

TRANSLATING THE VOICE OF ENGINEERING

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The recent IUSS report *Engineering: turning engineering into reality* touched on two interesting points. The first, which is self evident to all engineers, was that engineering is everywhere and is therefore vital to life as we live it. The second was that the diversity of engineering requires a multitude of disciplines and that many engineering institutions have grown up over the past 150 years to support this multiplicity. To add to this in reality many disciplines overlap and depend upon each other to produce a successful solution. For example, a railway would not work without structures, machines, energy and control systems – not to mention people.

The Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) was created to take account of engineering diversity and has over 37 technical communities within its global membership, covering, amongst others, aerospace, healthcare, management, photonics, robotics and power generation. The question for the IET is how can the wealth of expertise and experience from over 152,000 members be tapped to provide high quality, unbiased, evidenced-based policy advice for the public good? Luckily not all members want to have a say in the IET's policy positions at the same time, but it is the depth of expertise within the membership that gives the IET a unique strength and it is important that a balanced view is offered.

The IET has a tried and tested method of funnelling all this expertise into a manageable form. Policy committees, known as Sector Panels, have been established backed up by the existing range of technical communities and educational resources to provide the IET with strategic policy advice. The Sector Panels take a pivotal role in shaping and presenting IET policy and are set up to reflect the IET's main policy interests:

- transport
- energy
- education
- communications
- information technology
- and manufacturing

A separate panel looks into emerging technologies and specialist groups cover issues such as the biological effects of mobile phones and general health and safety. The panels are made up of senior members and high level experts from industry and academia, and are authorised to issue comment on public policy on behalf of the IET.

The panels work with the IET's policy staff to help the IET respond to consultations, inquiries and direct requests for policy advice. When responding to a call for evidence or a Government consultation, the

IET issues a call for input to the membership at large using the IET website, its communities and by issuing targeted *Policy Key* emails. All the contributions received are collated and a draft response is formulated by IET staff with advice from the Sector Panel. If the topic is out of the scope of a panel, then the advice from an expert in one of the technical communities is sought. The chair of the panel is the final arbiter of the submission. The Sector Panels also provide advice and support to the IET regarding media enquiries, press releases and public affairs work in Parliament and with Government departments.

The system works well, with a number of submissions of evidence to inquiries and consultations made each year. The aim is quality not quantity, for example last year the IET considered 139 consultations but responded to only 30, covering topics as diverse as the IUSS Committee *Inquiry into renewable energy*, the DCFS *Strategy for 14-19 qualifications* and the BERR consultation on *Improving outcomes for Health and Safety*. Over 25,000 IET members have registered an interest in policy issues and the global nature of this interest means we are able to take into account the experience of engineers living beyond the UK.

Member response varies greatly from topic to topic and again the aim is to get informed contributions and to present alternative proposals if there is no obvious 'right answer'.

In addition to providing informed comment to Parliament and UK Government, the IET has set up similar systems to offer policy advice to the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Irish Assembly as well as targeted responses to the European Commission. The IET is an expanding global organisation and is now looking to provide local access to the knowledge of its members in, for instance, India, China and Hong Kong.

It is often stated that Government has difficulty in listening to the advice offered by the 36 engineering bodies. Through the various channels outlined above, the IET has found a successful way of funnelling the opinions of its 152,000 members into a single voice to help policymakers make informed decisions. Whether that advice is listened to is perhaps a question for another day.

The full searchable list of the 118 submissions made by the IET since 2005 can be found on the IET website at www.theiet.org/publicaffairs/submissions/index.cfm.

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