

DIGITAL DIALOGUES

Third Phase Report: August 2007 – August 2008



An independent review into the use of online technologies to enhance engagement between central government and the public

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The Hansard Society is the UK's leading non-partisan political research and education charity, which exists to strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics. It has been conducting research into the political and social implications of digital information and communications technology (ICT) for over 10 years.

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The Democratic Engagement Branch (DEB) of the Ministry of Justice has a cross-government remit for promoting engagement with the public; the findings from Digital Dialogues will be used to develop government's appreciation of the role of new technologies in this context.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors. The Hansard Society and the Ministry of Justice are neither for nor against. They are, however, happy to publish these views and to invite analysis and discussion of them.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital Dialogues is an independent review of ways in which central government can use new technologies to promote public engagement and democratic renewal. It has been commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and carried out by the Hansard Society.

This third and final phase has focused, where possible, on multi-platform approaches to online engagement or on sustained approaches to computer mediated deliberation; the intention has been to keep pace with changes to broader internet usage. Previous phases have included 18 case studies and this report adds a further seven, whose intended scope and nature are summarised below:

CASE STUDY	PLATFORMS USED	ENGAGEMENT STYLE	TARGET USERS
Office of Children's Commissioner (OCC)	Social Networking site and Blog	Listening	Members of the public (children)
Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)	Blog with social networking and file sharing channels	Informing/networking	Members of the public (older people)
Office of National Statistics (ONS)	Blog, wiki and forum	Deliberating; developing a community of practice	Members of the public (blog) and stakeholders (wiki and private forum)
Office of the Prime Minister (10 Downing Street)	Debate Mapping technology	Deliberating	Key stakeholders (journalists and academics)
Food Standards Agency (FSA)	Blog	Informing	Members of the public
Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)	Suite of Blogs	Informing	Members of the public and key stakeholders
Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)	Panel	Listening	Experts

Our research shows that online engagement exercises with clear objectives have fared better than those with undefined goals. Websites that combine careful planning and appropriate marketing with the development of reflexive engagement strategies have a greater chance of

success. In such cases, policy leads have benefited from user input with government departments seeing enhanced public trust and receiving positive feedback from stakeholders. In turn, end-users report more faith in the political process and better understanding of government.

In a pattern familiar to anyone involved in online discussions, many visitors to government engagement sites do not contribute directly to discussions – instead preferring to read other people's posts. This means that site moderators were not required to manage as large a volume of traffic as many had initially feared they might. A key part of their role was to generate interest by providing content, encouraging posts, managing responses and giving feedback about the policy process – as much facilitation as moderation.

Successful online engagement exercises stimulate high quality interactions: in such cases, moderators provide guidance to participants and invite reasoned input – quality rather than quantity of posts is valued and timely interventions (such as summaries and debate triggers for users) to keep discussion flowing are valued. Simply by explaining how user comments are being processed (or how the public can take part in the policy process) engenders high levels of user satisfaction.

Members of the public visited the Digital Dialogues websites for a range of reasons – from general interest in online engagement to a strong interest on the policy matters being discussed. Many had previously not engaged in political processes; even when they had, most were initially critical of government. Such distrust was overcome when moderators facilitated open discussion and provided information to website users.

When government departments were reticent, they courted controversy and disengagement became inevitable. Some websites failed to gain traction (measured through few repeat visits) because users did not believe that anyone was listening or responding to their perspectives; in such cases, departments were paralysed by a sense of 'risk' and failed to harness the range of engagement opportunities at their disposal – responding only on topics deemed 'safe'.

The most successful websites devote resources (time, people and technology) to their online engagement exercise and this makes it possible to satisfy user requirements and provide professional standards of deliberation.

Some online engagement exercises are not designed to have a policy impact; in one such case, a blog set up to inform the public, had sufficiently high level of ministerial and policy team involvement that a user comment was nonetheless able to stimulate a policy review; websites that were disconnected from their policy or ministerial brief, or constrained by a long chain of command, engendered less user satisfaction (both among participants and the government officials running the exercise).

Most participating departments observed – at a minimum – that online engagement provided them with organisational, data handling and transparency tools; those with good marketing strategies (or who achieved media attention) noted that their exercise had led to the broadening out of engagement to people on the periphery of the policy process; those who were able to generate a sustainable community of practice noted that online deliberations allowed them to bridge space and time.

The government departments that benefit the most from online forms of deliberation engage the public (and/or stakeholders) at various stages in the policy process: where government departments were too fixed in their approach, they failed to capitalise on their investment; those with a reflexive and experimental approach were able to adapt to meet the challenges posed by online engagement.

Online engagement speeds up existing process; departments that connect their online and offline processes are more likely to have an integrated and efficacious approach to policy; in such cases, democratic disengagement becomes less of a risk than in departments that lack a coherent approach.

MINISTERIAL FOREWORD



For almost three years the Digital Dialogues project has supported the government's commitment to increase public participation in policy development. We have come a long way in this time, and there is much wider acceptance across government that citizens expect to be able to engage us online. This third Digital Dialogues report provides practical guidance for government agencies and politicians that want to make the most of opportunities to engage in this way. It emphasises the need to embed engagement in our processes and culture, and to be open to adapting our policies as a result of effective public participation.

The Government recently set out its plans for involving citizens in decision-making in the Ministry of Justice's Governance of Britain programme and the Department of Communities and Local Government's Community Empowerment programme. In these plans, talking with people face-to-face remains a central activity. However, Digital Dialogues has shown us how online methods can complement more traditional techniques: they can reach different audiences, provide less formal avenues to engage, and help to maintain contact with people beyond a single engagement event.

Online engagement presents exciting possibilities for the Government to converse with citizens. As the 2007 Power of Information Review recognized, there are new types of communities forming online with which government agencies could productively engage – if they take the right approach. Digital Dialogues provides advice on how to successfully connect with these communities. It also highlights the benefits of online engagement when it is properly run: well-informed policy and good relationships between citizens and their government.

It will be a continuing challenge for government agencies to take advantage of online communication options as they emerge. It will require the continuing devotion of time and development of expertise. The Digital Dialogues programme demonstrates that the Government is prepared to meet this challenge by testing new methods, accepting expert advice, and sharing good practice.

I commend the Hansard Society for this valuable report, and for its work throughout the Digital Dialogues programme. I also appreciate the participation of my Ministerial colleagues and the government officials who were willing to try different methods of reaching the public, and who provided the case studies for the Digital Dialogues programme.

I trust that this report will encourage even more of my government colleagues to undertake online engagement, and promote greater public participation in discussions of policy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Wills". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Michael Wills MP

Minister of State at the Ministry of Justice

INTRODUCTION

Digital Dialogues is an independent review of ways in which online communication tools (such as social networking sites and blogs) have been used by central government to support public engagement. The Digital Dialogues initiative was set up by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ)¹ and carried out by the Hansard Society from 2006 to 2008; the initiative was launched at a time when the public were already engaging politically online – albeit not with the government. It aimed to:

- raise central government’s awareness of the potential uses of new technology in communications and engagement contexts;
- develop case studies to explore the issues affecting online engagement between government and the public; and
- promote efficacious practices across central government.

During the initial phase of Digital Dialogues, the Hansard Society helped government departments and agencies to set up websites that suited their engagement needs: some were running a formal consultation and wanted to broaden their reach; others were interested in exploring different ways of involving and informing stakeholders and the public. From these online encounters emerged case studies that assessed the capacity of new technologies to support central government’s engagement practices and provided recommendations for those seeking to develop that capability. The first report was published in December 2006, containing the six original case studies and draft guidance for government officials.²

The second phase of Digital Dialogues embedded the practical experience acquired through the first. It offered government departments and agencies involved in Phase 1 the opportunity to continue exploring new forms of online engagement, should they wish to. For many, a dilemma was raised: is it possible to increase public understandings of government while ensuring that their concerns are heard and acted upon? The report provided guidance that

1 Then the Department for Constitutional Affairs.

2 Available at www.digitaldialogues.org.uk/interim report - providing background details about the pilot as well as showcasing the various case studies and draft guidance that emerged from them.

reflected the need for a sustainable approach to online engagement; it was published in August 2007.³

With the social networking capacities of the interactive web, and particularly Web2.0⁴, becoming pivotal in citizens' everyday lives and in campaigning contexts, the third phase of Digital Dialogues began to explore how these could be harnessed by government. Phase 3 incorporated case studies in which government departments and agencies were using diverse methods of online engagement, or embedding previous experience into sustained practice. In the few cases studies in which participating departments or agencies were new to online engagement, we explored the issues involved in changing communication cultures to accommodate them. In those where departments or agencies had developed a more self-sufficient practice, we examined the capacity for new methods of online engagement to broaden and deepen participation.

This report has been prepared to inform government approaches to online engagement. It gives practical guidance to suit a range of engagement contexts and styles; this is provided alongside a précis of the debates surrounding democratic renewal, online deliberation and governance – a useful scene-setter for all readers. This background and the report's conclusions highlight the issues faced by government departments who seek to engage and consult the public and stakeholders using new systems of communication. The case studies – detailed at the end of the report – are particularly relevant to members of the public who are interested in engaging with government; they are also useful to *engagement* professionals and academics, providing a benchmark for government's approach to online engagement and the shifting patterns of democracy and governance in the UK.

Taken together, the various sections of the report – the guidance, background, conclusions, and the individual case studies – highlight the factors that help and hinder online engagement. The report illustrates how approaches that focus too much on the technology without considering the need to communicate (and how) fare less well than those that embed good understandings of citizens, governance and online deliberation. Where government departments and agencies invest the time and effort to engage with citizens, there is a marked efficacy effect: public cynicism is reduced when policies and processes are explained; public trust increases when people feel heard.

³ Available at www.digitaldialogues.org.uk/secondreport.

⁴ Web2.0 is a term used to define web-based tools and sites that are interactive and allow for user-created content.

Online deliberations that inform the public about how their contributions are being considered, or – if not – how (or where) they can be expressed more effectively, engender trust. Where the role of the engagement exercise is to build and sustain a community of practice or stakeholder base, a reflexive approach to online engagement can help government departments to develop good practice. The collaborative nature of online deliberation can – at first – seem alien to government officials, stakeholders and the public: they require new approaches to ‘risk’ and communication. Offering greater transparency (and therefore increased scrutiny), online deliberation provides a powerful way of improving public understandings of policy issues specifically and governance generally, and enhances public engagement – provided that it is conducted efficaciously.

For many government departments, this means understanding how to harness the benefits of new forms of communication: new technologies can both broaden and deepen engagement. This report highlights how to make online engagement work, basing its guidance on empirical evidence from the case studies; these, together with insights into the democratic context, provide the report with a depth of knowledge and the benefit of experience. The next section will provide a set of guidelines for good engagement that have been developed through the research findings, this is then followed by a summary of the key findings from the first two phases of Digital Dialogues and a discussion of the third phase. The next section contextualises online engagement within a landscape of democratic disenfranchisement and digital deficit, exploring the socio-technical issues around engaging online. Finally, the report concludes with a summary of the project and a detailed description of each of the case studies in Phase 3.

GUIDANCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When and how to engage – both online and offline – is a challenging question. Or at least it should be. What emerges from the three phases of Digital Dialogues is that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to online engagement and there are no right answers – what works in one situation can prove very wrong in another.

It is important to recognise engagement as a part of a wider process. It does not occur in isolation and so the chosen methods, tools and timing must be appropriate for the context in which it takes place. Methods of engagement must reflect the needs of the groups being engaged or consulted, be they the public or specialist stakeholders, as well as those of the organisation doing the consultation. As government increasingly looks to whole-of-government – or at least cross-departmental – consultations and at partnerships with local government and NGOs, this will again affect the way online engagement can be shaped.

From our research we have identified four conditions that lead to a higher probability of success with online engagement:

1. Engagement is embedded within the processes and culture of the organisation, it does not just happen as an afterthought or on the periphery.
2. The choice of engagement tool is driven by the need, not by the technology.
3. Engagement works when organisations are prepared to listen – risk aversion and a fear of exposing the organisation to the outside are the biggest inhibitors of good listening and, therefore, of successful online engagement.
4. Reflexivity is vital to success and organisations that are adaptable – able to listen, reflect, learn, respond and change – prove better at engagement.

When it comes to designing the engagement exercise itself, the findings suggest a further set of considerations that will affect the nature and format of your engagement:

Who is your audience?	Professional bodies will engage differently from members of the public, young people are more likely to be online than older people.
Is the engagement deep or shallow?	Do you want a few people involved to a high level of detail or a large number of people providing more less-detailed responses?
How structured do you want the engagement to be?	More structured can be easier to manage but might stifle open discussion and the emergence of innovative ideas.
How managed is the engagement?	Will you exercise control over the process or will you allow stakeholders to drive how the engagement develops?
What tools will enhance your engagement?	Can multimedia and multi-platform techniques provide an added benefit to the engagement exercise and how can they be deployed?
At what stage do you want to engage?	As part of a consultation or before the development of a green paper?
What are you trying to do?	Whether you are trying to enquire, consult or inform will affect how you go about engaging.

Core Guidance

New technologies can be used to successfully promote democratic engagement throughout the policy cycle, enabling government to run consultations, inform and hear from the public, develop networks and build communities of practice. The various tools available are listed in Appendix A and this next section provides some core guidance that will assist organisations developing online engagement projects.

A key finding from Digital Dialogues is that online engagement exercises require time to gather momentum; simply setting up a website in the hope that people will come to it achieves little. Sites might initially spark interest (provided there is sufficient publicity), but this is not sustainable enough to enhance public engagement and political efficacy. Consider too that media attention is likely to be negative if the content and interaction are poor.

For online engagement to be useful to government, stakeholders and citizens, certain criteria have to be met. Public expectations of online engagement often start out low, even if their ideals are high. Successful engagement tools can overcome these barriers through careful planning and the development of good content and flexible practices. A well thought through engagement tool can be used to co-ordinate sustained and in-depth engagement with stakeholders throughout the policy cycle, provided it meets the requirements for success that are typical of offline forms of engagement.

The guidance below has been developed iteratively throughout the three phases of Digital Dialogues and is drawn directly from the case studies described in the three reports and supported by background research. It is by no means exhaustive; its aim is to highlight the process of setting up, running and developing online engagement and to promote good practice. The steps have been divided into three sub-sections:

- Pre-launch;
- Going live;
- Closing.

Under each step, key considerations are outlined. These are deliberately designed to be broad and generic because we recognise that every situation is different and unique. These guidelines, therefore, cover a range of techniques, tools and users potentially involved in an engagement exercise.

Pre-launch

The first step is to clearly identify and articulate your aims and objectives. Without these, it is impossible to decide on an appropriate engagement strategy. During this stage, the key questions are:

- What is the objective of the exercise?
- What styles of engagement are you using and why? For example public/stakeholder; formal/informal; open/closed
- What are the desired outcomes of the project and what outputs are you intending to produce (such as consultation responses, awareness raising or policy documents)?
- What risks do you face (internal and external)?

Online engagement is a multi-disciplinary exercise. It is important to bring together policy, communications and IT teams to develop the processes and tools. Each can contribute to the development of the overall engagement strategy. Consider managing risk, such as that people will not participate; that they will be critical or hostile; that the exercise will attract negative press or no media interest and do not ignore potential internal risks, such as any inherent resistance to openness or innovation. Subsequently, sufficient resources need to be devoted to the exercise so that they can remain involved throughout: there is a role for each.

Once the exercise has been properly scoped and the key internal stakeholders engaged, it is important to think about how you will market the exercise and recruit participants. Promotional activity needs to reflect your goals for the project, suit your budget and follow established department and governmental procedure. In this context, a balance of direct marketing and media relations techniques works well.

Give consideration to how the marketing and publicity of the engagement exercise will continue throughout the process, not just at the beginning; marketing must be ongoing to sustain and generate interest. When considering recruitment, it is important to consider:

- What types of people you want to recruit – is there a specific demographic or skill-set or do you want to get a range of people 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 and are there any extraneous issues that might damage, derail or negatively impact on your engagement exercise?
- Are your participants in a 'hard-to-reach' group?

As well as using conventional marketing methods, consider ways of raising your online visibility before launch. Page rankings in search engines give a sense of the penetration of your

engagement exercise online; choose a domain name that will reflect the search words that the public and stakeholders will use to find the site. Sites that are highest in search engine rankings are those that link to other sites and receive reciprocal links. Consider creating networks with existing online communities and resources. Promote the website name in your other material wherever appropriate to build awareness of it.

At this stage, it is important to think about resource implications throughout the exercise. Moderation on government websites does not require much administration, given the low volume of posts; but moderators are required to facilitate discussion, generate content, respond to users and provide feedback about the policy process. Before considering these issues, it is important to decide how you are going to evaluate the website, and tie performance indicators in with those used in the broader exercise.

Useful indicators for online engagement exercises include registrations (where relevant), posts/comments, unique visitors and repeat visits. The indicators you use should be built into the design of your website. For example, if you are basing your internal evaluation on site traffic, it is important to ensure that you have a suitable statistics package incorporated within your website.

Good engagement is not about quantity and so it is more important to identify ways of learning about participants and the result of their engagement. Important issues to consider are:

- Whether online activity was drawn into consultation or policy development processes;
- How much involvement participants had in the eventual outcomes and engagement process;
- Whether the engagement exercise addressed their concerns;
- Whether the public was informed of the policy process?

With the abundance of Open Source Software (OSS), it is becoming possible for government departments to develop engagement sites in-house, should they desire to do so; many hire contractors and use proprietary software instead. Either way, it is important to identify functionality and engagement requirements (such as the statistics package, mentioned above) prior to build, to be clear about lead-in times, and to ensure the involvement of policy, communications and IT staff. Engagement is not about the technology per se but choosing the

wrong technology or a tool with poor functionality and low usability will negatively impact on the project.

The best engagement exercises start small. Design needs to be appealing, easy to use and consistent with your own branding and accessibility standards; a lack of conformity in these matters can lead to public distrust and confusion. Content needs careful thought: successful websites are engaging because they use the right kind of language (textual and visual) to convey information and invite feedback. When designing content, there are several questions that need to be considered:

- What are the key messages and priority questions?
- Do these need to be adapted from a consultation/policy document for publication on the web?
- Who is responsible for managing online content and making sure that information and discussions are regularly updated?
- Are they experienced in developing web copy?
- Will they have autonomy or will they require sign-off?
- Can the site make use of contributions from key policy makers?
- Will most content be developed prior to or after launch?
- Do you have static content for your various web-pages (see Appendix B)?
- Is content dynamic and can users make changes to it (as is the case for a wiki)?

More often than not, background information will be required by participants to enable them to take part and to inform their participation. Language can easily exclude people who are new to the policy area and so there can be a requirement to provide summaries of important policy debates, whereas those seasoned in political engagement may want to read policy documents in full. The terms of engagement need to be clearly articulated to those taking part in online deliberations (see Appendix C for an example). Such information must be displayed clearly on dedicated pages or via links to other websites. Where necessary, one or all of the following questions should be considered in consultation with the departmental consultation team, web team and legal experts:

- Does the site meet the required standards in the Cabinet Office Code of Consultation?
- 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?

- Who owns user generated comments and content and how can it be used?
- Are accessibility standards observed?

Technical problems can arise during an engagement exercise and users require contact details to report problems. These can be minimised by keeping a log of errors that emerge during live testing pre-launch. This should not be limited to checking for technical problems; 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'.

Going live

Where demographic information is required of participants (for example, in pre-engagement surveys – see Appendix D), it is important to ensure that your handling, storage, analysis and reporting of responses meets data protection standards. Initially, moderators need to be on hand to deal with any initial issues users have with registration and posting a comment. For this reason, it is vital that users have a point-of-contact for feedback and that a process has been developed to ensure that any comments or feedback provided is responded to quickly, accurately and appropriately.

One role of the moderator is to publish participant contributions (where necessary), facilitate discussion and provide information and guidance (see above). Approaches to moderation will depend on the nature of the engagement exercise. Additional factors to consider when developing moderation guidelines (examples can be found in Appendix E) are:

- Will you be moderating posts before or after they go live?
- Who can contribute – anyone or only registered users?
- What kind of platform are you using?
- Who is using the site – have they been consulted before and has this taken place online?

Moderators must check for new comments at regular intervals (the frequency will depend on the level of traffic but during busy periods it will be multiple times per day). Transparency in moderation is a very important component of successful engagement online. The moderation policy (outlined at the start of Appendix C) should always be provided for participants to read and applied consistently. If comments are moderated and removed then the poster should receive an explanation as to why; treat this as an exercise in education, not one of control.

Facilitation is the single most important aspect of any online engagement exercise and requires input from policy and communications experts. In its absence participants can lose interest and become frustrated, which can create reputational risks. It is therefore important to be clear who is responsible for content production, facilitation, prompting and so forth.

Regular policy updates and debate summaries are useful, providing returning users with an opportunity to catch up on the discussions that are taking place. This helps the policy team to clarify issues that are being raised; as a guide, the more regularly they visit the deliberation (not necessarily always to participate) the more efficient and constructive the post-activity analysis will be. It is also good practice to offer participants an opportunity to review the summaries and make queries or suggestions for inclusion.

Closing

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 and how the public will be kept informed. In addition, if the intention is to use the site again for a follow-up exercise, you must decide how it will be developed and who by and whether a new URL is required.

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 engagement tools. It is important to consider:

- Who will be responsible for analysing the data, and how findings will be used;
- Whether the key performance indicators were useful in highlighting key issues and trends.

At the end of each exercise it is good practice to provide – as a package – transcripts, an executive summary and a statistical report. Consider asking participants to review the report. Provide a deadline and request comments on omissions or clarifications. Retain editorial oversight but do give genuine consideration to suggestions.

It is important as soon as the exercise closes to explain any next steps to the users. You do not need to present conclusions or definitive findings at this stage, but it is important to manage expectations. Provide information about when you are able to make a ‘final’ response, who will make it and where it will be distributed from.

It is good practice to conduct an evaluation at the end of any public engagement activity (see Appendix D for suitable questions); 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 engagement exercise.

CORE FINDINGS FROM PHASES 1 AND 2

Having presented an overview of Digital Dialogues and documented the guidance and recommendations from the project, the next section will summarise the core findings from Phases 1 and 2. During the Digital Dialogues project, the Hansard Society developed a range of methods to evaluate the case studies. Our primary data came from participant feedback: users were encouraged to fill in short surveys before and after taking part; through their responses, we were able to observe the impact of the web deliberations on their attitudes towards political engagement and efficacy. Participants' responses were analysed in the context of interactions on the relevant case study websites: this approach enabled us to identify issues that helped or hindered political deliberation. We also surveyed participating government departments and agencies to identify the challenges they faced and lessons learnt. Our reports for Phases 1 and 2 contained guidelines based on these evaluations; the individual case studies were presented to showcase different styles of and orientations to engagement.

We noted that many of the people taking part in Phase 1 were new to policy engagement (although they were interested in the issues being tackled and were keen to explore how new technologies could facilitate their participation). Many appreciated being given the opportunity to put their views to government officials and – in some cases – ministers. However, although online forms of engagement attracted higher volumes of interest than traditional methods, they did not sustain it; users required more interaction with government officials, a greater range of discussion themes, better networks with relevant online communities and multi-channel styles of communication. In addition, many felt that in the absence of information about the policy process, they lost motivation to continue participating.

Many participants in Phase 1 were drawn to the engagement exercises because of their familiarity with online political deliberations in non-government contexts; this meant that their feedback was invaluable in shaping the draft guidance about how new technologies could be used to support political engagement. Our recommendations focused on the need for interactivity (between participants and government officials) rather than information

dissemination.⁵ A central point emerged: unlike traditional forms of government communication, those mediated by the internet offer an opportunity for deliberation; indeed, with the rapid development of social networking tools, this has become a minimum requirement for users.⁶

One of the objectives of the second phase of Digital Dialogues was to embed a more dialogic practice within government departments. From the first phase of the pilot, we had developed an appreciation of the importance of doing so. Where successful, the earliest case studies had provided the public with direct understandings of government – the effects of mediation and ‘spin’ were greatly reduced. For example, even though the high profile blog of minister David Miliband received criticism (for being too ‘on message’ and expensive), some respondents noted that their impression of him and of the government had changed for the better on reading the blog.

Despite this potential efficacy benefit, many of the government departments and agencies participating in Phase 2 were concerned about the risks associated with online deliberation. These ranged from a lack of engagement by the public to outright hijacking by campaign groups. Such risk-aversion was framed by government officials as a reaction to public cynicism towards political processes (described earlier).⁷ A second objective for Phase 2 was to highlight how these risks could be offset through well thought-out engagement practices. A final objective for Phase 2 was to explore how multi-platform websites could broaden and deepen participation.

Evaluating 12 case studies, Phase 2 of the Digital Dialogues initiative moved from a general exploration of the suitability of online forms of engagement for central government to a specific critique of their deployment. We found that well run websites developed their own momentum with people contributing infrequent but regular posts and making repeat visits.⁸

5 When comparing, for example, user feedback from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) engagement exercise to that received by the government minister David Miliband’s blog, the latter was praised for the regularity of site updates; both were criticised, however, for their lack of interaction.

6 Respondents to our feedback surveys pointed out that their motivation to participate in discussion depended on the extent to which it was encouraged. Thus, in the case of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) case-study in Digital Dialogues 1, participants reported feeling disinclined to engage because the government officials running the site had a very low presence. Meanwhile, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) may have encouraged discussions, but respondents – used to the speed with which online deliberation occurred – were dissatisfied with the slow pace of official responses.

7 Everyday conversations about current affairs, however, are satirical, cynical and apathetic. This has been interpreted by some scholars as a revolt against politicians’ monopoly over political processes: see P. Bourdieu (1991), *Language and Symbolic Power* (Harvard: Harvard University Press); also, L. Van Zoonen (2007), *Entertaining the Citizen: when politics and popular culture converge*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield).

8 The DCLG forum managed to achieve this, unlike the DWP one – in part because of the sustained presence of government officials who provided useful summaries of the discussions.

Meanwhile, instantaneous approaches such as the DCLG webchats with government ministers provided a useful focal point and attracted broader but more superficial participation.

Those without ministerial briefs (the SDC, FSA and Party Funding case studies) were able to develop reflexive approaches to online engagement. These provided insights into the ways that web-based deliberation can be used at different stages of the policy process, and how various platforms can be used simultaneously to achieve different styles of engagement (as in the case of the Party Funding case study, which used forums and webchats at particular stages of the consultation).

Throughout Phase 2, we saw that stakeholders were more reluctant to use online deliberations (unless they were invitation-only) when responding to consultations than were members of the public, preferring traditional forms of communication that provided privacy. Meanwhile, many of those who did engage with the case study websites were generally distrustful of politicians and the policy process before taking part; because of this, they were using the website to get their point across, but did not expect their views to be taken on board – even though they thought they should be.

For successful case study owners, progress beyond such recalcitrance was slow and hard-won; stringent ministerial briefs and a rigid application of the letter – if not the spirit – of the Cabinet Office's Code of Consultation made the deliberative process seem protracted in some cases. However in others, clear terms of engagement, timely outcomes and input from moderators ensured that users and government departments or agencies were satisfied with the engagement site.

That is not to say that websites developed as part of a formal consultation were, by necessity, hidebound; even where they faced restrictions in terms of the subjects that could be discussed, there was still room to develop flexible engagement styles. Their ability to use them depended, in part, on their orientations to the exercise: where they were reluctant to take part in discussions, adopted heavy moderation, or did not provide enough feedback to participants, users became dissatisfied with their overall experience seeing it as a wasted opportunity. Those willing to interact with participants were able to diffuse criticism effectively, even if they did not attract large volumes of posts.

One of the challenges, then, for participating government departments and agencies was to overcome the reticence of those taking part in the deliberations. Another was to develop an

engagement strategy; more people visited the case study websites than participated in discussions (many said that they benefited simply from reading other people's comments), raising questions about the kinds of engagement that could be engendered. Moreover, the default position for some participating departments was based on a risk-assessment in which the threat of hijack gave rise to an over-zealous approach; the tendency in such cases was to clamp down on dissent rather than engage, giving rise to the kinds of user dissatisfaction described earlier.

Those government departments that devoted sufficient resources to administering their website – ensuring coordination between policy leads, communications experts and IT support – attracted positive feedback and felt that their experience was more rewarding than those which did not. Some case studies were impeded by convoluted chains of command, and were surprised about the amount of time required of staff involved in moderating and interacting with even small numbers of participants.

When effectively managed, case study teams were able to experiment with different styles of engagement and learn about the emerging role of the public in policy making. They harnessed public feedback and developed new proposals which could be tested out during the online deliberations. The iterative nature of this process – when it occurred – appealed to case study owners and participants alike. In its absence, users complained about the lack of contributions from policy officials and the poor quality of discussion between users.

A clear pattern emerged from Phases 1 and 2: online deliberation could be focused and structured (going against the grain of the hitherto anarchic styles of political web-deliberations) so long as they provided feedback and information to participants. Process, rather than outcome, was important to users; those departments that focused on the latter faced serious criticism from participants and did not see much benefit from their experience. And while online engagement did not necessarily provide the magic bullet solution to political disaffection, it was found – where successful – to initiate a process whereby public attitudes could be challenged and that new understandings could be developed about the policy area under discussion.

SUMMARY OF PHASE 3

Phase 3 of Digital Dialogues incorporated seven case studies; some emerged from already existing web projects – others were specially commissioned by departments or policy teams new to online engagement. Full details of the case studies can be found at the end of the report, while brief summaries are given below, starting with those case studies which explored how teams new to online forms of engagement adjusted to them and ending with those which examined how more seasoned policy teams are experimenting with online forms of engagement.

Office of the Children’s Commissioner – ShoutOut

The policy team involved in establishing this website was new to online engagement. Offline events were generally the preferred route for engaging young people; the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (OCC) tends to work closely with schools and youth projects to fulfil its representative function. The pilot was developed to enable the OCC to develop insights into the issues surrounding online engagement.

A closed social networking site was established; children could only register to use the site if they were invited to do so by the OCC (via their schools and projects) following their participation in an offline event that helped children to focus on the topics they wanted to discuss online.

Combining a blog, forum and a question and answer platform, the website provided young people with ways of engaging with the Children’s Commissioner who raised topics with them and responded to their questions. Although there were set times at which the Children’s Commissioner would be available (online sessions were organised with schools and projects accordingly), it was hoped that individual participants would return to the site to talk to each other and to the OCC staff in more detail about the issues that affected them.

Concerns about child safety online (raised by schools and projects) meant that the registration process was cumbersome; participants were discouraged from using their own emails when

registering to protect their privacy, which meant that it was hard for them to log-in to the site from their homes to continue discussing topics beyond the sessions with the Children's Commissioner. In addition, the site was limited because many of the children taking part in the engagement exercise were below the legal age needed to access video sharing sites. Given the popularity of multimedia platforms amongst younger people, it had been intended to provide a means for them to download and upload videos as a way of participating; the absence of such an option meant that the online engagement was text heavy.

The OCC has since set up a website that provides young people with a range of interactive areas discussing set topics. It combines a range of interactive features; children can use interactive image-based programs and games to express their ideas or can make comments on particular topics raised by the site. The site also has a calendar that alerts visitors to important events and allows them to download audio files. Log in is not compulsory, but those who register with the site can get involved in discussions. Reports of the OCC's work in representing young people are also available for download. This seems to offer the best model for engaging young people online safely and in ways that will maintain their interest.

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) – GenerationXperience

The policy team involved was new to using online forms of engagement (although aware of its use by other DWP teams in the past), and wanted to explore various methods in a non-consultation context. A web strategy was devised to tie in with the offline awareness raising campaign for the over-50s (called GenerationXperience), which was being run in conjunction with the Department of Health, with involvement from a number of non-government bodies. A public relations organisation was also involved in the project, which aimed to raise the profile of the over-50s in the UK through a number of local and regional events, supported by online engagement.

The full range of online tools (such as a channel on Facebook and YouTube) that had been developed to support online engagement were not deployed in this exercise, despite the fact that social networking and file sharing sites would have supported and linked into local and regional events. And although there was significant journalistic and online interest in GenerationXperience, interactions on the main platform (the blog) petered out. Partly, this was a problem of work-flow within the policy team; the resources originally devoted to the

initiative were diverted elsewhere. However, effective planning and the cooption of guest bloggers and buy-in from campaign partners would have ensured that the blog did not appear faceless or out of touch.

The DWP is keen to learn from the experience of this project and to develop a strategy for harnessing open source social software to enrich their engagement work in future: a key factor for the organisation is time and resource allocation to ensure that websites are regularly updated and posts are consistently responded to. Given the extent of public interest in their work, the DWP also needs to develop a strategy for media monitoring so that they can respond effectively when people are driven to their sites (by other websites) to ensure that their interest is sustained. This requires a re-examination of communication strategies to ensure that they are properly responsive and in keeping with the forms of engagement being deployed.

Office of National Statistics – 2011 Census Outputs consultation blog

The policy team involved in this project were new to online engagement, despite the fact that the Office of National Statistics (ONS) had developed a blog to accompany an online consultation survey as part of Phase 2 of Digital Dialogues. This case study developed a similar format: an online survey was developed by the ONS and respondents to it were driven to the blog, where particular issues raised by the consultation were discussed in more detail.

The consultation team also hoped to develop a more sustainable community of practice – perhaps even extending beyond those known to the ONS census team; a forum and wiki were set up alongside the blog for this purpose. Only registered users (those invited to participate) could contribute to either, although members of the public could read the wiki (and contribute to the blog).

The multi-platform approach was devised as a way of engaging both stakeholders and members of the public. In the event, it attracted mainly those who had been involved with the ONS in the past. Many users appeared to have particular gripes with the census team's approach, raising concerns that fell outside of the remit of the consultation. As a result, the ONS adopted a zealous approach to moderation, which may have deterred participation and reinforced unfavourable perceptions of the policy team's work.

A particular issue for the ONS now that it has achieved independence from a Ministerial brief is to explore how online technologies can be used in less structured ways. In particular, there is a need to find ways of making engagement more meaningful to participants; even if people's views can not be taken on board, a communications strategy must be found to highlight how and why the policy strategy is determined.

Number 10 – Debate Mapper

Since its inception, the 10 Downing Street website has attempted to engage the public in a number of often high-profile ways. The most well known of these is the ePetitions site, but there have been a number of less conspicuous attempts to explore the ways that online forms of engagement can revitalise public interest in politics – even where there is no policy impact.

Coinciding with Tony Blair's final weeks as prime minister, a series of public lectures were held in which he set out his view of contemporary issues affecting the UK. The final lecture on the media and public life became the focus of this engagement exercise. Journalists and commentators were invited (by Reuters and the Hansard Society, respectively) to take part in an argument mapping exercise about the lecture, which was testing new technology which aimed to facilitate deliberation (rather than polarised debate).

In the event, few people took part in the web deliberations. Invitees commented on the prohibitively complex interface that greeted them, but there were other reasons for their non-participation. Most were interested in commenting on the lecture in their own newspaper columns, and they set out their position on the topics raised by the former prime minister there rather than on the deliberative site.

However, the Debate Graph team (who had developed the technology that was used in this exercise) ensured that the content of media articles that discussed Tony Blair's speech were incorporated into the argument map so that it was possible to view the argumentative terrain surrounding the debates about the role of the media in shaping public attitudes.

Food Standards Agency Chief Scientist's Blog

During Phase 2 of Digital Dialogues, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) set up a blog, with support from the Hansard Society. The blog had no policy remit; its goal was to increase

public awareness of the Chief Scientist's work and to provide an opportunity for individuals to comment on particular issues raised on the blog. In its first year of existence, it was runner up for the 'best newcomer' prize at the *New Statesman* New Media Awards.

No changes were made to the format of the blog during Phase 3; the aim was to explore how the Chief Scientist's blog developed over time. A no-frills site, the blog has nonetheless attracted a sustainably high level of interest and participation because of its ability to raise issues about which the public is concerned (food safety) in a relaxed and informative way, unconstrained by Ministerial brief.

One of the issues facing the blog is the fact that it attracts a diverse audience. On the one hand, those more interested in the science behind the blog want to have more high-level discussions of the issues being tackled. But the public facing nature of the blog means that there is a requirement on the FSA to produce entries that have a broader appeal, given the FSA's remit (to engage and undertake outreach). It is currently investigating the possibility of running a suite of blogs, catering to these divergent interests.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office Bloggers

David Miliband – foreign secretary – has been blogging throughout his previous ministries; Digital Dialogues has incorporated evaluations of his previous blogs in Phases 1 and 2. Unlike in previous incarnations, David Miliband's current blog has been developed as part of a suite of blogs by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) whose global mission and understanding of the changing communications environment means that it is aware of the need to harness new technologies to engage those affected by its work.

The suite of blogs incorporated another ministerial blog as well as those of a number of embassy staff and delegates to a range of countries (from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe). Despite the sensitivity of the contexts from which the FCO bloggers were posting, they were given camcorders and encouraged to post videos of the environments in which they work. Many made multimedia entries to the blog, combining text with video to show the complexity of their work.

Although the blog was not designed to have any policy impact, there was one occasion when a comment from a reader of minister of state Jim Murphy's blog, inspired policy changes. Moreover, despite the relative lack of online experience of the bloggers, many have

impressive followings, with viewing figures and comments suggesting that there is a sustained interest in this kind of endeavour.

The FCO is aware that they may not be attracting people other than those who have a dedicated interest in the countries or subjects being tackled, but one of the advantages of its suite of blogs is its sustainability (which will outlive staff and ministerial changes). In addition, there is a growing sense of an online community with participants commenting on each other's posts from time-to-time, providing a multi-layered engagement opportunity.

Sustainable Development Commission Aviation Panel

A panel was set up by the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) before Phase 2 of Digital Dialogues which evaluated its first online deliberation. By the beginning of Phase 3, it had run another panel session and recruited more members – people with a specific stake in debates about sustainable living – to take part in online deliberations about consultation topics.

The deliberative style was developed by Dialogue by Design: panel members were asked a series of questions – in Phase 3 about the content of a publication on Aviation. They were also asked to comment on the iterative process in which they had been involved. In this way, the SDC were able to refine their understandings of engagement, and produce tangible outcomes from the process.

As a consequence of their focus on deep engagement, the SDC have developed expertise in panel and stakeholder engagement, and are considering ways of using different online platforms to engage both groups, and the public in sustainable policy development. One of the points of interest in this case study is the use of structured forms of engagement to ensure a high quality of response. By providing timely summaries of the emerging perspectives and soliciting feedback from participants about the process, they are developing efficacious practices while managing to engage early in the policy cycle.

THE CONTEXT FOR ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

Political disengagement is widespread in Great Britain. Voter turnout at general elections has fallen from a high of 83.9 per cent in 1950 to a low of 59.4 per cent in 2001: in 2005, it rose slightly (to 61.5 per cent) but the number of first-time voters continued to fall. These trends reflect a growing belief that the government is out of touch.⁹ Political parties are viewed similarly – their membership is declining, particularly amongst the young – but this does not suggest a lack of interest in politics. The emergence of issue based, activist structures,¹⁰ brings about a different style of participation; petitions are now the most popular form of engagement¹¹ despite the fact that their impact on policy processes is low:

[Petitions] are a useful backbench tool of minimal effect¹²

Meanwhile, political processes have become professionalised to the extent that the individual's stake in them is reduced. Instead of listening to the public via their representatives, the government relies on experts, pollsters and focus groups¹³. As political institutions become more centralised, individuals engage with issues and organisations on the periphery.¹⁴ In the UK, the gap between political institutions and citizens has been exacerbated by 'central and local government frameworks that focus solely on service improvements' rather than on the needs of the general public.¹⁵ Politics has become the domain of an active elite¹⁶ – the resulting culture within government has been described as one of 'bureaucratic dysfunction', where policy development has lost touch with its purpose.¹⁷

9 M.Thompson-Fawcett & C. Freeman (2006), *Living together: Towards inclusive communities in New Zealand* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press).

10 G. Stoker (2006), *Why politics matters: making democracy work* (England: Houndmills; New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

11 Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *Audit of Political Engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission).

12 A. Stevenson (2008), *Rise of the e-petition* (politics.co.uk) p. 1.

13 M. Mäilkiä, A.V. Anttiroiko & R. Savolainen (eds) (2004), *eTransformation in governance: New directions in government and politics* (Hershey, PA: Idea Group); P. Norris (2001), *Digital Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

14 A. Chadwick (2003), 'Bringing e-democracy back in: Why it matters for future research on E-governance', *Social Science Computer Review*, 21 (4), 443.

15 M. Lyons (2007), *Place-shaping: A shared ambition for the future of local government: Final report* (London: TSO).

16 C. Needham (2004), 'The Citizen as consumer: E-government in the United Kingdom and the United States'. In R. Gibson, A. Römmele & S. Ward (eds), *Electronic Democracy* (London: Routledge), pp.47-48; P. Norris (2001), *Digital Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

17 NZCCSS (2006), *Is any progress being made in care and protection for New Zealand children?* (Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services), p. 9.

But what is the solution? Is government able to engender the kinds of change needed to rekindle civic participation?

The Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement*¹⁸ explores the relationship between individuals and government and notes that efficacy is more evident amongst those who are already politically active. Only 50 per cent of the British population claims to be interested in becoming so; increasingly, government is viewed by citizens as 'mentally moribund, seriously incompetent and, on frequent occasion, offensively arrogant'.¹⁹ Public distrust is aggravated by a sense that the concerns of well-resourced lobbies are heard above their own;²⁰ public expressions of powerlessness are often accompanied by a belief that they are inadequately informed despite the plethora of news reports discussing policy, many of which appear to the reader as just another attempt to persuade.²¹

In response to declining public participation and trust, momentum has slowly started shifting towards re-engagement, but there is still a way to go before government can claim to have developed sound cross-departmental practices. There have nonetheless been steps in the right direction, based on an awareness that people want to do more than vote for an MP or councillor; they want to have a say in decision making or at least understand and believe in it.

In 2002, the *In the Service of Democracy* consultation paper invited input into the government's vision for a technologically enabled future. The green paper suggested that new media can help to bring about a restructuring of the relationship between citizens and state in line with proposed constitutional refinements, enabling individuals to become active participants rather than passive consumers. In its introduction, it suggested that:

[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.²²

18 The *Audit of Political Engagement* has been carried out since 2004 and identifies trends in political attitudes and engagement amongst the British public.

19 J. K. Galbraith (1992), *The culture of contentment* (Boston, M. A.: Houghton Mifflin) p.67.

20 A. Kakabadse, N.K. Kakabadse & A. Kouzmin (2003), 'Reinventing the democratic governance project through information technology? A growing agenda for debate', *Public Administration Review*, 63 (1), 44; A. Williamson (2007), *Empowering communities to action: Reclaiming local democracy through ICTs*, Paper presented at the Community Informatics Research Conference, Prato, Italy.

21 Ipsos MORI's annual survey highlights the fact that politicians and journalists consistently rank lowest in terms of public trust (IPSOS-Mori, 2007).

22 Cabinet Office (2002), *In the service of democracy* (London: TSO), pp. 5-6.

Constitutional reforms are ongoing (see below) and alongside these, government is promoting public engagement with the policy process. Moving towards a more deliberative approach, government departments have carried out an average of 609 consultations per year since 2003.²³ However, according to the *Audit of Political Engagement*, only 4 per cent of the public have responded to one; a further 14 per cent said that they did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to do so, despite wanting to.²⁴

The solution to this lack of efficacy has been framed in terms of political literacy – an issue being addressed, in part, by the introduction of mandatory citizenship education in schools.²⁵ Meanwhile, the government’s ‘together we can’ initiative – launched in 2005 – has been used to coordinate public engagement initiatives across central government. Government has begun to deepen its focus on citizen engagement and representative democracy through projects such as the Power of Information Review²⁶ and subsequent task force and a number of other new (or pending) initiatives, including:

Governance of Britain green paper: The proposals published in this green paper seek to address two fundamental questions – how should we hold power accountable, and how should we uphold and enhance the rights and responsibilities of the citizen? In response, the government is planning to engage people in a discussion on citizenship and British values and is conducting a series of events around the UK to gain input. This paper does not address the use of the internet as a tool for engagement although the engagement process itself will have an online component.

Community Empowerment Plan: Led by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), its aim is to enable people to play an active role in shaping the decisions affecting their communities. The plan carries a number of practical initiatives, such as the development of citizens’ juries, community kitties and local charters, and is due to be released in summer 2008. Whilst indications are that there is no specific focus on online engagement within the plan, it is understood that the use of the internet is addressed in a number of areas throughout.

This latest raft of measures highlights the government’s focus on reformulating the relationship between the individual, community and state so that it is less centralised with decisions being

23 See: www.berr.gov.uk/bre/index.html.

24 Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *Audit of Political Engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission).

25 This was made compulsory for under-16s in the Education Act 2002.

26 E .Mayo & T. Steinberg (2007), *The Power of Information Review* (London: Cabinet Office).

made by those directly affected by them (DCLG, 2008). For this to work, there is an inherent requirement on the part of the citizen to engage actively in the policy process and government is beginning to explore how the interactive aspects of the internet can be used to enable this process. The findings of Digital Dialogues become all the more important in this context because they highlight what happens when citizens and government *do* talk online, and why there is a need for a more sustained public deliberation with government. First, a brief reprise of the ways in which the individual and government has taken to the internet, via a re-examination of the concept of 'political engagement' online.

Online Solutions?

Internet use is rising, although a sizeable proportion of the British population is yet to go online. Only 57 per cent of UK homes have broadband internet access – up from 45 per cent one year earlier.²⁷ Low take-up results in a digital deficit that excludes those already marginalised; citizens who have no access are further excluded from social, cultural or economic activities – for example, failure to acquire basic ICT literacy skills reduces an individual's ability to gain employment and to participate actively in society.²⁸

The 'digital divide' is significant for eDemocracy projects since proximity to the internet is a direct and significant motivating factor for adoption.²⁹ An estimated 60 per cent of residents of Liverpool and Glasgow, for example, lack internet access at home,³⁰ meaning that these areas could become under-represented online. Part of the problem is that late adopters see the internet as expensive, intrusive or believe that it requires them to develop skills that they do not have; a vicious cycle of exclusion emerges.

Yet for the majority of internet users – research suggests that most earn above-average incomes; they are in the 25-45 cohorts, male and educated (OII, 2007) – the internet is a time- and cost-saving device that enables them to download music, stay in touch with people, access news and information, buy goods or make travel arrangements. According to survey respondents, it is used for these purposes more often than it is deployed as a means of engaging in political activities (OII, 2007). However, when people state that they do not

27 OFCOM (2008), *The Nations & Regions Communications Market 2008* (London: OFCOM).

28 K. Facer & R. Furlong (2001), 'Beyond the myth of the "cyberkid": Young people at the margins of the information revolution', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 4(1), pp.451-469.

29 A. Williamson (2007), *Empowering communities to action: Reclaiming local democracy through ICTs*, Paper presented at the Community Informatics Research Conference, Prato, Italy.

30 OFCOM (2008), *The Nations & Regions Communications Market 2008* (London: OFCOM).

participate in politics online, they may in fact mean 'on government or parliamentary websites'.³¹

Advocacy/activist websites are thriving; so too are civic sites. There are also incidental (or para-political) forms of political discussion on websites devoted to diverse social and cultural topics. Media sites – from mainstream news sources to independent bloggers – also provide opportunities for political engagement around the issues of the day, although these do not necessarily strengthen democratic participation.³² Instead, such sites provide individuals (and groups) with new ways of expressing their ideas and identities, both online and off-, or reinforce old ones.

In this way, the internet facilitates the kinds of single-issue politics that are becoming increasingly popular offline; these do not necessarily link back to traditional democratic processes or institutions. Instead, citizen-led online activism tends to be viral and anarchic, leading to a distributed model of political individualism. Nor do new technologies necessarily lead to an increase in the numbers of people participating; they provide access to a range of (often conflicting) sources of information – the overload arising from which may account for a reduction in participation.³³ Consider also that it appears to be online human-nature to congregate around like-minds, rather than to actively seek out difference.³⁴

While some fear that these trends could lead to a fragmentation of the public sphere,³⁵ others argue that the internet enables a more organic form of political engagement that fosters

31 Increasingly, politics attract a general (rather than niche) readership. During elections, around 37 per cent of the US population goes online to find out about the candidates (see L. Rainie, M. Cornfield & J. Horrigan (2005), *The Internet and campaign 2004*, retrieved 29 May 2008 from www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_2004_Campaign.pdf). Although this would suggest that the internet is helping people to connect with politics, it is still apparent that a general interest in politics is required before the internet becomes useful in connecting people to politics. See, for example, M. Prior (2005), 'News vs. entertainment: How increasing media choice widens gaps in political knowledge and turnout' *American Journal of Political Science* 49(3): 577–592.

32 Ongoing research into the democratising influence of the internet suggests that online deliberations do not necessarily lead to increased levels of activism: see A. Malina (2003), 'e-Transforming democracy in the UK: Considerations of developments and suggestions for empirical research' (Communications: *The European Journal of Communication Research*) 28, 135–155. See also M. Margolis & D. Resnick (2000), *Politics as usual: The cyberspace "revolution"* (London: Sage). See also Rethemeyer (op cit) for a discussion of the ways in which government strategies for e-engagement tend to only reach those who are already involved in deliberations. It has been suggested that online political communication simply speeds up the development of existing networks and shores up existing systems of knowledge and power – see N. Gane (2003), 'Computerized Capitalism: the media theory of Jean-Francois Lyotard' in *Information Communication and Society*, 6(3): 430-450.

33 B. Bimber (1998), 'The internet and political transformation: Populism, community and accelerated pluralism', *Polity*, XXXI (1), pp. 133-160.

34 T. Witschge (2002), *Online deliberation: Possibilities of the internet for deliberative democracy*. Paper presented at the Euricom Colloquium: Electronic Networks and Democratic Engagement, Nijmegen, Netherlands, 9-12 October.

35 W. A. Galston (2003), 'If political fragmentation is the problem, is the internet the solution?' In D.M. Anderson & M. Cornfield (eds), *The civic web: Online politics and democratic values* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), pp. 35-44.

engagement by local communities.³⁶ Rather than assume that diverse groups and opinions require shepherding into a unitary public sphere, advocates of internet-enabled governance suggest that areas of civic interest congregate online and networks emerge that lead to new forms of engagement. Such re-invigoration of civil society can itself be a catalyst for democratic renewal and, as Sunstein³⁷ argues, the internet in this regard is at least not bad for democracy although the tendency for activists to coalesce around their own interest groups remains as strong online as it does offline.³⁸

Civil society has always seen like-minded individuals and groups operate beyond economic and state systems, with varying degrees of formality and structure. Social movements, both online and off-, come and go – emerging to challenge hegemonic values, existing social orientations and ‘the modality of the social use of resources and cultural models’.³⁹ Rather than signalling a breakdown in democratic engagement, they require the government to respond in new ways.

The first tentative attempts by political institutions to do so occurred in the 1990s – long after commercial and media outlets had established interactive sites to engage web-users.⁴⁰ Since then, various new models of electronically mediated governance have emerged – each with a slightly different focus. For those concerned with service delivery, the ‘government online’ approach – provided by DirectGov and BusinessLink – has simplified transactions between government and individuals (or businesses) and made information more accessible.⁴¹ While such developments may transform the provision of government services, they turn ‘citizens’ into ‘consumers’ which reflects only one aspect of their identity.⁴²

36 J. Alexander (1999), ‘Networked communities: Citizen governance in the information age’. In G. Moore, J.A. Whitt, N. Kleniewski & G. Rabrenovic (eds), *Research in politics and society* (Stamford, CT: JAI), pp. 271-289.

37 C.R. Sunstein (2001), *Republic.com* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

38 The academic literature describes a bifurcation between traditional forms of political engagement and organisation and single-issue lifestyle politics. See J. G. Blumler & M. Gurevitch (2000), ‘Rethinking the study of political communication’ in J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (eds.), *Mass media and society* (3rd ed.) (London: Arnold) pp. 155–172, for a discussion of the competing ‘new’ and ‘old’ notions of politics. See also U. Beck (1997), *The reinvention of politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press) and A. Giddens (1991), *The consequences of modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press), for a discussion of the factors motivating the various forms of political identity that are synonymous with the term ‘lifestyle politics’.

39 A. Touraine (2000), *Can we live together? Equality and difference* (D. Macey, trans) (Oxford: Polity), p. 90.

40 The first ‘electronic town hall meeting’ took place in New York State in October, 2002. Since then, Santa Monica’s Public Electronic Network (PEN) has run 24-hour electronic town hall meetings; such initiatives have inspired a range of others, including citizen budgeting pilots, that seek to provide more direct engagement between citizens and governing institutions.

41 See: www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/index.htm and www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/home?r.l1=1073858790&r.s=m

42 The positioning of the citizen-as-consumer might make certain aspects of governance more efficacious but not necessarily those aspects that shore up our democratic health. See E. Vidler and J. Clarke (2005), ‘Creating Citizen-Consumers: New Labour and the Remaking of Public Services,’ in *Public Policy and Administration*, Vol. 20(2), 19-37.

Similarly, approaches that tend towards information transmission (of Bills, speeches and government publications) are becoming more prevalent, but this approach is not without criticism either; it works for those who understand government terminology and for those with the know-how to access appropriate information but excludes those who do not. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this approach is less popular than are the 'bottom-up' phenomena described earlier, such as blogs, social networking sites and viral campaigns. The popularity of the latter approaches indicates that:

1. more people are interested in politics than voting figures would suggest;⁴³
2. new technologies make it easier for those with access to have their say; and
3. people are talking about issues in ways that can be meaningful to government and policy makers – if only they would listen.⁴⁴

Government attempts to use online deliberations are emerging; like town hall meetings, these provide ordinary citizens with a means of finding out how decisions are being made, or of informing the policy process. The Digital Dialogues initiative was – as described earlier – conceived as a means of informing government approaches to such forms of engagement.⁴⁵

43 The *Audit of Political Engagement* bears this out, with the proportion of the public saying that they are very interested in politics remaining stable at 13% and 38% stating that they are fairly interested in politics. In addition just over half of the public (53%) claim they would be absolutely certain to vote at an immediate general election.

44 This last point forms the central claim of the Power of Information report – commissioned by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in June 2007 to provide a view of how Government can harness new technologies to engage the public.

45 Since the beginning of Digital Dialogues, there have been numerous initiatives across government to ensure that new technologies (and the communication associated with them) are harnessed. The Social Media review (emerging from the Power of Information report) aims to improve the way that government shares information with communities; the Code of Practice on Consultation is being revised with due consideration being given to the ways in which departmental practices should incorporate new technologies; and the Community Engagement Plan aims to incorporate online strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

People have different motivations for participating in online deliberations with government. Some want to have their say; others want to find out what other people think and to see how government responds. Online deliberations provide the government with opportunities to enhance public understandings of their work, but they are not a solution to disengagement of themselves. That relies on good practice.

Our guidance to government departments in the section above offers ways of achieving this, although it does not provide foolproof methods of overcoming obstacles. Success depends on the planning of online deliberations to ensure that there are sufficiently developed discussion topics and engagement strategies. Users expect a degree of interaction, which requires a time commitment on the part of the teams running the engagement exercise so that participants' posts go up and are responded to in a timely fashion. Online deliberations offer a promise of transparency; unclear communication from engagement teams is often read by participants as obfuscation. At all times, it is necessary to manage expectations about policy impact and ensure that the process is clear to those taking part.

Many other factors shape government approaches to online deliberation, which is why discontinuous adoption is a key theme throughout the three phases of Digital Dialogues. The culture of each department or agency, its stage in the policy cycle at the time of engagement and the exercise's objectives all generate different styles of online engagement. Some require deep deliberation with a few stakeholders or experts; others aim to increase their reach; many seek to discuss set topics; a few encourage users to set the agenda; some tie in with consultations; others are gauging public opinion. Each approach has a drawback: a deep approach requires participants to commit time and effort to understanding the issues; a structured approach stifles debate but an unstructured one is prone to hijack; etc. These detriments lead to different consequences, depending on the engagement context.

The picture that emerges is nuanced, and those government departments which benefit most from online engagement are the ones that are able to reflect on their experience and approach. For example, the FSA blog experienced a tension between conflicting expectations that they should develop scientific and public facing forms of engagement: their response is to

consider developing a suite of blogs – one with a consumer focus and the other with a scientist focus.

Online deliberations do not necessarily fail when such reflexivity is lacking, but any successes in such cases are due mostly to luck. Throughout the three phases of Digital Dialogues, there have been instances of government departments whose reticence in the face of criticism has meant at best that deliberations peter out and at worst that they risk being hijacked; a vicious cycle emerges when government departments disengage. Yet risk aversion on the part of government departments remains the biggest obstacle to success. So, too, do incorrect assumptions on the part of the department running the exercise.

Policies can change on the basis of well-informed comments posted by a small number of users on a government website (see under: Jim Murphy's blog); large volumes of participants and posts do not necessarily constitute success – some of the better case studies had small numbers of well considered comments; it takes less time to administer a well run engagement site than it does to deal with risk averse approaches and their consequences; people see through online gimmicks but appreciate it when government departments use a range of engagement methods to maintain their interest.

CASE STUDIES

Office of Children’s Commissioner Social Networking Site

URL	shoutout.11million.org.uk
CASE STUDY OWNER	Office of Children’s Commissioner

Strengths	Potential for improvement
Online discussion topics selected by children during ‘ShoutOut’ offline events;	Ongoing use of site through tie-ins with class/project activity;
Engagement, not consultation: allows for experimental approach;	Encouragement for young people to take ownership of the site and use it in their spare time;
Working closely with schools and youth projects;	Multiple engagement opportunities around set discussion themes;
High level input from Children’s Commissioner;	Regular updates to ensure that site appeals to repeat visitors;
Branding tie in with 11Million campaign;	Clear guidelines to teachers and project coordinators so that they know how to use the site, can systematise access and navigate around topics and sections.
Social networking capability.	

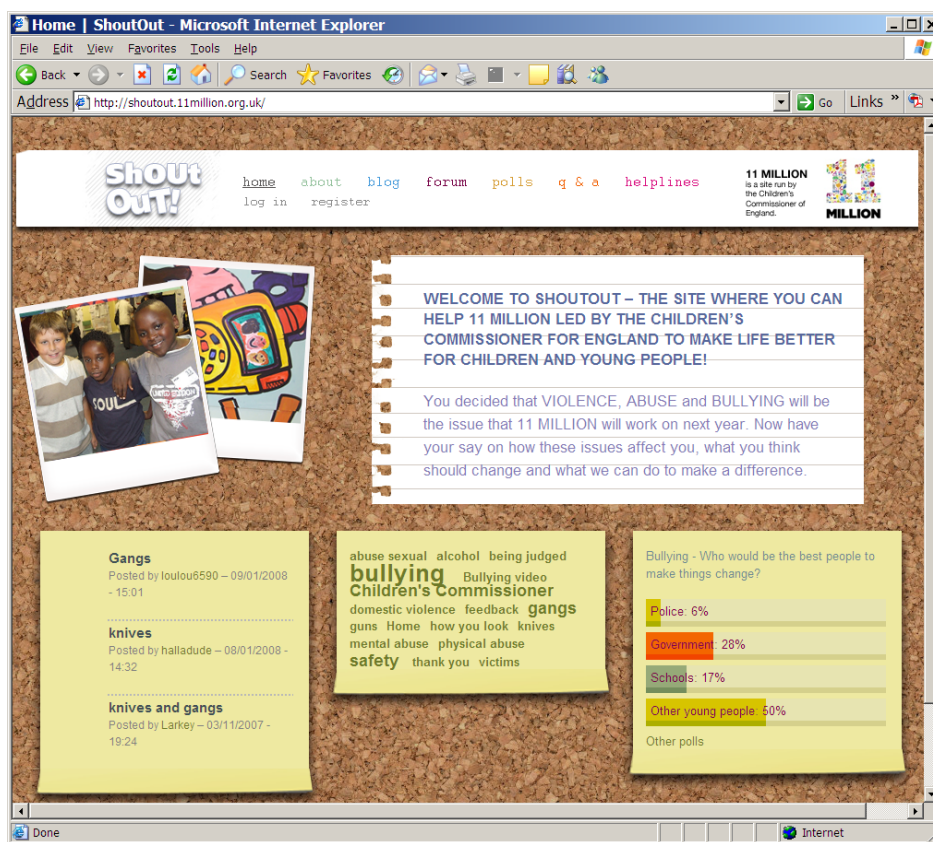
Overview

The Office of the Children’s Commissioner (OCC) was created by an Act of Parliament in 2004 to give voice to the concerns of children and young people – especially the disadvantaged and vulnerable – living in England.

An independent body, the OCC raises the profile of issues that affect children and works closely with organisations whose decisions affect their lives. To ensure adequate representation of young people, the OCC has begun to run engagement exercises via schools and youth projects to find out what children care about and provide them with resources.

Called the 11Million campaign, this part of the OCC’s work is designed to strengthen the Children’s Commissioner’s representative function, providing younger people with

opportunities to have their say on matters that affect them. As well as running offline events, the 11Million campaign has used online forms of engagement; its social networking pilot is the subject of this case study.



Policy purpose

The OCC hopes to run on- and offline deliberations as a way of identifying and tackling the problems faced by young people. It then feeds the issues raised by young people back to the organisations whose decisions affect them. ShoutOut was a pilot that tested the techniques of online engagement used by the OCC.

Model

To date, there has been one major engagement opportunity for younger people: the ShoutOut event took place in August 2007, involving children of all ages and backgrounds.

Children were invited to take part in ShoutOut via their schools, community groups and youth projects and to participate in online discussions about issues prioritised at the event. These

were selected by participants from a range of subjects – the 11Million website displays a video that explains how the themes were chosen.⁴⁶

The discussion website was developed to enable social networking while ensuring that the branding was consistent with that of the main 11Million platform. It aimed to provide multiple channels for engagement, combining a forum with a news blog, polls, and a question-and-answer section. Each registered user had a personal dashboard, which could be used to find out about new activity on the site, and to create content. Since most video-sharing sites (such as YouTube) have age-based restrictions, opportunities to allow users to post or view video content could not be taken up in this instance.

Publicity

The OCC invited participants to attend its ShoutOut on- and offline events. It also promoted them on its website and via press releases.

Other methods of engagement

Young people and children were encouraged to write to the OCC (by email or post) in response to questions raised by the ShoutOut events – many did.

The OCC is working to develop sustainable relationships with schools, community groups and youth projects so that they can develop online discussions about how to tackle issues raised in the ShoutOut events.

User profiles

Registration was required of visitors to the site, but to ensure that the process was as simple as possible, little information was requested. From the user profiles, we know that almost all of the 74 participants were aged between 14 and 19 (some participants did not specify age).

As is standard with Digital Dialogues pilots, participants were asked to fill in pre-engagement and feedback surveys. Few did – partly because participation was treated as a one-off.

⁴⁶ See: www.11million.org.uk/11million.html.

Site performance

As the table below shows, the site attracted a good number of visits (from people beyond the registered participants). However, there were few repeat visits and few comments made to the site following the initial postings.

Date	Unique Visitors	Number of Visits	Participant comments	OCC comments
Oct 2007	709	899	2	0
Nov 2007	511	701	35	17
Dec 2007	285	365	0	0
Jan 2008	399	572	2	0
Feb 2008	555	683	0	0
Mar 2008	177	221	0	0

The figures here represent activity on the forum and in the 'question-and-answer' sections of the site. In addition, 17 votes were cast in a poll on bullying; 10 each on polls about 'safety where you live' and 'safety at home'.

There was some good discussion between the OCC and one of the participants in the 'question-and-answer' section of the site in November; few other users came back to the site, however, to follow up on points raised.

User feedback

The feedback survey was answered by six participants. Views were mixed but largely positive, with the majority saying that they would recommend the site to a friend, and that they had learnt something about the role of the Children's Commissioner through taking part.

The site was efficacious; the majority of participants said that they would stay in touch with the OCC. Motivations were mixed with half of the respondents saying that they wanted to ensure that their voice was heard and the rest saying that they wanted to hear other people's views. After taking part in the ShoutOut website, most respondents said that they felt fairly positive about online political engagement.

The site was praised for creating opportunities for teachers to work with children on topics as diverse as social issues and IT skills and to hear what they think; children felt that the site offered them a space to have their views heard.

There was some criticism; one respondent described the site as 'unpopular' – its lack of success attributed to 'political correctness' and an unwillingness to enforce discipline. From the perspective of the case study owners, the problems faced by the site were administrative: without systematised login processes, it was difficult for young people to engage with the site via their school/project in the limited group time available and was unlikely that they would feel motivated to log in at home.

Other issues raised were that teachers missed some of the opportunities presented by the site since the different sections were difficult to spot. Regular updates were also encouraged by those who had made repeat visits but felt discouraged from posting because there was little new content.

Follow up

The OCC has launched a new website as of 15 May, this now provides each user with their own 'room' (or dashboard) which they can decorate as they wish: they will then be able to enter different communal rooms – each covering a topic that is being covered by the 11Million campaign.

The new site will encourage users to visit it in their own time (even if schools/projects facilitate their engagement in the first instance). The plan will be to organise key events and engagement opportunities for participants that will take place on- and offline.

Department for Work and Pensions Blog

URL	generationxperience.wordpress.com
CASE STUDY OWNER	Department for Work and Pensions

Strengths	Potential for improvement
Potential to engage older people using the internet and develop virtual networks;	Make use of specially established file sharing and social networking sites to showcase offline activity and engage users;
Tie in with offline activity;	Coordinate with DirectGov beyond Older People's Day;
Engagement, not consultation: allows for experimental approach;	Generate a consistent roll-out of blog entries and more engagement with questions from users;
Open source, open standards software used;	Take up opportunities generated by media: stimulate interest after press attention fades;
Good publicity, attracting potential engagement.	Provide signposts for further engagement possibilities, directing people to policy developments relating to questions;
	Present image that is consistent with demographics targeted by site.
	When consultation ended it would have been preferable to have created a public archive, rather than simply closing the site.
	Content on the site was removed after consultation ended and no archive was created.

Overview

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is the government body that oversees welfare benefits and employment practices across the UK. It has seven sub-divisions, one of which is the Pensions Service. This was set up to ensure that current and future pensioners have access to services and financial support and promotes the rights of older people: it is guided by the Department's 2005 Framework.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Information about the Framework can be accessed via the following URL (which also links to a PDF of the Framework): www.dwp.gov.uk/aboutus/departmental_framework.asp

Village Agents

Published November 9th, 2007 Uncategorized 1 Comment Edit

Today I want to talk about **Village Agents**. This is a scheme currently being piloted by Gloucestershire County Council. A Village Agent is a local volunteer who offers help and support to older people in the most rurally isolated parishes in Gloucestershire.

There are currently thirty Village Agents in Gloucestershire who act as a focal point for the older people in their parish. They can visit older people in their homes, provide high quality information, put people in direct contact with the service they need, or simply help develop a sense of community spirit.

Village Agents were particularly active during the widespread flooding over the summer, which hit Gloucestershire particularly hard. They ensured that older people were well looked after during those stressful times.

So what do you think of the concept of Village Agents? Perhaps you are one, or have been helped by one. Are there any similar schemes in your own area? Let me know what you think.

Regards

Mark

60 goals for the over 60s

Published October 11th, 2007 Uncategorized 5 Comments Edit

Recently published research among 1000 people aged 50+ produced the ultimate wish list of 60 goals for the over 60s. This list is available at:

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/campaigns/generationXperience/DG_070864

I found this list intriguing, amusing and was surprised by some of the goals. Some of my aspirations are contained in this list, such as seeing my children get married and going on safari; some have been achieved - I have run a

Pages

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Evaluation

The Hansard Society is evaluating this site. We would like your feedback.

Tell us what you think by clicking here: [Survey 1](#).

Pilot Partners

DWP Department for Work and Pensions



In March 2005, the Pensions Service established Opportunity Age.⁴⁸ Thus named, the DWP's 'strategy for older people' aims to challenge stereotypes about older people and ensure that the over-50s are able fully to participate in society and lead a decent quality of life. From Opportunity Age have emerged eight pilots (called LinkAge Plus) designed to coordinate services bringing central government, local authorities and civil society bodies into strategic partnerships. GenerationXperience was launched in 2007 with the first UK Day for Older People taking place on 1 October 2007. Led by the DWP and the Department of Health (DofH), GenerationXperience is a partnership with government departments and a number of stakeholders, which aims to:

- Inspire action;
- Involve stakeholders;
- Respect experience;
- Expand horizons;
- Increase knowledge.

48 Information about Opportunity Age (including links to the strategy's first report) can be found on the following URL: www.dwp.gov.uk/opportunity_age

Policy purpose

The GenerationXperience campaign was designed to broaden the DWP's participation base and enhance its Older People's Strategy. By combining offline and online activities, the DWP hoped to appeal to the increasing number of older people already using the internet,⁴⁹ and encourage late adopters to harness new technologies to connect with government. Offline events around Older People's Day were mentioned on the blog.

Model

The blog was set up using WordPress with a standard interface incorporating campaign branding; the DWP logo was low-profile for positioning purposes. GenerationXperience groups were also set up on YouTube, Flickr, Facebook and MySpace (although they were never used); it was intended that these would form networks around the blog (which would then operate as an aggregating hub). The idea was to encourage grass-roots engagement, with participation extending beyond the usual suspects. The network's aims were to:

- showcase videos and images from satellite sites;
- encourage visitors to form local community groups and support on- and offline;
- solicit feedback on issues covered by the government's Older People's Strategy;
- link to and comment on media stories about older people;
- engage with other online communities and networks serving older people.

Publicity

The DWP issued press releases to publicise Older People's Day and the GenerationXperience website: the latter was discussed on related blogs and forums over subsequent weeks (see discussion later on).

Other methods of engagement

The DWP seeks to involve stakeholders (such as charities working with older people, and other government departments) in the development of its Older People's Strategy. Individuals can write to the DWP about policy issues or respond to consultations.

⁴⁹ See ONS report: 'internet access 2007: individuals and access' www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/inta0807.pdf (downloaded 12/02/08).

User profiles

Visitors were not required to register with the site. However, the pre-engagement survey captured demographic data which – while not representative of all site users – is useful in identifying dominant trends amongst the readership of the blog and in finding out about their experience of online and political engagement.

The majority of respondents (over 90 per cent) were from the UK; the blog also attracted interest from British citizens living abroad who were concerned about the pension rights of expatriates. As can be seen from the table below, the majority of respondents were within the target age-range; interest from younger people was stimulated by coverage on policy/trade websites (see discussion later on).

How old are you?		
Answer Options	Response Per cent	Response Count
Under 18	0.0%	0
18-24	0.0%	0
25-34	5.8%	3
35-44	1.9%	1
45-54	13.5%	7
55-64	51.9%	27
65-74	17.3%	9
75-84	9.6%	5
85-94	0.0%	0
Over 95	0.0%	0
	answered question	52
	skipped question	1

Respondents were predominantly male (69.2 per cent), reflecting the prevalent gender balance across the internet. Most respondents (96 per cent) were frequent users of the internet, with the majority (75 per cent) accessing it from home.

Such patterns suggest that the GenerationXperience website reached those who were already online and politically engaged: 14 per cent of respondents claimed to have their own blog; 32.7 per cent were familiar with politics related websites, including *The Guardian*, They work for you, David Miliband's blog, Order-Order/Recess Monkey, Simon Dickson, Paul Canning.

Moreover, 58 per cent had been in touch with the DWP before – 73 per cent with their MP or councillor.

For the majority of respondents (71 per cent), there existed a general (rather than issue-based) interest in politics that exceeds the national average.⁵⁰

A significant proportion (53 per cent) said that they came by the GenerationXperience blog via links from other websites; fewer (29 per cent) were alerted to its existence by media coverage, while word-of-mouth was significant in promoting the blog (11.5 per cent of respondents heard about it that way).

How did you find out about the GenerationXperience blog? (Please tick all relevant options)		
Answer Options	Response Per cent	Response Count
website link	53.8%	28
media coverage	28.8%	15
search engine	7.7%	4
other blog	1.9%	1
word of mouth	11.5%	6
	answered question	52
	skipped question	1

Much of the web-based discussion about the GenerationXperience blog came about because of the media campaign around its launch, often paraphrasing or reproducing the DWP’s press releases. This would suggest that offline press strategies proliferate online, but there is little evidence that this guarantees more than a cursory interest. The table below indicates that by far the most significant reason for people visiting the site was ‘curiosity’ (67 per cent).

Although 25 per cent of respondents said that they used the site to post comments (see below), fewer expressed interest in deliberation; only 23 per cent read the other visitors’ contributions and fewer (11.5 per cent) looked at blogger posts. This suggests that respondents were more interested in making comments than in hearing those of others, although this may have changed if there had been a greater volume of posts by the case study owners.

⁵⁰ Hansard Society & Electoral Commission (2007), *Audit of Political Engagement 4* (London: Hansard Society & Electoral Commission).

Why are you using this site? (Please tick all relevant options)		
Answer Options	Response Per cent	Response Count
for general information	44.2%	23
to read blogger posts	11.5%	6
to post a comment	25.0%	13
to read others' comments	23.1%	12
Curiosity	67.3%	35
for work/study purposes	11.5%	6
	answered question	52
	skipped question	1

Site activity/performance

The table below indicates the number of visits to the GenerationXperience website during the pilot. There are five periods during which the number of visits peaked: the first corresponds with the launch – subsequent peaks correspond with discussions about the website that took place on the internet.

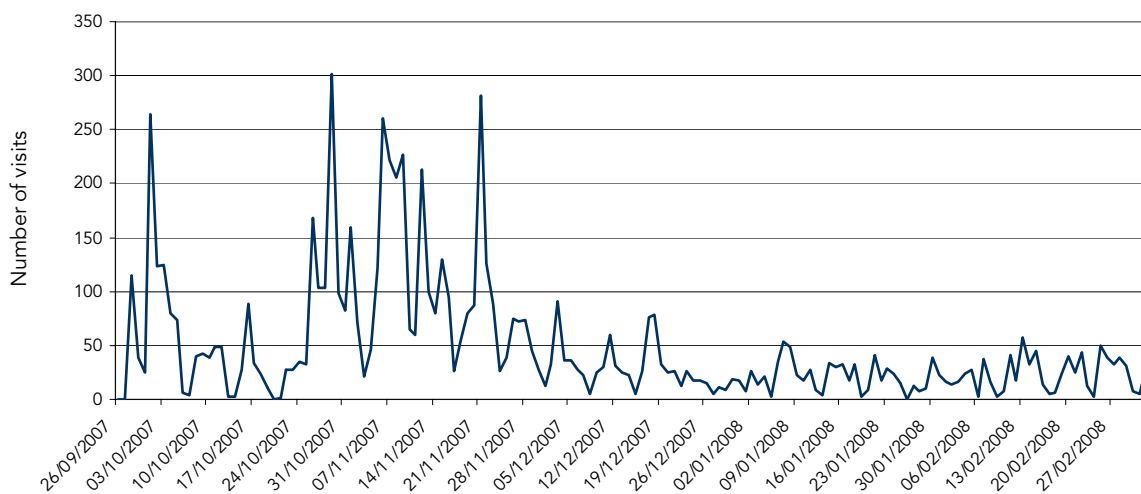


Figure 1: DWP Site traffic (daily)

Initially, the blog authors posted regularly: the first entry was put up before the site was launched; two, the day after, and one the week after that. These initial entries solicited responses from site visitors – the first attracted 15 comments and one response from the blog authors; the second received 21 comments and two responses. The third thanked people for participating and outlined plans for the site over the coming weeks.

The fourth entry attracted nine comments (one noting that the DirectGov link to GenerationXperience was not functioning) and two responses – one saying that the broken link

would be investigated. However, the link was never reinstated and, according to the administrators of the DirectGov site, the GenerationXperience campaign had ended.

The next blog entry was a month later – coinciding with the surge in (often critical) web-based articles about the site: it attracted three comments and one response. A month later, two entries were posted – one tackling a question raised by users regarding the idea that ‘over-50s’ could be included in one category: it received one response. A few weeks later, a ‘season’s greetings’ post received two comments and one response. The penultimate entry, posted two months later has, to date, received 12 comments over the course of several weeks; the final entry, posted over a month later, has received one.

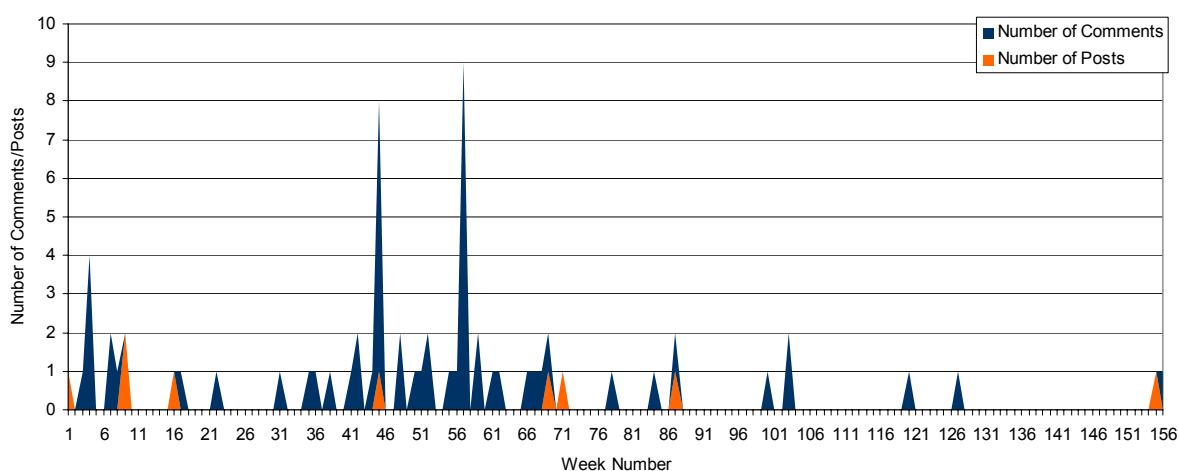


Figure 2: Activity on DWP website

The blog authors did not make use of the cross-fertilisation opportunities presented by the large volume of incoming links.⁵¹ Their lack of engagement had a crucial impact on the way in which the blog was perceived by its critics. Specifically, they started to raise concerns that it engaged only those who were already involved,⁵² and even then at a cursory level; and that it categorised the over-50s as ‘older people’.⁵³ There was an overriding sense that this initiative wouldn’t deliver on its promise (to listen).⁵⁴ Printed and online media described the campaign as an attempt to ‘spin’ old age.⁵⁵

51 From: www.which.co.uk/reports_and_campaigns/computers_and_internet/reports/internet/Generation_Xperience_news_article_557_124966.jsp (accessed on 26 Feb, 2008).

52 From: www.computeractive.co.uk/computeractive/news/2202391/generation-xperience-connect (accessed on 26 Feb, 2008).

53 From: www.grahamjones.co.uk/2007/10/does-social-networking-mean-anything-to.htm (accessed on 26 Feb, 2008).

54 From: www.maturetimes.co.uk/node/4205 (accessed on 26 Feb, 2008).

55 From: www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=484732&in_page_id=1770; and www.20plus30.com/blog/2007/10/only-show-nice-pictures.html (both accessed on 26 Feb, 2008).

User feedback

Respondents to the first survey mentioned particular issues with the site, from the broken DirectGov link to problems with navigation.

They suggested that the blog could have provided information about how the policy issues raised by users were (already) being tackled; there was some criticism of content and tone (respondents felt that they were talked down to) and expressed a general frustration about the lack of interactivity: although comments were published quickly, they were not always responded to and as illustrated above, the site had little momentum.

On a scale of 1 - 5 (with five being the top score), how would you rate the blog?		
Answer Options	Response Per cent	Response Count
1	42.9%	3
2	28.6%	2
3	14.3%	1
4	14.3%	1
5	0.0%	0
I have not visited similar websites	0.0%	0
	answered question	7
	skipped question	0

71.4 per cent of respondents said that they visited the site infrequently. Although the majority of survey respondents did not contribute to discussions, they were interested in reading the content of the blog (the table above suggests that around 80 per cent of site visitors did so); some were also looking for information and links to other sites.

Which section of the blog did you read most often?		
Answer Options	Response Per cent	Response Count
Blog entries	40.0%	2
Reader comments	40.0%	2
Links to other sites	20.0%	1
	answered question	5
	skipped question	2

Despite hoping to learn something about the opportunities for older people from reading the content and following links, 74.1 per cent said that they did not; 85.7 per cent felt that

blogging was not making a valuable contribution to policy relating to older people and 71.4 per cent said that it was not making them feel more confident about using new technologies.

These misgivings aside, 42.9 per cent of respondents said that they would visit the site in future – while they felt there were not at present many inducements to do so, they expressed hope that the purpose of the blog would be fulfilled; as it stood, however, 85.7 per cent said that they wouldn't recommend the blog to others.

Specific feedback concerned content and style (there were not enough responses; the layout was not user friendly; there was too much jargon and government spin; there wasn't enough attention given to the real concerns of older people).

Follow up

Soon after the launch of the site, the DWP had to divert resources away from the blog to meet other demands. This unavailability soon after launch was not explained to users; accordingly, the DWP were judged harshly by those visiting the GenerationXperience site.

The DWP still hope to continue using the site to promote other offline initiatives and to host guest commentary from stakeholders, and there is some general interest in using new technologies to engage older people. However, the main learnings from this pilot (see beginning of case study) must be incorporated in future.

Office for National Statistics Census Outputs Blog

URL	www.ukcensusoutputs.net
CASE STUDY OWNER	Office for National Statistics, Census Offices.

Strengths	Potential for improvement
Multi-platform site, combining blog with wiki and a private forum for registered users;	Inclusion of issues raised by users - even if they do not directly relate to themes of blog;
Diverse engagement opportunities alongside formal consultation;	More sustained blogging by census team on matters relating to the consultation;
Intention to create a community of practice, beyond known stakeholders;	Enhance user interest through use of multimedia approaches to blogging (embedded video to explain census office approach, for example);
User generated content encouraged within section of site accessible to registered users;	Better networks with more census related/academic blogs via blogroll.
Responses to comments published on blog;	
Investment in the site across the UK's census offices;	
Ongoing use of site, with development plans for the future.	

Overview

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) was formed in 1996 through a merger between the Central Statistical Office (CSO) - created by Winston Churchill in 1941 - and the Office for Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) which was developed by the CSO's Director in 1970. Its main function is to generate statistics about social and economic trends in the UK.

Recently, the Statistics and Registration Service Act (2007) has brought about some changes to the UK statistical system. Taking effect from 1 April, 2008, the Act has led to the establishment of the UK Statistics Authority - which is a non-ministerial department, accountable to Parliament – of which the ONS is the executive office.

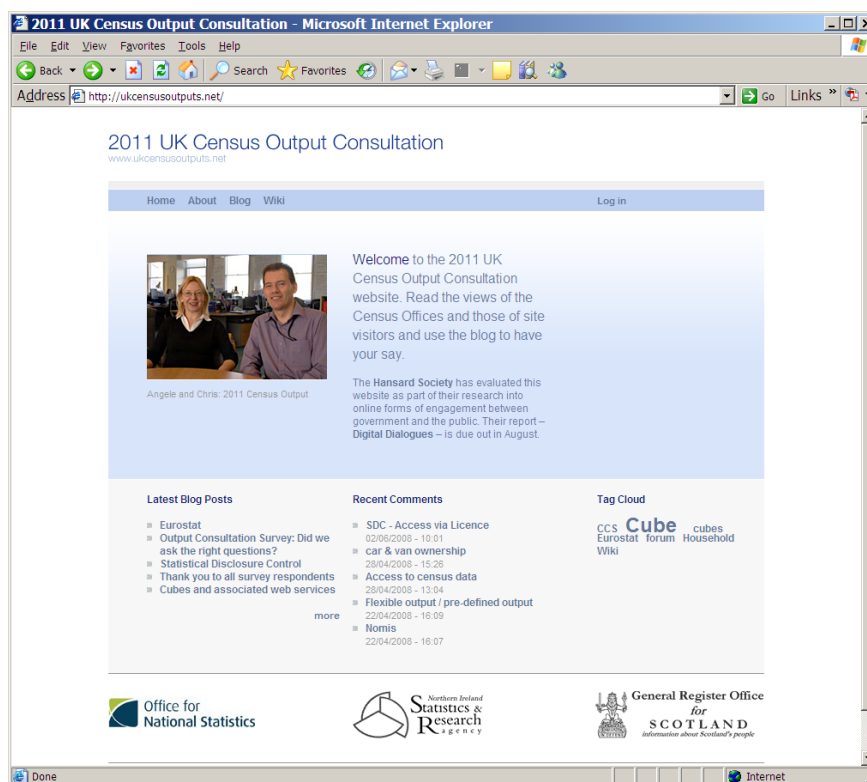
Policy purpose

Under the auspices of ONS, the UK Census Offices have developed a consultation on UK Census Outputs. Its aim is to find out what users of the 2011 census want from the data gathered and to help the census offices to prioritise output needs. The focus is on high level output issues. Topics covered include products, access, dissemination and metadata.

The case-study evaluates the web-based deliberations that accompany the consultation.

Model

The website is bespoke, with several platforms enabling different forms of deliberation. The public facing aspect of the site is the blog, which displays entries posted by staff of the UK census offices (representing England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and comments from visitors.



The blog was set up to enable the authors to raise specific topics discussed in the consultation survey (which the site accompanies). The idea was to start a new topic on a weekly basis, and when consultation themes were used up to either start new discussions based on suggestions by site visitors or to raise themes emerging from the consultation.

The case study owners also hoped to foster a community of practice via the website. The intention was to move beyond the typical stakeholders (for the most part academics and members of specific interest groups) and to develop a broader community of practice. Members were invited to contribute to the private forum (not visible to the public) and edit the wiki (which was readable by the public).

Publicity

The blog was promoted through emails to all registered census data users (numbering between 6,000 and 10,000 across the UK).

Those stakeholders who were invited to take part in the community of practice (numbering about 120) were contacted separately when the wiki and forum were established. In total 32 people registered with the site by the end of the pilot.

Other methods of engagement

This was the second formal consultation conducted in relation to the 2011 census; in addition, stakeholders and data users are able to contact the relevant census offices.

User profiles

Registration was not required of visitors to the site. Information about users was therefore gleaned from their voluntary completion of our pre-engagement survey. The average number of unique visits during the evaluation period was 610 per month; 50 people filled in the pre-engagement survey. Of these, around 67 per cent said that they were English (14 per cent were Scottish, 8 per cent Welsh and 4 per cent Northern Irish). Visitors also came from Germany and British Columbia.

Just over half site visitors (53 per cent) were men: the largest age group (made up of around 33 per cent of respondents) were between 35 and 44. These trends reflect typical patterns of online engagement. The graph below indicates the spread of ages of respondents to the pre-engagement survey:

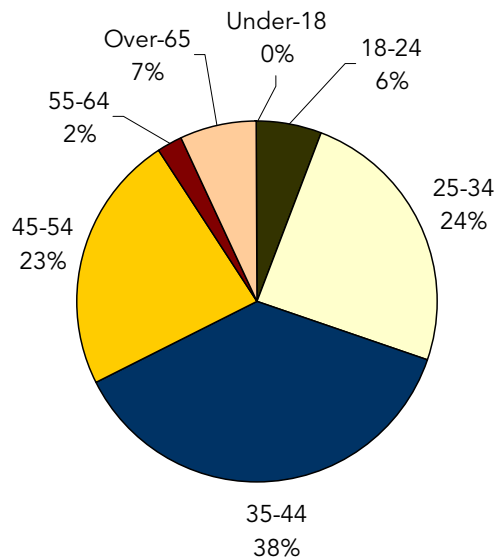


Figure 3: Age spread of visitors to the ONS site

The majority of respondents claimed to be regular internet users with 98 per cent saying that they went online daily; whereas in other case studies, users generally accessed the internet from home, the biggest group of respondents on this site (almost 43 per cent) claimed to go online from work; 22 per cent looked at the internet from home and around 30 per cent accessed websites from a range of places.

There was obviously a small element of maliciously entered data. This was apparent from comments made to this effect and by the quality of some data that was entered (for example, six survey respondents aged 95 or older).

Respondents seemed to indicate a more passive approach to online engagement than those engaged with other case studies: 8 per cent had their own blog, although around 90 per cent visited politics or census related websites.

The majority of respondents (around 68 per cent) found out about the blog via a website link or word of mouth, suggesting that the publicity strategy used by the case study owner (sending a link to the website via email) provided the primary route to the website. Just under 10 per cent of respondents said that they heard about the initiative through press coverage or via another blog,⁵⁶ highlighting the fact that more interest could have been stimulated via a media strategy.

⁵⁶ Examples of a referring websites are: www.geodemographics.org.uk - a resource site for those using geodemographic or census products; and www.thisisnotengland.co.uk/forum - a discussion site promoting Cornish independence: the majority of users accessed the site via the ONS or related census offices, however.

While some respondents were hoping to develop a community of practice through engaging with the site or wanted to take part in online discussions (6 per cent and 20 per cent respectively), the majority (55 per cent) visited the site to respond to the consultation survey only. Overall, there was more emphasis on the non-participatory aspects of the site (47 per cent of respondents were interested in the site for work/study purposes; 26.5 per cent wanted information about the census; 8 per cent said they were just curious about what was happening on the site).

This slightly passive orientation to online engagement did not necessarily reflect political efficacy: 65 per cent of respondents were interested in politics before taking part in the online consultation, with almost 90 per cent being specifically engaged in census related issues. And participants were divided on the question of whether they felt informed about the work of the census offices (there was close to a 50-50 split). This reflected the extent to which respondents had had contact with the census offices before; 47 per cent had – mainly for professional reasons.

Respondents were engaged with politics generally: about 27 per cent had been in contact with their local MP, councillor or MEP and a higher-than-average proportion of respondents voted in elections – the table below (on electoral engagement) highlights an emphasis on local polls:

National Polls	87.8%
Local Polls	93.9%
European Polls	67.3%
None	4.1%

Site performance

The site attracted an average of 610 visitors per month during the pilot period, with a large volume of repeat visits (see below) suggesting that the site managed to develop some ongoing interest.

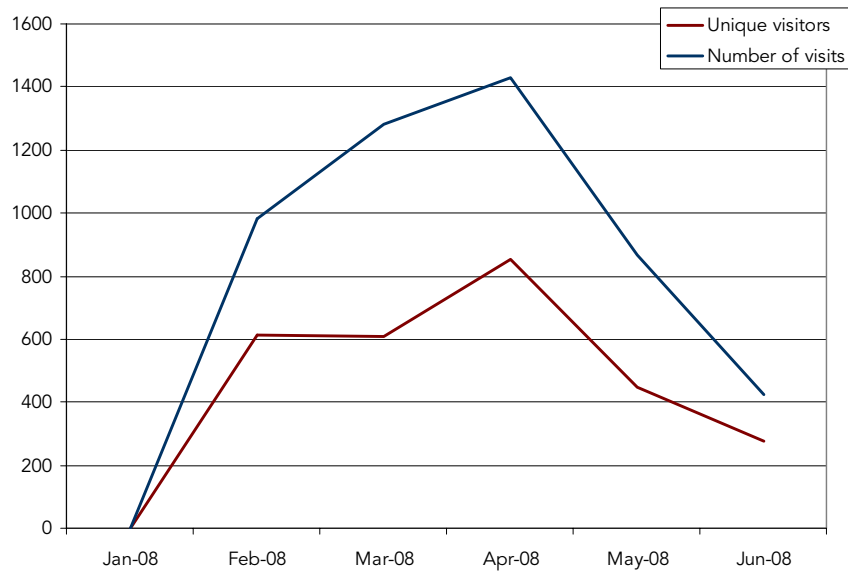


Figure 4: ONS site visitors

The majority of visitors accessed the Home, Blog and About pages, with volume for each reaching 2282, 807 and 309 respectively, and the majority of visits were of short duration (see table below).

These online forms of behaviour reflect those on similar websites that people visit out of interest or to engage briefly.

Number of visits: 980 - Average: 430 s	Number of visits	Per cent
30 seconds or less	580	59.1 %
30 seconds to 2 minutes	130	13.2 %
2 minutes -5 minutes	67	6.8 %
5 minutes -15 minutes	68	6.9 %
15 minutes – 30 minutes	42	4.2 %
30 minutes to 1 hour	48	4.8 %
More than 1 hour	45	4.5 %

User feedback

There was little feedback given. In general, the initiative was welcomed by users; however, when asked to rate its performance, it was given average scores. While some appreciated the fact that the site allowed for some interaction, others expressed concern that there was too much moderation. Users complained that comments that deviated from consultation topics

were not published, despite the fact that they might have generated more discussion on the blog and informed the census office's approach to its broader priorities. As one user said:

The web is not a panacea and in many ways can actually stifle discussion.

From the perspective of the case study owners, however, the idea of promoting general (non outputs-related) discussion did not appeal given that the website was being used to supplement a departmental consultation.

Users pointed to the difficulty of interacting with the different elements of the site; the structure and architecture of the wiki, for example, could deter users who are unfamiliar with the format. Despite these reservations, the website attracted a genuine interest that was sustained throughout the evaluation period.

Follow up

The census offices are likely to explore the use of online technologies in the future for consultation purposes. Meanwhile, the site attracted sufficient interest that they should consider maintaining the community of practice outside of the consultation period.

10 Downing Street – Debate Mapper

URL	debategraph.org/default.aspx?sig=2545-2545-4-0
CASE STUDY OWNER	Office of the Prime Minister

Strengths	Potential for Improvement
Creative use of new technologies to facilitate debate and deliberation;	Less complex interface to encourage participation;
Willingness of the prime minister’s office to engage publicly with people who hold diverse opinions;	Emergent categories defined by users;
Captured the media response as well as the speech by Tony Blair;	Facilitation of categorisation by Debategraph team.
Rich media embedded to allow downloads of speech;	
Tie in with end of Tony Blair’s premiership;	
Quick turnaround of argument-maps.	

Overview

The 10 Downing Street website was established to showcase the activities of the prime minister. Initially, it featured news bulletins, podcasts and video footage; gradually interactive features (such as virtual tours) were introduced, heralding the website’s first attempts at direct engagement.

These reached their heyday with the development of the ePetitions system, which brought the Number 10 website into the public eye. ePetitions allow people to have their say on matters that affect them but do not necessarily have a policy impact; despite this, they have proven popular, in some cases leading to webchats with ministers.

This case study focuses on an initiative targeting opinion leaders who were invited to take part in a facilitated debate mapping exercise. This allowed for an approach that differed radically from the traditional back-and-forth of political debate; instead, all positions needed only to be stated once and could then be developed, rated, categorised or added to. The idea was to encourage a more nuanced approach to deliberation.

Policy purpose

Before leaving office, the former British prime minister, Tony Blair, gave eight lectures on Our Nation's Future. The first focused on criminal justice, the second on developments in public health; the third tackled social exclusion and the fourth outlined the social implications of advancements in science. Lecture five promoted multiculturalism, while the sixth reviewed defence policy throughout British history; the seventh highlighted the relationship between work and society and the final lecture explored the relationship between the media and politics.

Journalists were invited (via Reuters) to attend the final lecture, alongside academics and public figures. Afterwards, they were asked to take part in the online debate mapping exercise. The aim was to explore whether key stakeholders could be engaged in a discussion about the mediation of politics and to evaluate new online techniques of engagement. There were no policy objectives and no anticipated outcomes.

Model

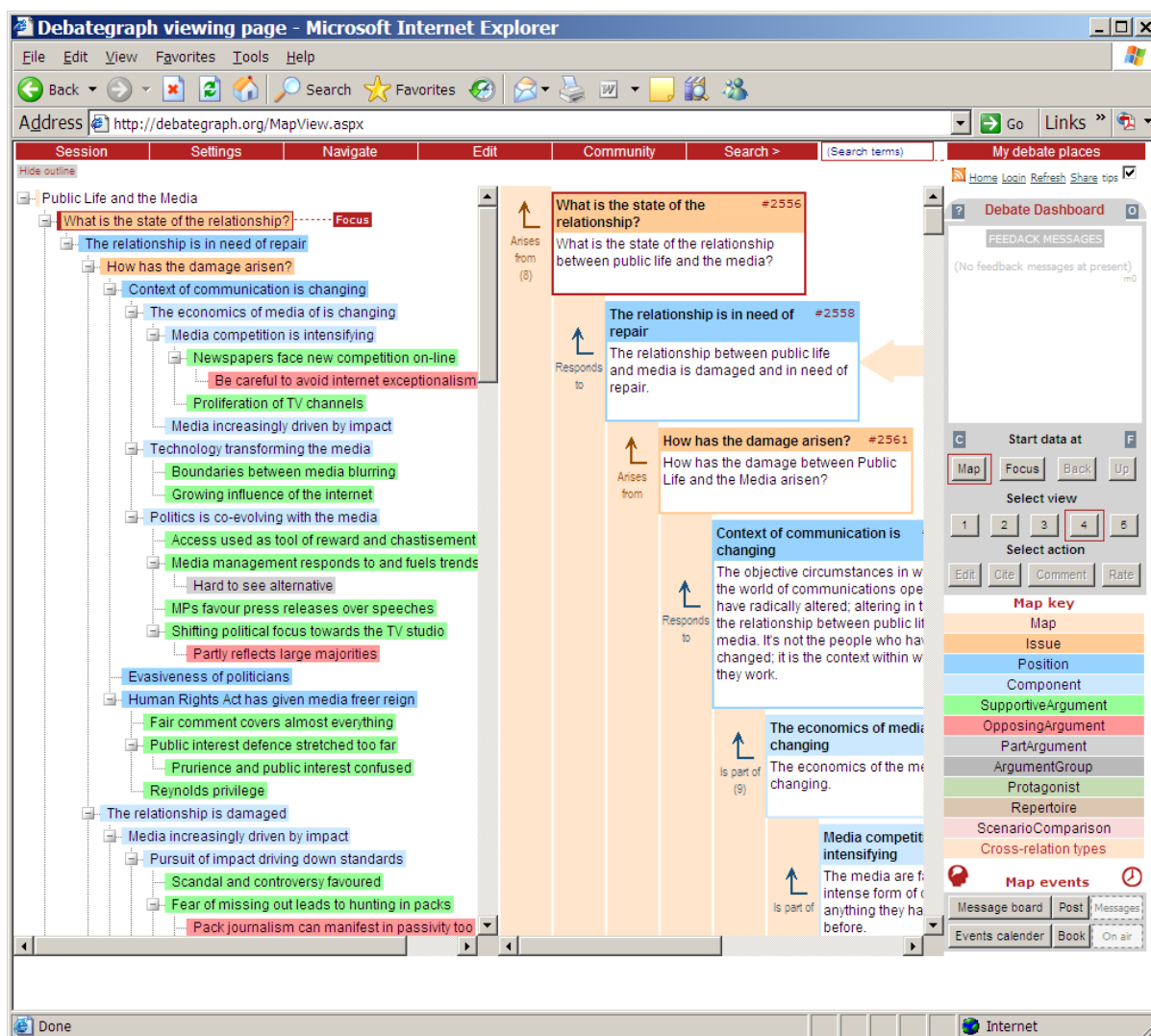
The debate mapping exercise was linked to on the 10 Downing Street site, but hosted externally.

The speech by Tony Blair was uploaded to the Debategraph site and mapped by the Debategraph team: breaking the structure of the argument presented in the speech into its constituent parts, each of which could then be challenged, rated and commented upon. The categories used in the debate map were:

- Position
- Component
- Supporting Argument
- Opposing Argument
- Part Argument
- Argument Group
- Issue

The categories contained in the map allowed users to compare the ideas being expressed in the speech to those contained in surrounding debates. Participants could contribute their own perspectives, too: and the Debategraph team also mapped arguments raised in the media

response to the speech. Thus, the site doubled as a map and archive of the different positions in the debate about the mediation of public life. Participants could amend and contribute to the map of the debate: which evolved as they did so.



Feedback was collected from participants. This enabled the Debategraph team to enhance the features and usability of the tool while enabling the Number 10 site to assess new forms of engagement.

Duration

The DebateMapping exercise started on 12 June, 2007 – the day on which Tony Blair made his speech. It continued until 20 July, 2007.

Publicity

Participants (mostly journalists or academics) were invited by Reuters and the Hansard Society (rather than Downing Street) to take part in the debate mapping exercise with a view to ensuring that participants felt unrestricted in terms of their licence to be critical about the content of the prime minister's speech. Meanwhile, relevant arguments contained within the 102 related articles carried by domestic and international press were included in the debate map.

Other engagement methods

The Number 10 website provides a number of other interactive facilities that promote engagement with the prime minister's office, such as webchats, virtual tours and the famous ePetitions site. These are designed to be accessible to the public and to provide people with information about and ways of linking into government consultations.

User profiles

Invitees came from outside of government (from media organisations and academic institutions, as well as public engagement bodies). No demographic data were collected, nor any attitudinal or behavioural data.

Usage trends

There were 309 invitees, with 240 invited via Reuters and 69 invited by the Hansard Society. 22 (7 per cent) of the invitees registered, including 17 (25 per cent) of the Hansard invitees and five (2 per cent) of the Reuters invitees. Two (12 per cent) of Hansard invitees contributed to the map – via edits (two) and comments (two). None of the media invitees contributed directly to the map.

There were 362 referrals from the www.debate.pm.gov.uk URL during June, and a further 38 in July. The combined figure of 400 includes referrals during the pre-project development phase, referrals initiated by the project team and a few referrals initiated by colleagues/family/friends.

The Debategraph team estimate that the total number of independent visits to the Downing Street debate map between 12 June and 20 July was around 225.

User feedback

The deliberative design appealed to users, who were also pleased to have been invited to take part in the initiative. Few wished to comment on the ex prime minister's speech via the medium of the site, preferring to publish their views in articles in the press and online. Partly, this was because of the site's interface: users complained that it was not immediately accessible and that engagement did not produce clear outcomes. In addition, they wanted to reach a wider audience.

The purpose of the exercise was unclear to users. Many were unsure how to take part – specifically some mentioned finding it difficult to track arguments and locate comments: to do so, one would have to click on every category which was time-consuming. Such problems are best summed up in the words of one of the participants:

The debate mapper is a great idea to look at arguments systematically. However very often people just want to give their views overall and want them listened too (sic) and don't approach debates logically. This coupled with complex structure may put people off.

Despite reservations about the specific format of the engagement exercise, respondents were happy to have taken part and felt it worthwhile – even if they would not necessarily recommend that it be used with the public. It was suggested that such deep deliberation should be used only with key stakeholders.

Moreover, respondents emphasised the need to ensure that the objectives of such deliberation were clear; specifically, they stressed the importance of process – if people were taking time to comment, then their views should be taken on board, it was argued. And meanwhile, one participant questioned whether it was preferable to reduce the so-called digital divide to ensure mass participation rather than engaging only with the elite.

Despite these reservations, participants noted that the asynchronous aspects of online engagements make them more accessible and less expensive than traditional forms: they also recognised that the structure of online deliberations provides a systematic and transparent framework for engagement, although some doubted that they really lead to the kinds of deep deliberation hoped for. Nonetheless, all wished to see the government using more online forms of engagement, but doubt was expressed about a cross-governmental commitment to doing so.

Follow up

The Debategraph exercise is less about representing interests to government and more about exploring new ways of providing overviews of debates and allowing participants to develop and categorise them.

The site was in Beta when used on the Downing Street site and is still under development – the shape of that partly influenced by the feedback from participants.

Since the exercise took place, the site has been developed to make it more user-friendly. In addition, the Debategraph team have started up a blog⁵⁷ to discuss the debate mapping process of deliberation, its theoretical origins and its practical applications. It has since been used in a number of different policy contexts.

The Downing Street website has not since run any debate mapping exercises: the case study is linked to in the Tony Blair archives.

57 See: www.opentopersuasion.com

Food Standards Agency Chief Scientist’s Blog

URL	www.fsascience.net
CASE STUDY OWNER	Food Standards Agency

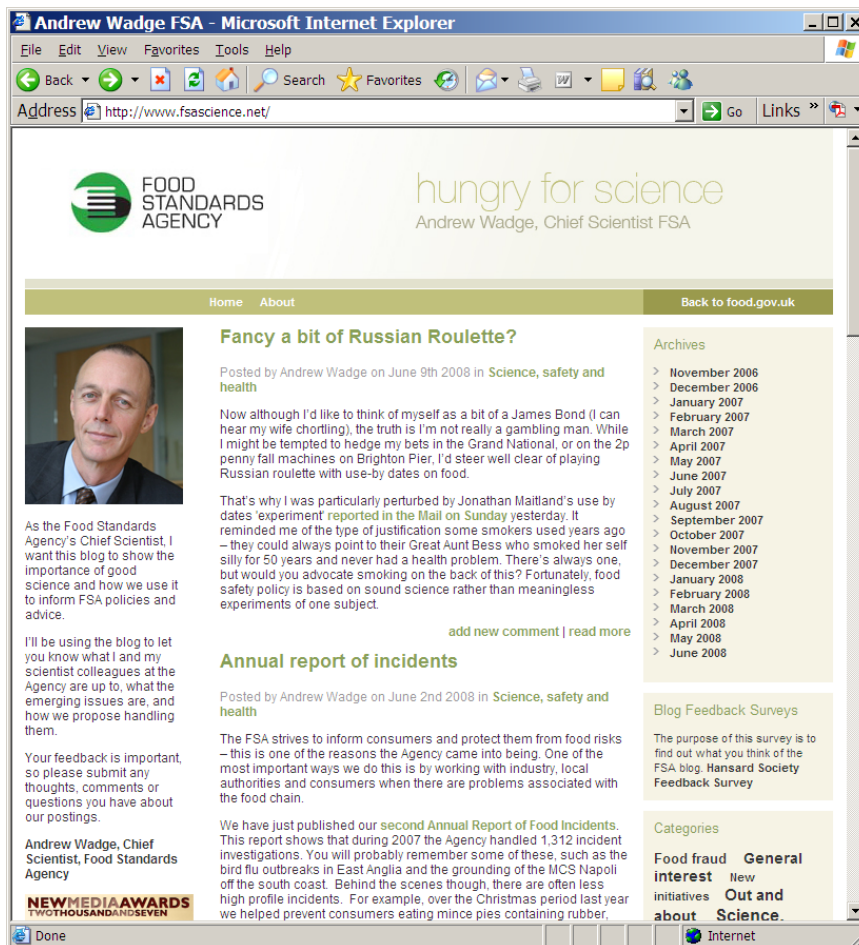
Strengths	Potential for improvement
Well established brand raising the profile of the FSA Chief Scientist;	Links with other government departments to share engagement practices;
Trailblazing use of new media by government department;	Create multiple engagement opportunities by co-ordinating on- and offline activity;
Good relationship with mainstream media organisations (e.g., <i>The Guardian</i> and BBC);	Develop suite of blogs rather than focus on Chief Scientist role, to engage people in the food industry and consumers.
High level input (entries and responses) by the Chief Scientist;	
Discussion of key issues and debates around food technology and safety;	
Ongoing use of site, with development plans for the future;	
Good coordination across FSA, enabling it to respond to pace of ICT-mediated communication;	
Interaction with site visitors ensuring repeat visits and improving efficacy.	

Overview

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) was formed by an Act of Parliament in 2000. A statutory body, it advises government on food policy, enforces safety laws and monitors food production to ensure compliance; its role is to represent consumers and raise awareness about topical issues relating to food safety.

At arms length from government (it is a department without a ministerial brief, while remaining subject to Parliamentary scrutiny), the FSA acts independently and takes an evidence-based approach; the work of its Chief Scientist is pivotal in ensuring that the FSA maintains its standing in relation to all interested parties within government, the public and the food industry.

The FSA attempts to ensure that its engagement and consultation processes are open and transparent – the Chief Scientist’s blog provides a means of promoting this aspect of its work, soliciting feedback on thematic issues where possible.



Policy purpose

The blog was set up to raise the Chief Scientist’s profile and increase public understandings of the FSA. In its first year, it tackled issues that were in the public eye (such as traffic light labelling of food) and addressed high-profile issues (such as avian flu) – at times setting and at others responding to the press agenda. Its main intention was to bypass the ‘government silo’ and provide a more direct means of engagement with citizens.

Its success in creating an engagement channel led to it being a runner up for the Newcomer’s competition at the *New Statesman* New Media Awards (2007). It has since continued to develop, with the Chief Scientist raising diverse topics of scientific interest (such as the effect of drinking caffeine during pregnancy), as well as high profile stories (such as the Chief

Scientist's presence on BBC2's *Newsnight*). The blog has also carried some off-topic content (such as a story about the *Sweeny Todd* movie).

Such attention to the media context fulfils its main remit – namely to raise the Chief Scientist's public profile. The blog continues to address topical food-related issues and to engage the public.

Model

The blog uses open source open access software. Mainly written by the Chief Scientist, the blog has also featured stories written by FSA staff.

Publicity

The blog was initially promoted via press releases and through the FSA's outreach and engagement work. However, it has since developed its own momentum and has acquired a media presence: it has been positively featured in Ben Goldacre's *Bad Science* column (*The Guardian*), while the Chief Scientist has appeared on BBC2's *Newsnight* programme, been profiled in *The Times*' *times2* and made the front page of *The Daily Telegraph*.

Other methods of engagement

The FSA engages in stakeholder and public engagement to ensure that its decisions are as open and transparent as possible. Its main method is consumer outreach, learning about the dietary practices of diverse communities.

The FSA organises two offline stakeholder forums a year enabling consumer organisations, pressure groups, industry stakeholders and enforcement authorities to bring matters to the attention of the department. Between times, individuals and organisations are encouraged to contact the FSA.

User profiles

Registration was not required of visitors to the site. Information about users was therefore gleaned from their voluntary completion of our pre-engagement survey. The average number of unique visits during the evaluation period was 6600 per month; those completing the pre-engagement survey constituted under 1 per cent of site users. Of these, 80 per cent said that they were English (5 per cent were Scottish, 5 per cent Swiss, 5 per cent Australian and 5 per cent Irish).

The site appears to have reversed the gendered pattern of engagement typical of the internet: 68.4 per cent of respondents were women, compared to 31.6 per cent men. The age range of respondents reflected the online norm:

Age	Percentage of respondents
25-34	36.8%
35-44	10.5%
45-54	31.6%
55-64	21.1%

All respondents claimed to be regular internet users with the majority accessing it from home (25 per cent), work (20 per cent) or a combination of the two (50 per cent); 5 per cent mentioned accessing the internet via their university.

The majority (85 per cent) were not active bloggers, but 15 per cent had their own websites. A higher proportion of respondents read policy-related blogs regularly (45 per cent) – those cited included food safety blogs and the BBC website, suggesting that the FSA blog had a strong appeal to those interested in food policy (85 per cent said that they were very interested in food policy compared to 15 per cent who were moderately so).

This did not preclude an interest in general policy: half claimed to be fairly interested in politics, with 30 per cent expressing keen interest, 15 per cent claiming a lack of interest and a further 5 per cent showing some ambivalence.

Political engagement was slightly above average amongst these respondents: around 37 per cent had been in contact with an MP or local councillor (with 5 per cent being in touch with both); around 58 per cent had not been in touch with either, although all had voted in national elections (84 per cent had voted in local elections; around 58 per cent in European elections). Involvement with the FSA was higher: 75 per cent of respondents were already in contact with the department and 45 per cent had been in contact with them professionally.

Access routes to the site suggest a food orientation: 55 per cent of respondents claimed to have come to the blog via the main FSA homepage; it was recommended to a further 10 per cent and an additional 10 per cent sought it out via search engines. Media coverage also drove people to the site (such coverage was in trade press, and was generally positive), with

25 per cent of respondents saying that they'd heard about it that way – the remaining 25 per cent said that they'd picked up a link to the FSA blog via another website.

The site managed to attract active engagement (rather than transitory traffic) with 15 per cent choosing to actively engage by posting a comment and 45 per cent coming to the blog for work/study purposes. Only 15 per cent expressed a passing interest in its content; 45 per cent wanted specific information, either from the Chief Scientist's posts or from those of other visitors.

A newer site, or one that had not established a community of readers would inevitably have drawn more people to it out of curiosity, spurred by media attention. We shall see in a moment the rate of repeat visits which should confirm the reported activity of the site by respondents.

Site performance

Date	Unique Visitors	Number of Visits
April 2007	8,181	13,723
May 2007	9,093	16,148
June 2007	5,710	12,046
July 2007	4,595	10,079
August 2007	5,692	12,973
September 2007	8,714	18,169
October 2007	8,333	20,175
November 2007	8,263	20,148
December 2007	7,265	20,654
January 2008	5,398	12,111
February 2008	5,114	13,134

Figures in the table above suggests that there was some repeat traffic to the site (each user averaged two visits). The fluctuating figures are seasonal - the FSA blog was relatively quiet in the summer; the preceding months were more active because of discussions about high-profile media issues (e.g., avian flu and traffic lighting of food labels).

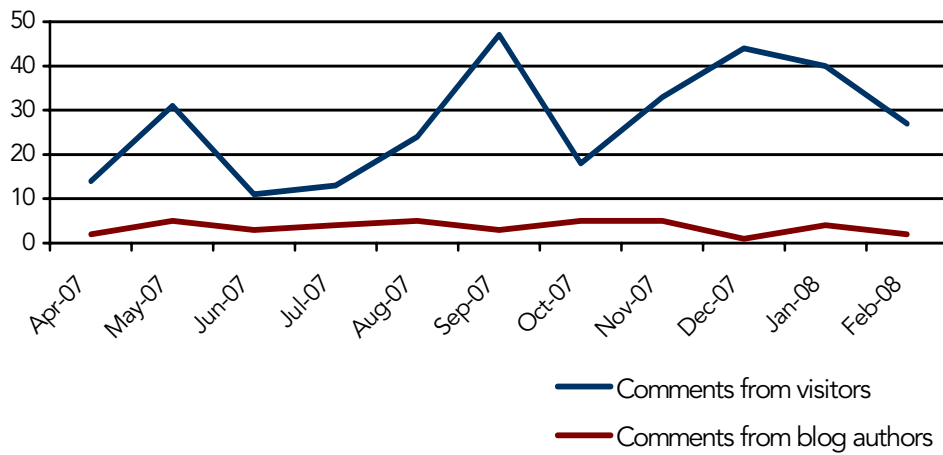


Figure 5: Comments to FSA blog

The graph above highlights the relationship between the blog author’s contributions and those of site visitors. Peaks in the volume of posts by the latter correspond with the topics being discussed – the first peak (in September) occurred when the blog focused on hyperactivity and food additives; others corresponded with discussions about milk, salt, sports nutrition, detoxing and new technologies and food.

User feedback

33 people responded to our feedback survey: a high proportion (45 per cent) rated the blog highly, but a similar number was unable to judge the blog, having never seen similar sites.

A large proportion of respondents (55 per cent) claimed to have visited the site at least once a week, suggesting a reasonable amount of traction; despite this, few posted comments on the blog (over 65 per cent had not). The main appeal for those visiting the site was to read other people’s comments; over 75 per cent of respondents claimed to do so while 63% said that they mainly looked at the blog author’s posts.

The site was praised for its success in presenting the human face of the FSA; the Chief Scientist’s relaxed style was commented on. Visitors appreciated the fact that he provided useful alerts to news stories. Some claimed that the site was hard to navigate around, with PDFs becoming hard to locate; others said that it could have done with more publicity and an increased level of interaction between the blog author and site visitors.

The site was informative for most users: over 55 per cent said that they understood the role of the FSA better and around 89 per cent said that they had learnt something about food related issues from reading it. Accordingly, over 78 per cent said that the blog was making a

contribution to public engagement and efficacy – around 80 per cent said that they'd visit the site in the future and would recommend it to others.

Follow up

The blog may continue to be a (mainly) single-authored site or could provide a platform for different authors tackling specific themes, targeting distinct audiences. At present, it is public-facing, but there are hopes to use online technologies to engage specific groups of stakeholders within industry in the future.

This has been attempted in the past (see earlier phases of Digital Dialogues) and it is notable that the public-facing work of the Chief Scientist has been received more favourably than that designed to engage stakeholders. This suggests that the subjects being raised are able to generate public engagement (while being risky topics for industry stakeholders to engage with in a public setting). It reflects also the FSA's success at public (and stakeholder) engagement offline.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office Bloggers: Global Conversations

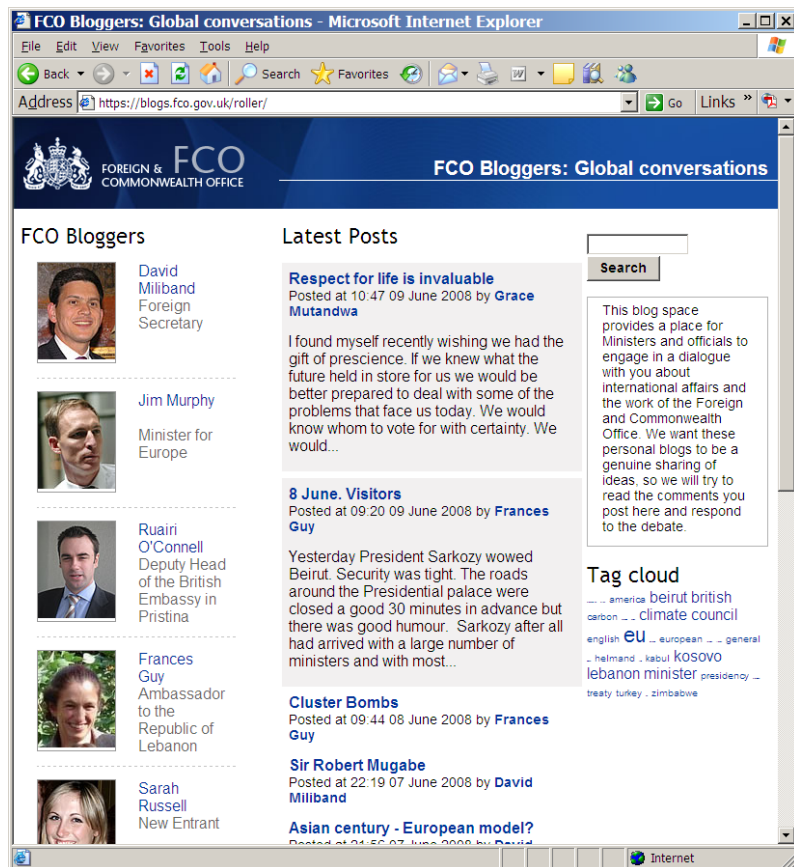
URL	blogs.fco.gov.uk
CASE STUDY OWNER	Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Strengths	Potential for improvement
Well conceived suite of blogs establishing engagement across the FCO's portfolio;	Links with other government departments to share engagement practices;
Building on foreign secretary's prior experience, new media strategies normalised within the FCO;	More consistency across the blogs vis input from authors;
Development of policy outcomes from blogs;	Display links to all pages of each person's blog;
Prominent links to blog from main FCO website;	Better networks with more foreign policy/academic blogs via blogroll.
High level input from ministers and officials, providing insights into the FCO's work;	
Embedded video and links to social media sites provide range of engagement opportunities;	
Ongoing use of site, with development plans for the future;	
Interaction with site visitors ensuring repeat visits and building efficacy.	

Overview

When the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) published its new priorities in the 2006 white paper, it emphasised the need to adapt to a fast-changing and increasingly globalised communications environment. The result is a plethora of new strategies embracing emerging technologies.

As well as the 'FCO bloggers' website being evaluated in this case study, the FCO has channels on YouTube and Flickr providing multi-platform mixed channel approaches to engagement.



Policy purpose

The site was set up to encourage a range of FCO personnel (from ministers to staff) to blog; beyond that, the intention was to find ways of feeding issues raised during engagement (rather than consultation) into the policy cycle.

Model

The site was carried over from DEFRA where it had been used to host David Miliband's blog when he was secretary of state for the environment. By stripping and re-skinning the site, those who had followed David Miliband's blog in its previous incarnation lost access to its archive. The new site allowed bloggers to embed videos and images; authors were given camcorders and the FCO developed channels on Flickr and YouTube, with comments enabled.

David Miliband writes in his role as foreign secretary; Jim Murphy, as minister for Europe; Frances Guy posts from Lebanon, where she is Ambassador; and Sarah Russell – a new entrant to the diplomatic service – posts about her experience. This permanent slate of authors allows us to explore how newer bloggers develop their web-presence and how established bloggers carry a following.

The majority of blog authors on the FCO site have a temporary presence either because it is their preference or because the project about which they are blogging is short-term (e.g., the FCO blog on climate change from Costa Rica). Many are posted in turbulent contexts (currently, there are blogs from Harare and Pristina; previously, from Afghanistan), aiming to increase engagement and understanding (the British-Bangladeshi delegation to Dhaka is another case in point). Once they are closed, blogs are archived – accessible by prominent link.

Publicity

The blog was initially promoted via press releases and through the FCO's website. It has been picked up by a number of government-related blogs, but there is little evidence that it is being discussed or linked to by foreign policy blogs.

Other methods of engagement

Since the 2006 white paper, the FCO has positioned itself as a 'global network' which can and should benefit from the forms of engagement made possible by the internet. This hasn't replaced its offline activity; in fact, the FCO still meets with academics, think tanks, NGOs and representative organisations. It has also undertaken a stakeholder survey to assess its work.

User profiles

Registration was not required of visitors to the site. Information about users was gleaned from their voluntary completion of a pre-engagement survey: 80 people responded to it – of these, around 70 per cent said that they were English; 1 per cent Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh (respectively). Visitors also came from France, Canada, Japan, Qatar, and South America.

The site conforms to the gendered pattern of engagement typical of the internet and political engagement generally: under 30 per cent of respondents were women, compared to over 65 per cent men. The age range of respondents reflected the online norm:

Age	Percentage of respondents
18-24	13.8%
25-34	21.3%
35-44	17.5%
45-54	21.3%
55-64	16.3%
Over 65	7.5%

The majority of respondents claimed to be regular internet users with most accessing it from home (over 85 per cent) or work (around 50 per cent); political blogs were generally on their radars (over 40 per cent of respondents looked at mainstream current affairs blogs, such as those run by the BBC or *The Guardian* as well as more partisan blogs). Despite engaging with politics online, few (11.5 per cent) were active bloggers themselves.

The blog appealed mainly to FCO-insiders, be they people who had regular contact with the FCO or who worked for it. Around 20 per cent heard about the site from the general media or via other sites. The remaining respondents heard about the site by email, or via its website or by word-of-mouth.

Political engagement was significantly higher than average amongst respondents: around 50 per cent expressed a keen interest in politics with almost 70 per cent claiming to be specifically interested in foreign policy. Most were already fairly-to-very aware of the FCO's role (almost 70 per cent) – a statistic that reflects the avenues by which people came to read the blog in the first place, with 40 per cent claiming to have had some individual communication with the organisation. Interestingly, around 50 per cent of respondents claimed not to have had similar contact with their MP or local councillor; despite this, almost 80 per cent had participated in local and national elections, suggesting a much higher than average political engagement.

The site managed to develop a community of readers fairly quickly; although a high degree of curiosity was expressed (45 per cent of respondents claimed that their interest in the site was cursory), many respondents wanted to actively engage with the site; 49 per cent wanted to read specific blogs; 24 per cent to post comments; 39 per cent to read comments.

Site performance

The evaluation period ran from 1 September 2007 – 31 March 2008. Statistics collected from the back-end of the site suggest that there were on average three page views per visit; this is indicative of the site's appeal to its users who moved between different bloggers and site pages. The following table provides a breakdown of the number of page views per blog section.

Blogger	Posts	Total Views	Comments
David Miliband (Foreign Secretary)	87	215,546	1,065
Clare Hughes (Costa Rica)	16	2,418	6
Jim Murphy (Minister for Europe)	43	58,395	651
Frances Guy (Beirut)	27	46,718	28
The Hajj Delegation	12	16,921	4
Lindsey Appleby (Brussels)	15	4,026	32
Maria-Pia Gazzella (Santiago)	20	3,043	20
Philip Barclay (Harare)	2	883	19
Ruairi O'Connell (Pristina)	15	24,348	32
Sarah Russell (New Entrant)	28	23,000	83
Sherard Cowper-Coles (Kabul)	19	13,600	35

The figures in the above table provide us with a sense of the interest generated by the various blogs. In total, during the evaluation period, a total of 185 entries were made by bloggers; David Miliband was (perhaps unsurprisingly) the most prolific. He continued to build on his experience of blogging to achieve a high level of interest (his blog attracted over 50 per cent of the site's visits).

The foreign secretary's blog attracted fewer comments per post (1065 comments to 87 posts) than did the minister for Europe (651 comments for 43 posts). However, interest in Jim Murphy's blog was largely prompted by a comment made on it – about French health care for British ex-pats – which, in turn, led to policy change.

The number of visits to blogs was high – even when there were few comments (e.g., Claire Hughes's six-week blog attracted almost 2,500 visits, with only six comments (and 16 entries) made).

The FCO was unable to provide us with monthly statistics to highlight how the blog traffic varied over time. However, the response to the two newest blogs (those of Philip Barclay et al (starting on 29 Feb, 2008) in Harare and that of Ruairi O'Connell (commencing 23 Jan, 2008) in Pristina, suggests that interest is still strong. This suggests that the suite of blogs has attracted sufficient interest that even if there is a personnel change within the FCO, the enterprise will continue.

User feedback

Around 60 per cent of the 30 people providing feedback said that the blog compared favourably to similar sites they had visited: a high proportion of respondents (over 25 per cent) visited the site daily; a similar volume looked at the site on a weekly basis, and around 25 per cent checked the blog at least monthly. Where the site gained traction in terms of visits, it also drew in new visitors through the temporary blogs about specific countries (such as Kosovo or Zimbabwe).

Respondents reported a high level of interaction with the blog, with almost 45 per cent saying that they had posted comments; not only did around 85 per cent of respondents read posts by other visitors, but there was a high level of engagement between users.

A non-interventionist approach was taken to moderation; posts were turned away only if they broke site terms and conditions, rather than because they expressed challenging perspectives. This often meant that users moderated themselves and others effectively – a point that was noted by the case study owners who felt that the interactions on the blog generally warranted the light-touch moderation used on the site. Users, too, expressed some satisfaction with the fact that they were left to their own devices when it came to addressing topical issues:

The blog has reflected the policy of interaction and highlighted on the importance of debating hotspot issues.

This view was by no means universal, however: some users felt that the site was too harshly moderated and that it was important for the debate to be had – even if the views expressed were outlandish (in which case they could be tackled).

Interaction was also felt to be less frequent than was required; this was attributed in some cases to the failure to promote the site externally to attract a greater number of voices. However, the case study owners noted the draw of two high-profile ministers and highlighted

a dilemma about quantity and quality – the latter is not ensured by the former, but is more likely when engaging with people who are fairly knowledgeable about the subjects being discussed.

Despite these reservations, users were generally happy with the site and pleased that it exists, noting that it continued to discuss issues that were sensitive to the FCO. David Miliband's blog was one of the biggest draws to the site. Of our respondents, over 35 per cent claimed to visit his blog most regularly, with Jim Murphy's attracting 22 per cent of respondents. Miliband's blog was viewed by many as authentic:

The fact Miliband manages to pull off putting a personal touch to his entries despite being the foreign secretary.

Praise for the foreign secretary's blog was not tempered by any criticism; whereas in the past, there have been negative comments about the cost of his blogging platform or his 'institutional' patina, such concerns seem to have tailed off, suggesting that the suite of blogs has an appreciative audience.

The minister for Europe received some criticism because of his lack of engagement; policy changes, however, arose because of comments posted on his blog. Users appreciated the developments that occurred around French health care but noted that the minister for Europe could have used the blog to respond a bit more (while effecting change).

The blog preferences expressed by site visitors are confirmed by the statistics presented in the site performance section of this case study. Meanwhile, respondents reported reading comments more often than they did other sections of the blog; a similar proportion (around 11 per cent) reported focusing on specific themes rather than particular blogs (e.g., French health care).

The blog in general was a success, according to respondents; just under 60 per cent said that they learnt about the FCO from participating in or reading discussions. This is an achievement for an organisation whose security concerns are such that the idea of engagement can often be considered risky. Over half (55 per cent) said that they learnt about specific areas of foreign policy from the blog: the video-blog from the British Ambassador to Afghanistan provided the case study owners with a concrete example of the way that the blog can communicate what the FCO is doing behind the headlines.

Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that around 70 per cent felt that blogging could provide a valuable means of engagement in this context; helping users to find out about developments and affect them; providing information that might never be published in newspapers or broadcast on TV or radio about trouble-spots and issues being tackled by the FCO.

The positive outcomes of the blog were such that the vast majority (over 85 per cent of users) said that they would continue to visit the site: fewer (just over 70 per cent) said that they would recommend the site to others, perhaps emphasising the developed nature of people's interest in foreign policy prior to engagement.

Follow up

The FCO has upgraded to a new platform. All the current discussions will be archived but the intention is to carry on developing a multi-blog platform and to combine off- and online activity (such as the delegations) to promote understandings of the FCO's work. The intention is to harness the multimedia aspects of the internet so that the site does not rely on text.

The suite of blogs means that the site is not dependent on Miliband's ministry to continue; the intention is to learn from the evaluation and develop the blog and the culture of blogging within the FCO.

Sustainable Development Commission Panel

URL	www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/sd_panel.html
CASE STUDY OWNER	Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)

Strengths	Potential for improvement
Clear objectives to consultation;	Depth of engagement between panel and policy makers;
Participants kept informed about the progress of the SDC's deliberations during and after consultation;	Further opportunities to engage with the SDC beyond the panel consultations.
Participants had previous involvement with an SDC panel consultation;	
Topical issue discussed, ensuring a well-motivated and informed process;	
Participants were able reflexively to engage with the consultation process.	

Overview

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) is the government's independent adviser on sustainable development, reporting to the prime minister and the first ministers of Scotland and Wales. Its aim is to put sustainable development at the heart of policy through advocacy, advice and appraisal.

The work of SDC is divided into 10 policy areas: climate change, consumption, economics, education, energy, engagement, health, housing, regional and local government and transport. Each policy area is led by a steering group of Commissioners and SDC staff.

To inform its work, the SDC established a stakeholder panel in September 2006. It has so far recruited over 600 members – the majority of whom have been involved in two stakeholder panels since March 2006. The panel is UK-based; participants are selected for their interests and expertise, rather than to provide a representative sample of public attitudes. Panel activity takes place online.

Policy purpose

The SDC uses its panel to:

- Understand depth and breadth of opinion on SDC projects; and
- Provide a transparent and systematic means of consultation.

This case study evaluates the second SDC panel – the first was held in 2006-07 and was evaluated in Phase 2 of Digital Dialogues. The second fed into an SDC consultation on aviation: the panel advised on the content of the SDC publication on aviation, which would then form part of the SDC's broader consultation with the public and with core stakeholders about aviation.

Model

There were three structured panel sessions (running for three weeks each). Panel members could also participate in the SDC forum where issues around climate change and travel were being discussed. The first session was held in July 2007: panel members were required to look over a draft of the SDC's draft aviation publication and to answer a number of open-ended questions about how it could be improved as well as about innovative aviation policy ideas. Panel members were entitled to give one answer to each question but they were not obliged to do so.

The second session took place in August, 2007. Participants were shown a summary of responses to the first session and asked to discuss the strategic role of government on aviation as well as how the SDC should engage further around the issue. In the third session, a final report was shown to the panel reflecting their priorities for government focus and giving the SDC clear direction for its ongoing engagement on aviation. This session, which took place in September 2007, invited panel members to provide feedback on the consultation process itself and to review their experience of the panel and make suggestions for its improvement.

SDC staff facilitated the consultation, but website design and panel recruitment were undertaken by a third party, Dialogue by Design, who also collected feedback on panel members' experience of the consultation, focusing on its clarity and the design of the website.

The Digital Dialogues team added some further evaluation questions: given that people had been approached for feedback on their experience of the SDC panel previously, the focus was on form and function of the stakeholder group rather than on political engagement, generally.



Publicity

Panel members were recruited to form a dedicated stakeholder group with whom the SDC could consult on different issues over its lifetime. On joining, panel members were given an indicative brief, highlighting the number of times per year they could expect to be consulted. The work of the panel is described on the SDC website (URL given at top of the case study).

Other methods

The primary means of engaging with the panel is via the online platform, whether it be through structured consultations, polling, forums, or sharing information on the SDC extranet

User profiles

Members of the panel were recruited because of their expertise on the consultation teams; despite this, there is an attempt on the part of the SDC to build a demographically representative panel. As it stands, the gender balance is 65 per cent male to 35 per cent female. The majority of panel members are aged between 24-54 (78 per cent); 18 per cent are aged between 55 and 64; 2 per cent are over 65 and 3 per cent are under 24. Meanwhile, 96 per cent of panel members consider themselves to be white; 2 per cent Asian; 1 per cent

Chinese; 1 per cent Black (according to the definitions provided by the site). Most panel members (74 per cent) are English; there are also Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and international members. Meanwhile, the professional breakdown of panel members was as follows:

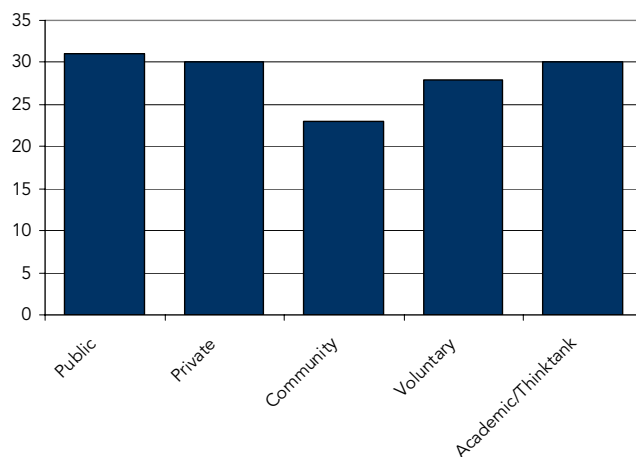


Figure 6: Number of members who participated in session one, broken down by sectoral perspective

By consulting people with a number of different orientations to aviation, the SDC was trying to get an overview of the range of opinions and perspectives rather than develop a consensus. As the chart above reflects, the approaches to aviation were balanced between different stakeholder groups.

Usage trends

The 600 panel members were invited to take part in three sessions. The chart below indicates the rates of participation:

Session	Question	Responses
1	1	104
	2	100
	3	92
	4	86
	5	75
2	1	73
	2	65
	3	66
	4	61
3	Evaluation	30

As in other case studies, the rate of participation drops considerably during the life-cycle of a project (as is evident above). While the approach taken to online engagement might have an effect – appealing to some more than others – a pattern emerges that the more involved the engagement, the fewer people take part.

User feedback

Participants were asked to respond to questions on a 5-point scale (1 being high – 5 being low). The table below highlights the fact that the engagement exercise appealed to panel members because of the topic alone; 57 per cent expressed strong opinion in this regard, with an additional 20 per cent believing that aviation was a relevant theme for discussion. Nonetheless, participants were divided on the question of whether the objectives were clear and the background information, useful. Despite this, the majority of respondents appreciated the outputs (i.e., the summary reports).

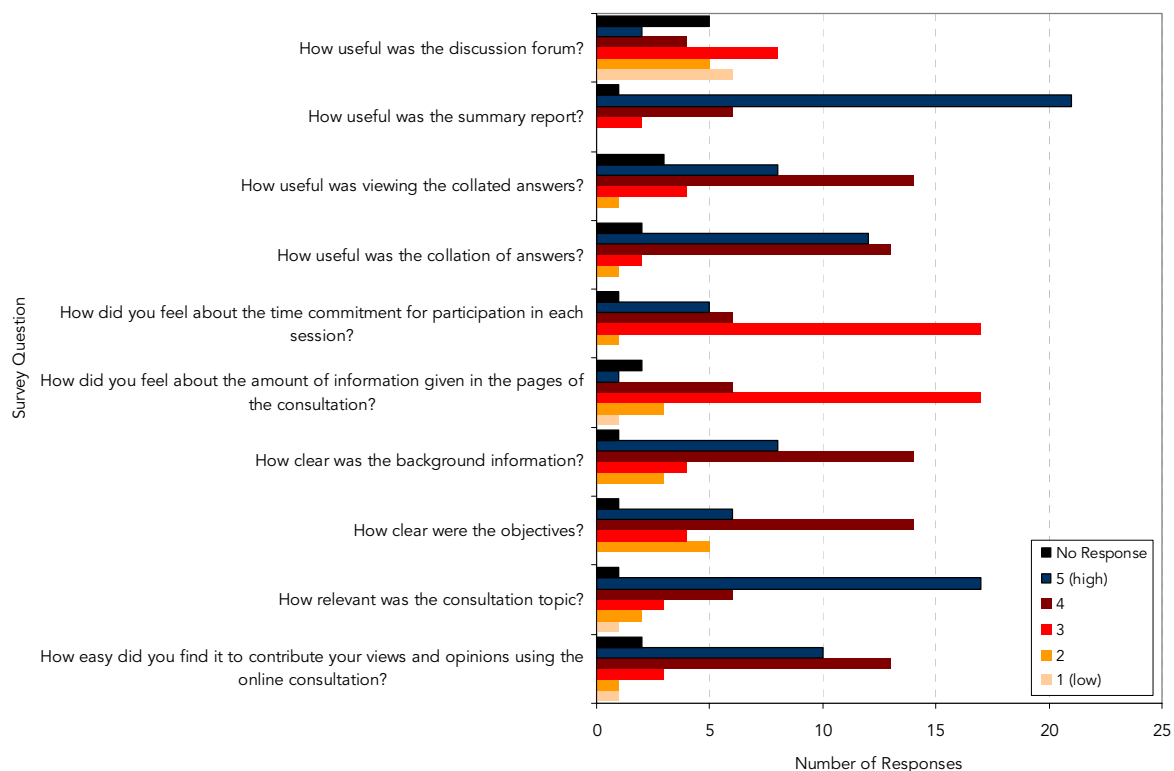


Figure 7: SDC user feedback

When asked about the time-commitment required from participants and on the volume of background information given to panel members, responses were clustered around the centre of the scale provided. To interpret these patterns, it is important to turn to some of the more detailed responses panel members gave (see below).

Detailed feedback

In general, participants were positive about their involvement with the SDC panel. In the words of one participant:

The first stage consultation question – 'what should the SDC put in a leaflet on climate change and aviation?' was in my view trivial, a mis-framing of the problem, and a question for which a group of sustainable development experts / advocates were not a very useful consultation panel. However the responses, and the way the facilitators interpreted them and framed the second stage, wrenched this round into a much more rich, interesting and useful debate about how the public policy community, including but not only the SDC, should respond to the huge problem of the unsustainability of aviation growth. So congratulations to all involved for rescuing what seemed to start as a monumental waste of time. But it would have been better to start with a more important and suitable question.

The format of the consultation was a concern for other participants – partly this was because of the volume of reading required, the need to switch between different forms of information (some moved between a number of computer windows – others between hard copies and the online panel). Some suggestions were made about how the consultation could be simplified, including breaking questions down and requiring less detailed reading.

Although these make sense from a user-perspective, a balance needs to be struck between their concerns and the SDC’s desire to obtain knowledgeable responses. The role of the SDC facilitators was generally viewed positively although for some, there was a concern that the consultation was over-structured to the extent that it limited the expression of different perspectives.

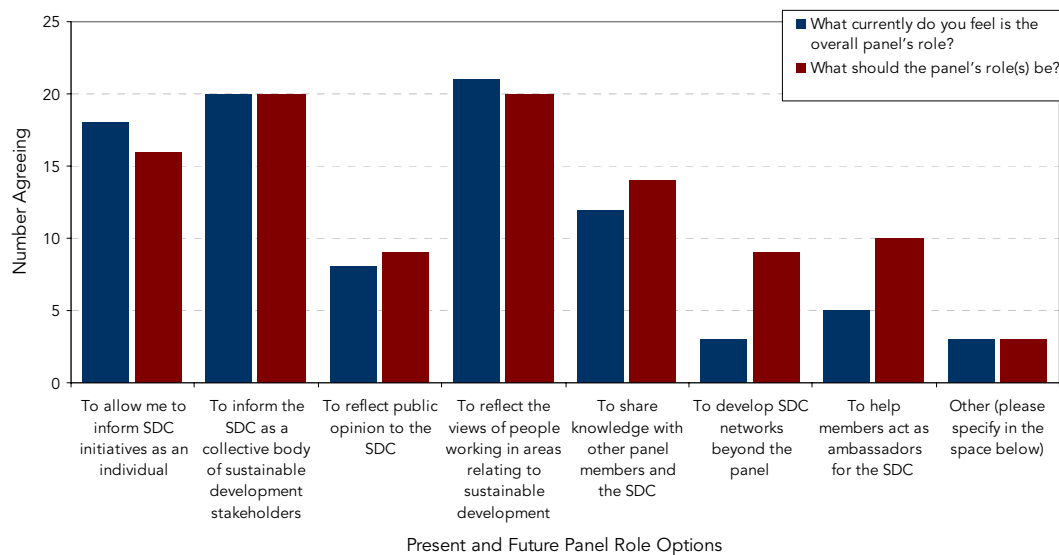


Figure 8: Role of SDC panel

The above graph represents participants’ opinions about the role of the panel; certain roles are identified as being more important at present than they will be in the future – informing the SDC (as individuals and as a collective body), for example, and reflecting the perspectives of those working in sustainable development. Participants were interested in expanding the panel’s remit in the future – in particular the desire to build a sense of community was emphasised. Participants also hoped that in the future, they could act as ambassadors for the SDC, representing its agendas to the public.

For some participants, the role of the panel was less defined: some thought its role was to influence policy-makers; for others, its role was broader, providing a repository for a range of

opinion and creating a knowledge-base, while developing a range of approaches (from lay to specialist) for feeding in to the SDC's deliberations through a variety of means (on- and offline).

Follow up

The results of the consultation can be found on the SDC panel website (address provided at top of case study).

Since the end of the consultation on aviation, the SDC has continued discussing the issues raised on its forum. The panel has continued to grow and a subsequent panel email consultation on carbon emissions in schools has been launched. Other agencies and departments are considering setting up their own engagement panel (or borrowing that of the SDC where relevant).

The SDC is now thinking about engaging people earlier in the policy cycle via its online forums, involving the stakeholder panel at times when a range of expert opinions is required.

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APPENDICES

The following are examples of the typical kinds of basic guidance provided to those wishing to take part in Digital Dialogues, from phase 1 onwards. It is provided here as a useful historical reference and, where it is drawn upon to inform and guide future engagement projects it should be updated.

Appendix A – Online Engagement Tools

Over the course of Digital Dialogues, we have looked at how different web applications can be used in a range of policy and engagement contexts. Below, we highlight the benefits of each before listing some of the less conventional tools which can be used to supplement them.

Blogs

Blogs can be collaborative, or be produced by a lone author; they are generally text-based but can incorporate audio, images and video. Entries are date-stamped and presented in reverse chronological order – often with tags and categories that allow the reader to explore by theme and author. While blogs are a useful way of transmitting information to readers, they provide opportunities for user feedback and can generate new understandings of policy, political processes and ideas. They also provide the public with a direct interface with political institutions, commentators, and decision makers. For this reason, they are becoming common in an engagement context.

They can be as simple or as complex as the author wishes. Certain features come as standard: a text-editor similar to that of word processing software, requiring little or no knowledge of web programming; a content management system (CMS) that allows authors to moderate comments. Some types of blog software also incorporate web statistics, allowing the author to monitor traffic to and within the blog.

Blogs are cost-effective and simple to use; they can achieve a number of different things, from informing the public and raising awareness to developing networks (which requires the author to establish reciprocal links with other sites/offline organisations); they can also anchor

consultations enabling discussion about particular themes that are emerging in policy debates. They demand a user-friendly approach to language and text (and make possible the supplementary use of video and images), but in so doing can help to raise the profile of ministers whose work would otherwise seem remote.

Essentially, they suit any engagement purpose (apart from one that requires instant response or is of short duration); a user base takes time to build, and therefore a blog should be viewed as a long term project. As a blog builds up momentum, it can be used for different purposes throughout the policy cycle, with spin-offs (such as webchats) supplementing it. Blogs can be used to link to other blogs and resources on the web, comment on other relevant websites: of prime importance is the need to keep content up-to-date and topical.

Forums

Forums (sometimes known as bulletin or message boards) are good platforms for structured, topic-based deliberation between large groups of users. Comments are presented either in a linear or clustered (threaded) format. Content and user comments are managed much like a blog. However, where a blog does not require registration to post, a forum usually does.

Forum sites, therefore, have community management tools built in. Users can participate in forums and share information about themselves in a profile to help other users contextualise their comments.

Deliberation often starts with broad points and the aim is to narrow down toward conclusions through interaction between the users and facilitation carried out by the site's moderators. Deliberation is often asynchronous, meaning that users are not required to be in the same place at the same time to interact. Deliberation is structured around themes designated either by the site's managers or its users. Comments are moderated, either before or after publication.

A condition of a successful forum is often the visibility and commitment of its moderators. In forums, moderators facilitate deliberation much like a chairperson in an offline meeting – keeping the discussion on topic, keeping the momentum, looking for actions and ensuring that the space stays inclusive to participants who may drop in and out.

Forums can be open or closed to spectators. They can be used to host deliberations of anywhere between a day and many months. It can be that a forum is opened out to general

participation, but forums can focus in on particular groups of stakeholders to provide a space for detailed deliberation. Indeed, outside of politics and policy making, the most successful forums are often those maintained for special interest communities.

Webchats

Webchats differ from blogs and forums in that the interaction takes place in 'real time'. These sites are based around instant-messaging software. In a policy context, they support 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.

Webchats are popular because they feel like events and provide users with a unique interaction with decision makers. They are a useful addition to face-to-face meetings, and with audio and video-streaming technology, chats do not have to be purely text based. Some webchats can be general in their focus, but good sessions tend to focus on pre-defined themes.

The pace of real time interaction can make webchats quite difficult to manage. However, the scale of the task can be reduced by encouraging pre-registration and asking people to pre-submit questions. However, pre-submission should only be used as a guide and users should be able to submit different questions in the event. Moderation of questions and responses is possible in webchats, but should be responsive to ensure a quick turnaround.

Increasingly widespread mechanisms

File-sharing and Social Networking

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 engagement exercises. They might in the future let participants post and download audio-visual content; videos and images can be embedded into blog/forum text; departments can set up channels on the main networks (YouTube and Facebook, for example) – as many already have – to provide the public with multi-channel methods of connecting with government; these can be linked up to other existing online networks, maximising the social networking potential of the internet.

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 can be used to develop policy documents, such as white papers and bills. The policy team can work closely with a team of experts who would be able to collaborate to rebuild documents and the arguments contained within; a wiki allows those consulting to track deletions and inclusions in a straightforward manner and provides a map of developments. In such cases, the public may be able to see the wiki as it unfolds, allowing for greater transparency – government shows how it has arrived at decisions.

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 others 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 already experimented with ePetitions as a means of connecting people to policy; the 10 Downing Street website, for example, has encouraged ministers to take part in webchats to discuss issues raised in the most popular petitions.

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 citizens’ 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;

Choosing an application

Blogs, forums and webchats can all be run as sites in their own right; however, it is also worth considering combining these applications at different stages of an engagement process. Find out, from the people you want to talk to, what type of site they would like to use and what type of interaction they are looking for. Balance this with your needs.

It is not possible to give a specific recommendation of a company or system you should use; such a recommendation would be circumstance and time dependent. Be assured, however, that there are many different vendors and a range of software available. As with any market, shop around to get the best deal; ask questions, find out what others have used. Think carefully about your needs and those of your user base, and procure on that basis.

Almost all of the Digital Dialogues sites were built using open source technology, but proprietary systems were an option. Open source software is owned by no one and can be adapted by anyone; this suited us because it meant we could customise a basic platform based on the particular requirements of our case study owners. But this did require a detailed knowledge of web design and programming. Proprietary systems are owned, sold and licensed; they look good and are ready to use straight off the shelf. Plus, they come with technical support and usually automatic software upgrades. The potential drawbacks can be the cost, and that proprietary systems tend to be generic and are rarely bespoke.

Based on current standards (at the time of writing), whether you bring in an open source or proprietary solution, look for the following content and community management functionality:

- 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 embeds 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;
- Full compliance with accessibility standards;
- Content and data export.
- Each product will have a particular range of functions and associated costs. If in doubt, consult with a departmental IT or web team.

Less conventional tools

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.

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 data.

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.

Appendix B – Web Content

The following guide provides a basic outline of the copy (text) required for a generic online engagement site. This covers the basics but is not fixed and it is possible to deviate from it depending on the requirements of your exercise.

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 copy (or text) on an online forum:

Static content that stays the same throughout the consultation (for example, a welcome message). Changes to this type of copy are usually only made at the close of the exercise to make it clear that the site is no longer live, what the next steps will be or where to go for further information;

Dynamic content is content which is expected to, or could, change over the course of the exercise (such as forum summaries, topics, news updates);

User generated is content generated by the users of the site.

Quantity of content

Much of the content required by a forum 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 audio and visual content, and weaker on text. Copy works best online when it is presented in a compact and highlighted 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 off of which other pages (sub-navigation) were found. These ran in the following order:

- Home** the homepage, the entry point for login, the central orientation point for participants and interested observers;
- Forum** the page through which the deliberation topics are introduced and accessed (also the first page the participant should be directed to following initial log-in);
- About** where the exercise is explained and any important context is provided. In this section users should also be provided with consultation codes and other submission route details where required;
- 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;
- Feedback** this page is conventionally used to gather input from the participants about the specific exercise or site.

Homepage

The homepage is the welcome and orientation point for the website. There are a number of elements important to a homepage – 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 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/Blog

The first page of the forum is the orientation and entry point for the topic 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 deliberation. 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 direction of the exercise.

It is also useful to start each deliberation with a post from a representative of the department or the team running the exercise, or a key opinion leader or 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.

About

The 'About' page takes the brief detail about the nature of the exercise 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 exercise and its online element will develop during and after).
- It is recommended to provide information about consultation codes, contact details and other submission routes on these pages.

Resources

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

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

The decision on how much material to provide will be determined by who the participants are and on what aspects of policy they are deliberating. (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 corporate or 'parent' website.

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

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.

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.

Appendix C – General Legal Issues

Commenting/Discussion/Posting Rules: Rules for users should be posted clearly on the website and preferably provided at the point of registration (and/or posting). At some stage, they require explicit acknowledgement and agreement (usually through a tick box).

The following are a generic set of discussion rules from a Digital Dialogues case study:

1. Debate between users should be lively but also respectful. Taking part should be a positive experience.
2. Stay on-topic. Don't post messages that are unrelated to this online forum.
3. Do not incite hatred on the basis of race, religion, gender, nationality, sexuality or any other personal characteristic.
4. Do not swear, use hate-speech or make obscene or vulgar comments.
5. Do not break the law. This includes libel, condoning illegal activity and contempt of court.
6. Please do not post personal information – addresses, phone numbers, email addresses or other online contact details, either those relating to yourself or other individuals.
7. Please do not impersonate or falsely claim to represent a person or an organisation.
8. Do not add the same comment to more than one forum.
9. Each comment should not exceed 1,000 words.
10. Do not advertise products and services.
11. Do not post in a language other than English.
12. 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.

Dealing with problem posts

If a comment contravenes any of the discussion rules do not publish it (or unpublish it, if using a post-moderation strategy). Posts should be returned to the participant by email, along with a reference to the broken rule(s). The participant should then be invited to make appropriate changes in order that the post can be reconsidered. However, if a participant repeatedly breaks the rules, their user account can be suspended and may be permanently revoked.

Defamation and Obscenity

Defamation takes place when an untrue statement is made about a person which is damaging to their reputation. Defamation is known as 'libel' if the statement is recorded (such as in writing or in an email); it is known as 'slander' if the statement is made live (published online). The conventional (offline) rules of libel still apply on websites. There is some risk in providing a link to another website containing defamatory material. This risk can be minimised by using an appropriate link disclaimer, which makes it clear that a user is being linked to pages which are not endorsed by the blogger.

Defamation legislation gives a defence where the 'publisher' (the host) has no knowledge of the defamatory remarks or no reason to suspect the remarks have been made. This gives some protection to internet service providers (ISPs) but very little comfort where the 'publisher' has read and accepted comments. Use pre-moderation to avoid this liability as a publisher of libel.

Departments should be aware of their responsibilities as hosts of discussions where comments are invited from users, and must take action if they become aware of unlawful content being posted in such discussions. They are not liable for such content if it was posted without their knowledge, until they become aware of it.

It is a criminal offence to publish obscene material or send it via the internet. However, the definition of what is 'obscene' is constantly changing, and the current situation is that only extreme material is likely to carry great risk.

Legislation prevents incitement to racial hatred as well as discrimination on the grounds of race, sex or disability. This applies to the content of webpages.

Pre-moderating and asking all registrants (or users) to agree to a set of discussion rules before allowing them to submit comments, will generally provide sufficient legal cover. Prompt removal of unlawful content is an acceptable alternative.

Copyright

Copyright is the right to prevent another from carrying out unauthorised copying. The usual copyright rules apply to websites – so copying text or images onto a website from a copyrighted source is likely to constitute a breach. Citations should always be provided, crediting the original source.

Content produced by government departments is often subject to Crown copyright protection unless otherwise indicated. Wherever this is the case, a notification should be carried on the website.

Data Protection

Data protection legislation generally prohibits the publication, or any other use, of personal data about individuals without their knowledge. Where data is sensitive then consent should also be obtained. Where it is not sensitive then it is good practice, but may not be mandatory, to do so. The following disclaimer provides general cover:

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.

Departments wishing to publish information about someone else, even simply their contact details, should make sure the person concerned is aware that they are doing so. If any personal data is published on a website not hosted by the department, there may also be an obligation on the department to register with the Information Commissioner (known as 'notification'). Failure to notify is a criminal offence. If there is any doubt as to whether notification is necessary, it would be advisable to check with the Information Commissioner and appropriate departmental legal teams.

Accessibility

Where pages constitute a 'service', sites are expected to make reasonable adjustments to allow for access by people with disabilities such as blindness or poor motor control, who may be using specialist access software rather than normal browsers. The general standard for UK government sites is level AA of the Web Accessibility Initiatives standard (version 1.0), although this probably exceeds the minimum required to comply with the law. As a ground rule, sites should always be designed to meet basic accessibility requirements – observing these design principles usually benefits those with or without disabilities alike. Consult with departmental web teams for further advice.

Party Political Content

Discussion of, or links to, party political content should be treated in an even-handed manner. While a department must not publish material which, in whole or part, appears to affect public support for a political party, it is fair to include information about a government's proposals, decisions and recommendations.

Touching on issues that are controversial, or on which there are arguments for and against the views or policies of the department or government, is permitted provided that issues are presented clearly, fairly and as simply as possible (but without over-simplifying).

Linking

It is good practice to link to other websites and resources – in order to increase the visibility of your own site and to provide users with alternative sources of information. However, to avoid liability for the content of these sites, always provide a disclaimer, for example:

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.

In some circumstances 'deep linking' into material on other websites without permission may also breach copyright in the linked page, although the law in this area is very unclear. Where possible, alert those whose material is linked to.

Appendix D – Evaluation

Pre-engagement survey

This survey is designed to find out about why you are using x engagement exercise. The survey should take less than five minutes.

The feedback is being evaluated by [the Hansard Society, an independent, non-partisan charity, as part of the Digital Dialogues pilot].

In line with the Data Protection Act, your responses will be anonymised and no details will be passed on to third parties. The results of the evaluation will be available to the public.

Note: * denotes a question that requires an answer.

If you have any queries about the evaluation, please email x

Thank you!

1. * Where do you live? (England; Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Outside of UK: please state)
2. * What age are you? (Under 18; 18 - 24; 25 - 34; 35 - 44; 45 - 54; 55+)
3. What is your gender? (Male; Female; Do not wish to say)
4. * Are you a frequent user of the internet? (Yes; No; Unsure)
5. Where do you most often access the web? (Home; Work; School/College/University; Library; Cafe; Other public access point; Combination)
6. Do you have a blog/website/facebook page? (Yes; No)
7. * Have you visited other politics-related blogs before? (Yes; No; Unsure)

8. * How did you find out about the x engagement? (Website link; Media coverage; Search engine; Other blog; Word of mouth)
9. Why are you using this site? (For information; To post a comment; To read others' comments; Curiosity; For work/study purposes)
10. * How interested are you in politics? (Not at all; Not very; Undecided; Fairly; Very)
11. * How informed are you about the x department/policy area? (Not at all; Not very; Undecided; Fairly; Very)
12. * Have you been in contact with the x department before? (Yes; No; Unsure)
13. Have you been in contact with your MP or local councillor before? (MP, Councillor, Both; Neither)
14. Have you ever voted in a national, local or European election? (Multichoice: National; Local; European; None)
15. Do you have any other comments to make? (Open)

Post-engagement survey

1. * On a scale of 1 - 5 (with five being the top score), how would you rate the online engagement? (numbered scale)
2. * How often did you visit the engagement site? (Daily; Weekly; Fortnightly; Monthly; Rarely; Never)
3. * Did you post a comment? (Yes; No)
4. Did you read other people's comments? (Yes; No)
5. Which section of the engagement site did you read most often? (List of authors/categories?)
6. * Describe one thing you liked most about the blog. (Open)

7. * What one thing about the site would you change to improve it? (Open)

8. * Did you learn anything new about the department and/or minister and/or policy? (Yes; No; Undecided)

9. In your view, is online engagement making a valuable contribution to politics and/or specific policy area? (Yes; No; Undecided)

10. * Will you visit this site in the future? (Yes; No; Undecided)

11. Will you recommend it to others? (Yes; No; Undecided)

12. Please make any other comments about the site, or about politics online. (Open)

Appendix E – Moderation Guidance

Defining moderation

All online engagement sites will have some form of moderation in place to monitor user-generated content. This is partly a legal consideration, but is also motivated by the desire to create inclusive spaces and deliberations with momentum. Moderation is not a byword for censorship.

Administration

There are two types of moderation available:

- **Pre-moderation:** where all user-generated content is checked against the terms and conditions before they are published;
- **Post-moderation:** where all user-generated content is checked against the terms and conditions after they are published.

If a pre-moderation policy is in place on a blog or forum – where interaction is usually asynchronous – the expectation is that during the working week all posts will go live within 24 hours of submission. Posts made during the weekend will go live on the following business day. For webchats – or where the interaction is in real time – the aim should be to publish user-generated content within 10 minutes.

A ‘moderator’ is internet jargon for somebody who is responsible for making sure that the rules of engagement on a site are respected. ‘Moderation’ commonly refers to the mechanical aspects of publishing or unpublishing user-generated content. Moderators also have important facilitation responsibilities (covered below), which are visible rather than the administration aspects, which take place unseen in the site’s community and content management system.

Each exercise should have at least two moderators to share the workload; three is ideal, and one is feasible. Where there is more than one moderator, a lead role should be assigned to one of these individuals. This individual will be a named point of contact and will assign roles to the others (where appropriate).

It is recommended that moderators be government representatives and, ideally, policy officials with a strong grasp of the subject matter. However, additional, supporting moderator roles may also be assigned to expert stakeholders or particular public users.

Moderators should aim to check content queues at regular intervals throughout the working day; a minimum of three times is recommended. Moderators should also aim to make their own interventions into a deliberation at least twice a week; however, these should always be substantial contributions and not simply for the sake of 'being seen'.

Facilitation

In 1999, the Hansard Society outlined its first classification of the facilitation roles performed by moderators; these have been refined over time. In this guidance, 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 over the course of an online deliberative exercise. Not every role will be used; each exercise will require different degrees of moderator intervention and role application.

Host

Often the first duty of a moderator 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; they may remain that way throughout.

The acclimatisation that comes with every new community may not faze all participants, but could concern and dissuade others from getting involved. Moderators 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-moderator 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 exercise progresses, moderators 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 engagement exercises 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. Moderators have an important 'managerial' role to play in this respect.

In the planning stages of any engagement activity, 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). Moderators should pay close attention to this schedule (even if a separate project manager exists) and be sure to provide users with reminders where appropriate.

Referee

In addition to clear timetables, good engagement exercises 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 set of rules of engagement.

Participants should be required to formally acknowledge the discussion rules at registration or before submitting content. 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, 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.

Pre-moderation allows the moderators to identify potentially antagonistic or unlawful posts prior to publication. If a comment contravenes any of the discussion rules do not publish it (or unpublish it, if using a post-moderation strategy). Posts should be returned to the participant by email, along with a reference to the broken rule(s). The participant should then 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 can be suspended and may be permanently revoked.

Most unconstructive arguments are avoided through use of a pre-moderation policy. Moderators should be even-handed and should allow a free-flowing discussion as far as possible. More often than not, where moderators are visible, 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 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-moderators 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 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.

Moderators 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 provoking a personally-motivated attack. They know that they are able to challenge those contributions that they believe are wrong, in need of further qualification or could be superseded. Online interaction 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.

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 responsibilities and a set of terms and conditions for participants (see the foot of this section).

Librarian

It is desirable for moderators to have expertise in the subject matter of the exercise. 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 moderators in this respect should be reinforced by a set of rudimentary background notes and suggested reading for users to refer to.

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

Again, the scope of these duties is largely defined by the sophistication of the technology being used. Systems should allow the moderators 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-moderator 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 moderators should also 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. Moderators must never edit participant posts without permission from the individual participant.

Reporter

The final role that will be set out here is that of the moderator as a 'reporter'. This is another significant responsibility and likely to be the one role that is present in every exercise that has moderation woven into its structure.

Over the course of the exercise, moderators 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. Copies of these summaries – best compiled weekly – can be published online as much for the benefit of latecomers as for 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 an exercise. At this point, it is the responsibility of the moderators 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-moderator 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

Moderation is a discipline in evolutionary flux. As online engagement exercises move from their developmental phase and become a mainstream feature, 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 every application 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 moderators, on each participation exercise a breakdown of responsibilities and an explanation of the moderation policy should be provided for reference by the participants. Alongside this should be included contact details for the moderator team.

A sample moderation policy for online engagement (to be posted on the site)

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.

A moderation policy should always link back to the discussion rules. Wherever possible an alternative means by which a user can contact the department should also be provided in case of a dispute.

It is useful to produce guidance for those running a forum or blog. This will vary depending on the platforms being used, but for guidance, here are the kinds of points you might want to reinforce.

Model forum guidance – for moderators (not to be published)

1. How to moderate comments

The consultation team moderators can moderate comments by logging into the site, using their login details;

You will see an admin box (with your username above it) in the right hand column. Inside this box click on the 'administer' option, followed by the 'comments' tab;

You should now be able to see the comments page, which lists the comments waiting to be approved;

To check a topic select/click on the comment title;

To check a comment in the queue, click on the 'edit' option. Check the comment for relevance and that it conforms to the comments policy;

If you are happy with the comment select the 'published' option near the bottom of the page, followed by the grey 'submit' button;

However, if you are unhappy with a comment leave it in the approval queue and inform x who will archive the comment for reference purposes. Please do not delete any comments.

To unpublish a comment, repeat steps 1 and 2 (above). You will now find yourself on the comments page - click on the 'published comments' option, where you can search for the comment you want to unpublish. When you have found it click on the 'edit' tab, followed by selecting the 'not published' option near the bottom of the page. Complete the process by hitting the grey 'submit' button.

2. How to create/edit forum topics

The consultation team moderators can create and/or edit forum topics by logging into the site, using their login details;

From the homepage, click on the 'create content' link on the right hand side of the page;

Now, you should be looking at the 'create content' page. Click on 'forum topic' and enter a 'title'. Type your introductory copy and questions in the 'body' section. (Please note – to spell check your copy you should do so in Microsoft Word before copying and pasting into your forum topic);

When you have finished composing your forum topic, click on the grey 'preview' button near the foot of the page;

Finally when you are happy with your post, hit the grey 'submit' button near the bottom of the page. This will publish your new forum topic;

To create a new 'forum', contact the x.

3. How to add new moderators

In the first instance, you should instruct any new moderators to register with the forum, if they haven't done so already;

Once they have registered successfully, contact x and we will upgrade their account accordingly.

4. How to change copy on the website

Contact x

Model blog guidance – for blog moderators/authors

The blog author can moderate comments by logging into the site, using their login details;

You will see a grey admin box (with your username above it) in the right hand column. Inside this box click on the 'comments' option;

You should now be able to see the comments page, which lists the comments waiting to be approved;

To check a comment in the queue, click on red 'edit' option. Check the comment for relevance and that it conforms to the comments policy.

If you are happy with the comment select the 'published' option near the bottom of the page, followed by the grey 'submit' button.

However, if you are unhappy with a comment leave it in the approval queue and inform the Hansard Society who will archive the comment for reference purposes. Please do not delete any comments.

How to write blogs – for blog authors

Keep to the thematic purpose of the blog. Focus on writing about what you know.

Post regularly. A minimum of twice a week and not more than twice a day is a good rule of thumb.

Every blog post has a headline. This can be anything from a literal representation of the post to something witty. It should be short.

Blog posts can be as short as a sentence, but often don't exceed 1000 words. Break up the body of your post into paragraphs of not longer than four sentences. Consider the option of using a photo, audio clip or video instead of text.

Write succinctly and in plain English. If required, you can link to other websites or upload documents that contain more detail.

Link out to other websites and sources on the web.

Don't edit people's comments. Publish all but those posts which break the blog's commenting rules.

Encourage commenting by occasionally raising questions for debate in your posts.

Don't worry if you don't get a lot of or any comments. Similarly, don't worry if you get lots. The main thing is to keep writing well.

Interact with people who comment on your blog now and then. Either by making a comment of your own or addressing a number of comments in a fortnightly or monthly post.

DIGITAL DIALOGUES

Third Phase Report

August 2007 – August 2008

An independent review into the use of
online technologies to enhance
engagement