Responing to consultations efficiently and effectively: Tips for voluntary and community organisations

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The responses government departments receive to their consultations are vital for informing the development of well-informed policies and design of effective services.

Feedback from departments consistently confirms that they are keen to hear the views of voluntary and community sector stakeholders. Receiving responses from a wide range of organisations provides a wealth of different perspectives and ensures that the needs and views of organisations’ service users are represented. Ultimately, well designed, responsive policies benefit communities and citizens and lead to better targeting of resources.

This short guidance has been developed following discussions with representatives from a range of departments. There is little in the way of guidance for voluntary organisations on how to respond most effectively to departmental consultations. These short tips aim to help voluntary organisations to respond effectively and efficiently to any departmental consultation, ensuring that their voices – and those of their service users – are heard and listened to.

1. Short responses that just cover key issues are welcome
It is acceptable and useful for a VCS organisation to produce a response that just covers the issues where you feel you can offer a unique perspective. A number of government departments have pointed out that some of the most useful responses they receive consist of a few clear and concise points from the point of view of an expert. Don’t feel you have to answer every single question.

2. Give priority to the consultation answers
Background information on your organisation can be useful – but is not generally considered as part of the core analysis of responses. It’s suitable to include this information, but it is best included at the end, so departments can easily access the key parts of your response.

3. Responses from individuals are welcome
Most responses come from organisations but responses from service users or practitioners are equally welcome and are read in the same way as the others.

4. Collaborative and joint responses are encouraged
Collaborative and joint responses can save time for the organisations involved. If this method saves time and means responses are sent that might otherwise not have been, then this approach is especially useful. Joint responses can also help departments to understand how widely and strongly views are held.
5. Ensure you provide references for evidence and research used
If it is unlikely that a department will have seen the evidence or research you are referring to in your response; you should ensure that it is referenced in full so departments can look at it first-hand and in its entirety.

6. There is no ‘right’ format
But it will help departments if you respond to the consultation in the same structure as the consultation paper. Use subheadings, answer the questions in the same order and then add your views.

7. Be clear, succinct and jargon-free
In addition to this – don’t worry about being direct if you have a particular message you wish to convey (as long as you stay within the boundaries of libel law and decency!).

8. Responses are often logged, read and considered as soon as they arrive
With this in mind, it can be useful to try to submit your consultation before the deadline (though we appreciate this can be challenging when consultation periods are shorter).

9. Do share your views on how consultation processes could be improved
Feedback about what works in terms of the process is useful – include these thoughts at the end of your response.

Compact Voice has also produced accompanying guidance for Government departments to enable them to engage meaningfully with the voluntary sector when consulting, especially if timeframes are shorter. This guidance can be downloaded from: www.compactvoice.org.uk/resources/publications/ensuring-meaningful-engagement-when-consulting.