance out ease of use against quality of submissions. The right solution will depend on your objectives - and of course on what the target tells you they need.

- If you don't want supporters to be able to edit your suggested text, you could add a comment field so people can add a couple of sentences of personal input, and/or leave the subject line blank and prompt people to fill in their own.

Eg Woodland Trust's action to DEFRA had a main message which was not editable, plus a field where people could add a personal comment.

- Strip the consultation down to the questions that are really relevant to your supporters.

Eg Shelter worked with the target to work out which were the key questions.

- Providing editable, pre-prepared text against each question will speed things up, but be prepared that most people won't edit the text.
If you want people to write their own message, you can give them guidance and talking points - in Campaignion you can provide pop up 'Read more' text help against each question field.

Eg Young Minds' action provided guidance against each field, but encouraged the user to write a personal response.

- Your supporters want to help - use the introductory text to explain that a personal response is more valuable, and reassure them that they can express their own views.

"We're always really explicit in the instructions and ask people to please write an original submission. This seems to work well for us."

Mike Morel, ORG

What if someone uses your platform to make points you wish they wouldn't?

To some extent, this is unavoidable. If your purpose is to enable people to speak up, you have to accept that you can't really control what they say! However, the organisations we spoke to had found this really hadn't been an issue with their campaigns. People with opposing views had other ways to contribute.

"Landlords had their own organisations encouraging them to fill in the consultation - there wasn't any reason for them to use a Shelter action to put their case, and we didn't see that happening."

James Austin, Shelter

"Our consultation action took place in a very polarised context. We found very few opponents of reform used our tool, potentially because they didn't think Stonewall would pass on their responses, but also because opponents had created a one-click action with auto-populated answers."

Robbie de Santos, Stonewall

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Think carefully about **DATA AND TRANSPARENCY**

It's important that supporters understand what will happen to their submissions, so make sure your form is clear about this - eg that their response will be sent to the target, and that you'll also keep a copy on file for analysis.

If the target publishes all submissions, as some do, make sure your supporter knows this before they take part. If you want to be able to contact them about their response, make sure you ask, or make it clear that you may do so.

Ensure that you're collecting all the data that may be important to the target - there may be questions that don't seem vital to you but may form an important part of their analysis - check with the target.

Think carefully too about the ethics of your action. Take care that, when paraphrasing or simplifying the consultation's language, you're helping the user to understand the question, rather than pushing them to take your preferred position.

As well as being unethical, the target may be more likely to discount contributions if they consider people weren't really answering the same question, or were pushed to respond in a particular way.

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Build **INTERNAL SUPPORT**

As with any campaign, getting people in other teams on board and bought into your action will make a huge difference to what you can achieve.

You may need to consider who's talking to whom - for example, policy colleagues may usually be the point of contact with a target organisation, but it might make more sense for campaigners to be in touch with the target to work out the kind of details and data questions above.

Reaching out to your supporters via your existing email list will be vital, but, as ever, a campaign action can be a great way to reach new people via social channels and traditional media. Get your colleagues involved early on, get their input into the media hooks and communication opportunities that can help make your action compelling and get it in front of the right people.



YOUNG MINDS WISE UP
www.youngminds.org.uk/TellOfsted
TO WELLBEING IN SCHOOLS

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Consider the **SUPPORTERS' NEEDS**

How are people going to find out about your action? What information and support will they need to help them decide to take part, and feel confident to complete a pretty high-bar action?

Your issue might be quite niche, or, as in Stonewall's case, you might be working on a consultation which becomes a national talking point, with significant media coverage.

Either way, here are some things to consider:

- ➔ Who do you want to take part? Do they need any particular qualification - eg to live in a specific area, or be affected by a particular condition or experience?

Eg Mind knew that their existing email list would take their action to the right people - those with experience of a mental health condition, and of the benefits system.

Eg RSPCA Cymru made sure their actions were set up with filters so that anyone entering a postcode outside Wales was directed to an alternative action.

- ➔ What will persuade them to act - being asked by an organisation they trust? How can you convince them that taking part will make a difference? What might stop them from taking part?

Eg Young Minds knew that proposals to add more to Ofsted inspections were likely to be unpopular with teachers. So they produced a targeted video, linking the issue of young people's mental health and wellbeing with teachers' wellbeing, to deliberately head off those concerns.

Eg Stonewall changed tack part way through the consultation period, switching to a more humanised, story-led approach, which paid off.

- ➔ What resources do you have at your disposal? Do you have budget for paid social outreach? Capacity to produce video?

Eg Mencap produced a very simple video to explain to people with learning disabilities how taking part in the consultation could help improve medical care for people like themselves.

Eg Shelter's action reached many more people by getting influencers to promote the action on social channels.

Eg Mind produced an interactive guide using the turtl platform to help people engage with complex information around a consultation on social housing.

- ➔ Don't forget to test your action fully! This may seem obvious, but as well as thoroughly testing that everything works as expected, also get someone 'fresh' to complete your action once you think you've finalised it. Remember your supporters probably aren't as familiar with the issue as you; they may want to think carefully about their submissions and it's likely the action will take a lot longer to complete than you estimate.

*"We thought it would take 5 mins to complete but it actually took most people more like 15."
James Austin, Shelter*

- ➔ Think about what happens next. How will you introduce new supporters to your organisation, and how will you keep all participants updated?

We have a whole report on designing great supporter journeys - find out more [here](#).



About more onion

More onion is a digital mobilisation agency. We work exclusively with progressive non-profits to deliver high-impact digital campaigns and fundraising, providing strategy, execution, design and technology.

At more onion we love to support charities to develop and execute high impact campaigning actions, strategies and supporter journeys. In our free reports we offer guidance and experience to help you create campaigns with impact, but it can be helpful to have additional strategic consultancy or an outside perspectives when designing pages and bringing campaigning and fundraising projects to life.

Our campaigning and fundraising toolset 'Campaignion' allows you to build powerful and effective landing pages and forms through a simple interface. Campaignion integrates with systems such as MailChimp and dotmailer to allow you to effortlessly personalise your supporters' email experience, such as by triggering welcome journeys, or being responsive to the user's past submissions.

Find out more at campaignion.org



We hope this report was helpful

If you'd like to know more about Campaignion or would like some support with your campaigns, please get in touch. Whether it's creative, strategy, or technology, we're here to help!

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