Introduction

MIDAS is a business intelligence system developed by tCI that contains detailed data on hundreds of past and present consultations. It is based on the world’s first comprehensive data architecture for consultations, their outputs and outcomes and has been used as source of our comparative insights for this report.

Piecing together consultation data

The careful aggregation and classification of consultations in MIDAS means that tCI has valuable insights gained from the ability to look across consultations as well as within them.

MIDAS is not an online system for collecting consultee feedback, nor is it designed to replace existing technologies. Instead, it is intended that MIDAS complement the process of consultation by supporting our charter principles of visibility, transparency and publicity.

We believe that MIDAS is destined to be the standard for capturing important related data not always captured today. It is certainly the definitive collection of pubic engagement and attitudinal “big data” in the United Kingdom and will serve as a useful reference for the Institute in our ongoing pursuit of high standards in public engagement.

(We only use published information but host copies of consultation documents so that they can be permanently retained and maintained in one place)

Discover, explore, indulge

An information layer provided by tCI identifies any consultations which are a precedent and our “auto assessor” feature helps you identify consultations which are not compliant with the law of consultation.

You can browse our growing collection of consultation data from which this report was generated by pointing any modern web browser at the following destination:

www.midasdb.com
Unlock your data potential

Engagement data has the power to change:-

• How you plan your consultations - to learn from what has happened in the past on the same/related topics or in a different geography
• How you schedule your consultations, knowing what consultations are currently taking place across the UK
• How you design your consultations based on what has worked for other consultors
• How consultees discover opportunities for getting involved and finding out what happened (closing the feedback loop)
• How you measure and track your performance. For example, on engaging the right audiences, against your own consultations and others.

And our survey said...........

We take a ‘deep dive’ into our current data-set and reveal some of the trends and statistics underpinning consultation activity in the United Kingdom.

Methodology

In the period of sixth months between winter 2020 and spring 2021, the Consultation Institute has evaluated 135 public consultations across 121 UK consultors covering a wide range of topics and issues. The majority (94%) of these consultations were recent ones - from the period between 2018 to 2021 (just over 50% from 2020). Around 10% were very fresh consultations launched in 2021. Approximately 6% of these were older consultations from 2015, 2016 and 2017.

Eight associates and four members of staff gathered the data from online sources and mapped this across a range of observations ranging from the consultation design to the consultation timeline.

100 DATA POINTS

Our unique data architecture indexes just over 100 data points about each consultation. These include details of the consultation scope, design, output, outcome and any legal challenges.

14% OF CONSULTATIONS HAD LESS THAN 50 RESPONDENTS

While we always advocate quality over quantity, there are still a sizeable proportion of consultations which fail to attract the kinds of numbers which make them look credible.
Anecdotal findings

The first hurdle our researchers experienced was finding published consultation documents. Questionnaires were rarely archived and consultation web pages were often poorly maintained and archived.

Fragmentation was particularly acute in local government where consultation outcome and output reports tended to appear in as appendixes to Council minutes and agendas.

The lack of care and attention towards consultee feedback has been a concern of the Institute for some time and our findings indicate that this is warranted.

The quality of analysis for consultations was very variable and there are gaps in our data as a result. Among common bad practice was the use of percentages to describe the proportion of consultees who might agree or disagree with a proposal without specifying how many of them responded to the individual question or providing a numerical equivalent.

Generally speaking, views synthesised by external analysts tended to be better than ‘in-house’ efforts.

The majority of consultation documents which form part of the supplied evidence are still being produced in the PDF format. This can cause problems for reading on mobile devices and with screen reading software and we would like to see a shift towards more information being provided as web pages.

Very few, if any consultations published the consultation questions separately and up-front to the questionnaire. We think this is a simple strategy which can help consultees in their formation of responses.

Response rates

Predictably, response rates varied depending on the scale and salience of consultations. While we always advocate quality over quantity but we were surprised that 14% of consultations recorded less than 50 respondents. At the other extreme, one of the consultations (“Due Diligence on Forest Risk Commodities”) received 63,720 responses – but 63,506 of these were the result of an orchestrated campaign. We noticed that campaign responses were more common for environmental consultations and are aware that “stock responses” are becoming increasingly commonplace.

A more typical consultation might expect to elicit 1,530 responses – this is the average number of consultees who responded to all consultations in our sample once the data had been cleansed for anomalies. The distribution of total responses by frequency in our sample is represented in the chart on the left hand side of this page.

In terms of individual versus organisational or representational responses, the response rate was established as having a typical ratio of 54:1. In other words, for every 54 individual responses there was one stakeholder response. Internal responses (e.g. by staff members) to any given consultation had a longer ratio at approximately 215:1 compared to individual responses. These ratios indicate to us that there are generally no problems with the balance of stakeholder versus individual views, in-line with what might be considered as a typical consultation audience.

There was no data available on the number of informed versus uninformed responses despite consultors having the ability to measure this as they become increasingly digital by default.
Consultors are maintaining a good balance of responses by gender and ethnicity but young people are frequently under-represented.

We identified over 40 different (named) target audiences for consultations in our sample, from members of the public to residents, local businesses, service users, farmers, educational institutions and industry bodies.

The most popular named target audience for consultations were citizens, local residents, businesses and service users. Among other common audiences were civil society organisations, local authorities, staff, SMEs and politicians.

Encouragingly, the average participation rates of ethnic minorities (BAME) stood at a healthy 14% of all consultees - which is in line with the national average.

In terms of male and female gender balance, the vast majority of consultations had surprisingly close-matched levels of representation. There were only two examples of where an extreme imbalance had occurred. In these cases, over a third more of a particular gender had responded to the consultation.

The first instance of this concerned health reconfiguration where there were significantly more female voices and the second concerned taxis where there were many more male respondents. Arguably these cases are still representative given the distribution of gender in these professions.

Thankfully the total number of consultees reporting to be “out of the immediate area of impact” was very low at an average 0.1% of the total number for any particular consultation. However, there was one example where the number of consultees from outside the immediate area of impact stood at 27% of all responses due to campaign responses received.

Timetable

The average consultation was open for 73 days, a little shorter than the default 12-week guidance once recommended by government but perhaps reflective of a more modern and nimble decision-making cycle, particularly for consultations with marginal impact. The distribution of consultations based on the duration of the dialogue phase for our sample is presented in the chart at the top of this page.

There is no strong correlation between the number of responses received and the duration of consultations although it stands to reason that, in general, shorter consultations collected fewer responses.

Our findings show that the majority of consultations concluded within the planned timescale and approximately one-in-ten consultations were extended beyond the original closing date. Of these, the average consultation extension period is one month. A third of consultations that were extended beyond the one-month average focused on the future of new sites for service delivery and education and skills.

Of the 16% of the consultations launched just before the national lockdown, between the months of January and March 2020, approximately 1/3 of consultations extended the closing date to allow more time for responses (two such examples were Central Governmental emergency proposals in response to the pandemic).

The average time for an output report to be published was 116 days after the dialogue phase of the consultation had concluded. This is disappointing given the 84-day target set under civil service guidelines. The quickest consultors were able to turn around an analysis within a week (rare!) but the slowest took two years, which is totally unacceptable.

Worse still, around a quarter of consultations that closed over a year ago (2017-2019) still have not managed to publish an output report, with no update or indication of a delivery timeframe for the report.

While we have no data about the timing of responses received during the period in which consultations were open, our working assumption is that it will be in tandem with the marketing effort and similar to an online petition whereby 95% of signatures are received within the first 110 days or less.

Compliance

A massive 41% of consultations had no equalities monitoring questions and a further 45% lacked a published equalities impact assessment. There is clearly much work to be done in this regard and we urge consultors to be more mindful of their public sector equalities duty.

Around one in five consultations failed to provide any information about GDPR and consents (such as a privacy information notice). Likewise, nearly a third failed to include a disclosure of responses statement with regard to alerting the consultee of the possible visibility of their response (e.g., via the FOI regime).

More worryingly, one in five consultations also failed to ask a key question about the proposals which we know to be a commonly cited flaw at judicial review.

1https://spartakan.wordpress.com/2011/02/03/the-100-day-lifespan-of-the-e-petition/
Online versus offline

Turning our attention to online versus offline methodologies, the Institute has for a long time stressed the importance of a mixed channel strategy, especially in the context of the pandemic and previous caselaw.

In 2020, around a fifth of consultations were solely held online (3% of consultations remained wholly offline), without the opportunity for participants to respond via non-digital means, such as by telephone or in writing. By contrast, a year earlier in 2019, just 1% of consultations we inspected were online-only.

Feedback methods

Unsurprisingly, questionnaires (both online and offline) were found to be the most frequently used method offered to consultees for soliciting views.

Email was the second most frequent method offered for providing an official response to a consultation (two of the consultations in our sample were email response only). While this is convenient, we have concerns that email responses are unstructured by default and may not capture sufficient consultee data such as consents and equalities information.

Of concern were the 35% of consultations we inspected that only offered a single response method. Of these, 40% used online questionnaires as their only response method and 15% offered email submissions as their only response method, whereas 4% only allowed written submissions.

Questionnaire design

Our research revealed that the typical number of main questions for consultations in our sample was 18 with a further three for capturing “who” was speaking. This would suggest that, in general, questionnaire designs are still overambitious.

According to SuveyMonkey research, most people are unwilling to spend more than 20 minutes responding to a consultation and 45% of people less than 5 minutes. Their data suggests that if a respondent begins answering a survey, the sharpest increase in drop-off rate occurs with each additional question up to 15 questions. Furthermore, for respondents willing to answer over 35 questions in a survey, they may be indifferent to survey length, and are willing to complete a long survey.

A chart of the questionnaire length versus response rates for our sample is presented overleaf. You can see that our data is in support of the SurveyMonkey findings.

Conclusions

It is important to capture consultation data in a structured way to measure improvements in practice but also detect anomalies and empower scrutiny by consultees. The data warehouse that the Institute has developed will help the industry benchmark performance across the industry and we encourage consultors to think about ways of capturing key indicators.

There is still much to do in terms of raising consultation standards, particularly when it comes to embedding basic compliances such as GDPR and equalities requirements. For example, consultors need to get better at providing timely feedback and ensuring there is a well maintained, unified archive of their consultation activity.

The true test of consultation integrity will be to see how these various measures change over time. We are confident that TCI members buck the trend when it comes to poor practices but mindful that the pandemic has changed the dynamic over the last year and that shortcuts have been made.

Institute members who do not have a consultation database or means of recording structured participation data are encouraged to start keeping records and we invite them to work with us in using the MIDAS platform.
Benefits of using MIDAS

- Consultors are able to undertake pre-consultation horizon scanning, looking for similar consultations and taking cues from existing document designs/findings/participation rates and outcomes.

- Consultors are able to benchmark their consultations with their peers and across user defined collections.

- Consultors are able to adopt the data warehouse as their own directory of consultations, should they not have their own online facility. Each consultor has a branded landing page.

- Consultors are able to use the data warehouse as a permanent archive, useful if migrating between platform providers.

- Consultors are able to identify good practices thanks to an information layer provided by tCI which highlights consultations that are significant.

- Consultees are able to find consultations easier thanks to the defragmentation of consultation information, deep search, indexing, pre-categorisation and search engine optimisation.

- Consultees benefit from the increased transparency of consultations which captures the journey of a consultation across its lifespan, including details of any legal challenge.

- Consultees can engage in a conversation with other Consultees about any consultation in a safe and neutral environment by making use of the public comments feature.

- Consultees are able to check the vulnerability of any particular consultation and mount valid process related disputes quickly and easily using our sister product, MIDASresolve.

Want to know more?

Many businesses are embracing the sharing of data. It can lead to the individual benefits described in this paper and has cross-industry impact such as enabling open innovation, developing improved trust in the process of consultation and helping tackle sector challenges such as improving minority engagement.

Use of the data warehouse

The ability to view our minimum and basic consultation data will be free to all, including non-members of the Institute. However, Institute members will have read access to much more detailed data from each consultation - such as a breakdown of responses by demographic.

Institute members will be given full and free access to author their own records in the system (privately or publishing them as they see fit). Access to our data analytics module for benchmarking purposes involves the payment of a small annual fee.

There will be an in-house authoring service for members who wish to archive their existing consultations but have no capacity to input their data. This will be charged at a rate of £3,500 (ex VAT) per 100 records.

We welcome discussions with existing platform providers relating to integration opportunities. If you have any questions, suggestions or requests please contact us directly and we will reply as quickly as we can.

We are committed to the “good” use of engagement data which is purposeful, proportionate and responsible.

That’s why we are publishing open data standards and focused on realising benefits that are tangible, recognised and valued by service providers and the wider public.

The Institute will continue to author consultations in the system. The will be at our own discretion but likely to be high profile consultations or those which are noteworthy.

Our plan is to expand the number of records significantly over the next year.