

Open Government status: Fully open	Paper Number: ACTS/01/2004
	Meeting Date: 25 March 2004
	Type of Paper: Above the line
Exempt material: None	Paper File Reference: HD/350/1004/03

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON TOXIC SUBSTANCES

Open Meetings: Review of October 2003 meeting and future strategy

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Cleared by John Thompson on 23 February 2004

Issue

1. The first ACTS open meeting was held on 17 October 2003. The Committee now needs to agree its strategy for future open meetings, particularly its intentions for 2004.

Timing

2. At least one open meeting must be held in 2004. The Committee therefore needs to agree the way forward in March so that the necessary arrangements can be made in good time.

Recommendation

3. In the brief review that followed the October 2003 open meeting it was agreed that Secretariat would provide members with options for the future rather than a specific recommendation. It was agreed that the Committee would discuss the options in March 2004 and reach its own conclusion on how to proceed (see minutes ACTS/MIN/3/2003, paragraph 1.3). The Committee is asked to consider the options (paragraph 15) and actions set out in paragraph 22–23. It is recommended that for 2004 the November meeting is the open one.

Background

Review of the October 2003 open meeting

4. The first ACTS open meeting was held on 17 October 2003 (notes of the meeting can be found in paper ACTS/42/2003). Some 38 delegates (representing 32 organisations)

attended the meeting. The venue (Rose/Globe Room, Rose Court) had a capacity for 60 delegates. More than 60 seats were initially requested for the meeting, however in the weeks leading up to the event the numbers fell to the final 38. A list of the organisations represented at the meeting can be found at Annex 1 of this paper. All delegates were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire at the close of the open meeting. Questionnaires were returned by 35 of the 38 delegates (92%)

5. **Publicity** for the meeting was carried out in a number of ways. This included an invitation letter (sent to 55 organisations, see paper ACTS/23/2003, Annex 2), an article in the HSE newsletter *Toxic Substances Bulletin (TSB)* and via the internet by use of the HSE website (“current events” page) and ACTS web page. Of those attending, some 68% did so as a result of receiving an invitation letter. Some 15% of delegates found out about the open meeting via the HSE website (9% via the current events page and 6% via the flyer on the ACTS web page). *TSB* accounted for 3% of the delegates. The final 14% found out about the meeting by other means, e.g. word of mouth and recommendation by colleagues.
6. In terms of the **agenda** and the various **presentations** given (by ACTS members), 97% of delegates classified the content as “about right” and just 3% as “too simplistic”. Typical comments made about the agenda items/presentations included that they were “*all useful/good*”, that they “*were brief and simple enough to retain interest*” and that overall the meeting was “*well structured*”. The occupational asthma agenda item received most individual praise followed by the presentation on the development of the new OEL framework. The open session (i.e. the question/discussion session at the end) was judged as either “very helpful” (65%) or “adequate (35%)”. All delegates said they left the meeting knowing and understanding more about ACTS and their role and work.
7. An **exhibition**, staffed by HSE policy advisers, was open in an adjoining room for an hour before and after the open meeting. Material (display panels and web-based) covered areas such as the ACTS and their work plan, asthma, CHIP, asbestos and *COSHH Essentials*. Some 87% of delegates visited the exhibition and of these 96% found it “very useful”.
8. Some 94% of delegates assessed the **organisational arrangements** of the meeting as “good” (6% as “adequate”). There was one request that we avoid holding future meetings on a Friday. There were no complaints about of the **location** of the meeting (i.e. being in London), though 7% of delegates that Birmingham would be a good location too. One delegate stated a desire for future meetings to be rotated around the country, especially so as to give access to people from Scotland and Wales, quoting other Advisory Committees as already doing so.
9. Space was provided in the evaluation questionnaire for delegates to make any **general comments** they had about the open meeting. The comments made are reproduced in Annex 2 (attached). These include comments such as “*This meeting was a revelation as to how the HSE/HSC works with specialists*”, “*Good meeting. Going in the right direction*” and “*A very useful introductory meeting, sketching out what ACTS is trying to achieve. I would expect future meetings to cover other projects that ACTS are working on*”.

Summary of what was agreed by ACTS following the October 2003 open meeting

10. Following the October 2003 open meeting ACTS members briefly discussed their first impressions (see ACTS/MIN/3/2003, agenda item 1). It was agreed that planning for future open meetings would be progressed as follows:
 - a) Having analysed the feedback questionnaires, Secretariat would prepare an “options” paper for discussion in March 2004.
 - b) Committee members were asked to e-mail Secretariat their reflections on the first open meeting together with ideas on how open meetings could be held in the future. These ideas would be included in the “options” paper (above).
 - c) In advance of the March meeting, Secretariat would “ballot” members, by e-mail, to identify the most popular format for future open meetings.
11. Action a) has been completed (see paragraphs 5 - 10). With regards to action b) an email was sent to members on 30 October requesting reflections on the first open meeting together with preferences/ideas for the future. A response was received from nine members. In terms of the first open meeting, all members felt that the meeting had been a success, with several members expressing that it had exceeded their expectations. Members’ views on a strategy for future open meetings have been summarised in Annex 3.
12. Views from members on how we should proceed varied to such an extent that it was considered to be inappropriate to conduct the e-mail ballot referred to in c) above (paragraph 10), i.e. without first having further formal debate/discussion at an ACTS meeting. Concerns were also expressed that as ACTS does not normally conduct business and make decisions in this way, i.e. via e-mail ballots, that it was not appropriate to agree how to proceed with future open meetings in such a way.

Advice from the Commission to be considered when planning open meetings

13. HSC has agreed that its advisory committees (ACs) should hold at least one open meeting a year. The Commission has also said that further meetings in public should be held where it would be a useful means of consultation or it would help the public have a greater understanding of the work of the AC.
14. The Commission has identified four criteria that need to be taken account of in planning open meetings, these are that:
 - a balance needs to be struck between transparency and the most effective operating methods for ACs (so where the nature of the business is sensitive or commercial in confidence, an open meeting would not been appropriate);
 - open meetings should be well advertised and should be held at a time and place that will encourage interested parties to attend;
 - advertising should be proportionate to the size and expenditure of the AC; and
 - in deciding on the location for an open meeting, consideration should be given to ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities.

Argument

15. Taking account of the ideas proposed by members (Annex 3) the **options** for the format of future ACTS open meetings would appear to be as follows:
- i) All future meetings to be “open” (agenda items which are sensitive or not fully open could be held in a “closed” meeting at the end of the day);
 - ii) Hold one open meeting a year, this being a normal business meeting (again any sensitive items that cannot be held-back to the subsequent meeting could be discussed in a closed session at the end of the day);
 - iii) As for ii) but alternating every other year with a themed seminar style meeting;
 - iv) Retain a format (each year) similar to that used in 2003, focusing on topical issues and asking attendees to submit questions in advance. If the location of meetings is rotated one suggestion is to make the topics covered relevant to the industry typical to that area, i.e. focusing on their health priorities;
 - v) An annual themed seminar/meeting only, never making any normal business meetings as open, perhaps using syndicate groups to look at particular issues.
16. In terms of the **location** for future open meetings there were no strong views. Members were content with London as travel is easy (if expensive) and the facilities in Rose Court are good. Three members thought rotating between England, Wales and Scotland was worth considering. Three members specifically suggested Birmingham (and the West Midlands) as a suitable location.

Consultation

17. Members were consulted immediately after the first open meeting and subsequently by email.

Evaluation

18. The October 2003 open meeting was evaluated by way of a questionnaire completed by delegates. It is proposed to develop a similar questionnaire to suit whatever format of open meetings is agreed for future.

Costs and Benefits

19. As per the Commission guidance (paragraph 14), costs of open meetings should be proportionate to the events themselves. Costs will have to be met out of the existing budgets. This will be the limiting factor should there be a preference to move away from Rose Court/London or to have repeated seminar-style events. Open meetings will raise the public profile of ACTS and their work and highlight the dangers resulting from exposure to hazardous substances in the workplace, and at the same time will meet the Government/Commission desire for greater transparency and openness.

Financial/Resource Implications for HSE

20. Of the option set out in paragraph 15, numbers (i) and (ii) would have minimal resource implications for ACTS Secretariat/HSE. The costs of such meetings would be little

different (e.g. just additional refreshments) to those of a normal business meeting and publicity requirements could easily be met via HSE's website and the organisations that expressed an interest in the 2003 event. **Based on the time and effort that went into organising the 2003 open meeting options (iv) and (v) would have considerable staffing resource implications for HSE.** Planning, pre-event publicity, writing and responding to potential attendees, preparing PowerPoint presentations, briefing notes and exhibition material are all necessary for the seminar-style events. **If the Committee opts for this type of event on an ongoing basis an assessment of the full staffing resource implications would have to be made by HSE before agreement could be reached to proceed. Resource intensive options must have clearly identifiable outcomes and bring with them the benefit of making a real difference in the workplace.** The need expressed by the Commission to maintain a balance of proportionality whilst meeting the need for greater transparency must be remembered. Option (iii) would appear to offer a reasonable compromise on resources, e.g. minimal additional resources every other year.

21. Choice of a venue outside London (i.e. somewhere other than HSE's Rose Court premises) would incur considerable additional costs, e.g. for conference facilities at a hotel or similar. No other HSE premises could host a seminar-style meeting of the type held in 2003. It is possible however, that for options (i) and (ii) alternative (non-London based) HSE premises might be available (e.g. Edinburgh or Cardiff). This is on the assumption that the public response to attend and observe a normal business meeting would be considerably less than that of the 2003 meeting. One way of using a non-London location for more costly seminar-style events might be to find a venue in partnership with stakeholders or via members own organisations or networks.

Action

22. Members are asked to consider the background and options (paragraphs 4 –16) and agree the format and location for future open meetings.
23. The date for the 2004 open meeting needs to be agreed, the options being one of the meetings planned for July or November. It is proposed that November is most appropriate to allow sufficient time for planning and preparations. Members are asked for their views.

Contact

24. ACTS Secretariat
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Organisations represented by public attendees at the 1st ACTS Open Meeting

ORGANISATIONS REPRESENTED
Ask Consultants
Association of Occupational Health Nurse Practitioners (2)
British Aerosol Manufacturers' Association
British Association for Chemical Specialities
British Chemical Distributors & Traders Association Ltd
British Coatings Federation
British Compressed Gases Association
British Occupational Hygiene Society
Cast Metals Federation
Chemical Industries Association
Composites Processing Association Ltd
Confederation of British Industry
East Sussex Hospitals NHS Trust
Eurisol (UK Mineral Wool Association)
Federation of Small Businesses (2)
GeneWatch UK
GMB Union
Independent Health & Safety Consultant (1)
James Fisher Rumic Ltd
Kaolin and Ball Clay Association (2)
Occupational Health Review
Pfizer UK
Photo Imaging Council (3)
Quarry Products Association
Royal College of Nursing
Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland
Royal Society of Chemistry
Silica and Moulding Sands Association
Solvent Industry Association
ToXcel International Ltd (2)
Toxicology Advice & Consulting Ltd
UK Cleaning Products Industry Association

Feedback from the 17th Oct. 2003 Evaluation Questionnaire

Question 10 on the questionnaire stated, **“Please use the box below to make any other comments you have about the meeting”**. The comments made are reproduced below:

- *Want more to learn about strategy & policy development.*
- *The new OEL system should indicate the importance of good practice but they are just tools for preventing ill health which is in the goal.*
- *Several representatives from only a few sectors - was this deliberate.*
- *Audibility should have been better.*
- *Many questions focussed on communication, particularly in relation to small businesses. It would be reassuring to think that HSC would take those comments into account when finalising the new OEL framework.*
- *A very useful introductory meeting, sketching out what ACTS is trying to achieve. I would expect future meetings to cover other projects that ACTS are working on.*
- *Good variety of knowledgeable speakers.*
- *Will feed back to the organisation the need to make nurses aware of resources available and especially issues around occupational asthma for themselves as employees but also to recognise there may be a link to occupational asthma in other patients and clients.*
- *This meeting was a revelation as to how the HSE/HSC works with specialists.*
- *Good meeting. Going in the right direction. More work needed on simple easy to use systems to find cost effective solutions at the front end. Improvements to "mapping" the way through the forest can be improved.*

Views from members on future strategy for ACTS open meetings

Nine members responded to the 30 October e-mail requesting preferences for the format of future open meetings and as views on locations. The responses are summarised in the table below:

Member	Views on format and location of future ACTS Open Meetings
1. (CBI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference: Themed meeting. Of the view that the Committee rejected the notion of a normal meeting being open to the public. • Location: No strong views, but most attendees at the 10/2003 meeting came from the SE (though this may not mean much).
2. (CBI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference: Themed seminars with syndicate groups to answer particular questions. • Not keen on having one “open” meeting per year when public can attend to observe – feels would inhibit discussion. Even less keen on making all future meeting “Open”. • Location: Thought “could” rotate with Birmingham, but feels rotation between Scotland, England and Wales excessive.
3. (Independent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference: Hold one open meeting a year, this being a business meeting alternating with a themed seminar meeting. Next year (2004) should perhaps be simply a business meeting open to the public which is properly in keeping with our responsibility to ensure transparency. May be less well attended than themed meeting, but is important as provided opportunity to see the workings and tripartite debates that make ACTS balanced and fair. • Location: Rotate around the major cities of the UK; suggests Birmingham as the next venue, which is central and will capture a representation of the West Midlands light and heavy industry.
4. (Independent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference: Keep similar format to Oct. 2003 but with topical presentations by ACTS or HSE members as appropriate (followed by normal ACTS meeting). Invite attendees to submit questions to be addressed during the meeting. • Believes the most important stakeholders are represented through the tripartite system and therefore holding completely open ACTS meeting unnecessary. • Location: Favours holding a Birmingham meeting but recognises Wales and Scotland may also be appropriate.
5. (Independent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference: All future meetings being “Open”, perhaps every 3-4 years or so with a PR-style event similar to October 2003 (so reducing time and resource costs that would result from frequent PR-orientated meetings). • Location: HSE’s Rose Court facilities.

6. (Independent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference: Themed meetings, perhaps with input from the locality as to their H & S priorities if the location is rotated (see below). Would also support opening – on a trial basis – one normal ACTS meeting. • Proposes a themed meeting on carcinogens, to include a “forward look”, i.e. could a work related cancer epidemic, similar to asbestos related mesothelioma occur again? • Location: Rotate, perhaps to NI, Wales and Scotland – but not so frequently that costs excessive.
7. (Independent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference: Favours an annual seminar around a theme, keeping other meetings for serious business. • Location: No preference stated.
8. (TUC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference: One normal ACTS meeting per year open to the public. Has no problem with all meetings being open, but recognises that a mechanism would be required for dealing with issues where some material cannot be disclosed. • Location: No objection to rotation though London easiest to travel to (but expensive!).
9. (TUC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference: No preference stated. • Location: Could be held in different locations.