

Good practice guidance for expert consultation processes

AIMIE HOPE
NAOMI VAUGHAN

TYNDALL CENTRE
FOR CLIMATE CHANGE RESEARCH
WORKING PAPER NO. 2025/01

Introduction

This good practice guidance is intended to improve the inclusion of qualitative social science insights within decision-making. It is developed for non-statutory expert consultation processes. The guidance is presented as a series of prompts, for those conducting an expert consultation, to consider at each stage (e.g., planning, meetings, outputs). The guidance is the output from academic research (Hope & Vaughan, available as a [pre-print](#)).

Who is the intended audience?

This good practice guidance is intended for individuals including (but not limited to) civil servants and members of independent statutory bodies who use informal (ad hoc) expert consultations (e.g., panel discussions, roundtables, workshops) for the purpose of gathering evidence and providing advice or other policy support to the UK government.

Which types of consultation is the guidance designed for?

Informal (or ad hoc) consultations typically involve multiple stakeholders such as experts from academia, NGOs and industry, and two-way dialogue between stakeholders and policymakers. Informal consultations are: (1) non-statutory; (2) may be short term and can include one-off meetings; (3) may lack administrative support (e.g., a secretariat); (4) tend to have stakeholders who are identified and invited by convenors (i.e., they are not formal appointments which tend to be advertised with published person specifications); and (5) may lack a formal term of reference.

Why was the guidance developed?

Insights from the social sciences and humanities are underrepresented in some areas of national UK government decision-making (e.g., see Markusson et al., 2020). One such area is carbon dioxide removal (CDR). Qualitative evidence and theoretical insights can be challenging to synthesise with quantitative decision tools and policy. This can lead to real-world complexities being absent from feasibility assessments and decision-making in areas such as carbon dioxide removal, with consequent risks to the implementation of specific projects, and ultimately the delivery of net zero.

Our research focuses on identifying specific points within informal evidence gathering procedures where insights from the social sciences and humanities (especially the more social, qualitative and theoretical) may be vulnerable to being excluded or marginalised.

We argue that the risks are greater for more informal or ad hoc consultations, than for formal statutory consultations. This is because informal consultations have more fluid procedures leaving greater scope for the quality of evidence gathering processes to be impacted by a variety of human and institutional factors (Stirling, 2008).

Our research compliments the work undertaken by others looking to increase the contribution of the social sciences and humanities in addressing issues such as climate change. For example, the [ACCESS network](#) focuses on equipping environmental social scientists to engage with policymakers. In this work, however, we look at things from the

‘other side’ - that is the processes by which experts are selected to give evidence, what kinds of evidence gets heard, and what evidence is likely to make it into policy outputs.

How was the guidance developed?

The guidance is based on the collective knowledge and expertise of the 26 participants who were interviewed about their experiences of convening and participating in expert panels on the topic of carbon dioxide removal. The guidance is based on what our interviewees felt worked well within evidence gathering procedures and aims to address the challenges they identified. Findings from the interview analysis were supplemented by UK government and research resources (see list in this document on page 5). The guidance was reviewed by the project’s Stakeholder Co-design group (three individuals with expertise in national government bodies and international policymaking), selected academics, and a representative from the Government Office for Science.

The academic paper that underpins this guidance is currently available as a [pre-print](#). The paper details the points of vulnerability within evidence gathering procedures where wider social insights are likely to be excluded or marginalised.

What was the associated project?

The ‘Beyond Cost & Carbon’ project was funded by a Philip Leverhulme Prize awarded to Professor Naomi Vaughan and conducted by Dr Aimie Hope. The project focused on Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR) methods (technological and land-based) and associated areas (e.g., bioenergy) which together have a pivotal role in achieving net zero emissions and limiting the impacts of climate change. **The project addressed the challenge of how to include more real-world complexity (i.e., a broader range of insights and evidence types including social, qualitative) into assessments of CDR and associated decision making for policy.** While CDR was used as a focus area for interview discussions, the guidance produced is more general and can be applied to non-statutory evidence gathering procedures on other topics.

The idea for this research came from Prof Vaughan’s participation in expert consultation processes.

Good practice guidance for non-statutory expert consultation processes used to gather evidence and inform policy relevant decision-making.

1. Identify purpose of expert consultation

1.1 Define the key research question(s) or topic and scope.

1.2 Decide on consultation time available and the type of panel feasible within this e.g., scoping or ideas development, testing assumptions, feedback on the implementation or finalisation of plans.

Other considerations:

- How will the defined questions and scope shape the way potential issues are framed and limit the insights that will be gathered?
- Are any potentially relevant insights at risk of being excluded?
- Are there other ways of framing the question to keep the evidence gathering more open (e.g., setting a discussion topic rather than a specific question)?
- Consider undertaking a short literature review to demonstrate the gaps you have identified as the research questions and sharing these resources during the consultation (i.e. to show that your research question is backed up by evidence).

2. Selection and assessment of stakeholders

2.1 Draw up a list of stakeholder groups that you and your colleagues think should be involved (e.g., academics, NGOs, industry representatives).

2.2 For each stakeholder group you list, identify *more than one* named individual. Ask your colleagues to individually suggest names to identify a greater diversity of people who hold similar expertise.

Considerations for expert selection:

- Has stakeholder engagement previously been undertaken on this topic/area and, if so, are there existing stakeholder relationships to build on? Where stakeholders have already been consulted, might inviting other individuals with comparable expertise offer fresh insights?
- Do the stakeholders have peer recognition and established expertise?
- Does the stakeholder expertise represent a thorough coverage of the area under investigation?
 - Map out the areas of expertise represented by the named individuals to identify potential gaps. For example, are technical, environmental, economic, socio/cultural, institutional, and geographical expertise covered?
 - Identify experts who work at boundary areas and in multidisciplinary research.
- Are certain types of insights (e.g., cultural) and/or evidence types (especially qualitative) at risk of being excluded or underrepresented? Will it be possible for these types of insights/evidence to be included in the policy output?
- Will your group be able to provide sufficient challenge or is there a risk of “group think”?
- Is there diversity of perspectives, knowledge and/or knowledge systems?
- Equality, diversity, and inclusion factors. What steps can be taken to utilise the talents and resources offered by underrepresented groups (e.g., early career researchers, women, people of different ethnicities)?
- Are you aware of stakeholder motivations and current views about the topic/area on which you are consulting?
- Consider how well stakeholders may work together on the panel. Is there a risk of imbalances in power, lobbying interests, issues with interpersonal dynamics, or of an inability to reach consensus/produce the required output? Can any of these be pre-emptively addressed?

3. Method of engagement

- 3.1 Decide on which format is appropriate (e.g., advisory committee, workshop, round table discussion).
- 3.2 Decide if meetings will be in-person, online, or a mixture to limit biases (e.g., London centric, larger organisations may be able to afford to send dedicated staff while smaller organisations, part-time employees or those with caring responsibility may find travel a barrier to participation).
- 3.3 Inform stakeholders what their involvement will require in terms of resource and time commitment (meeting type, duration, frequency, project timeline) as well as risk and public perceptions.

Other considerations:

- Is there a way to capture insights for future use or reference that are beyond the remit of the current panel?
- Is there time for insights (e.g., from qualitative evidence) to be included (e.g., translated into usable formats)?
- Will the time frames on which different stakeholder groups operate (e.g., large corporations, NGOs, academics) impact their ability to participate?
- Do methods with anonymous responses need to be considered to bolster engagement for fractious areas?

4. Meeting Management: ensuring all stakeholders contribute

- 4.1 Select an appropriate chair with sufficient experience (e.g., area of expertise, neutrality, respect of members).
- 4.2 What kind of accountability mechanisms might help keep a chair aligned to the objectives?
- 4.3 Be transparent about the panel aims and likely outcomes from the start.
This will help stakeholders to contribute and know what to expect from participating. While this can be done with a formal Terms of Reference, it could also be managed more informally such as by an open discussion with stakeholders at the start or in the email invitation to participate.
- 4.4 Be clear on any code(s) of practice, roles, responsibilities, how decisions will be recorded and explained, and how confidentiality and conflicts of interest will be managed. Provide guidance on how the panel process will work including timelines and what will happen to the evidence provided (e.g., in terms of outputs including expectations around format, length, quality, opportunities for comments, review procedures, and etc).
- 4.5 Secure any other support needed, such as administrators, technical support, facilitators to enable breakout groups or manage online chat discussions.
- 4.6 Are any additional measures needed to ensure that all panel members can fully contribute? E.g., feeling comfortable to participate and feeling heard. Are there plans for managing issues such as vested interests, lobbying, unequal power dynamics?

5. Outputs: synthesising insights

- 5.1 Is there a way to capture, record or acknowledge insights which cannot feed in directly, or where the proxy does not capture the insight sufficiently (e.g., a written example somewhere within the written output to illustrate the nature of the insight)?
- 5.2 Is there a way to integrate qualitative or social insights within the main report? For example, are these insights included in the conclusions and recommendations? Treating these insights as ancillary such as being presented separately to the other evidence can minimise their value.

Additional Resources

These additional resources on Stakeholder Engagement best practice from across UK Government departments were used to support the development of this guidance.

- Department of Health & Social Care (2012) The Pathology Services [Commissioning Toolkit](#) - Step 4 Tool 1 [Engaging Stakeholders](#). 15 May 2012.
- Government Communication Service (2021) [Ensuring Effective Stakeholder Engagement](#). Published 2016, last updated 23 April 2021.
- Single Source Regulations Office (2023) [Stakeholder Engagement Strategy](#) 2023. *SSRO is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Ministry of Defence.*

References

Markusson, N., Balta-Ozkan, N., Chilvers, J., Healey, P., Reiner, D., & McLaren, D. (2020). Social Science Sequestered. *Frontiers in Climate*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2020.00002>

Stirling, A. (2008). "Opening up" and "closing down": Power, participation, and pluralism in the social appraisal of technology. *Science Technology and Human Values*, 33(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243907311265>

Beyond Cost and Carbon | Oct 2025

E:N.VAUGHAN@UEA.AC.UK | TYNDALL CENTRE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE, SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA, NORWICH, UK

