



Digital Dialogues

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Interim Report, December 2005 – August 2006

An independent investigation into the use of online technologies to promote dialogue between central government and the public

Executive Summary

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

- ‘**Digital Dialogues**’ is an initiative established by the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA);
- **Phase One** of 'Digital Dialogues' took place between December 2005 – June 2006. This report covers Phase One and contains case studies and draft guidance from that phase;
- The **Hansard Society's** eDemocracy Programme was commissioned to administer 'Digital Dialogues' and produce the case study evaluations. The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan educational charity;
- **The purpose** of the 'Digital Dialogues' initiative is to promote use of online technology by central government for the purposes of enhancing public engagement in the policy process;
- **Six case study evaluations** were completed in Phase One, involving a cross-section of central government agencies, departments and ministerial offices;
- The case studies used **web-based applications**, including blogs, forums, surveys and webchats;
- **Evaluations** were generated through analysis of site statistics, interviews with case study owners in government, and surveys with registrants and site users;
- Phase One case studies and their evaluations were used to inform the drafting of **guidance resources**;
- **Phase Two** of 'Digital Dialogues' is scheduled to be conducted between August 2006 – February 2007. It provides an

opportunity for longitudinal evaluation of case studies to test the guidance created following Phase One;

- Further information and updates can be found at www.digitaldialogues.org.uk.

INTERIM FINDINGS

- Public engagement can **enhance policy making**;
- Public engagement enhances citizens' and government's **efficacy**;
- The use of online resources presents significant logistical, data gathering and transparency **benefits** not always present in conventional, offline methods;
- **People attracted to participating** in online consultation and political deliberation were regular internet users. The majority had not been active in politics previously. It was the online mechanism (combining with an interest in the subject matter and the opportunity to deliberate with policy makers) that attracted them to engage in these case studies;
- Citizens were asked to **engage with complex issues**, deliberate and begin to find solutions together and with government representatives;
- Most of the people who used the websites **preferred to spectate** rather than participate in the deliberation, but did visit and logged-in regularly;
- **Feedback** attested to a satisfaction with text-based deliberation but expressed interest in greater use of audio-visual content;

- **Scepticism** amongst the public about the value of engagement in the policy process can be addressed as it begins by clearly setting out the potential for influence over outcomes. This must be matched by commitment to feedback processes at the end of an engagement exercise;
- Public **engagement around policy** must be led by ministers and policy officials, whilst ensuring that technical expertise is sourced from communications, IT and web teams;
- Simply **building a website** does not equate to online engagement. Site moderation and facilitation of the deliberation is crucial and must be led by officials with the depth of knowledge and ownership over the policy areas;
- If the breadth and depth of participation is to be enhanced, a **marketing** campaign must be put in place to drive traffic to a site, maintain interest and publicise outcomes;
- Participants may be unused to deliberation. Therefore, guidance and **information resources** will benefit the engagement process;
- Online engagement activity is **not a replacement** for conventional offline methods. It should be used as a complement and is best placed with a multichannel engagement campaign;
- Blogs are **suitable where engagement is** ongoing over a long-term period. Forums are good for periodic, structured deliberation with large groups. Webchats are useful as one-off real-time events (but may be combined in a series or with other applications);
- Participant bases created around one exercise should be maintained and encouraged to take part in an **ongoing dialogue** at appropriate junctures around the policy cycle;

- Online engagement exercises should start small and should be **scaled-up** in response to demand;
- Both the **government and the public** have had a long-standing interest in greater interaction online. The technology is now catching up with this aspiration;
- **Planning** and sufficient lead-in times are necessary to the success of online engagement activity;
- **Discussion rules**, terms and conditions, and moderation policies must be clear, easy to follow and published on the site;
- Consistency, personality and responsiveness are important in **good facilitation** of deliberation online;
- Opportunities to engage in the policy process online should be open to all, wherever possible. However, so long as the **process is transparent**, it is acceptable for government to select stakeholders;
- Further, **longitudinal evaluation** is required to gather data which can be used to inform long term online engagement strategies and procurement.