



Digital Dialogues

Digital Dialogues

Interim Report, December 2005 – August 2006

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

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Author

Ross Ferguson

Ross Ferguson is the Director of the Hansard Society's eDemocracy Programme.

Research Support

Barry Griffiths

Dr Laura Miller

Barry Griffiths is the Project Manager on the Hansard Society's eDemocracy Programme. Dr Laura Miller is the Researcher on the Hansard Society's eDemocracy Programme.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Foreword

Introduction

Part One

Government, Public Engagement & ICT

- 1.1 The Challenges of Engagement
- 1.2 eDemocracy and Government
- 1.3 Using Technology to Promote Engagement
- 1.4 Benefits of ICT
- 1.5 Web Technologies
- 1.6 Barriers to Using ICT for Engagement

Part Two

The Digital Dialogues Initiative

- 2.1 Overview
- 2.2 Evaluation
- 2.3 Case Studies
 - Department for Education and Skills online survey site
 - David Miliband MP ministerial blog
 - Department for Work and Pensions Welfare Reform forum
 - Department for Communities and Local Government forum
 - Department for Communities and Local Government webchats
 - Food Standards Agency forum

Part Three

Guidance from Phase One

- 3.1 Online Consultation Steps
- 3.2 Draft Guidance Resources
 - Sample registration form
 - Sample user survey
 - Application specification
 - Online copy guide
 - Sample terms and conditions
 - Facilitation of online participation sites

Part Four

Key Findings & Next Steps

Bibliography

Glossary

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 This report covers Phase One and contains case studies and draft guidance from that phase;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.

FOREWORD

Society has changed significantly over the past decade. The way we do business, access information, communicate and deliver services has been revolutionised by the digital era. The once formal structures and barriers to trade, media, travel and interaction have been reduced by the huge growth in the use of computers and access to the Internet.



Commentators have criticised Parliament and Government for not adapting traditional political structures and processes to reflect society's increasing reliance on digital media. This has resulted in these institutions becoming out of touch with the public.

In addressing the real and perceived disconnect between the public and the government, Whitehall has commenced a programme of incorporating the use of innovative online deliberative tools to interact with people at both national and local levels. My Department's Digital Dialogues pilot has played an integral part in this ongoing process to bridge the communication divide.

The Digital Dialogues initiative offers government departments, agencies and ministerial offices the opportunity to test three ICT tools - webchats, forums and weblogs - as a means of re-engaging with the public and encouraging interactive ongoing dialogue. The programme is evidence of my Department's commitment to promoting public participation as a means of empowering people to voice their opinion and be actively involved in our democracy.

The Digital Dialogues interim report illustrates how public involvement in the policy development process can influence policy outcomes. I am encouraged by the positive findings of the report and I strongly support the continued practice of using digital means to promote public participation in policy development.

I would like to thank the Hansard Society for their valuable contribution to the Digital Dialogues initiative. I would also like to thank those agencies, departments and Ministers participating in Digital Dialogues for their willingness and enthusiasm.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bridget Prentice".

Bridget Prentice, MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Constitutional Affairs.

INTRODUCTION

'Digital Dialogues' is a pilot initiative established by the Democratic Engagement Branch of the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA). As part of its remit to promote public engagement, the Democratic Engagement Branch has a cross-government responsibility for embedding the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support dialogue with the public and strengthen the government's openness and transparency, particularly in policy making.

The dual-purpose of Digital Dialogues is to:

- Assess the capacity of ICT to support central government's communication and consultation activity (principally with the public but also with internal stakeholders);
- Build the capacity within central government for setting up, managing and evaluating ICT as a mechanism for encouraging and supporting public participation in the policy process.

The initiative aims to inform government's strategy for applying ICT across its communication and consultation processes through analysis of case studies. These case studies are a combination of existing activity and specifically commissioned exercises undertaken by government agencies, departments and ministerial offices. In addition to improving government's understanding of the democratic engagement potential of ICT, Digital Dialogues also contributes to ongoing public debate about the role of technology in an inclusive and vibrant representative democracy.

The Digital Dialogues initiative has been divided into two phases of action research. The first took place between December 2005 and August 2006; the second will be conducted between August 2006 and January 2007, reporting in April 2007. Part one of this report provides a brief overview of the emergence of ICT in a public engagement context. Parts two and three relate to the case studies and the draft guidance informed by the Digital Dialogues initiative. Part four unpacks the key findings from Phase One and sets out the next phase of the initiative.

The DCA commissioned the Hansard Society to oversee and evaluate the Digital Dialogues case-studies. The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan educational charity established in 1944 to promote and support effective parliamentary democracy. The Society set up its eDemocracy Programme in 1997 to undertake research and development work around new media technology. Before Digital Dialogues, the eDemocracy Programme had undertaken similar ICT-led participation initiatives at parliamentary and local government levels. For more information visit www.hansardsociety.org.uk.

PART ONE

GOVERNMENT, PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT & ICT

1.1 THE CHALLENGES OF ENGAGEMENT

Public trust, knowledge and efficacy in British politics have been low in recent years. The UK's central political institutions have felt the affect acutely. Whilst few would question that Britain is a democracy, it has been criticised for its lack of democratic vitality. Its citizens have been described as 'noisy spectators' rather than active participants, and its politicians and government accused of retreating into a 'bunker mentality'. These problems of political engagement are not unique to the UK, but are all the more significant given the UK's position as a world-class progressive democracy.

The disengagement of British citizens from the formal political process has been at its most conspicuous at local, national and European elections. At the 2001 general election, the overall turnout was 59% - the lowest turnout since 1918. In 2005, overall turnout rose to 61%, but amongst the youngest voters it was down from 39% in 2001 to 37% - suggesting the potential for a sustained depression in political awareness and participation.

Disengagement from the electoral process is not simply the product of swathes of the electorate deciding that they have not been convinced by the election campaigns or that they are too preoccupied to turn up at the polls. A significant factor behind poor turnouts is the absence of engagement opportunities between elections. Whether the problem is viewed from the root up or the top down, the damage to the credibility of the UK polity is clear. It is not, however, unassailable.

The Hansard Society and Electoral Commission have conducted an 'Audit of Political Engagement' on an annual basis since 2003. In the 2006 Audit, 56% of people said that they were very or fairly interested in political engagement – an improvement on recent years. Eighty per cent of political activists [those defined as having been involved in at least three political acts - *excluding* voting - over the course of the previous three years] stated that they were 'absolutely certain' to vote compared with 50% of non-activists. This would suggest that the more often people get involved in politics *between* elections, the more likely they are to participate *in* elections.

Our broader research demonstrates that the public is interested in a more meaningful and sustained interaction with political institutions, and that this aspiration is reciprocated by Parliament and government at a central and local level. On the government-side for example, there has been a range of initiatives launched since 1997 to address falling political engagement. In 2002 Citizenship Education was introduced as a statutory requirement in English and Welsh schools, and in 2005 the 'Together We Can' initiative was launched to coordinate public engagement initiatives across central government. Pilots and policies like these have been high-profile and designed to be sustained over the long-term.

Questions remain, however, about ways of balancing the expectations and requirements of the government and citizens in a society that is shifting under global pressures and significant demographic change. Is it possible to improve people's understanding of issues and priorities whilst ensuring that the concerns of the people are heard and acted upon? Are there emerging methods and structures that can enhance the relationship between the people, elected representatives and the institutions efficiently, effectively and sustainably?

1.2 eDEMOCRACY AND GOVERNMENT

Dismissed by some as a dangerous dislocator of communities and a tool for distributing misinformation, ICT is prized by others as a support for conventional political structures and a platform for promoting democratic renewal.

The meeting of people, technology and politics can be referred to as 'eDemocracy'. The development of eDemocracy as a practice and a field of study have taken on greater urgency in recent years to help counteract the current period of falling engagement in UK politics. The Digital Dialogues initiative took eDemocracy into account broadly, but the initiative was purposely set up to focus on participation and the interactions taking place between government and the public online.

The absence of longitudinal studies has made it difficult to determine what long term impact ICT is having on the UK's policy process and public engagement. Nevertheless, when the anecdotal evidence is placed against the adoption and adaptation by other businesses and organisations in the UK, it is clear that central government has not kept pace with developments in ICT and failed to take full advantage of new interactions that are emerging. Government must look at use of ICT elsewhere in society and consider whether it is something that it will embrace or something it will resist.

An interesting comparison is found in the mainstream media's response to the dawning of the 'digital communications age'. Over the course of the 20th Century a relationship established itself between the media and the public based on the media as the 'editor' and 'sender' of information and the public as the 'receiver' and 'consumer'. The emergence of new, principally web-based media is changing this relationship. 'Social software' or 'participative media'— of which blogs, forums and webchats are examples — support user-generated content and are inherently network-orientated. They are forcing a rethink of the user as an 'active participant', and even a 'producer' who uploads as well as downloads.

This concept (and practice) has growing support amongst a British public that is better educated, more affluent and less deferential than in previous generations. At the beginning of the 21st Century British citizens expect choice in and to contribute to the design of the products and services they use, rather than simply having these bestowed upon them. These are formative stages for new digital communications spaces. In some ways there is a 'land-grab' under way; however, the contest is not for space and resources but for position and influence. The government and the media are equally susceptible to having their influence reduced in this process. To date, it is the media which has been the quicker of the two to adopt new media techniques in reaction to changing patterns of consumption.

It would be inaccurate and unfair to say that government has been static in response to the development of the digital communications. In 2002, the government published the 'In the Service of Democracy' consultation paper inviting input on a government eDemocracy framework. This was an important policy document that took steps toward formulating a strategy for applying ICT to engagement:

"[An] e-Democracy policy should be viewed in a context of those political and constitutional reforms, which seek to devolve power, extend citizens' rights and improve the transparency and accountability of government and politics".

In the service of democracy, Cabinet Office 2002

The paper's articulation of an eDemocracy strategy is still relevant today. Yet the paper and the cross-government framework it attempted to generate lost momentum after publication. Changes in the Cabinet Office priorities meant there was little cross-departmental coordination. Though the paper grouped eGovernment, eParticipation and eVoting together under the umbrella-term of 'eDemocracy', in practice these complementary areas have come to be managed separately, with eGovernment taking precedence. The few ICT-led participation exercises that were sparked by 'In the Service of Democracy' suffered from too great an emphasis on their marketing value at the expense of structured attempts to establish a viable channel for two-way communication with the public. As a result they were not long-lived.

Today, every government department has at least a corporate website, eGovernment is a priority policy area and the DirectGov web portal has been designed to provide a one-stop store-front for citizens to access government services. Government can also legitimately claim a credit for driving up broadband access and coverage, promoting technical literacy and skills, and even of encouraging eParticipation at a local government level. However, in its attempts to promote democratic engagement at a national level, government has failed to capitalise on the opportunities presented by ICT. It has been content to try the basics but has faltered when presented with opportunities to sustain and develop the depth of its practice.

In the context of UK politics, where citizens have been variously described as 'spectators', 'strangers' or 'disengaged', the fact that new media demonstrates disruptive, distributive and democratising potential is of no small significance. The conditions are right for an institutionalisation of eParticipation in central government. Government in all its forms must accept that greater commitment and investment in public engagement – not just that which is online - is an enabler of better, more transparent policy-making. It is an opportunity to improve communications and strengthen transactions between the government and the public - whether in its capacity as citizens, customers or voters.

1.3 USING TECHNOLOGY TO PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT

There are many different forms of participative transaction that can be entered into by government and citizens – from the one-directional provision of information, to the empowering devolution of many-to-many decision-making. Falling somewhere between these two extremes, is consultation - the conventional method of public participation.

Consultation is undertaken to:

- Communicate and inform;
- Obtain feedback on analysis, decisions, policies;
- Identify alternatives.

Consultation is most often undertaken at the beginning of the policy cycle. Yet consultation need not be restricted to taking place at the development stages of policy, it is also valuable and viable during delivery and evaluation points around the policy cycle.

Conventional methods of engagement based around consultation can include:

- Media campaigns;
- Stakeholder meetings;
- Market research;
- Distributing literature;
- Written dialogue;
- Exhibitions;
- Interviews;
- Focus groups.

Each has its benefits, but they also have their limitations in terms of cost, longevity, penetration and tracking. Taken alone each method is of limited value, but in combination, they can ensure high visibility for consultations and healthy response rates.

Consultation and other forms of engagement can now take place via another route – information and communication technology. ICT offers up new consultation spaces and can increase the breadth and depth of participation. It will not replace the conventional methods but can act as a complement that can overcome their shortcomings for tapping into new methods of communicating and interacting within communities.

1.4 BENEFITS OF ICT

In the near future, the internet will begin to converge with mobile devices and digital TV. Presently, however, the most viable platforms for technology-enabled consultation are those hosted online.

The benefits of using online ICT to consult with the public are many. They include:

1. Asynchronicity

Participants and administrators need not be in the same place at the same time to interact. This is as useful for localised consultation as it is in an international context, particularly in instances where resources such as staff or time are limited;

2. Cost

The web is often associated with high costs for factors such as design, hosting or security, but this is not predetermined and is often the result of poor planning or lack of detail in specification documents. There are benefits to having a healthy budget of course, but with the maturity of contemporary open-source software there are alternatives to costly proprietary systems.

Additionally, with significant rises in uptake and use of the web amongst the general population, online activity now competes with conventional channels in terms of penetration and can thus return on investment;

3. Accessibility

The web can help to accommodate those on the margins of politics - for example, people with disabilities or those whose first language is not English.

Significant efforts have been taken to develop web accessibility to make it both suitable for the end-user's requirements and manageable for site administrators. Accessibility requirements are now protected in law, and to help institutions adapt there is extensive support available online (see www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government/resources/handbook/html/2-4.asp);

4. **Design**

Attention to design is a very important factor in creating effective engagement. A comfortable and appealing environment can make the difference in the success of a consultation exercise – particularly online.

Consultation is often regarded by the public as clinical or dry, deterring participants and contributing to the austere and unwelcoming image of government. The nature of the online medium discourages the verbose, rewards directness, and benefits from the use of colour and graphics (often in place of text). The web also offers greater scope than print for customisation to suit a particular demographic;

5. **Scalability**

The flexibility of web applications and hosting provision means that the scale of consultations and their resource allocation can be constantly reviewed and adapted depending on demand and shifting requirements over the short or long term;

6. **Durability**

As a result of their asynchronicity, it is possible to sustain online activity for far longer than, for example, a traditional media campaign that is at the mercy of editors, the rolling news cycle and competing demands of advertisers;

7. **Maintenance**

Online applications have developed in such a way that they are now easier to manage and update even by the non-expert through content management systems and remote devices such as mobiles. This can be particularly useful in ensuring that consultations remain responsive, topical and engaging;

8. **Tracking**

With statistical software built in at a server and site level, it is easier and quicker to collate information on audience and participant demographics, to monitor the traffic around a site, to observe ways in which people are finding out about it and reacting to it. The advantage of this real-time information is the ability to adapt consultations through scaling-up resources to respond to demand;

9. **Data**

At the close of a consultation, the qualitative and quantitative data gathered can be mesmerising in its volume. The interfaces of web-based platforms can help in this regard, allowing easy search and analysis of data - either at the end or over the duration;

10. **Multichannel**

Given all the factors stated above, the web has proven that it can lock together campaign and consultation activity by acting as a central reference or participation point, bringing together a stakeholder base rather than

disaggregating it. It has also generated new participant bases that may not have previously engaged with government (see the case studies in this report).

1.5 WEB TECHNOLOGIES

Since 1992 a wealth of online applications have emerged that move the internet away from its origins as a purely text-based read-medium, to one that supports dynamic and modifiable rich-media content. These technologies are being used most intensively in a consumer and leisure context. Though some are beginning to make an impact in a political context, in comparative terms, those making and scrutinising policy have been slow to recognise technology as a means of facilitating greater public participation.

It is vital to have working understanding of the technology available. The following section provides an overview of the ICT applications available online and suggests potential uses in a public engagement environment. These have been divided into three categories:

1. Conventional – these applications are already being used by government;
2. Innovative – applications which are used only occasionally and are still under development;
3. Speculative – examples of applications with potential (but rare) use in policy-making.

CONVENTIONAL

– Email

A very familiar application and most government consultations have an email response option. It is easy to compose an email, put together a contact list, send out an email and manage the responses.

Email is limited in that it is not always clear what has happened to the email once it has been sent out and whether anyone is preparing to act upon it. Participants face a similar problem - finding it impossible to track the influence of their participation once they have responded;

– Polls

Another common tool, usually structured around a proposition and a for/against/undecided set of response options. These can be easy to set up, quick to participate in and quite gratifying for participants because the results are often instantaneously generated in a chart or graph.

The limitations are that the options for respondents are limited, and the results are often only indicative making the data of limited value;

– Surveys

These too are fairly well established as a tool for online consultation by government. They allow structured, in-depth questioning and easily retrievable results.

However, their length and detail can feel laborious to participants and, again, once they are submitted there is little to guide the respondent on the impact of their participation. There is also no option to compare with other participants responses;

INNOVATIVE

– Blogs

These are websites with an easy to update content management system that presents content in a journal-like structure and allows visitors to add comments. They are a cost-effective, low-maintenance means of publishing online and are very useful as a long term, ongoing positioning tool that requires low-intensity management. Because they allow visitor comments, they are to some extent deliberative, which can improve perceptions of government transparency. Blogs can be authored by one or more people; they do not have to be personal, they can also be used as a collaborative tool by group or project team.

However, blogging is hype-ridden. As a favoured tool of the citizen-activist, the government is not always welcomed in the blogosphere, so launching a public-facing blog needs to be approached with care. A bad blog is worse than not having a blog at all. Nevertheless, blogging is an evolving practice and technology, and presents greater opportunities than risks. Establishing clear ground-rules and being direct about the purpose of the site can avoid misinterpretation;

– Forums

Forums (sometimes known as message boards) have been around in a consultation context for about 10 years but have been used only to a limited extent. The administrator and user interfaces have undergone significant development in that time and there is great potential in this application. Some forums take the form of linear message boards; other forms allow participants to post in confidential areas with the option of later moving into group deliberation areas.

As a periodic consultation tool they fall somewhere between webchat and blog. They are good for structured, deliberative consultation and can support large numbers of participants. They do, however, require close moderation, and facilitation is an intensive (but fruitful) condition of success;

– Webchats

These sites are based around instant-messaging software. In a policy-context, they support real-time question-and-answer interaction between the public and usually ministers or senior civil servants. These usually come as hour-long events, but can also be upgraded to online conference status carried out over the course of a day or more.

The real-time element, however, can make them quite difficult to manage and most of the available software packages do not allow for much control over the flow or structure. Open-source software offers great opportunities to develop functionality based on bespoke-needs;

SPECULATIVE

– File-sharing

The practice of file-sharing taps into the powerful network opportunities of the web and has given rise to popular sites such as Flickr (photos) and YouTube (videos), where people share content they have produced or sourced themselves.

File-sharing models like these are an interesting prospect for consultation. They might in the future let participants post audio-visual content as an alternative to that which is text-based, perhaps making consultation more lively and expressive;

- **Virals**

Viral emails and websites have been used in government campaigns in the past to inform people or drive them to sites. This is a creative approach that relies on peer-to-peer distribution, and in this sense can get the message out quickly and to new audiences.

They could, however, also be used to a greater extent to support consultation and gather responses by combining an email and a website to collect responses straight from a user's inbox. Again an intriguing way of throwing off the stuffy, laborious connotations of government consultations;

- **Wikis**

These are websites that allow anyone to edit content whilst allowing administrators to retain editorial control. In this sense, they are often referred to as 'collaborative tools'.

Wikis require close management but as a collaborative tool could have some great uses for focusing on policy documents under development, such as white papers and bills. Where a policy team has access to an established network of experts who would be able to pore over detailed clauses, a wiki would allow those consulting to track deletions and inclusions in a straightforward manner and be able to map developments;

- **Online games**

Like virals, online gaming can be more than just a marketing tool and might help to change the look and feel of government consultation.

Well designed games could attract a new type of respondent and be fun to participate in whilst maintaining structure and returning good quality of data;

- **Online petitions**

Petitioning online is more commonly associated with citizen-initiated submissions to government rather than a tool for government to solicit the public's views. People are able to suggest a motion and invite other people to sign the petition in support.

Usually petitions constitute a means of gathering public opinion rather than engaging in deliberative decision-making. Nevertheless, government has the potential to use petitions to put a range of views online and ask the public to sign up to the one they support. In many ways this would be similar to a poll but allow for a more measurable and transparent method of consultation;

- **Budget/Policy Simulators**

The concept behind these programs is to provide the public with an opportunity to compare fiscal or policy options against one another. Users are presented with a scale of demands which they are invited to prioritise. Based on pre-set

variables, prioritising one option can then demote another or increase its cost. The user sees the effects of taking a decision on other budgets or services in real-time and can adjust their choices before submitting.

Such 'simulators' are beneficial in enhancing citizen's understanding of the competing demands and needs that budget-setters and policy-makers are often required to balance. However, the benefits are apparent to those on the government-side. This tool allows government to see how citizens prioritise budgets and policy, and where these choices differ or reflect their own. Nor do these tools simply need to be simulations; they could involve real options allowing government and the public to engage in co-design of appropriate budgets or policies;

– **Chatbots**

Chatbots are programs designed to simulate dialogue with human users via audio or text. Using keywords and syntax, the bots retrieve information from a database and present it back to the user.

In a policy context they may provide an innovative, cost-effective interface for providing information about a department or policy. They may prove particularly appealing to young people or those who struggle with textual content. They may be useful for providing a limited form of 'out-of-hours' moderation where this was clearly explained to participants.

1.6 BARRIERS TO USING ICT FOR ENGAGEMENT

For each of these tools (above) there is a precedent in the commercial sector. They are, however, rarer in a political context. There is little reason why those involved in policy-making should not begin to adapt these applications and refine their use for designing, scrutinising, delivering or evaluating policy.

What is holding their usage back? Costs are a major concern based on past experiences of ICT and IT procurement. Government has found it difficult to identify the necessary resources and skills in-house, so has instead contracted external providers. Some of these providers have failed to understand the unique requirements of government as a client and have opted for big-spend, big-bang campaigns over gradual, sustainable transfer of knowledge and skills. Of course, government itself has at times requested such approaches, and has often failed to provide clear specifications or changed requirements during projects.

Confidence is also a factor. The government can give the impression of being uncertain about public engagement and unsettled by the swift pace of technological development. At a departmental level, there is uncertainty as to whether public engagement should be the responsibility of those in policy or those in communications. There is nervousness about accountability both in terms of answering to ministers and the public. The response to this lack of confidence has been to rely on conventional methods; however, this has led to conservatism and, in some cases, stasis.

Perhaps the final factor holding back central government's application of ICT for participative purposes is the lack of public demand. Only in 2005 did broadband penetrate over 52% of UK households. Home computer ownership has also been slow in building as has take-up of broadband. Although there are more mobile phones in the UK than people, the capacity of these devices has been limited to calls and shortcode messaging.

Increased personal and household ownership of new media technology, the development of greater functionality in devices, in parallel with ever-more vocal demands for increased transparency and opportunities for public participation, have now put development and investment in ICT amongst the top priorities for government. Nevertheless, it would be wrong for the government simply to push budgets at online participation projects without first understanding exactly what demand exists, how flexible the technology is and what impact new interactions with the public will have on the policy process. The 'Digital Dialogues' initiative was launched to help answer questions like these.

PART TWO

THE DIGITAL DIALOGUES INITIATIVE

2.1 OVERVIEW

The Digital Dialogues initiative began with four broad questions:

1. How can central government strengthen consultation and interaction with citizens using ICT?
2. How can government improve intra- and inter-departmental communications using digital information and communication technology?
3. Which ICT-led techniques and tools are suitable for use by central government?
4. What demand exists amongst the public for interaction with the government via ICT?

To answer these questions the DCA wanted first to assess what capacity and activity was already present across central government, and second to observe the use of ICT for public consultation by policy teams (with the aim of embedding democratic engagement and leadership principles).

To support the first objective the DCA undertook interviews and meetings with communications and policy teams across central government. To support the second objective, an action-research programme was designed to evaluate the application of ICT from the beginning to the end of consultation activity.

Some ICT applications – such as email and online surveys – are now in mainstream use in government consultation. The DCA wanted to build on these foundations and explore the potential of more deliberative and innovative online platforms. Three platforms were selected based on their popularity in the consumer market and their occasional use in eParticipation exercises – blogs, forums and webchats.

Government agencies, departments and ministerial offices were contacted and invited to participate in the Digital Dialogues research. The initiative sought two types of government participant:

- Those already running online engagement exercises interested in taking advantage of independent, external evaluation;
- Those interested but new to participation online. This group was offered the opportunity to make use of one or more of the online applications as part of their communication, public engagement or consultation processes, in isolation from, or in parallel to, conventional, offline techniques.

As part of the pilot dynamic, emphasis was placed on the case study team being self-sufficient at each stage of the exercise with guidance being provided by the Hansard Society (based on current good practice at a parliamentary and local government level) only where it could not be resourced from within a team or department.

Examples of the guidance provided by the Hansard Society include:

- Providing initial training/briefing to participants on general eParticipation principles and specific tools;

- Assisting in liaison with existing support networks within departments, for example, communications and IT teams;
- Oversight of set-up and implementation of pilot case studies;
- Co-production of site content;
- Assessment of software requirements in relation to consultation objectives;
- Providing guidance to departments on recruiting consultation participants;
- Providing support in moderation of online interaction between government and citizens. All the case study owners were encouraged to carry out their own moderation where possible. Where support was required this was only applied to administrative moderation and not facilitation, which was solely a responsibility of the case study owners.

The Hansard Society worked with long-term technology partners, Vohm.com, to develop and build the applications used in Phase One of Digital Dialogues. All the applications were built using open source software.

2.2 EVALUATION

Qualitative and quantitative techniques were used in the Digital Dialogues evaluation to capture:

- Scope for applying different ICT techniques and tools across central public engagement exercises;
- Practice of managing ICT by policy teams to support their public engagement activity;
- Short-term impact of ICT-enabled consultation on policy outcomes;
- Government and public attitudes towards communication and consultation through technology.

Statistical data about site visit and usage traffic was gathered at a server and site level. Demographic data about participants was recorded at registration. As far as possible a set of standardised questions were used but on occasion policy teams adapted the questions to meet their departmental standards [see 'Draft Guidance 1'].

Surveys, incorporating both closed and open-ended questions, were used to capture attitudinal and behavioural data from participating members of the public [see 'Draft Guidance 2']. For forums, surveys were introduced at the beginning and end of the consultation; for both blogs and webchats a single survey was available for completion toward the end of the evaluation period. All public participants were invited to complete surveys (both the pre- and post-consultation where applicable). Participants were sent a maximum of three requests to complete surveys. Surveys could be completed on- or offline; no zero-response rates were recorded. Samples were self-selecting and thus not representative of the entire UK population.

Feedback from government participants was collected at group and individual training sessions and interviews. At least two government participants from each exercise were obliged to complete questionnaires and participate in interviews, and this was achieved for each of the case studies. Wherever possible, the findings gathered were compared with those from consultation activity conducted by conventional, offline means (for example, opinion polling or citizens juries).

Evaluation periods were set at a minimum of three weeks and a maximum of 20. It was not possible to pre-determine sample sizes and response rates before each exercise began. Ultimately, sample sizes differed for each case study.

The impact of ICT-enabled consultation on policy is a challenging and under-developed area of study. Established practice in online consultation is to define feedback processes and provide responses to contributors soon after the closure of a consultation. Therefore, it was possible in some instances to observe the short-term impact on policies, and their developers, as a result of Digital Dialogues exercises. Practically all of the Digital Dialogues case studies observed consultation undertaken at the developmental stages of policy-making, thus putting evaluation of long term impacts beyond the scope of this particular initiative.

2.3 CASE STUDIES

In Phase One of Digital Dialogues, 16 case study places were available. The DCA and Hansard Society met with 20 interested parties; 11 case studies were undertaken with 6 evaluations completed during the duration of Phase One (see 'Next Steps' for more details of Phase Two).

Case studies 1 and 2 were already live and offered evaluation only; case studies 3, 4, 5 and 6 were set up, supported and evaluated specifically within the parameters of the Digital Dialogues initiative.

A full list of Phase One case studies is as follows:

1. Department for Education and Skills online survey site;
2. David Miliband MP ministerial blog;
3. Department for Work and Pensions Welfare Reform forum;
4. Department for Communities and Local Government forum;
5. Department for Communities and Local Government webchats;
6. Food Standards Agency forum.

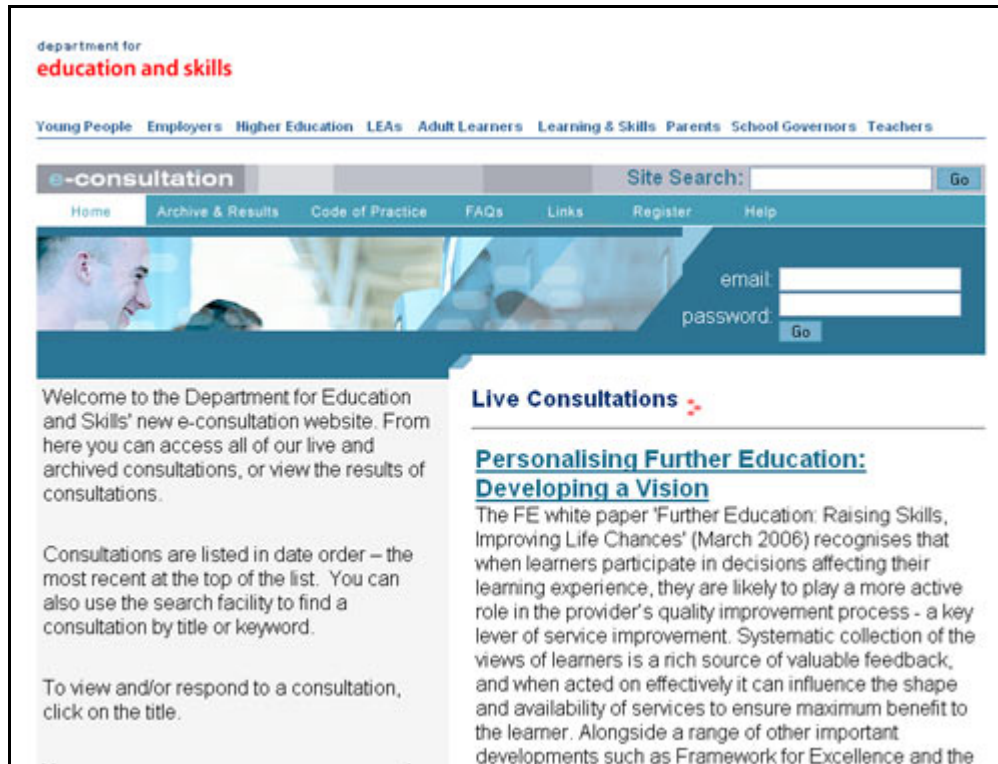
Note: The case study sites are currently archived at the URLs provided; these are not, however, permanent and will be taken offline by the end of 2007. The Hansard Society will make copies of each site for offline storage. In most cases, transcripts of the consultation are also provided on the case study owner's corporate site.

1. Department for Education and Skills e-Consultation/Online Survey Site

Title/URL

www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations

Screenshot



Department

Department for Education and Skills (DfES)

Policy Overview

Various.

The department runs a number of consultations each year around developing policies; most have an online response option. A limited number of the department's consultations address selected stakeholders and do not have an online response option.

Each consultation has a named policy contact.

Objective/Context

Various.

The DfES states it aims to open up decision making to as wide an audience as possible.

Application

Online surveys.

Surveys are completed by responding to a series of closed questions. A 'comments' field accompanies most questions allowing respondents to expand on answers selected from the set scales.

The surveys can be completed without registration and submitted anonymously.

By registering with the site participants can receive notifications and updates about consultations. Registration also allows participants to store surveys (for up to 12 months after the close of a consultation) and to return to partially completed surveys.

Moderation

N/A

The DfES has created a dedicated consultation unit responsible for managing surveys and processing responses.

Catchment

Policy impacts on England and Wales. However, access and participation was not restricted to England and Wales.

Duration

The evaluation of the site was conducted between 20 February – 10 March 2006.

In general, a number of surveys may run concurrently.

The majority of online consultations on the site run for a minimum of 12 weeks in line with the Code of Practice on Consultation (see www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation). In exceptional circumstances a consultation may run for less than this period (with an explanation provided).

The department's aim is to publish the results of a consultation within three months of its closing date. However, this is dependent on legislation and ministerial approval, and is not always possible. Results are viewed in the archive section of the consultation website.

Participation type

Consultation – to obtain feedback on policy analysis and decisions.

Other consultation methods used

Stakeholder meetings; submission by email, post or telephone.

Surveys issued on the online consultation site are also available for download and completion offline.

Participant profiles

Data unavailable.

Registrants are a mixture of private individuals and organisations (Source: DfES).

Publicity

The department sends out emails and letters to parties who have expressed interest in receiving consultation updates.

Consultations are often issued to organisations the department identifies as having an interest in the content. Schools are often deliberately selected as part of a sample to ensure that the same schools are not targeted each time.

Participation rate

Thirty-two consultations with an online response route (conducted in 2005) were analysed. The average number of overall consultation responses (per survey) was 843; the average number of respondents who submitted online was 39%.

Distinct features

Strengths

- Regularity of consultation;
- Breadth of consultation subjects;
- Creation of dedicated online consultation unit;
- Structured responses;
- Inclusion of open field to allow elaboration by respondents;
- Respondents can participate anonymously or register an account;
- Respondents can choose how they wish to be kept up to date on consultation.

Potential for improvement

- Respondents participate in isolation making it difficult to gauge impact of participation;
- No deliberative mechanism;
- Reliance on respondents finding consultation;
- Consultations are text-led and can involve detailed, technical terminology.

The DfES consultation site is a useful case study. Consultations are regular, diverse and the creation of a dedicated consultation unit means that those undertaking a consultation exercise online are well-supported.

For participants the experience of participating in these consultations should be fairly positive. Participation is quick and straightforward. It is possible to interact with DfES policy via this route in a low-intensity way. Those who wish to regularly participate can create an account, which ensures that they are kept up-to-date with new additions and the progress of an exercise once it has closed. An average participation rate of 39% would suggest a healthy interest amongst the department's stakeholders in this route for participation.

However, the 'lite' format of the consultation – based on surveys – may also leave those participating in the consultations, and those owners of the consultations, unfulfilled. The surveys have pre-determined questions, do not allow deliberation and the process of analysis after submission lacks a transparency that we have seen in other case studies, which can raise suspicion and put people off.

The DfES' 'e-consultation' site represents one of the longest serving online consultation exercises at a central government level. Using this established site and its participant base, the DfES is presented with a valuable opportunity to branch out and experiment with other online consultation techniques and tools. It will be interesting to see whether this opportunity is pursued or whether the department decides that its current method and procedures are sufficient for its purposes.

Participant feedback

Data unavailable.

Departmental feedback

In its interview, the department said that it was pleased with the performance of the online survey site, which it had run since 2001. It was happy with response quality and rates, and with the processes it had developed for analysing data received online.

However, it also said that it was regularly assessing the way it conducted online consultation and was open to exploring new routes and structuring. It also wanted to refine the site's content and interface to ensure it was accessible and appealing to as wide a group of stakeholders as possible.

Outcomes

N/A

The department is continually assessing its online consultation options. In addition to its main online survey site, the department also runs occasional webchats with ministers or government experts. It has also explored deliberative online forums as an alternative method of consultation.

2. David Miliband MP Ministerial Blog (first as Minister for Communities and Local Government, then as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

Title/URL

www.davidmiliband.defra.gov.uk

Screenshot



Department

The blog was started at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), now Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), in December 2005.

The blog has been transferred to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in May 2006.

Objective/Context

David Miliband was elected as MP for South Shields in June 2001. He has held the position of Schools Minister (2002 - 2004) and Minister for the Cabinet Office (2004 - 2005). His first Cabinet position was as Minister of Communities and Local Government (2005 - 2006) at the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. He was appointed as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 5 May 2006.

Content in the blog reflects David Miliband's ministerial responsibilities, interests, research, visits, as well as reactions to developments outwith the department. The blog format allows the Minister to personally publish on departmental and ministerial matters without the conventional intermediation that is associated with government communications. Blogging also allows readers to comment on the author's posts, thus allowing for quick and direct dialogue between a government minister and the public.

Though the blog is authored by David Miliband in his capacity as a government minister, it was also set up to serve the department with a channel to communicate and interact with the public and the department's stakeholders. Therefore, the blog has come to combine policy, positioning and consultation purposes.

Policy Overview

Various – reflecting departmental policies.

Whilst blogging at the ODPM, the blog posts were divided into the following categories:

- Housing;
- Inclusive communities;
- Local government;
- Public services for all;
- World class cities.

Once transferred to Defra, the following categories were created:

- Animal welfare;
- Climate change;
- Food and farming;
- Natural resources;
- Rural communities.

Application used

Weblog (third-party build, design and hosting).

The blog was public and anyone could post, though name, email and acknowledgement of the terms and conditions were required.

Purpose

Positioning and consultation tool.

Moderation

Reader comments were pre-moderated against the terms and conditions (published on the blog). Comment moderation was carried out by ministerial team.

Catchment

Policy impacts on UK. However, access and commenting was not restricted to the UK.

Timeline

The blog was publicly launched on 16 March 2006 and is still live and being maintained. The blog was run internally between December 2005 – March 2006 to allow a practice period for the Minister and the departmental web team.

The evaluation of the forum began on 6th January and was completed on 17th May 2006.

Blog statistics

These statistics were compiled over the months of March and April 2006 (*source: compiled by DCLG*):

- ranked at 33,276 out of 37.7 million listed blogs (*source: Technorati.com*);
- had attracted 86 inbound links;

- had been viewed 34,950 times (average 37 views per day; 852 per post);
- had 183 comments from visitors;
- averaged 5 blog posts per week;
- Ranked 1st on Google for 'David Miliband blog';
- Ranked 1st on Google for 'government blog'.

Participant profiles

No demographic data was collected.

Anecdotally, a rich mix of visitors came to the blog – from inquiring members of the public and journalists, to expert practitioners and other elected representatives.

Publicity

The ODPM undertook a 'soft launch' in March, relying on word-of-mouth and interest among bloggers to generate traffic.

The department linked to the blog from their corporate site and satellite sites, such as the 'local:vision' forum (see 'Case Study 4').

The majority of participants recall finding out about the forum via email, a link online or via a search engine.

There was no 'paid for' marketing.

Distinct features

Strengths

- First MP to blog in ministerial capacity;
- Posts written by Minister himself;
- Regularity of posting;
- Succinct posts;
- Topicality of post subject matter;
- Comprehensive set of basic blog features in application and actively used on site;
- Longevity of blog;
- Relaxed comment moderation;
- Active referencing and visible linking between the departmental web-based (blogs, corporate sites, forum, webchats) and offline channels making good use of audiences and participant bases.

Potential for improvement

- Cost of blog platform;
- Rarity of blog author's responses to visitor comments;
- Participants pursuit of off-topic agendas for which other, better-suited forums exist;
- Lack of links with other blogs;
- No 'TrackBack' function used.

David Miliband's blog was a genuine attempt to launch and sustain a blog authored by a government minister. It was the first of its kind and has to date performed well. It

has the necessary technical features of a blog; its content was authored by the Minister himself, updated regularly, and members of the public were encouraged to comment on the Minister's posts.

However, the blog has had a rocky reception. Some of the criticism is confusing. As blogging began to emerge as a communications tool in British politics in 2003, many of its early promoters urged politicians to blog in order to bring themselves more directly and frequently into contact with the public. Yet Miliband has been reproached for his attempt. As blogging has become more entrenched as a tool for citizens to get a foothold in political debate, it seems that the tide of calls for senior political figures to blog has turned. That a major member of the Cabinet began to blog was perhaps too much of an affront to those who prize the anti-establishment connotations of blogging.

The Minister's blog has also been criticised for being too 'on-message', suggesting that he should divulge more about himself and his department. For some, Miliband should perhaps be using his blog as a 'confessional' to expose big government and his fellow members of Cabinet. Of course, this was never the intention. The blog is revealing and provides an insight about a minister and his department that might not otherwise have been available in the mainstream media. Without it there would not have been a public space where members of the public could gather to criticise, debate and support the Minister's ideas, opinions and activities in such a frequent and open manner.

The cost of the blog technology generated a great deal of the negativity directed at it. At just over £6000, this was (comparatively) an expensive blog – given that there are a range of free and open source alternatives on the market that are popular and widely used. Compared to government's wider spending on online communications, however, it is a small sum. The decision to spend this amount on a blog was driven by the departmental web team's desire to ensure that the application they bought enabled maximum flexibility, manageability and security. Ultimately, the costs should be measured against usage and impact over a longer evaluation period (see 'Next Steps').

There are aspects of David Miliband's blogging that have justified the criticism. The most important is that for reasons of inexperience and lack of time Miliband has not adequately established his blog's presence online. There are very few links to other relevant blogs – either in the permanent 'blog roll' or in the posts. The Minister rarely interacts with the comments made in response to his posts, and does not visit other blogs to comment. Therefore, the Minister's blog fails to exploit its potential as a node in the communicative network that blogging has created. It stands out because of its establishment associations and looks awkward next to its peers.

Redressing the inefficiencies presents the most pressing challenge to David Miliband and his fledgling blog. Success may bring a greater acceptance by bloggers and generate more general traffic amongst those who are not regular participants in the political process. However, this will require a team effort by the Minister and his departmental communications team, and it will be interesting to see how this will be viewed by evangelical bloggers and political opponents.

Participant feedback

The Hansard Society surveyed 110 people who visited and/or commented on David Miliband's blog. The following are a selection of the core questions and their results:

Do you have a blog or a personal website?

Yes	60%
No	40%

How would you describe the frequency of your internet use?

Always on	66%
Occasional user	2%
Regular user	32%

Accessing from...

Home	68%
Work	30%
Library	1%
Other person's house	1%

How often do you visit blogs for politically-orientated content?

Frequently	53%
Occasionally	27%
Rarely	19%
Never	1%

Did you learn anything about being a Minister from the blog?

Yes	55%
No	45%

Did you learn anything about policy from visiting the blog?

Yes	66%
No	34%

Compared to other politics blogs you visit, please rate David Miliband's blog (5 is best rating, 1 is the worst rating)

1	10%
2	15%
3	32%
4	30%
5	13%

Would you visit the blogs of other Ministers and government representatives?

Yes	80%
No	20%

Is blogging a credible form of political participation?

Yes	87%
No	3%
Don't know	10%

In the surveys there were a number of open-ended questions to allow respondents to articulate their views. Broadly, there were two camps who were favourably inclined toward the UK's first ministerial blog – i) online political activists and bloggers, and ii) a group who were visiting the blog for its departmental and policy content and were not often involved in political discussion sites.

A smaller third camp was negative about blogging in general, and thought that this site should be taken offline. This third group centred its criticisms on the cost of the blog (around £6,200 for technology set up), claiming that blogging distracted the Minister from his duties, or that blogging encouraged flippant and rant-driven commenting which diluted the quality of political debate.

A sizable number of the survey respondents were themselves bloggers. Some thought that David Miliband had got the basics right – conceptually and technically. Others chided the blog for not having the latest functionality or plug-ins installed; many lamented the fact that the department had bought in blogging software rather than using a readily-available free or open-source package.

Some took exception to the content, feeling that it read too much like a press release. Others complained that there were too few personal insights, and in this sense they argued that the blog failed to credibly claim the title of a ‘blog’. There were calls on the one hand for more party political content, others were critical of what party politics there was.

Overall, despite complaints about specific content details, the cost of the software and the rarity of ministerial responses to visitor comments, feedback was positive. People welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise the Minister directly without the intermediation of the media. They liked being able to get an alternative view on what a government minister was doing and thinking on a daily basis.

Nevertheless, a significant number of respondents warned that their positive appraisals were subject to review. This first attempt by government to blog was welcomed – even seen as brave - but there was also wariness about how long it would last and many thought that despite the positive impact blogging could have on political information and debate, the government’s commitment was fleeting and in the long term would not properly engage with the medium.

Departmental feedback

David Miliband set up his blog when he was at the ODPM. He tasked the department’s eCommunications team with setting it up and helping him get started. The Minister and the team did not undertake the task lightly and spend a significant amount of time researching the medium, the use of blogging at both grassroots and corporate levels, and then put their learning into practice internally before going live.

In interviews before and after the blog went live, little changed in the overall aims of the blog. The Minister wanted a platform to express his ideas and thoughts, he wanted to experiment with a new tool for positioning departmental policy and he wanted to solicit public feedback.

What did change between the time of going live and the next evaluation interview a few months later was that the Minister and his team were more acutely aware of the realities of live, public blogging. They respected blogging more as a result - viewing it both as a more intensive undertaking than first envisaged and more fruitful in terms of public responses and input. From a technical perspective, the communications team attested to having improved their programming skills and was glad of the opportunity to trial a new type of web application.

Negative feedback had been expected, but the Minister and the team behind the blog were disappointed by the concentration on the cost of the blog software. They

argued that it was not a waste of money and that the software also included the ability to run additional blogs and forums for the department, and included extra security measures required by the government's hosting standards. In terms of content, there was also surprise at calls for more party political content and parallel criticisms that there was too much.

The learning at the ODPM benefited the Minister and Defra when David Miliband took up his new position as Secretary of State, moving the blog over with him. The speed of the handover was very quick and the Minister soon restarted blogging. With handover support from the team at the ODPM, the communications team at Defra reacted positively and welcomed the opportunity to rise to the challenge of supporting the Minister's use of a tool that was unfamiliar to them.

Outcomes

David Miliband is still blogging and has expressed an intention to carry on in the long term.

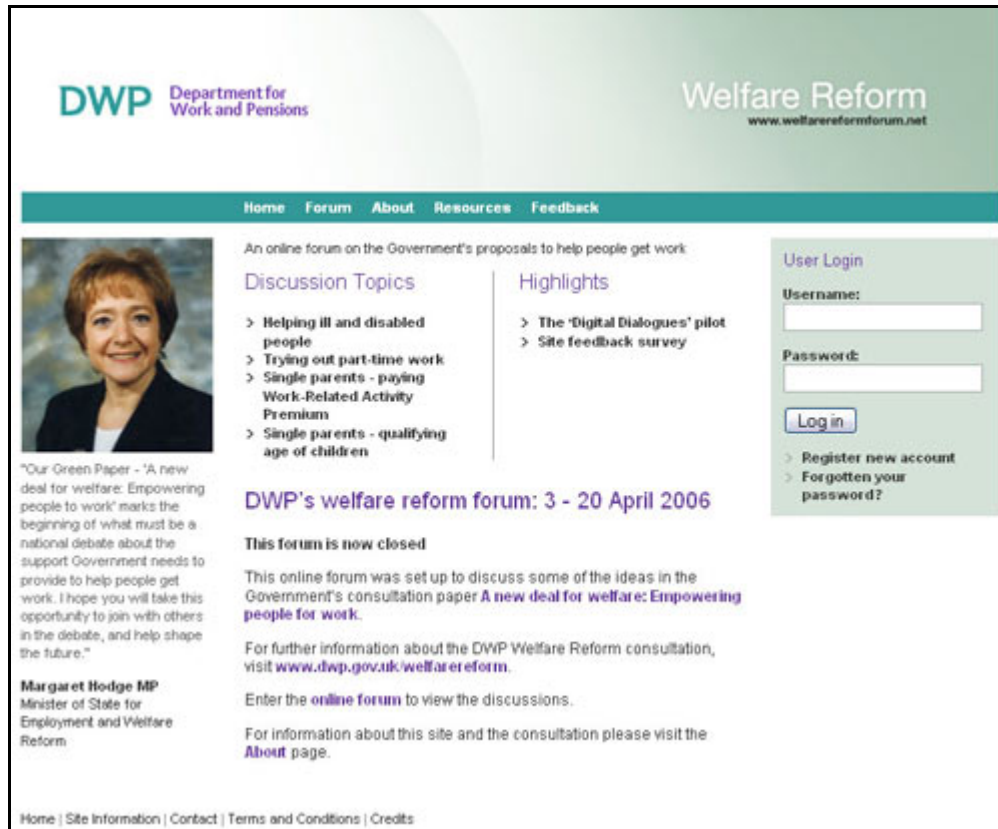
The communications and web teams in both the DCLG (former ODPM) and Defra have expressed a greater confidence and enthusiasm for blogging in a government context and are considering ways to expand the practice.

3. Welfare Reform forum

Title/URL

www.welfarereformforum.net

Screenshot



The screenshot shows the homepage of the DWP Welfare Reform forum. At the top left is the DWP logo (Department for Work and Pensions) and at the top right is the 'Welfare Reform' title with the URL www.welfarereformforum.net. A navigation bar contains links for Home, Forum, About, Resources, and Feedback. On the left, there is a portrait of Margaret Hodge MP, Minister of State for Employment and Welfare Reform, with a quote: "Our Green Paper - 'A new deal for welfare: Empowering people to work' marks the beginning of what must be a national debate about the support Government needs to provide to help people get work. I hope you will take this opportunity to join with others in the debate, and help shape the future." Below her name and title is a link to the forum. The main content area is titled 'An online forum on the Government's proposals to help people get work' and is divided into 'Discussion Topics' and 'Highlights'. The 'Discussion Topics' list includes: 'Helping ill and disabled people', 'Trying out part-time work', 'Single parents - paying Work-Related Activity Premium', and 'Single parents - qualifying age of children'. The 'Highlights' list includes: 'The 'Digital Dialogues' pilot' and 'Site feedback survey'. A 'User Login' box on the right contains fields for Username and Password, a 'Log in' button, and links for 'Register new account' and 'Forgotten your password?'. A central announcement states 'DWP's welfare reform forum: 3 - 20 April 2006' and 'This forum is now closed'. It explains that the forum was set up to discuss ideas from the consultation paper 'A new deal for welfare: Empowering people for work' and provides links for further information and the online forum. A footer at the bottom contains links for Home, Site Information, Contact, Terms and Conditions, and Credits.

Department

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

Objective/Context

The Government states a belief that people should be able to work if they want to, and should work if they can. This consultation was about how it proposed to help people who are able to work to get back into the workforce. The exercise was also designed to explore new ways of making the benefits system easier and fairer.

These welfare reform objectives were encapsulated in the green paper; the online forum was set up to discuss some of the ideas contained in the paper. The forum topics centered on four themes:

- Helping ill and disabled people back to work - activities people could do to get them back to work;
- Helping ill and disabled people back to work - encouraging people to try out part-time work;
- Single parents - Money and help through the Work-Related Activity Premium: is paying it for 6 months long enough?
- Single parents - Money and help through the Work-Related Activity Premium: is 11 the right qualifying age?

The Welfare Reform policy team was concerned that conventional methods of consultation would principally draw responses from organisations, service providers and representative groups. Although it wished to engage these parties, it was also eager to explore how open, deliberative online consultation might encourage private individuals to participate, particularly those with direct experience of the welfare system who might provide insights not otherwise available to the team.

Policy Overview

A new deal for welfare: Empowering people to work

Since coming into office in 1997, the Labour Government has embarked on a series of reforms to the UK's welfare state. These reforms set out to develop the UK's welfare system to accommodate demographic change and globalisation, and encourage economic growth and social inclusion.

The Department for Work and Pensions launched its Green Paper, 'A new deal for welfare: Empowering people to work', on Tuesday 24 January 2006. The publication of the green paper marked the beginning of what the Government hoped would be a national debate on the future direction of welfare reforms.

Application used

Online deliberative forum.

The forum was readable by anyone, but registration was required to contribute.

Moderation

Participant posts were pre-moderated against the terms and conditions (published on the website). Comment moderation was carried out by the Hansard Society on behalf of the department.

Departmental representatives involved in the green paper consultation logged in to the forum and posted follow-up questions to those used to open the debate, and to pick up on issues raised by participants.

Catchment

Policy impacts on England and Wales. However, access and participation was not restricted to England and Wales.

Duration

The forum was open between 3 – 20 April 2006.

The evaluation of the forum began on 3 April and was completed on 2 June 2006.

Participation type

Deliberative consultation – to obtain experiential feedback on policy analysis and decisions.

Other consultation methods used

Stakeholder meetings; submission by email, post or telephone.

Alternative versions of the green paper and the consultation report were available in audio, Braille, Easy Read, large print and Welsh, in addition to hard copy.

Participant profiles

84 registrations

Male	43%
Female	57%

England	83%
Scotland	14%
Wales	3%

Under-24	nil
Under-46	40%
Over-46	60%

First online forum?

Yes	15%
No	85%

Participated in Government/Parliament consultation before?

Yes	17%
No	83%

Publicity

The department prepared and distributed press releases to relevant broadcast and press outlets prior to the launch of the forum.

The department sent out emails to parties who had expressed interest in receiving departmental updates. The department also made use of email bulletins administered by the department, its partners and by third-parties.

The majority of participants recall finding out about the forum via email, a link online or via a search engine.

There was no budget for 'paid for' marketing.

Participation rate

18 registrants posted a total of 44 messages (average of 2.4 per participant)

Distinct features

Strengths

- Accessibility standards achieved by the site;
- Clarity of site copy (derived from 'Easy Read' version of consultation paper);
- Glossary of terms in resources section.

Potential for improvement

- Small number of registrations and participants;
- Absence of policy teams in forum. Participation was left to the department's Consultation Coordinator;
- Short lead-in time for site preparation and promotion;
- Lack of reference to online consultation in consultation response document.

The DWP's welfare reform forum represented an intriguing opportunity for the department to interact with users of its services that it had previously only had indirect contact with. The department was unsure if its customers would respond to the opportunity but was willing to experiment with this application alongside established consultation routes. Effort was put into ensuring that the site was accessible and that its content was direct and easy to follow.

The forum attracted a diverse participant base – ranging from those with disabilities to MPs. From the participant surveys, it emerged that the majority of these individuals (85%) had used online forums and message-boards in the past but that this was their first government consultation (83%). This familiarity with e-communication combined with an interest in the policy area created a pool of participants willing and able to engage with the department.

However, the forum did not take advantage of this potential and the overall participation rates were disappointing. Partly, this is because there was insufficient marketing of the forum. Though the participant base was varied, it was also small. Raising the profile of the forum further would have required a strategic marketing campaign. Leafleting, posters in benefit centres or adverts on local radio would all have helped drive up registrations and may have brought the forum to the attention of those people who the department wanted to involve in the consultation forum.

Increasing registrations is an important factor, but it is also important to then turn registration into participation. Many people signed up to spectate rather than post their own contributions. However, evaluation of the use of online forums by Parliament demonstrated that when representatives of the inquiry or consultation owners deliberate with the public it positively impacts on the participation rate. The DWP was sporadically represented by a consultation coordinator in the forum but this was irregular and the coordinator, though not lacking in enthusiasm, did not have the necessary depth of policy knowledge required to respond directly to participants' questions and views.

Marketing and staffing resources would have helped this forum. Though supported by policy officials, it was managed by the Consultation Coordinator. This absence of policy ownership became most apparent when the consultation response paper was published. It made only passing reference to the forum and the transcripts of the deliberation that took place were not included either in the paper or on the main departmental site. This means that the forum participants have little or no idea of the influence of their participation and could challenge the openness of this policy area and the willingness of the department to embrace customer input.

Participant feedback

In feedback, most participants stated that they registered because they wanted the opportunity to share their views, to access and debate the views of others and to engage with the department without intermediation by the media. However, there was concern that the forum was a 'tick box' exercise designed to give the appearance of consultation.

In post-consultation surveys, participants said that they were disappointed by the low levels of interaction between participants and policy team representatives. They were, however, appreciative of those responses they did receive.

Departmental feedback

In surveys and interviews, the department revealed that there were two tactical objectives to their online forum within the Welfare Reform consultation. The first was to broaden citizen engagement around the consultation (the forum was one of a combination of channels employed by the department). The second was to scope out what value there was in online consultation for promoting DWP-owned issues, drawing in members of the public who do not usually engage with the department, and to understand what would be required if the department were to invest in similar technology.

When reflecting on the exercise, the department detailed a number of aspects it would approach differently with the benefit of hindsight. There was concern that the right questions had not been asked; the questions asked online had been adapted from those designed for written submissions. The department would have liked to have targeted these better and adapted their wording for the online medium. The duration of the forum was also felt to be too short and the promotional activity too scant.

Nevertheless, the department was content with the number of registrants (the consultation had a total of 624 submissions through all its channels). They were interested to see that some of those who made submissions through conventional means also made posts in the forum (anecdotally observed, unsubstantiated in post-consultation surveys).

Outcomes

The Government published a response to the consultation on its green paper on Monday 19 June 2006 reflecting the consultation feedback. The online forum is referred to in the introduction of the consultation report; however, no further mention is made. The report uses quotes lifted from the submissions but does not use any from the forum's participants. No transcripts appeared in the reports annex, or on the Welfare Reform pages of the DWP website.

The government published its Welfare Reform Bill on 4 July 2006, which builds on the Welfare Reform green paper and the subsequent consultation report.

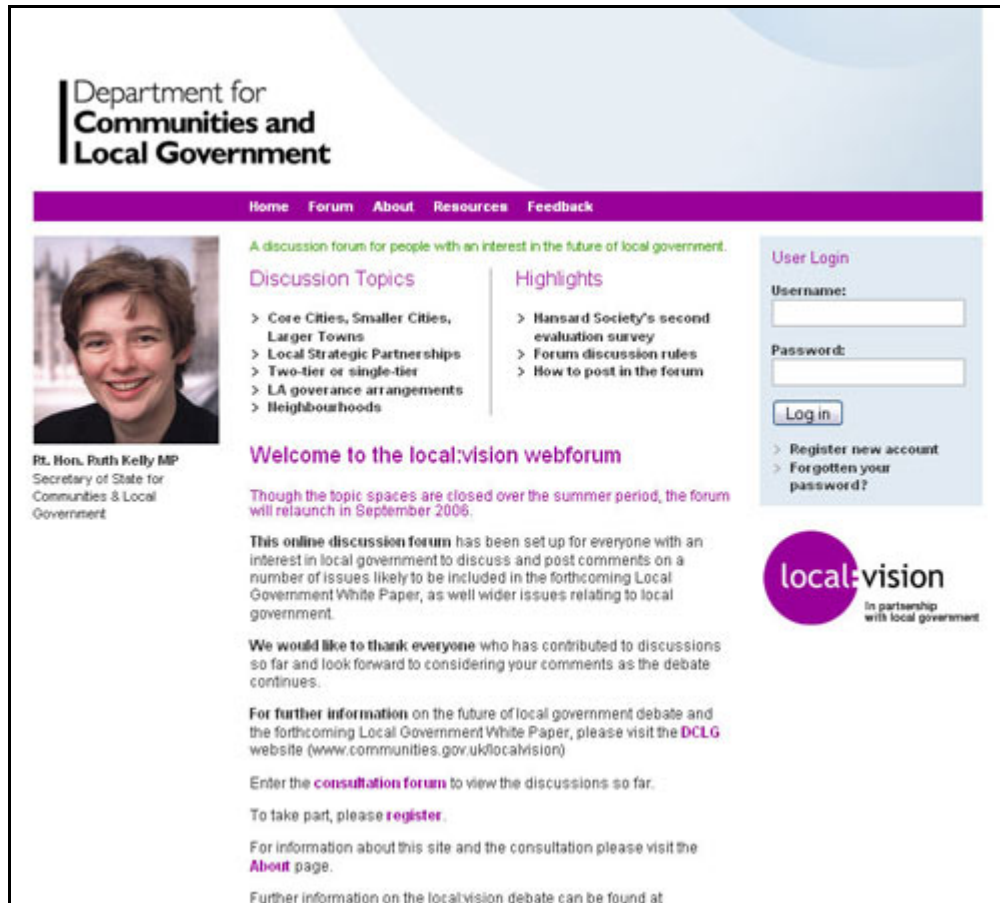
The DWP has expressed an interest in further exploration of online methods of consultation. Around its Pension Reform consultation it has incorporated blogging and webchat applications with assurances on the site that all comments will be taken into account as part of the formal consultation process. An RSS feed has also been incorporated to help interested parties keep up to date with changes to site content (see www.dwp.gov.uk/pensionsreform/forum).

4. Department for Communities and Local Government web forum

Title/URL

<http://forum.communities.gov.uk>

Screenshot



Department

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), formerly Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)

Objective/Context

The online discussion forum was set up for everyone with an interest in local government to discuss and post comments on a number of issues likely to be included in the Local Government white paper, as well as wider issues relating to local government.

In July 2004, the ODPM (now the DCLG) started a debate with local government and partners on the future of local government under the banner of 'local:vision'. local:vision sought to develop a shared agreement of what the roles and functions of local government should be in the future in order to deliver improvement in public services.

The forum began with a debate on local strategic partnerships. Topics on local government reform and neighbourhoods were subsequently added. Lastly, a discussion topic on cities and towns was incorporated.

Policy teams were particularly interested in developing an ongoing dialogue with their stakeholders by a means that was efficient and logistically advantageous. To this end, representatives of policy teams were nominated to login to the forum regularly and facilitate the discussion.

Policy Overview

local:vision - the Future of Local Government

In summer 2004, the ODPM launched a broad debate with local government and partners, called 'local:vision', on the role and functions of local government.

It was initiated with the publication of their document, *The Future of Local Government: Developing a 10-year vision*, which identified a number of issues and challenges that it felt should be considered as part of a debate on the future of local government.

Policy themes included in the local:vision debate are:

- Local leadership;
- Neighbourhoods;
- Developing a new Performance Framework.

Application used

Online deliberative forum (third-party build and hosted on external servers).

The forum was readable by anyone, but registration was required to contribute.

Purpose

Deliberative consultation – to obtain experiential feedback on policy analysis and decisions.

Other consultation methods used

Stakeholder meetings; submission by email, post or telephone.

Moderation

Participant posts were pre-moderated against the terms and conditions (published on the website). Comment moderation was carried out by the Hansard Society on behalf of the department.

Representatives of the policy teams involved in the local:vision debate logged in to the forum and posted follow-up questions to those used to open the debate and to pick up on issues raised by participants.

Catchment

The policy directly impacts on England and Wales. However, access and participation was not restricted to England and Wales.

Timeline

The forum was launched with a debate on Local Strategic Partnerships, which ran between 27 February - 3 March 2006.

The forum was broadened out to incorporate the local:vision debate on 24 March. The forum was temporarily suspended during local government elections (13 Apr - 5 May) – a statutory requirement, known as 'purdah'.

The evaluation of the forum was carried out over 14 weeks with completion on 2nd June 2006.

Registrant profiles

707 registrations

Male	66%
Female	34%

England	96%
Northern Ireland	nil
Scotland	2%
Wales	2%

Under-24	3%
Under-46	51%
Over-46	46%

First online forum?

Yes	37%
No	63%

Participated in Government/Parliament consultation before?

Yes	18%
No	82%

Publicity

The DCLG wished to consolidate and deepen the network of stakeholders it was in contact with.

The department prepared and distributed press releases to relevant broadcast and press outlets prior to the launch of the forum.

The department sent out emails to parties who had expressed interest in receiving departmental updates. The department also made use of email bulletins administered by the department, its partners and by third-parties.

The majority of participants recall finding out about the forum via email, a link online or via a search engine.

There was no budget for 'paid for' marketing.

Participation rate

101 participants posted a total of 152 messages (average of 1.5 per participant)

Distinct Features

Strengths

- Large number of registrants and repeat visitors;
- Clear delineation of responsibilities between communications, policy and web teams. Greater interaction between these teams through close collaboration on forum tasks;

- Active referencing and visible linking between the department's various web-based (blogs, corporate sites, forum, webchats) and offline channels making good use of audiences and participant bases;
- Good range of discussion themes representative of the policy responsibilities of the department;
- Speed of brand and content update following ministerial reshuffle and departmental transition from ODPM to DCLG.

Potential for improvement

- Propensity of registrants to spectate rather than participate (though it is acknowledged that spectating is a credible form of engagement);
- Temporarily closure around local government elections (purdah) with little notice provided to participants;
- Occasional instances of participants referencing and pursuing localised disputes in the forum;
- 'Summing up' posts from policy teams were not published quickly enough after closure of topics.

The use of online deliberative forums seems to have suited this department well. Given its varied policy responsibilities, the forum allowed the department to support a number of policy discussions simultaneously whilst administering them centrally. Technology was important in this respect, but it was also vital that the various departmental teams (policy, web and communications) coordinated closely.

The department's stakeholder base was initially sceptical but gradually the forum was used more regularly and the substance of contributions became more focused on the consultation areas. The participation rate was low but steady; nevertheless the numbers spectating were high suggesting a great deal of interest in the subject matter, forum and the deliberation taking place.

Participant feedback

In feedback, the majority of participants stated they registered to share their views, to be able to access and debate the views of others (both government and otherwise) with an interest in these issues, and to learn more about local government policy. However, a large segment voiced suspicion that their views would not reach ministers and not be addressed.

The forum was seen as a valuable opportunity to have open debate away from intermediation and 'spin'. Participants welcomed the forum as a means of holding the department to account.

In post-consultation surveys, a small majority of respondents felt the policy teams had participated sufficiently in the forum. However, they said that the deliberation between participants was more visible than that between participants and the department. Respondents felt that they had learned more from other participants than from the policy team representatives.

Most respondents believed that the forum had achieved its goals. Though many were concerned about how representative the participant base was and the extent of the department's commitment to public engagement, almost all respondents said that online forums were a credible platform for dialogue between the public and the department and that they would participate in future.

Departmental feedback

The departmental teams involved in the forum looked forward to the prospect of engaging with the public in an asynchronous and deliberative format. The forum, they said, provided useful insights into the public's understanding of local government policy and its implementation. It was also a useful means of gauging the success of departmental communications and the breadth and depth of the department's active stakeholder network.

Support from ministers and senior officials for enhanced public engagement is strong. Before the 'Digital Dialogues' initiative, the department had been considering how online applications might support its public engagement activities. As a result of participation in the initiative, the DCLG has expressed an interest in exploring forum-based methods of consultation in the long-term future and has begun scoping a specification for procuring the necessary technology.

Outcomes

The local:vision debate will be drawn together in a white paper which is intended to provide the beginning of a new settlement between citizens, communities, local and central government that enables the best possible outcomes to be secured for all communities. Participant's posts in the forum will be recorded as contributions to the debate and will be considered as proposals are developed.

After a period of stasis over the summer, the department reopened the forum in September 2006 - allowing follow-up on the themes previously covered and adding new ones, and acting on learning from their involvement in Phase One of Digital Dialogues.

5. Towns, Cities and Regions Webchat

Title/URL

www.tcrwebchat.net

The transcript of the 18 May Cities webchat with Phil Woolas, Minister for Local Government, has been published on the DCLG website - www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1500331.

The transcript of the 25 May Cities webchat with Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, has been published on the DCLG website - www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1500376.

Screenshot

Department for
**Communities and
Local Government**

Home Webchats About Links Feedback

Thank you!
Thanks to everyone who posted questions. Responses to all the questions have now been posted on this website.
You can continue to input your views on the Towns and Cities debate at our DCLG webforum – www.localvision.net.

The DCLG webchats on the future of towns, cities and regions

Welcome to the Smaller Cities and Towns Webchat

‘Cities and Towns make a significant contribution to the economic growth and prosperity of the nation as a whole. 58% of the population and 63% of the employment are in the largest 56 cities and towns in England.

Our work on Towns, Cities and Regions is looking to raise the economic performance of our cities. To do this we want to see what the visions of cities and towns are, what the assets are they already have, what the barriers are and what Government can do to help to remove them and make these visions a reality.’

Ruth Kelly MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

An archive of the 25 May cities webchat with **Ruth Kelly MP**, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, is available in the [webchats](#) section.

The transcript of the 18 May Cities webchat with **Phil Woolas**, Minister for Local Government, has been published on the DCLG website – www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1500331.

User Login
Username:
Password:

> Register new account
> Forgotten your password?

Who's online
There are currently 0 users and 1 guest online.

Department

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)

Objective/Context

Part of the DCLG's work on Towns, Cities and Regions policy is seeking to raise the economic performance of the UK's cities. To do this the DCLG wanted to find out what the visions of cities and towns are, what assets they already have, what the barriers to growth exist and what government can do to help to remove them.

In May 2005, DCLG ministers took part in a series of summits around England in smaller cities and larger towns where they met with local authority leaders and councillors to discuss the economic performance of these cities. However, there were regions that they were unable to visit due to resource and time restrictions. Real-time

webchats were held to facilitate dialogue between the Minister for Local Government and the Secretary of State in those areas where live summits were not possible.

Policy Overview

Urban Policy - the Future of Towns, Cities and Regions

DCLG's Urban Policy is about creating better towns and cities in England with:

- healthy economies;
- well-designed homes;
- better public services;
- attractive and safe environments.

The 2000 white paper 'Our Towns and Cities: the Future' sought to usher in a 'sustained urban renaissance across the country'. To make this happen the DCLG works in partnership with:

- government at all levels;
- local communities;
- the voluntary sector;
- businesses.

Urban Policy is an important part of the department's sustainable communities agenda - improving the construction and design of buildings, ensuring that regeneration and redevelopment benefits everyone in the community, and developing the skills that are needed to ensure this happens.

Application used

Real-time webchat based on blog/instant messaging hybrid (third-party build and hosted on external servers).

The webchats were readable by anyone, but registration was required to contribute and restricted to specific local authority leaders and councillors.

Purpose

Deliberative consultation – to obtain experiential feedback on policy analysis and decisions.

Other consultation methods used

Stakeholder meetings; submission by email, post or telephone.

Moderation

The webchats ran on a 'question and answer' format. The webchats were real-time but the moderation meant that the participants' initial questions took up to a minute to appear. The moderation was carried out by the Hansard Society on behalf of the department

If the initial question met the terms and conditions of the site it was moved from the moderation queue to a pending list, where it was available for everyone to read. When the minister was ready to answer the question it was 'activated' (appearing in the 'Active Q&A' list).

Once the minister responded to the question, the participant could then post further unmoderated comments. The minister was also able to post again and could spread responses across discussions. Only the minister and the participant who asked the question were able to add further comments to the original question, but anyone could read the question and its responses.

Catchment

The policy directly affects England. Participation was restricted to specific local authorities. However, read-access was not restricted.

Timeline

The webchat with Phil Woolas, Minister for Local Government, took place for just over one hour on 18 May 2006.

The webchat with Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, took place for just over one hour on 25 May 2006.

The evaluation of the webchats took place in the month following the webchats and closed by 9 June 2006.

Registrant profiles

35 local authority leaders and councillors.

Gender

Male	29
Female	6

First webchat?

Yes	34
No	1

Publicity

The department sent out invite letters and emails to those it wished to participate in the webchats.

There was no 'paid for' or media-based marketing undertaken.

Participation rate

Participants and ministers took part in 38 separate discussions, posting a total of 93 questions and responses.

Distinct Features

Strengths

- Real-time interaction;
- No need of download or installation of software on users' computer or network (with this software);
- Structured discussion;
- Speed of moderation process;
- Ministers could participate in more than one webchat simultaneously;
- Control over closed/open registration and/or participation;

- Policy support team held practice sessions and were familiar with the platform and its interface in advance of the events;
- Range of topics discussed in short timeframe;
- Sense of webchat being an event;
- Ability to quickly transcript discussions;
- Transcripts archived on webchat and corporate departmental site;
- Webchats used to complement rather than replace direct stakeholder meetings;
- Active referencing and visible linking between the departmental web-based (blogs, corporate sites, forum, webchats) and offline channels making good use of audiences and participant bases;
- Numbers of civil servants required to support ministers' participation was under half that for equivalent offline summits.

Potential for improvement

- Participants unfamiliarity with platform;
- Ministers' unfamiliarity with webchat dynamic and platform;
- Increased familiarity with platform will enable the department to reduce ministerial support team even further;
- Time allotted insufficient for participant demand.

There was a slight apprehension amongst the policy team supporting the chat due to the unfamiliarity of the technology. This made the process of organising the exercise tense at times. However, a practice simulation within the department greatly helped and showed its benefit when the actual chats took place.

Overall, these two ministerial webchats proved successful. The real-time nature of the chats provided a useful complement to a series of 'offline' summits that took place around England earlier in the month. Where ministerial time is at a premium this relieved pressure on logistical resources, while ensuring that key stakeholders were not excluded.

Participant feedback

Participants provided little depth in their feedback, but appeared to appreciate the opportunity to exchange views directly with a minister.

A few participants experienced technical difficulties caused largely by unfamiliarity with the webchat platform.

Departmental feedback

Despite being keen on the concept of a ministerial webchat to complement face-to-face meetings with stakeholders, the support staff involved from the policy team were apprehensive. They were unfamiliar with the technology and concerned about their ability to manage the discussions that would take place. Finally, the team was anxious that the site would not be able to accommodate the needs of the minister on the day.

To reassure those involved in staffing the webchat on the government side, simulations were organized by the Hansard Society. Staff played the part of moderators, support staff, participants and the minister. This proved its value on the days when the real webchats took place. The events went smoothly, the minister enjoyed the experience,

and the team was pleased by the participant turnout and surprised by the breadth of topics covered.

The department reported that in future it would have liked to do more briefing with the participants and ministers ahead of the webchats, benefiting the events by bringing more detail into the discussions. In response to queries about the staffing required to support the chats, the department said that this was necessary cover because of the breadth of subject matter and their relative inexperience with the format. It was pointed out that each of the [offline] summits required more than 10 civil servants to coordinate, so by comparison the chats were less resource dependent.

Outcomes

Based on this engagement process of which the webchats were a part, the department will be developing a generic menu of enabling measures from which local authorities can choose options as part of their Local Authority Agreement negotiations. The aim is to publish this menu in the autumn of 2006.

The department expressed an interest in running webchats in the future and investing in technology to facilitate online consultation.

6. Food Standards Agency web forum

Title/URL

www.food.gov.uk/sfbbforum

Screenshot



FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY

Safer food, better business Forum

Home Forum About Resources Feedback

An online forum, run by the Food Standards Agency, to discuss the 'Safer food, better business' (SFBB) pack.

Discussion Topics

- > Using SFBB
- > Good practice
- > Your suggestions

Welcome to the SFBB online discussion forum - 2 May to 31 May 2006

The Food Standards Agency's SFBB forum has now closed. Thank you to everyone who posted comments during the pilot. Each one of these will be considered in the ongoing development of the Safer food, better business (SFBB) pack for caterers, and other versions of SFBB.

The forum has been extremely useful to the Agency, both in terms of feedback on the SFBB pack for caterers, and in terms of testing the online forum as a means of communicating with stakeholders. We hope that those people who have posted comments, or logged on and read other people's responses, have also benefited from participating in the forum.

Enter the [online forum](#) to view the discussions.

For information about this site and the consultation please visit the

User Login

Username:

Password:

- > Register new account
- > Forgotten your password?

FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY
Main site: www.food.gov.uk

Department

Food Standards Agency

Objective/Context

'Safer food, better business' (SFBB) - introduced in September 2005 - is a practical pack designed to help small catering businesses comply with food hygiene regulations. It was developed by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in partnership with catering businesses and local authorities. Other food safety management packs have been produced by FSA Scotland and FSA Northern Ireland ('CookSafe' and 'Safe Catering' respectively).

The aim was to give local authorities and catering businesses the opportunity to share their views, experiences, good practice and ideas. The launch of the forum coincided with the release of the small retailers' version of 'Safer food, better business' published on 31 May 2006.

Policy Overview

Safer food, better business

The FSA is an independent government department set up by an Act of Parliament in 2000 to protect public health and consumer interests in relation to food.

The FSA provides advice and information to the public and government on food safety, nutrition and diet. It also protects consumers through effective food enforcement and monitoring.

The Agency is concerned with the whole food industry - from farming and food production, packaging and distribution, to retail and catering - and addresses safety issues at every stage of the chain.

Safer food, better business (SFBB) is described by the FSA as 'an innovative and practical approach to food safety management'.

Application used

Online deliberative forum (third-party build and hosted on external servers).

The forum was readable by anyone, but registration was required to contribute.

Purpose

Deliberative consultation – to obtain experiential feedback on products and services.

Other consultation methods used

Stakeholder meetings; submission by email, post or telephone.

Moderation

Participant posts were pre-moderated against the terms and conditions (published on the website). Comment moderation was carried out by the FSA.

Representatives of the policy teams involved in the coordination and production of the SFBB packs logged in to the forum and posted follow-up questions to those used to open the debate, and to pick up on issues raised by participants.

Catchment

The policy directly affects England. Participation was targeted at specific users of the SFBB pack. However, access was not restricted.

Timeline

The forum was held between 2 May – 31 May 2006.

The evaluation of the forum was carried out from 3 April with completion on 2 June 2006.

Registrant profiles

269 people registered to take part in this consultation over the course of 3 weeks.

Male	57%
Female	43%

Under-24	3%
Under-46	64%
Over-46	33%

First online forum?

Yes	25%
No	75%

Participated in Government/Parliament consultation before?

Yes 41%
No 59%

Frequent user of the internet?

Yes 100%
No nil

Publicity

The department sent out invite letters and emails to local authority stakeholders it wished to participate in the forum. These individuals were on an established contact database.

The department prepared and distributed press releases to relevant broadcast and press outlets prior to the forum's launch and following its close.

Links to the forum were placed on the FSA website (including on the homepage).

There was no 'paid for' marketing undertaken.

Participation rate

32 registrants posted a total of 46 messages (average of 1.4 per contributor).

Distinct Features

Strengths

- Diversity of registrants – ranged from caterers to enforcement officers.
- Clear delineation of responsibilities between communications, policy and web teams. Greater interaction between these teams through close collaboration on forum tasks;
- FSA prepared its own forum designs to ensure coordination with corporate and SFBB branding;
- Speed of FSA responses to arguments and queries raised in the forum;
- Comment moderation carried out by the FSA.

Potential for improvement

- Propensity of registrants to spectate rather than participate (though the evaluators recognise that spectating is a legitimate form of engagement);
- Lack of clarity in influence available to participants at beginning of forum;
- Little detail provided to participants by FSA on their influence on the published pack.

The Food Standards Agency has a good track record in using micro-sites to engage stakeholder groups and is positive about exploration of new online techniques and tools. This previous experience proved useful in allocating staff resources to this participation exercise. Again, this was another instance of policy, communications and web teams working well together and ensuring that there was a clear delineation of responsibilities.

However, like some of the other case studies in Digital Dialogues, the registration rates suffered from inadequate marketing. The active participation rate was low but a reasonable number of registrations were received. Although the forum was promoted

with trade press that would have been read by those stakeholders who the forum was aimed at, the shortage of lead-in time reduced the impact that these articles could have had.

It became clear some way into the forum that there was a lack of clarity about its purpose and influence that participants had. The majority of participants arrived at the forum with the purpose of informing the Agency about their views on the pack and how it could develop. However, the Agency had intended for the forum to provide a platform for exchange between stakeholder peers. This diluted the effectiveness of the exercise and obstructed deliberation.

Participant feedback

In their feedback, participants were very positive about the forum. Much of the feedback specified two key advantages: it was a quick and convenient way of participating, and it allowed open discussion. Other factors identified included allowing anonymous participation and the ability to focus in on technical details.

Participants were disappointed that the forum did not run for a longer time. They also wondered if more promotion could have led to greater numbers participating. Some, however, speculated that the low participation rates may have been because many small catering businesses did not have the necessary IT hardware to access the forum.

Departmental feedback

The department's communications, consultation coordinators and policy teams worked closely together on this online consultation exercise, and this collaborative effort was evidently beneficial for sharing the set up and administrative labour of the consultations.

The department was disappointed by the take up and thought that there would have been more deliberation between participants. The data they received through the forum reinforced much of what they already knew about the pack, they said, but they saw great value in providing the forum as a place for disseminating information and encouraging greater interaction between their stakeholders.

Outcomes

The SFBB pack for small retailers has now been published. Feedback and suggestions made in the forum have, where possible, been included in a revised version of the pack scheduled for publication in October 2007.

The FSA has expressed an interest in incorporating online channels into its future consultations.

PART THREE

DRAFT CORE GUIDANCE

3.1 ONLINE CONSULTATION STEPS

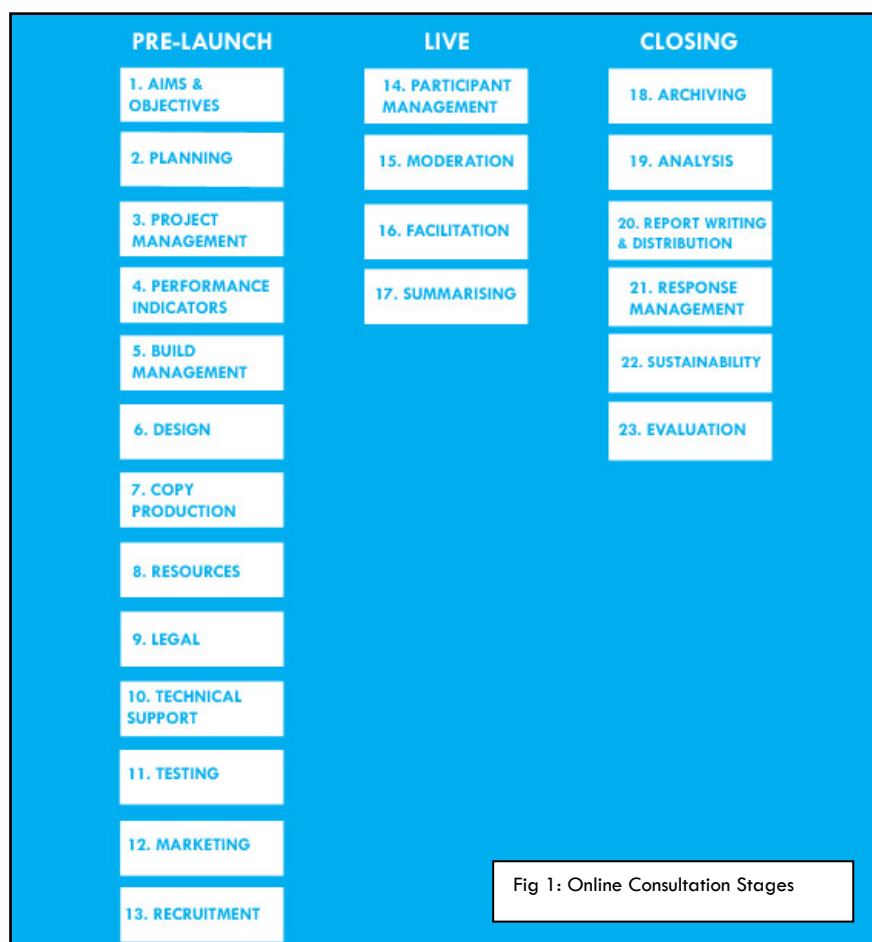
Just as online consultation has advantages, some of which are unique to the medium, it also presents some distinct challenges. It is important to emphasise that online consultation should not be undertaken lightly or the scale of the tasks involved underestimated. Neither should it be overstated; online consultation does not require extensive training or technical experience.

The following section provides an overview of the key steps of an online consultation. This has been informed by drawing on existing practice in the use of online consultation techniques and tools at a parliamentary and local government level, and the experiences of the case study owners in Phase One of Digital Dialogues.

The steps have been divided into three sub-sections:

- Pre-launch;
- Live;
- Closing.

Under each step, key considerations are outlined for those undertaking future online activity as part of a government public participation exercise. These are broad and as Digital Dialogues is unfinished, this guidance should be regarded as draft; it will be tested and refined in Phase Two (see 'Next Steps').



PRE-LAUNCH

1. Aims & Objectives

Before selecting technology or committing to a public engagement exercise online, first define the aim and objectives.

- What is the overall point of the exercise?
- What manner of participation are you offering the public and for what end?
- What are the specific outcomes and outputs you wish to create from undertaking the exercise?
- How does this activity complement offline strategies?

It is possible to become distracted by the flexibility and reach of online participation. Getting aims and objectives as clear as possible at this stage will benefit all subsequent decisions.

2. Planning

This stage involves setting out the format of the exercise. The more planning and lead-in time there is the better.

The online considerations should draw on broader plans for the consultation/engagement:

- Who do we want to consult with; when; and on what basis?
- Which type of application or combination of applications could be used?
- How will the online activity be drawn into the consultation or policy development process?
- What influence are you prepared to give to participants over the eventual outcomes?

Bring all required project partners together at this point and hold a meeting to scope out this and subsequent stages. Encourage colleagues to discuss benefits and risks, and to bring in previous experience.

3. Project management

This will reflect your established project management procedures for any participation activity – assigning staffing, setting schedule, milestones, budgets, resource allocation. Use of project management software is advisable.

Consulting online, however, may require skills and resources outwith conventional practice in which case preparation must be undertaken to ensure these are available.

4. Performance indicators

Consider at early stages what performance indicators you will use. These should be based on the indicators used throughout the broader consultation.

Remember that many website statistics can be misleading. Disregard 'hits' and concentrate on registrations, posts/comments, unique visitors and repeat visits. Page rankings in search engines are also useful indicators of the penetration

and visibility of your consultation online, so carefully determine what search words the public and stakeholders will use to find the site.

Ultimately, web statistics make for inadequate key performance indicators but provide useful contextual data.

Monitor the number of incoming/out-going links. It is important to remember that those sites that are most visible online and highest in search engine rankings are those that link out to other sites and receive reciprocal links. Particular efforts should be made to network with other relevant online resources.

5. Build management

This relates to which application or medium is being used. To recap, in Digital Dialogues we found:

- Blogs are useful for ongoing, low-intensity consultation;
- Forums are good for episodic usage;
- Webchats are useful for one-off event-style stakeholder engagement.

Key considerations prior to committing the construction of a website are:

- Can you build an application or site in-house, or do you need to hire a contractor?
- Do you need to build/buy in something new or reconfigure an existing tool?
- What are your functionality requirements? [See 'Draft Guidance 3']
- Do you want to use open-source or proprietary software?
- Can you manage the build within your team, or is there a need to draw in expertise from other teams?
- How long will it take?

Hosting and database requirements should also be considered here. You will find it beneficial to draw on internal expertise from your web team.

6. Design

This is an important aspect in ensuring that your platform is conducive to deliberation, appeals to participants and draws them in on more than a fleeting basis.

Design will be largely dictated by answers to the questions asked at planning and project management stages. However, it should also draw in considerations about inclusivity, accessibility standards, existing branding and sustainability (in the sense of how quickly the design will date). Above all, ensure that design is user-centred.

7. Copy production

Vocabulary and syntax are crucial to a successful consultation online. [See 'Draft Guidance 4']

- What are the key messages and priority questions?
- Do these need to be adapted from a consultation/policy document for publication on the web?

- At what stages of the consultation could/should content be updated?
- Whose responsibility will this be?
- Is there a lot of technical language? Do we need a glossary?

Remember that copy online works differently to offline. More often than not, it should be shorter and more direct. Testing copy on internal or external focus groups ahead of launch is a sensible investment.

8. Resources

More often than not information resources will be required by the participants to enable and inform participation.

- Are these provided on the participation site or hosted on other sites and linked to?
- Are they sufficiently visible on the site and are participants encouraged to make use of them?
- Will there be a dedicated page for holding resources or will they be downloadable from specific participation points?
- Have all relevant documents been made available for download?

9. Legal

Always ensure that consultation rules and guidelines are available to participants. [See 'Draft Guidance 5']

- Does the site meet the required standards in the Cabinet Office Code of Consultation?
- If relevant, does the site meet the required standards in the Ministerial Code?
- Does the site meet the required standards in the Civil Service Code?
- Does data capture meet Data Protection and Freedom of Information requirements?
- Are accessibility standards observed?

If in doubt about any of these questions or copies of codes, contact the department's consultation coordinators, legal team and/or web team.

10. Technical support

The risk involved in the use of ICT is that it fails partially or completely during the exercise. Problems may arise for the administrators of a site – which are often quickly spotted - or for the users – which often take longer to be drawn to the attention of those who can rectify them.

- Is your support being provided by a departmental team or an external contractor?

Technical risks should be reduced by careful procurement and pre-launch testing. During the live consultation, technical support should also be on-call to deal with issues within at least a 24-hour period.

Keep a record of technical problems experienced over the course of the exercise.

11. Testing

Testing can seem like an unnecessary hassle that can be left as a responsibility for a supporting technical team or dispensed with where time is in short supply. This would be misguided; testing should always be carried out, and it should be task-orientated.

Wherever possible, testing through simulated exercises should involve those communications, policy and web teams who are scheduled to be involved when a site goes 'live'.

These 'dry-runs' are vital if everyone in a combined team is to work adequately together once the site is active and being utilised by members of the public. Testing will also highlight technical bugs that only present themselves under 'live' conditions – potentially saving embarrassment at a later date.

- Have all the moderators been given access and supplied with log-in details?

12. Marketing

Communications teams should be consulted on this aspect.

Promotional activity will be driven by the participation focus and participants; it should also reflect established procedure in the department and across government. It should be planned within budget, time and be designed to meet the objectives of the consultation.

A balance of PR and advertising techniques works well. Give consideration to how the marketing and publicity of the consultation will be managed as it progresses and once it has closed. Remember, it will not be enough to do one push at the launch of the consultation; marketing can be staggered but it must be ongoing.

Research your target participants extensively. Find out socio-demographic data about them, their attitudes and behaviours. Make a particular effort to access information that covers their use of the internet and political engagement.

13. Recruitment

Marketing is vital to recruitment and is tied in with the early defining steps. It is important to consider recruitment throughout because in some instances recruitment will be an ongoing process.

You should also consider:

- What personal information do you want to gather?
- Consider what types of people you want to recruit - is there a specific demographic or do you want to get a mixture of demographics together?
- Do you want to broaden and deepen your stakeholder base, or focus in on expert practitioners?
- If you want to bring expert stakeholders and the public together in deliberation; will this be their first meeting?
- Are your participants in a 'hard-to-reach' group?

LIVE

14. Participant management

Key considerations concerning management of participants are:

- Are participants registering properly?
- Are they providing the necessary details?
- Are these details being stored?
- Are complaints/problems/positive feedback being dealt with?
- Are you updating participants regularly on any significant milestones over the course of the consultation?

15. Moderation

'Moderation' refers, here, to publishing participant contributions. It is a crucial but flexible aspect of all online consultation.

Your approach to moderation will depend on which platform you are using. Weblogs require the least moderation, forums the most, although again this depends on other factors - for example:

- Will you be moderating posts before or after they go live?
- Who is using the site - have they been consulted before and has this taken place online?

All of the case studies during Phase One of Digital Dialogues employed a pre-moderation strategy (comments were checked against the site rules and for relevance before publishing). On some occasions the Hansard Society moderated comments but it is preferable for the owners of the exercise to moderate. Moderators were required to check for new comments at regular intervals (at least five times a day).

Transparency in moderation is a very important component of successful engagement online. A moderation policy - outlining the what, why, when, who and how - should always be provided for participants to read. [See 'Draft Guidance 5']

16. Facilitation

Like any offline meetings or stakeholder engagement, online participation also requires good chairing. This is the single most important aspect of online consultation that is deliberative in nature. At least two members of staff, preferably policy officials, were assigned to an exercise during Digital Dialogues.

Participants will deliberate amongst themselves, but the participation of the government/participation owners is the glue, and in its absence the participants who came to get into a dialogue will lose interest and become frustrated and. At best, participants will voice their criticism to you; more likely they will drift away and tell others about the experience.

- Which members of staff or departmental representatives will post in the flow of the deliberation, keeping the focus, asking further questions, responding to queries? [See 'Draft Guidance 6']
- How many people will be assigned to facilitate the discussions?

17. Summarising

Considerations of how and when to summarise deliberation will be most relevant to forums, where you have asynchronous group-based participation. Summarising is as important for 'veterans' of the consultation as it is for 'newcomers'. It is also recommended for the benefit of the moderation team and content analysis at the close.

As a guide, the more regularly the policy team visit the consultation (not necessarily always to participate) the more efficient and constructive the post-consultation analysis will be.

It is also good practice to offer participants a response route so that they are able to query the summaries and make suggestions for inclusion.

CLOSING

18. Archiving

Your platform should automatically archive the user-generated content, participation data, and all accompanying analytics. However, it is important to consider how this automated archive will be taken offline, stored and accessed by your team.

- Which data elements will be shared with the public and at what points?

19. Analysis

Online participation exercises gather a great deal of data - the submissions, the participant details, site and server analytics. This aggregation and ability to filter this data set is one of the foremost attractions of online consultation.

The considerations for this stage relate to:

- Who will be responsible for analysing the data, at which stages and when is the report deadline?
- What are the key indicators and how will these be related back to findings from other methods employed for the consultation?

20. Report writing and distribution

At the end of each consultation it is good practice to provide - as a package - transcripts of the consultation, an executive summary and a statistical report.

You should consider who will compile the report and who it will be distributed to (it is best practice to post the same report on the website for public access as it is passed on to those conducting the consultation). The length of the report will depend on the consultation focus, participants and duration.

Consider asking participants to review the report of the forum. Provide a deadline and request comments on omissions or clarifications. Retain editorial oversight but do give genuine consideration to suggestions.

21. Response management

It is important as soon as the consultation closes to explain the next steps to the participants. You do not need to present conclusions or definitive findings at this

stage, but it is important to manage expectations. Consider when you will be able to make a 'final' response to the consultation, who will make the response and where it will be distributed from.

Not having sufficient feedback processes will frustrate participants and do long term damage to future engagement activity.

22. Sustainability

An essential step for consideration is sustainability, which will be largely dependent on whether you plan to use the platform again.

If you plan to close it down:

- How will the important content be lifted off and archived?
- Where will participants be able to go for follow-up?

If the intention is to use the site again for a follow-up consultation:

- Who will the content be changed by and how?
- What will the site be used for in the interim?
- If the plan is to reuse the platform for another consultation, how should the content and databases be cleared and should the platform be shifted to another server or the URL redirected?

23. Evaluation

It is good practice to conduct an evaluation at the end of any public engagement activity; online engagement is no different and during these formative stages is crucial.

The purpose of the evaluation is to look back at the aims and objectives you set for the exercise and ascertain whether or not these were achieved. The evaluation should pinpoint the factors contributing to the success or lack of it. For example:

- Was planning time sufficient?
- Was the application fit for purpose?
- Did the marketing transmit the purpose of the exercise to the target users?
- Were project costs adequately managed?

It is acceptable that an evaluation can remain internal, but consider the value in also making the evaluation available to the public, or at least the participants. Other agencies, departments and ministerial offices are also likely to benefit from your experiences.

Evaluation of the online engagement activity should be included within impact assessments of the broader consultation/engagement exercise.

The steps outlined above provide a useful guide to those that should be undertaken over the course of an online public participation exercise. For a broader appraisal of planning public engagement, see the selected further reading section toward the end of the report.

3.2 DRAFT GUIDANCE RESOURCES

Draft Guidance 1

Sample registration form

The following resource provides a sample registration form for a forum or webchat. It may also be considered as a suitable form for registration to comment on a blog; however most blogs do not require creation of a user account to comment. More commonly, blogs ask visitors for their name and a valid email address before commenting.

All personal information collected should conform to data protection and freedom of information legislation. Guidance on what will and will not be shared or made public should be provided to registrants at the point of registration. As a guide for wording and options in demographic data refer to the most recent census information.

1. Username [for this site]
2. Email address
3. First name
4. Last name
5. Organisation [or similar]
6. Position [or similar]
7. In which part of the UK do you live? [commonly -
England/Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland/Other]
8. Please indicate which age bracket you come under
9. Are you female or male?
10. Which of the following best describes your interest in [consultation dependent]?
11. Which of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong to? [based on census options]
12. Have you taken part in any online consultations or forums before?
13. How did you hear about this online forum?
14. Please tick if you wish to receive email contact from the department in relation to this consultation.
15. Please tick if you agree to the terms and conditions of this site and to abide by the discussion rules.

Draft Guidance 2

Sample user survey

The following are sample questions from pre- and post-consultation surveys used by the Hansard Society in the past to capture feedback from site users and registrants. You should design your survey to fit the purposes of your exercise. However, it may be advisable to separate policy questions from those relating to user experience.

PRE

1. Are you a frequent user of the internet?
2. Where do you access the internet?
3. Have you participated in other online consultations/discussion forums?
4. What are your expectations of online consultation prior to taking part in this forum?
5. Have you been in contact with your local MP before?
6. Have you given evidence to Parliament before?
7. Have you participated in a government consultation before?
8. Nobody in Parliament or government ever listens to people like me.
[Agree/Disagree]
9. There is not much I can do to change the way the country is run.
[Agree/Disagree]
10. Do you have any other comments to make?

POST

1. Are online consultations a credible means of interaction between the government and the public?
2. Would you participate in government consultations online in the future?
3. Would you recommend participation in government online consultations to others?
4. Briefly, what are the advantages of online consultation as you see them?
5. Briefly, what are the disadvantages of online consultation as you see them?
6. How often did you read other participants' posts?
7. How often did you visit the forum over its duration?
8. How often did you post a contribution in the forum?

9. If you registered but did not post, briefly tell us why.
10. Did government representatives make sufficient contributions in the forum?
11. In which direction was the main flow of deliberation in the forum?
12. Did you learn anything about X policy from participation in this forum that you did not know previously?
13. Did you learn anything from the other participants in the forum?

If yes, outline briefly
14. What was the main objective of the forum as you understood it?
15. In your opinion, did the forum perform the role it set out to?
16. Briefly describe one aspect of the forum you would change to improve it
17. Briefly describe one thing you like most about the forum
18. Did you contribute to the consultation by any other means?
19. Please make any other comments you would like to be considered in the evaluation.

Draft Guidance 3

Application specification

There is a vast array of proprietary, free-to-download and open-source blog, forum and webchat software available.

Each of these applications can be referred to as 'social software' or 'participatory media' and broadly share some core functionality. It is when content and design come into play that these applications begin to diverge and take on unique characteristics.

The pace of development and the choice available make it impossible to provide a definitive list. The following lists basic and desirable functions for blogs, forums and webchats.

- Simple content management system for static and dynamic pages;
- Changes to design templates or entries with no need for regenerating static pages;
- User commenting and moderation;
- Choice of hidden and open comments/password protected posts;
- Optional user registration;
- User account management;
- Multiple authors - levels of users, with configurable privileges;
- Text formatting/WYSIWYG text editor for authors and users;
- Create, maintain, and update any number of static link lists;
- Embedded links in posts;
- Content upload via email or external device;
- Word and PDF document upload;
- Capacity for audio, video or photo content (either as imports or directly on site within size limits);
- Content scheduling;
- Creation of surveys/polls;
- Spam protection;
- Printable pages;
- Threaded/unthreaded posts;
- RSS;
- Trackback;
- Archiving and search facilities;
- Site statistics;
- Create, maintain, and update any number of static link lists;
- Full compliance with accessibility standards;
- Content and data export.

Each product will have a particular range of functions and associated costs. Suppliers and/or web teams should be consulted before procurement. Some products will have a set functionality range and will be cheaper as a result; customisation will increase costs.

Some off-the-shelf proprietary systems will allow administrators to create instances of blogs, forums or webchats within a day. Some well-known free blogging sites allow users to create blogs within five minutes. However, contractors should be given a

minimum of 10 days to produce a site. Ideally, there should lead-in time of a month before launch of any site to allow testing. Where possible, attempt to integrate a new application into an existing site rather than creating a new one.

Draft Guidance 4

Online copy guide

The following outlines copy (text) required for an online forum. This covers the basics but is not fixed and it is possible to deviate from it depending on your consultation's requirements.

Blogs and webchats will differ and often require substantially less 'orientation' copy. The bulk of the copy on blogs will be made up of dynamic content generated by authors and users. Nevertheless, the following guidance will provide a useful reference.

Types of content

There are three types of text (or 'copy') on an online forum:

- Static... content that stays the same throughout the consultation (for example, a welcome message). Changes may be made at the close of the consultation to make it clear that the consultation has happened and is no longer live;
- Dynamic... this is content which is expected to, or could, change over the course of the consultation (such as forum summaries, topics, news updates);
- User... this is content generated by consultation participants and is almost always restricted to the posts made in the forum.

Quantity of content

Much of the content is commonsense and will already be familiar from conventional consultation or website literature. However, some areas may require extra copy, a cut-down version of what is conventionally produced, or writing in a style more appropriate to the online medium (i.e. succinct and punchy).

The internet is good for visual content and weaker on copy. Copy works best online when it is presented in a compact manner; this makes the content more engaging and more likely to be read.

It is best to keep the word count per page to less than 1000 words, use paragraphs of no more than 4 sentences and make good (but reasonable) use of formatting (for example, sub-headings and bullet-points).

Where it is important to provide detailed, in-depth information (for example, the consultation document) this can be provided as a file download (Word or PDF). Alternatively, links can be used to refer participants to other websites holding the information, for example the corporate departmental website.

Core pages

The online forums being used for the Digital Dialogues initiative used a standard five points of top-level navigation. This means that there were five generalised pages of content of which other pages (sub-navigation) were found. These ran in the following order:

1. **Home:** the homepage, the entry point for login, the central orientation point for participants and interested observers;
2. **Forum:** the page through which the deliberation topics are introduced and accessed (also the first page the participant should be directed to following log-in);
3. **About:** where the consultation is explained and any important context is provided;
4. **Resources:** this might also be called 'background information' or similar. This page is the access point to information participants can use to inform their deliberation;
5. **Feedback:** this page is conventionally used to gather input from the participants about the specific site.

Home

The homepage is the welcome and orientation point for the website. There are a number of elements important to a home page - for example, links highlighting key areas of content within the site and login fields.

The copy that is used on the homepage should be succinct and contain the following key elements:

- Name of the forum;
- Summary of the consultation aim/focus/objectives in a sentence;
- A note about success criteria for the exercise, start and end dates of the forum consultation;
- Welcome message (ideally from a senior figure/representative). To be replaced by a closing 'thank you'/next steps message at the close.

Forum

The first page of the forum is the orientation and entry point for the deliberation spaces.

This copy should be short and to the point. It should also contain links to information on the discussion rules, moderation policy and how to make a post.

Topics

The forum will be sub-divided into a number of topic spaces. Each topic page corresponds to a priority area, question or theme for consultation. Each of these pages should begin with a short summary of the focus and, if possible, break the broad priority area down into smaller questions.

The idea behind the copy on each of these pages is to ease the participant into deliberation and clearly set out the aspects of each priority area which are crucial to the consultation.

It is also useful to start each deliberation with a post from a representative of the department or team running the consultation, or a key practitioner in the field, to stimulate discussion. This should be prepared in advance. An alternative use: using academics, journalists, experts or opinion leaders to start the discussion.

Topic titles should be short; questions should be to the point.

About

The 'About' page takes the brief detail about the nature of the consultation from the homepage and expands on it. The copy here should cover:

- Who (those consulting, being consulted and supporting);
- What (the purpose and the method);
- Why (the context and the next steps);
- When (reiterate the parameters of the consultation);
- How (the consultation and its online element will develop during and after).

Resources

The 'Resources' section can be approached in three ways:

1. Provide links out to websites, and lists for further reading which can be followed by participants to inform their deliberation;
2. Provide key facts and figures, and background reading in downloadable files (i.e. PDF or Word);
3. Provide key facts and figures, and background reading as printable webpages.

The decision on how much material to provide will be determined by who is being consulted and on what aspects of policy (for example, is your consultation base being asked to consider an area in which they have direct experience from a different perspective, or are they being consulted on a subject that divides opinion).

It is important to provide balanced background material that covers all points of view. A comprehensive (but not exhaustive) glossary should also be provided. In certain cases the resources page may be removed where the information is available on a 'parent' website.

Links to this information should be provided elsewhere on the forum site, for example, the forum.

Feedback

During 'Digital Dialogues' the feedback section was used to conduct pre- and post-consultation surveys of participants in order to gather feedback on awareness, knowledge, attitudes and literacy. It would be useful for government to collate similar research.

Other uses of the section can include providing interim responses, details of past consultations and details on how participants can encourage others to get involved.

Footer

The footer is the navigation menu found at the bottom of a webpage. This usually houses links to all the standard, technical information about the site. This can include site credits, accessibility policy, policy on data protection and contact details.

Draft Guidance 5

Sample terms and conditions

During Digital Dialogues, information about copyright, terms and conditions, discussion rules and moderation policies were developed to be appropriate to online consultation via the platforms used in the case studies.

The following provides drafts of this content. This is drawn predominantly from the forum sites but is also relevant to blogs and webchats. This should be adapted dependent on need and where there is doubt consult with departmental web and legal support teams.

Data Protection

X is strongly committed to protecting the privacy of users of its interactive products and services as well as to respecting the Data Protection Acts 1984 and 1998. We do all that we can to protect information about participants and will never pass on individuals' information to third parties.

This privacy policy applies to this specific online consultation website. The purpose of this privacy policy is to inform you, cover what kinds of information we may gather about you when you visit and register, how we may use that information, whether we disclose it to anyone, and the choices you have regarding our use of, and your ability to correct, the information.

In general, our site automatically gathers certain usage information like the numbers and frequency of visitors to the site and its pages. We only use such data in aggregate form. This collective data helps us determine how much visitors and participants use specific parts of our site, so we can improve its operation and appeal.

Information about specific users

This site requires registration to use its functions, such as posting a comment. At registration we specifically ask you for personal information. Certain information is mandatory - such as your name, valid email address, screen name, password. We would also appreciate you filling out the rest of the registration form to enable us to conduct a thorough evaluation.

Disclosure

We do not use or disclose information about your individual visits to the site or information that you may give us, such as your name, address, email address, to any third parties.

Terms and Conditions

Copyright and neighbouring rights

The material featured on this site is subject to Crown copyright protection unless otherwise indicated.

The Crown copyright protected material (other than departmental logos) may be reproduced free of charge in any format or medium for research, private study, web-based discussion, or for internal circulation within an organisation. This is subject to the material being reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context.

Where any of the Crown copyright items on this site are being republished or copied to others, the source of the material must be identified and the copyright status acknowledged.

The permission to reproduce Crown protected material does not extend to any material on this site which is identified as being the copyright of a third party.

For further information on Crown copyright policy and licensing arrangements, see the guidance at www.opsi.gov.uk.

The copying and use of X logo is not permitted without prior approval of X.

Virus protection

The site operators make every effort to check and test material at all stages of production. It is always wise for users to run an anti virus program on all material downloaded from the internet.

X cannot accept any responsibility for any loss, disruption or damage to your data or your computer system which may occur whilst using material off this website.

Your privacy

Cookies are pieces of data that are often created when you visit a website and are stored in the cookie directory of your own computer.

Cookies are used to store a session ID which allows you to log-in and make comments. No personal information is stored in the Cookie.

Other websites linked from this site are not covered by this privacy policy.

Links to and from other websites

X is not responsible for the contents or reliability of the external websites and does not necessarily endorse the views expressed within them. Links to external sites should not be taken as endorsement of any kind. We cannot guarantee that these links will work all of the time and we have no control over the availability of the linked pages.

X encourages users to establish hypertext links to the site. You do not have to ask permission to link directly to pages hosted on the website. We do not object to you linking directly to our information, but you should obtain permission if you intend to use our logo.

Commenting/Discussion/Posting Rules

* Rules for participants should be provided at the point of registration and require acknowledgement

By registering with this site you agree to abide by the following rules.

These are standard web discussion rules that are designed to ensure participants feel safe, keen to take part and the discussion meets its objectives:

1. Debate should be lively but also respectful.
2. Stay on-topic. Please don't post messages that are unrelated to this online forum.

3. Stay relaxed - though this deliberation is important and influential, taking part should be a positive experience.
4. Don't incite hatred on the basis of race, religion, gender, nationality or sexuality or other personal characteristic.
5. Don't swear, use hate-speech or make obscene or vulgar comments.
6. Don't break the law. This includes libel, condoning illegal activity and contempt of court (comments which might affect the outcome of an approaching court case).
7. Please don't post personal information addresses, phone numbers, email addresses or other online contact details either relating to yourself or other individuals.
8. Don't engage in 'spamming'. Please don't add the same comment to more than one forum.
9. Don't advertise. You can mention relevant products and services as long as they support your comment.
10. Don't impersonate or falsely claim to represent a person or organisation. Please don't mislead other users by abusing our registration procedure.
11. Don't post in a language other than English. We hope in the future to be able to support translation.
12. Avoid being party political - this site is about consensus-building, not party political point-scoring.
13. If you are aged 16 or under, please get your parent/guardian's permission before participating in this online forum. Users without this consent are not allowed to participate or provide us with personal information.

If a comment contravenes the discussion rules it will not be published or removed from the forum.

Posts may be returned to the participant by email, along with a reference to the broken rule(s). The participant will be invited to make appropriate changes in order that the post can be reconsidered. However, if a participant repeatedly breaks the rules that participant's user account will be suspended and may be permanently revoked.

Moderation Policy

Will X consultation/policy team be participating in the discussions?

Yes, relevant team representatives intend to regularly visit the forum discussions and where appropriate submit posts to encourage discussion.

What is moderation?

'Moderation' is the practice of:

- Facilitating online consultations to ensure that everyone can take part in discussion, get their views across and that the consultation meets its objectives;
- Maintaining the flow of the discussion by checking all posts in relation to the terms and conditions of the site.

What does a moderator do?

'Moderator' is internet jargon for somebody who is responsible for making sure that the forum discussion rules are respected.

A moderator is:

- Similar to a chair of a face-to-face meeting;
- There to encourage debate by asking questions but will not offer opinions;
- There to make sure everyone feels comfortable and equal in the online discussion.

Who are the moderators of this forum?

This forum will be moderated by the X consultation/policy team.

The moderators always aim to be fair and objective. Moderators are concerned with the quality of the discussion not the interests of one individual, group or idea over another.

Direct communication between the participants and the moderators can take place via email. The moderators' email address is...

What form of moderation will be used in this forum?

There are two types of moderation available:

- Pre-moderation: where all posts are checked against the terms and conditions before they are published;
- Post-moderation: where all participant posts are checked against the terms and conditions after they are published.

This forum will employ a X strategy. This means that posts will/will not go live instantly. They will be checked regularly by the moderators.

During the week all posts will go live within 24 hours of submission. Posts made during the weekend will go live on the following business day.

Forum spaces are readable at all times and you can submit a post at any time.

Important Government Codes

You may also consider linking or reproducing the following codes where appropriate on your site:

- *Code of Consultation:*
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation;
- *Civil Service Code:*
www.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/civilservicecode/index.asp;
- *Ministerial Code:*
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/propriety_and_ethics/ministers/ministerial_code.

Draft Guidance 6

Facilitation of online participation sites

'Moderation' commonly refers to the mechanical aspects of publishing participant posts and also to the practice of facilitating an online discussion. For the purposes of this section, 'facilitation' functions have been decoupled from those that are 'administrative'.

In 1999, the Hansard Society outlined its first classification of roles; these have been refined over time. In this resource, five facilitation functions have been classified as follows:

- Host;
- Manager;
- Referee;
- Librarian;
- Reporter.

Facilitation roles are best understood as strategies which should be adopted to achieve different objectives in moderating an online deliberative exercise. Not every role is adopted in the course of a consultation; some consultations require different degrees of moderator intervention and role application. Indeed, in some consultations there may be no moderator activity in the actual consultation space; instead moderators are only carrying out 'off-stage' administrative duties.

Host

Often the first duty of a facilitator will be that of 'host'. During the lifetime of a consultation a community of participants is created. However, the platforms hosting these consultations can be alien, barren spaces. Certainly this is the case in the initial stages as the deliberation picks up momentum. The people who constitute the community will all start as strangers to one another. Indeed, they may remain that way throughout.

The acclimatisation that comes with every new consultation may not faze all participants, but could concern and dissuade others. Facilitators in the 'host' role can ensure that everyone knows why they are there and ensure that the platform retains an atmosphere conducive to deliberation. The host-facilitator can make everyone feel welcome, ensure everyone has what they need, that everyone feels positive towards participation and that they are aware of the context within which the deliberation is taking place.

As the consultation progresses, facilitators can make sure that the momentum and interest are sustained. This could include bringing up fresh, interesting points, ensuring that alternative perspectives are aired or introducing new pieces of evidence for consideration.

Manager

Online consultations are held for specific purposes. There are cost considerations, time constraints, targets and objectives in mind. These become increasingly important considerations for those involved in policy formation. Discussion facilitators have an important 'manager' role to play in this respect.

In the planning stages of a consultation, timetables should be constructed and critical points identified (such as the airing of a relevant television programme or the close of deliberation within a certain topic). Over the course of the consultation, then, facilitators should pay close attention to the participation exercise schedule (even if a separate project manager exists) and be sure to introduce reminders into the flow of the debate for the benefit of participants.

To make sure that consultations do what they are set up to do, manager-facilitators should also be available to be consulted on operational aspects of the consultation - by participants drawn from the public or fellow members of the commissioning body.

Referee

In addition to clear timetables, good consultations require clear definition of rules and etiquette. This is an acknowledgement of the proliferation of peer-to-peer interactive platforms (some of which are formal and others informal) without the parallel development of a universal code of conduct.

Participants should be required to formally acknowledge the consultation's discussion rules before gaining entry to the consultation space. Even so, disagreements can occur and provide tense encounters some of which, given enough fuel, could potentially overrun the deliberation exercise.

Here 'deliberation' is defined as structured group discussion where one expresses one's experience, ideas or views whilst acknowledging that they may be challenged for the benefit of reaching a judgement or making a decision. Therefore, 'conflict', 'dissent' and 'disagreement' are all to some extent legitimate factors in good deliberative consultations.

Yet, despite the fact that argument and constructive criticism are integral to productive debate, participants who are inexperienced in debating, or the specific subject matter, may find this aspect of deliberation difficult to deal with. At the other extreme (it is wise to acknowledge all motivations), there may be those who spoil for an argument or are so convinced by the faultlessness of their views that they react negatively to disagreement.

Dealing with disagreement is one of the trickier and consequential roles of the moderator. In the vast majority of consultations, participants avoid direct contention, choose their words carefully, use evidence or are happy to simultaneously accommodate different perspectives. In this respect, participants can be 'self-moderating' and even on occasion self-policing, in that where disagreement occurs between individuals, other participants step in to remind them of the consultation rules, request supporting evidence, and ask for clarification or restraint.

Participant-to-participant moderation should be informally encouraged but it should also remain the policy for the referee-facilitators to have the overall authority and responsibility to resolve conflict. This is because at the root of qualms around group deliberation is a fear of being challenged, berated or singled-out in the public domain. These fears put some off of group participation. Of course, this was one of the motivating factors behind online consultations - that people could participate anonymously, that they could do so from 'comfortable' surroundings, at any time and with the ability to leave the debate without 'loss of face'. However, it is clear that although the parameters of online deliberation are different to those of face-to-face

or voice-to-voice meetings, there is still a human apprehensiveness that reduces participants' willingness to contribute.

Facilitators in their 'referee' role are there as a reassurance to participants. They exist so that participants know that as long as they stay within the general rules and context of the topic, they are able to say what they want without stoking a personally-motivated attack. They know too that they are able to challenge those contributions that they believe are wrong, in need of further qualification or could be superseded. Online consultations can be kept secure, structured but non-sanitised, and the only way that this can be sustained is if the participants have trust in the facilitators to be fair and decisive.

Where facilitators have to step in to resolve conflict then they must do so in a determined manner. Arguments are rarely between camps and more often involve two individuals. There are slight differences in the approach of a moderator depending on whether a consultation is pre- or post-moderated (that is whether participant posts go live immediately or are checked for suitability prior to publication). Pre-moderation allows the moderators to identify potentially antagonistic posts and ask the participant to reassess or justify their post.

If and when participants get into a disagreement some time should be given to allow self-resolution. But if a settlement is not reached by those who disagree or through the pressure from other participants, facilitators should begin resolution in the public consultation space. Carrying out this initial action, in front of the community, is a means of demonstrating that this sort of disagreement is not accepted but also of showing the participants how to deal with the conflict themselves.

Disagreements can continue or resurface later, at which point the facilitators will post a public rebuttal but also consequently strive to settle the issue in private - via email, letter or phone. On rare occasions, facilitators will take the decision to suspend participant accounts until the participant has either expressed their lack of interest in continuing or has pledged to change tact.

Expulsion of participants is rare - if such a move is necessitated all participant details and a record of contributions will be stored. This is in large part a result of having moderation planned in early on, a clear statement of moderator-facilitator responsibilities and a set of terms and conditions for participants.

Librarian

It is desirable for facilitators to have expertise in the subject matter which the participants are discussing. This is largely a requirement of good chairing. The 'librarian' role is about encouraging use of evidence, facts and figures by participants and to signpost useful information as part of the ongoing responsibility to facilitate informed deliberation. The 'intervention' of the facilitators in this respect, should be reinforced by a set of rudimentary background notes and suggested reading for participants to refer to.

Some consultation spaces can become complex due to their popularity, frequency of posts or consultation objectives. To prevent the integrity of the deliberation structure unravelling or becoming too complex to navigate, facilitators must observe 'janitorial' responsibilities.

Again, the scope of these duties is largely defined by the sophistication of the technology supporting the consultation platform. Systems should allow the facilitators to manage the consultation spaces by the likes of re-sorting out of place posts, clearing incomplete or garbled posts and closing overpopulated threads.

The librarian-facilitator is ultimately responsible for securely archiving and retrieving data - be it participant contributions or survey data - and this is all about ensuring good database construction and maintenance thereafter. The facilitators should also carefully ensure that posts are stored in their entirety (no matter what their form or content). This is the case even if a post contravenes the consultation rules and is unsuitable for publication (facilitators must never edit participant posts without permission from the individual participant).

Reporter

The final trade that will be set out here is that of the facilitator as a 'reporter'. This is another significant responsibility and likely to be the one role that is present in every consultation that has moderation wired into its structure, whether moderation is being applied in back- or foreground.

During the existence of a consultation facilitators must methodically summarise the deliberation. This involves identifying key posts that stimulated a debate, perhaps contained vital information, aired an alternative view or completely re-orientated a discussion. This practice is as much for the benefit of latecomers as it is veterans. It is also useful from the perspective of ministers whose resource limitations and procedural regulations may prevent regular, consistent participation.

However, a more important aspect of the reporter role comes with the close of a consultation. At this point it is the responsibility of the facilitators to provide an overall summary report of the deliberation that is both independent and accessible. Summary reports do involve constructing a narrative to illustrate the deliberation behind the results, but in doing so the moderators must conduct themselves with the same detached objectivity with which they approached the other roles.

The final role of the reporter-facilitator is to manage expectations of participants by outlining a timetable for feedback and then ensuring that the feedback is either posted directly on the site or passed on to participants via email or post.

Evolution

Facilitation is a discipline in evolutionary flux. As online consultations move from their developmental phase and become a feature of legislative institutions, there will be increased pressure for regulation of moderators' qualifications and skills. This will be difficult to achieve in a way that will be suitable for all applications of moderation. Nevertheless, a set of core skills may include:

- tolerance;
- integrity;
- empathy;
- objectivity;
- capability to carry out conceptual thought;
- good listener;
- attentive;
- observant;
- attention to detail;

- composed nature;
- confidence in mediation abilities;
- strong problem-solving ability;
- high level of ICT literacy;
- cross-cultural awareness;
- excellent researcher;
- strong communicator;
- fluency in written language;
- confidence in group and interpersonal communications.

Even in the absence of a set job description for moderator-facilitators, on each participation exercise a breakdown of facilitator responsibilities and an explanation of moderation responsibilities should be provided for reference by the participants. Alongside this should be included contact details for the moderator team.

PART FOUR

INTERIM FINDINGS & NEXT STEPS

Interim Findings

This report accounts for case study observations over a six month period across central government. In that limited time, some interesting practices and trends have been observed, and an informative snapshot has emerged of existing capacity for online consultation and attitudes toward its use by government as it attempts to enhance public engagement.

We have seen that online technology provides a useful complement to conventional means of communicating, consulting and engaging with the public. It has been shown that online methods can make an important contribution to 'multichannel' consultation. We have also seen that ICT offers the opportunity to consolidate a stakeholder base that can be engaged on a rolling-basis rather than simply as a one-off.

The available technology has been tested and shown its advantages and risks. In this phase of the initiative, we have begun to formulate an understanding of what capacity there is within government agencies, departments and offices and where it could be improved. We now know more about tangible capacity in government – such as technology skills and staff availability; but we are also more aware of attitudes toward engaging with the public in the policy making process and how this is moving from a periodic to an ongoing pursuit.

Perspectives on government

Over the course of this phase of Digital Dialogues, we have seen that a wide-range of policy areas is suitable for taking online. Policy teams have demonstrated their ability to adapt their public participation methods to an online medium. During the initiative they were able to interact closely with participants compared to before the exercises, when some were more used to a 'stand-back and watch' approach where participants were left to their own devices, or responsibility for engagement was handled externally. Nevertheless, confidence and desire do not equate to actual deliverable capacity, and it is clear that experience is needed when it comes to sustained participation and greater interaction with the public, particularly online.

Communications, IT and web teams have shown that they have many of the skills to support online consultation by their policy teams. A lack of experience in managing deliberative and participation-orientated online applications is made up for by a great interest in experimentation and learning, given sufficient backing and resources. Nevertheless, we have also witnessed a tendency on the part of some communications teams to push for overall control over the direction and scope of public engagement exercises.

Ministers and senior management are providing leadership in drives for greater public engagement. There is clearly recognition that the public has been a silent partner in the development, delivery and evaluation of policy and services for too long. There is concern that innovative approaches should be treated as complementary rather than as a replacement for conventional methods. There is also a vital insistence on careful evaluation of new techniques and tools in order that commitment can be sustained and that procurement undertaken within means, whilst ensuring high standards are maintained. However, on occasion we have also seen that ministers can underestimate the budgetary and resource requirements of online engagement, as well as the lead-in

time required. There has also been too little in the way of cross-departmental coordination.

Perspectives on the public

During the case study consultations, citizens were asked to engage in complex issues, deliberate and begin to solve problems. Amongst the public participating in the case studies, we witnessed enthusiasm tempered with a healthy scepticism. Whilst the opportunity to interact directly with policy makers and deliberate amongst peers has been welcomed, there remains wariness about how genuine these government efforts are and what degree of influence the public can have on the decision-making process. This has directly influenced levels of take-up and participation.

Based on qualitative feedback, the more that government is able to show that it takes online participation seriously the more people will be prepared to get involved in the future. Sustaining opportunities will also help participants develop deliberation skills that will improve the content and structure of their contributions.

Those participating in Phase One case studies had been drawn from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, and represented various stakeholder profiles – from the curious onlooker to the front-line service deliverer. They tended to already be active online, but most had not participated in parliamentary or government consultations before – this includes many local government staff, academics and expert practitioners. The vast majority reacted positively to the availability of online routes and expressed a belief in their credibility.

Perspectives on policy impact

The impact on specific policies has been difficult to determine. Any influence must be small given the numbers participating online compared to those using conventional means. Nevertheless, the participants have not been the usual suspects. The policy teams have attested to the value in the participation of these new stakeholders and the different – sometimes unique – qualitative and quantitative data they generate.

Even if the influence of these online consultation exercises on specific policies has been small, it has had substance and broader credibility. Learning from earlier exercises and examples outside of central government has been apparent. There has been deliberate avoidance of a ‘big bang’ approach, instead the intention has been to start small and steadily build toward effective and sustainable practice. It has benefited government to explore alternative routes, develop new skills and send out a statement about its commitment to better engagement and more transparent decision-making processes.

Next Steps – Phase Two of Digital Dialogues

Phase Two of Digital Dialogues will build on the networks, practices and processes established during Phase One: attempting to embed these across central government and test the guidance material produced. New case studies will be combined with a number carried over from Phase One to allow for longitudinal evaluation vital to capturing trends and establishing sustainable practice.

New case study leaders will be offered the tools utilised in Phase One of Digital Dialogues - blogs, forums and webchats. In addition, Phase Two will make available innovative applications that are beginning to see mainstream use - wikis, podcasting, file-sharing directories, audio-visual blogs, mapping software and virals. New case

study leaders will also be encouraged to combine applications - for example, converging polling software with forums, or photo-sharing with mapping tools.

At the close of Phase Two in Spring 2007, we will have a fuller, more detailed assessment of public demand for participation and government's capacity to respond to it via ICT. Digital Dialogues will produce an impressive data-set built over a 12-month period, combining both attitudinal and behavioural information about government and public participants. We will also continue to monitor policy impacts related to the online engagement activity. These outputs will be used to refine guidance and to inform future development of participation frameworks. It will also be used to reflect on arguments for bringing eParticipation and eGovernment closer together.

This data and learning generated through Digital Dialogues will undoubtedly benefit central government; it will also provide valuable comparative research for other institutions interested in improving their own public engagement. For the public it will present an instructive insight into the workings of key political institutions and generate a better understanding of the scope for democratic renewal and their power as active citizens on- and offline.

For more information and links to Phase Two case studies, visit www.digitaldialogues.org.uk.

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There is much debate around political engagement in the digital communications era, accessible both on the web and in academic literature. There are, however, few authoritative sources or works, such is the novelty of online politics and the small scale of research and development projects.

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GLOSSARY

Accessibility

Ensuring that a website is made usable to all visitors, including those with cognitive, physical or sensory disabilities;

Analytics

Data about site traffic and usage, such as the number of people visiting a site, how they arrived at the site and how long they stayed on a given page;

Application

A software programme designed to perform a specific task or group of tasks such as word processing, instant messaging or file-sharing;

Asynchronous

Communication that occurs with a spatial and temporal delay, allowing participants to respond at their own convenience – deliberation in a forum is mostly asynchronous;

Blog

Short for weblog. A weblog is a content managed website that presents its entries in reverse chronological order and allows visitors to comment;

Blogger

Someone who has a blog;

Blogosphere

Describes the interconnected nature of blogs or the blogging community;

Browser

An application that enables a user to access and interact with the internet;

Bug

An error or fault in a computer programme that prevents it from working correctly;

Content

On a web page, content refers to the audio, text and visuals;

Consultation

A process of communication among various groups or individuals with the aim of obtaining views, imparting advice and exchanging information on given topics;

Convergence

The coming together of two or more disparate disciplines or technologies to produce something new. For example, the 'fax revolution' was produced by a convergence of telecommunications technology, optical scanning technology and printing technology;

Deliberation

The process of considering all sides of an issue or question before making a decision or passing judgment;

Digital

Refers to information processing techniques that convert data for more efficient transmission and storage;

Domain

A name by which a website is known and found via a browser– often referred to as URL or web address;

Download

To copy or move a file from a site to a device;

eCommerce

The process of buying or selling products via the web;

eDemocracy

The use of ICT to conduct political processes;

eGovernment

The utilisation of ICT to conduct the business of government;

eVoting

Voting enabled by ICT;

End user

The person who uses a computer application, as opposed to those who developed or administer it;

Extranet

A company or organisation's internal computer network (intranet) that is partially accessible to outside users;

File sharing

The practice of swapping files with other people over the internet;

Firewall

A firewall allows or blocks traffic into and out of a private network;

Flash

An animation format used to develop interactive graphics for websites as well as desktop publications and games;

HTML

Abbreviation of 'hyper text mark up language' - the authoring language used to create world wide web pages;

Hardware

The electronic, electrical and mechanical components of a computer system - the computer, printer, terminal;

ICT

Abbreviation of information and communication technology – commonly used to refer to software;

IT

Abbreviation of information technology – commonly refers to hardware;

Instant messaging

A form of communication which takes place online in real-time;

Internet

The worldwide, publicly accessible network of interconnected computer networks, which allows users to interact and exchange information;

Intranet

An intranet is a private computer network used by companies, institutions and organisations;

Link

An active connection to another web location or other internet resource – commonly a link is presented as text;

Microsite

Satellite site attached to but independent of a corporate site;

Mobile

Portable or wireless communications devices such as mobile phones, laptops and PDA;

Moderation

In an online context, moderation is a way of maintaining rules or standards on a website. A moderator may remove unsuitable, aggressive or offensive contributors from the website or forum in accordance with the site's moderation policy;

MP3

An audio file type;

Narrowcast

The process of delivering data to a specific audience segment;

Online forum

An application for holding themed discussions between large groups of participants;

Open source

Refers to any programme whose source code is made available for anyone to work on, modify or learn from;

Participation

The act of sharing in the activities of a group. In politics, it refers to the process by which individuals, groups and organisations are consulted about or have the opportunity to become actively involved in a policy project, discussion or decision-making;

Platform

The type of computer or operating system on which a software application runs – for example, PC or Mac;

Podcasting

The method of distributing multimedia files via subscription, such as audio programmes or music videos over the internet for playback on mobile devices or computers;

Portal

A website 'gateway' that serves as a starting point to other destinations and services on the web such as email, forums and search engines;

Proxy blogging

When someone produces a blog pretending to be someone else;

RSS

Abbreviation for really simple syndication- an alternative means of accessing the vast amounts of information that now exist on the world wide web. Instead of browsing websites for information of interest the information is sent directly to the user via an aggregator or feeder;

Real time

'Live' internet activity taking place as it is happening without delay;

Referrer

The webpage from which a visitor came to another webpage based on an active link;

Rich media

Multimedia content on a website such as audio, video or special effects, allowing user interaction;

Search engines

An internet facility that helps users find websites – examples include Google or MSN. Users can locate the information they want by using keywords;

Site Map

A diagram or arrangement of words that shows users of a site how the content and pages of the site are linked and accessed;

Social software

Software that lets people connect, meet and collaborate by use of the internet;

Software

Programmes that tell a computer which tasks to perform, for example word processing or photo editing. Distinguished from hardware, which refers to the physical parts of a computer;

Spam

Refers to unsolicited, unwanted or irrelevant messages, especially commercial advertising in mass quantities;

Spyware

Any software that gathers information about a person or organisation without their knowledge, used mainly for advertising purposes;

Stakeholder

A stakeholder is a person who has an interest in a policy or project;

Streaming

Technology that enables the playback of sound or video without the need to download the entire resource file in advance;

Tagging

Assigning keywords to content to make it easier to search for;

Tags

In HTML, tags are the codes that determine the structure and presentation of information within a document. Tag codes are enclosed in brackets, for example, <H1> Introduction</H1> is a tag indicating that the word 'introduction' should be treated as a level 1 heading;

Technology

Hardware and software that allow users to do tasks more efficiently and effectively;

Track back

A mechanism for communication between blogs whereby different websites can post messages to one another to alert one another to related resources;

UGC/user generated content

Content on websites that has been created and uploaded by the users of that site;

URL

Abbreviation of 'uniform resource location', the global address of documents and other resources on the web;

Unique visitors

The individual visitors that visit a site. A unique visitor may visit a site several times a week; however, because it is the same person, it can only count as one visitor;

Upload

Opposite of download. Transferring data from a device to a site;

VoIP

Stands for 'voice over internet protocol'. The technology used to transmit voice conversations over the internet – sometimes known as internet telephony;

Viral

In an online marketing context, this means a technique that encourages people to pass on a campaign to their peers, resulting in exponential growth of that campaign's visibility and participation rates;

Virus

A programme written to cause damage to a computer system. Many viruses can damage files and even hardware. Viruses can be transmitted via email attachments, downloads or be present on a disk;

Web 2.0

Refers to a 'second generation' of software available on the web, that lets users collaborate and share information online - blogs, wikis, tags, podcasts are all examples of web 2.0 applications;

Webchat

Form of instant messaging application allowing real-time communication;

Wiki

Web-based application which allows users to add content to or edit a webpage;

Wireless

Networking without any wires, meaning that data is transmitted over electromagnetic waves rather than wire connections;

World wide web

Often referred to as www or the web, it is the collective term for information and sites accessed over the internet using a web browser

WYSIWG

Stands for 'what you see is what you get' in reference to text editors that allow users to format their comments and posts.

