Annex F – Policy discussions: topic guide

Background

This topic guide is part of a wider GO-Science initiative to learn how scientists and engineers in government can best be supported and developed so that they meet the future needs of the civil service.

The questions below are intended to help conduct short discussions with experienced policy profession members enquiring into their experience and reflections of being customers of science and engineering advice.

Objectives of interviews

- To learn about the experiences of policy colleagues who have been 'customers' of science and engineering advice.
- To encourage individuals to disclose positive and negative experiences.
- To encourage individuals to reflect on their experiences and suggest practice improvements.

Broader context

In the light of the civil service reform plan, to consider how scientists and engineers in government can best be supported and developed so that they meet the future needs of the civil service (especially the aspiration that specialists and experts are visible, contactable and deployable across government).

To generate insight about views expressed to GO-Science staff that there are both recurring difficulties and good 'practices-in-use' in how scientists / engineers and policy officials communicate 'across the boundary.'

To gain enriched understanding of what the characteristics of 'policy-relevant science' looks like or would look like (this term has been used by experienced scientists and engineers).

To generate greater understanding of how government scientists and engineers could contribute towards the aspiration for more open policy making (and to explore what this may look like in practice).

To build understanding of the *actual roles* people with a science and engineering background are performing in the civil service. For example:

- A practitioner – has knowledge of a specific discipline or sector of science or engineering and draw on this to provide advice or make judgements
- A facilitator applies their science or engineering background to help identify the need for science or engineering expertise and seek out, procure and translate the expertise of others to inform decision making.
- An Informed advocate retains an interest in science and engineering issues and brings analytical skills to bear in a broader context. They recognise and promote the value of

scientific and engineering expertise and the importance of using the best available evidence to inform decision making in government.

However, discussants may suggest other terms and characterizations and these should be recorded and explored.

Suggested opening statement

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our project. Our purposes today are to enquire into your experiences and reflections of being a policy 'customer' for science and engineering advice. I have a few questions I would like to ask you, but mostly I will be led by the issues you raise.

All information you give us will be held in confidence and your contributions will be anonymous. We may use unattributed comments in our final report which will focus on how we should be developing scientists and engineers to ensure the profession meets the future needs of the civil service.

I would like your permission to take notes and / or tape record the interview. If we use a tape recorder I will use the tape to transcribe detailed notes after which I will return it to you if you wish.

We hope these discussion will help generate some insight into how in the future scientists and engineering can best work with policy makers.

The discussion will start with a few basic factual questions, after which we will enquire into the main topics under enquiry.

1. Please provide us with some basic information before we start

Your department, agency or NDPB?	
Your primary discipline or area of expertise?	
Your level or grade?	
Years experience in the civil service?	
Age band?	• 20-29 • 30-39 • 40-49 • 50-59 • 60+

2. We would like to hear about your experiences of working with science or engineering experts? Are there any particular issues or even difficulties that arise if you are a customer for such advice?

Question 2 guidance. Allow the person to relate experiences with nil or minimal interruption. If the person needs help to gather their thoughts or dries up quickly the following prompts could be tried:

'At a recent workshop held by GO-Science, a number of experienced people working in scientific and engineering roles thought that it was often difficult to 'deliver' expert knowledge or advice to policy colleagues. There was no single reason for this, but the following issues were raised:

- Scientists and engineers often brought in too late to make a difference
- Policy officials do not always understand 'expert' advice
- Experts do not always explain themselves well or clearly
- Experts sometimes find it difficult to provide immediate answers in the terms asked

From your knowledge or experience, what do you think?'

3. I would like to learn more about what you said about X or Y?

Question 3 guidance. This question is quite content-driven dependent on how the person answers the first question. However, the following formulations are offered as a menu to probe particular issues.

- 'Clearly you have experienced difficulties in communicating across the boundaries. How did you resolve or tackle the difficulties?'
- 'Clearly you evolved effective ways of working. What would you say are they key features of the approach you developed?'
- 'Do you think that difficulties concerned were mostly about timing, language or other factors?'
- 'Do you think there are particular issues with scientists or engineers compared with other disciplines (economics / statistics)?'
- 'When working with scientists and engineers, are there behaviours you have found to be more effective or less effective? How does this compare with other professional advisors?'
- 'Do you feel confident or comfortable inviting a scientist or engineer into a 'policy' conversation?'
- 'Have you any experience of receiving advice strongly qualified by risk and uncertainty from a scientist of engineer? Was this delivered in a way that you could work with?'

- ‘Would you say you have a good sense of how to commission or involve a scientist or engineer in the most effective ways? ‘

It may help to refer to or show one of the ‘policy cycle’ models in currency.(It may be useful to have the current one used by the particular department to hand). This may help talk about timing issues (as it has been said to GO-Science that science and engineering advice is often called upon too late). In this regard it may be useful to ask the following:

- ‘In your experience is science and engineering advice often commissioned too late?
- ‘Is this an issue unique to science and engineering input?’
- ‘Is it an issue arising more from the crowded nature of a “policy job”?’

The roles and identities chart may be useful to help this conversation. For example the following questions might be useful?

- ‘Was the scientist or engineer who advised you operating from a stance of a specialist practitioner giving you ‘straight’ advice or helping to facilitate your understanding?’
- ‘Do you have any preferences about how you would like to receive specialist advice?’

4. We have covered a lot of ground in a short space of time. Have any particular insights emerged for you? How do you think these might be relevant to the civil service of the future?

Question 4 guidance. It may help to prompt flow if the enquirer (person leading the discussion) shares one of their insights. And by this stage the policy person may be able to articulate some suggestions or practice improvements.

It may also be useful to ask the person to consider if any of the issues arising have particular salience for the future of the civil service. For example:

‘Do you think that policy makers in future will need advice of a different kind? Explain?’

‘Do you think scientists and engineers will need to approach things differently? Explain?’

5. Is there anything you were expecting to be asked which has not been mentioned?

Question 5 guidance. This final question allows the person to place any emphasis that s/he feels needs placing on a particular issue, and helps avoid anything obvious being overlooked. Sub-questions might be

- ‘Is there anything we have skimmed over which needs more attention?’
- ‘Is there anything else you would like to add?’

It is also an opportunity to summarize the discussion one more time before closing, and allow any late thoughts or reflections to emerge. Sometimes these can be very valuable.

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