Digital Dialogues
Second Phase Report, August 2006 - August 2007

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

Ministry of JUSTICE

HANSARD SOCIETY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital Dialogues is an independent review of ways in which central government can use information and communication technology (ICT) to enable and enhance public engagement. It has been commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and carried out by the Hansard Society. The report is based around evaluations of 12 case studies.

A) Case Studies

CASE STUDY	PLATFORM	FORM OF ENGAGEMENT	TARGET USERS
David Miliband/DEFRA	Blog	Informing	Public
Communities and Local Government	Forum	Deliberating	Public and Stakeholder
Family Justice Division/DCA	Forum	Listening	Public
Review of the Funding of Political Parties	Forum	Listening	Public and Stakeholder
Review of the Funding of Political Parties	Webchat	Listening	Public and Stakeholder
Department for Transport	Webchat	Deliberating	Stakeholder
Office of National Statistics	Blog	Listening	Public and Stakeholder
Food Standards Agency	Blog	Informing	Public
Foreign and Commonwealth Office/European Youth Parliament	Forum	Deliberating	Public
Planning Portal/CLG	Forum	Listening	Stakeholder
Law Commission	Forum	Listening	Public
Sustainable Development Commission	Panel	Listening	Stakeholder
Downing Street	Webchat	Deliberating	Public

B) Findings

1. There has been a long-standing interest in enhancing public engagement with the policy making process throughout central government. Advances in technology mean that this aspiration can now be realised online.

2. The use of online engagement methods presents significant logistical, and transparency benefits that are not always present in conventional offline methods.

3. ICT-led engagement methods are not replacements for conventional offline methods, and perform best when used as part of a combined approach. The *Digital Dialogues* case studies did not establish a sufficient link between on- and offline activity.

4. Good online engagement is less about sourcing technology and more about the quality of content, interaction and outcomes. Those case studies that were best received were those in which government representatives were active participants and not detached convenors.

5. *Digital Dialogues* case studies were coordinated and facilitated by in-house government staff who adapted existing experience or developed new skills as required. However, adaptability is restricted by the availability of resources to engagement teams and levels of confidence vary greatly across government.

6. The case studies in this report highlight that online engagement activity should be owned by and involve ministers. Facilitation should be led by policy officials, with technical support from communications and IT divisions.

7. The most successful case studies were not necessarily the ones that attracted the greatest number of participants. More significant performance indicators relate to who got involved, why and what happened as a result.

8. In most *Digital Dialogues* case studies, the long-term influence of participation on policy was unclear to the public. Response management is a crucial component of good engagement.

9. Online engagement exercises can be cost-effective. Most *Digital Dialogues* case studies were built using open source software, which reduced costs and enabled customisation to suit the needs of a specific agency, department or ministerial office.

10. Launching a website does not mean that it will be used. Online public engagement is a recent development and opportunities should be marketed in these formative stages: our case study owners did not address this challenge as well as they could have.

11. Discussion rules, terms and conditions, and moderation policies must be clear, easy to follow and published on the site. Submission guidance and policy information resources also benefit the engagement process, but were lacking in the case study sites evaluated.

12. People attracted to participating in the case studies were regular internet users. The majority had not been active in the policy process previously. It was the online mechanism - combined with an interest in the subject matter and the opportunity to deliberate with policy makers - that motivated engagement.

13. Citizens welcomed online engagement generally, saying they would take up opportunities in the future and recommend it to others. However, most expressed dissatisfaction with the specific exercise they were involved in.

14. Most of the people who used the websites spectated more frequently than they contributed. However, they did make regular return visits over the duration. Scepticism about the credibility of the engagement exercises dissuaded participation, but so too did low efficacy and a lack of knowledge and skills.

15. Online communities created around one exercise had the potential to be maintained and encouraged to take part in ongoing dialogue at appropriate junctures around the policy cycle.

16. Opportunities to engage in the policy process online should be open to all, wherever possible. However, so long as the process is transparent, it is acceptable (and sometimes advisable) for government to select specific stakeholders.

C) 10 Recommendations

On the basis of case study evaluations carried out between December 2005 – August 2007, we have made the following recommendations to the UK Government relating to its aim of getting the most from the engagement opportunities presented to it by digital information and communications technologies:

1. **Innovate…** Government needs a culture of innovation in lots of areas of its work, but particularly in relation to how it engages with the public. Investing in innovation will help government to learn, make informed decisions and motivate the public to interact with its agencies, departments and representatives. *Digital Dialogues* demonstrates this is feasible and productive;

2. **Be scalable…** Launch exercises as pilots (or betas), and keep the conditions of the exercise limited. Carry out evaluations and if the demand exists, and an ability to supply is in place, release more budget and resources to support expansion. Conversely, scale-down and reallocate resources if evaluation demonstrates little return or a need to start afresh;

3. **Observe the rules of engagement…** If government is to convince citizens that it is serious about engaging online, it must build up an understanding of how people currently interact with one another and other public and private sector bodies online. Government must not colonise online spaces and avoid the temptation to impose its way of doing things;

4. **Design with users…** Before launching an online engagement exercise, government should consult with the intended users: ask them what sort of engagement exercise they want, what manner of discussion should be had, and on what kind of platform. Balancing this user input with the needs of policy makers will result in a more engaging and productive exercise than would otherwise be achieved;

5. **Train staff…** Successful online engagement is more about content, interactivity and skills than it is about technology, which means it needs people. In some cases this may mean that government needs to recruit, but it should also invest in the staff currently in place. Take advantage of transferable experience and skills, provide training and design refresher courses to plug the online engagement skills gap;

6. **Be strategic…** The best online engagement exercises will be those that make the most strategic choices: about who to target, which offline methods to combine the online with, and at what points around the policy cycle. The advice is to make use of a 'mixed-economy' approach, so as to avoid dependence on any one method;

7. **Be interactive…** It is not enough for government to convene online engagement at arm's length; it needs to be an active, enthusiastic and visible participant. Asking people for their views and then ignoring them risks the loss of their confidence in both the process and the sponsoring institution;

8. **Show your working…** In some exams marks are awarded for explaining how you came to an answer. A similar approach should be taken to demonstrating what happened with the input arising from an online engagement exercise. If the input was not especially useful, explain why; do the same where it had an influence on the decision making process.

9. **Evaluate…** Government should ask difficult questions of its online engagement activity. It should keep a constant review of exercises, carry out its own evaluations but also invite the assistance of independent outside bodies. Government should share its experiences and evaluations. This means that departments would learn from one another's success and failures; but also that the public would be able to follow government activity and make its own judgements about what is working well.

10. **Team up…** There are a number of different government networks and funding streams specialising in discrete engagement fields. This fragmentation is leading to replication and inefficiency. Government should establish a cross-departmental 'community of practice' to provide leadership, coordination and resources in order to maximise the effectiveness and sustainability of on- and offline engagement activity.

These recommendations are by no means exhaustive but we are confident that these provide the founding principles for government to perpetuate government's online engagement momentum and begin turning around the fortunes of democratic engagement generally.

FOREWORD

In the *Governance of Britain* Green paper, the Government expressed its commitment to promoting civic empowerment by examining new ways in which citizens can influence decisions. The Ministry of Justice's *Digital Dialogues* project supports this agenda, as it demonstrates by evaluating and showcasing practical examples how government can deliver good quality online public engagement exercises that successfully involve citizens in decision-making processes.

Since December 2005 the *Digital Dialogues* Project has sought to encourage the use of information communication technology tools by central government; to build the capacity of officials to conduct online public engagement exercises; measure and analyse online participation rates; and investigate the impact of government's online engagement activities.

The Digital Dialogues second phase report builds on the findings of the August 2006 Interim report and reveals that citizens are keen to receive information directly from officials and participate in online discussions about policies which are important to them and where it is perceived they can influence policy outcomes. The public's interest in engaging with the government online mirrors the growing use of the internet to communicate with others. The Government recognises this trend and is keen to provide citizens with genuine opportunities to input into the policy development process and shape policy outcomes.

I commend the report's findings. Although there is a long way to go in embedding the practice of online public engagement across government, the constitutional renewal agenda provides a real opportunity for government to deliver online public engagement exercises based on the practical guidance, achievements and lessons outlined in this report.

The Hansard Society has a deserved reputation for expertise in the field of e-democracy, which is bolstered further by its delivery of the *Digital Dialogues* project. I also extend my gratitude to the departments, areas, agencies and fellow Ministers who have participated in this fruitful initiative with an open mind, dedication and vigour. The next phase of the project is guaranteed to continue to test the boundaries future government online engagement activities.

Michael Wills MP
Minister of State
Ministry of Justice

INTRODUCTION

Digital Dialogues is an independent review of ways in which central government can use information and communication technology (ICT) to enable and enhance public engagement.

Digital Dialogues has three basic aims:

- To raise awareness of online engagement technology and techniques available to central government;
- To promote online engagement skills in central government;
- To evaluate a series of case studies in order to benchmark administrator and user demographics, attitudes and behaviours.

The initiative aims to inform government's strategy for applying ICT across its communication, consultation and engagement processes through analysis of case studies. These case studies cover existing activity where possible, and specially commissioned exercises undertaken by government agencies, departments and ministerial offices.

In addition to improving government's understanding of the democratic engagement potential of ICT, *Digital Dialogues* also contributes to ongoing public debate about the contribution of ICT in an inclusive and vibrant representative democracy.

The Hansard Society has been commissioned by the Ministry of Justice (formerly the Department for Constitutional Affairs) to deliver *Digital Dialogues*. The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan political literacy charity established in 1944 to promote effective parliamentary democracy. In 1997 it launched an eDemocracy research and development unit to explore the political and social implications of digital information and communications technology.

The Ministry of Justice has established its Democratic Engagement Branch (DEB) with a cross-government remit for promoting engagement with the public. The aim is to strengthen government's capacity to deliver effective public engagement.

An interim report was published in December 2006 - available at www.digitaldialogues.org.uk/interim report - containing policy overviews, six case studies, and draft guidance for government officials. The findings demonstrated that online engagement had tangible communications, delivery and policy-making benefits. Data from the case studies also showed that for the majority of those citizens who participated in the case studies, this was their first formal interaction with the policy process and that they were inclined to participate in future.

This second report contains a complete overview of the initiative, and is built around 12 case studies. Section one of this report provides a brief overview of the emergence of ICT in a public engagement context. Sections two and three relate to the case studies and the draft guidance informed by the *Digital Dialogues* initiative. Section four unpacks the key findings from the second phase, and makes a number of recommendations to government about how to get engagement value out of ICT.

A third phase of *Digital Dialogues* will take place between August 2007 - May 2008.

We have tried to keep the use of technical terms to a minimum in this report. However, it has not been possible to avoid it completely. A glossary has been provided at the end of this report to help navigate some of the terms used.

SECTION ONE – **GOVERNMENT, CITIZENS AND ICT**

1.1 CHALLENGING DISENGAGEMENT
The UK government has a challenge on its hands. Public trust, knowledge and efficacy in British political institutions have been consistently depressed in recent years. Whilst few would question that Britain is a democracy, it has been criticised for its lack of democratic vitality. Its citizens have been described as 'noisy spectators' rather than active participants, and its politicians and government accused of retreating into a 'bunker mentality' rather than facing the problem.

There are various measures of political disengagement. Concerns in recent years have been brought to the fore by low turnouts at elections. At the 2001 general election, the overall turnout was 59% - the lowest it had been since 1918. In 2005, overall turnout rose to 61%, but amongst the youngest voters it was down from 39% in 2001 to 37% - mooting the potential for a sustained slump in political awareness and participation.

Disengagement from the electoral process is not a result of unconvincing campaigns, or of laziness, or contentment amongst citizens. Significant factors behind poor turnouts are the absence of engagement opportunities between elections, low efficacy and a lack of political knowledge and civic skills.

An annual *Audit of Political Engagement* - carried out since 2004 by the Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society - takes the 'political pulse' of the British public. It has demonstrated a latent interest on the part of citizens to be more engaged by political institutions and representatives. However, it has also shown a failure on the part of political institutions to take advantage of opportunities to engage the public, often by failing to address what motivates awareness and participation.

In the 2007 *Audit*, 69% of people claimed to be interested in getting involved in political and policy processes between elections. However, only 39% of people believed that they had sufficient knowledge and skills to be able to do so effectively; and only 33% believed that when 'people like them' got involved, it made any impact.

People in the UK often look to petitions and boycotts in order to have their say on the issues of the day. Whilst legitimate, these are blunt and informal forms of participation. There are established 'formal' routes through which the public can engage more directly with the government's policy-making processes. For example, since the *Audit of Political Engagement* first reported in 2003, the government has carried out an average of 609 consultations per year [Better Regulation Executive: 2003, 2004 and 2005]. In the *Audit*, people were asked if they would consider participating in a (local or national) government consultation

- 14% replied in the affirmative, but only 4% had actually done so in the previous three years.

In addition to its consultation exercises, a range of initiatives has been launched by the government since 1997 to address falling political engagement. In 2002, Citizenship Education was introduced as a statutory requirement in English schools (with variations in place in the other home nations), and in 2005 the 'Together We Can' initiative was established to coordinate public engagement initiatives across central government. Pilots and policies like these have been high-profile and designed to be sustained over the long-term. Government has not been idle; questions remain, however, about how successful its policies and initiatives have been.

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

Whether the problem of political disengagement is viewed from the root up or the top down, through the media lens or statistical analysis, the ongoing damage to the credibility of the UK polity is clear. It is not, however, unassailable.

1.2 THE UK GOES ONLINE

Wherever you look, British society is embracing the information and communication technology. UK internet access is above the EU average. There are an estimated 31 million internet users in the UK. Nearly 14 million households in the UK have access to the internet; with around 69% of these using a broadband connection (ONS: 2007). Almost 45% of households have access to a combination of the internet, a digital television service and a mobile phone.

People in the UK do a range of things when they get online. Social networking is popular amongst UK web users. Social networking sites pepper the list of the top 20 sites visited in the UK, and 61% of young people in the UK have a profile on a social network site (Guardian: 2006). Seventeen million people do banking online; 2 million more than those using the telephone to do similar transactions.

In the educational sector, over 99% of primary and secondary schools have broadband connectivity of 2 Mbps or better (Becta: 2006). A majority of school teachers make regular use of ICT as a teaching aid, and most teaching staff were considered by their school to be confident users of ICT.

National newspapers have spent millions of pounds on setting up online versions of their printed output, and developing their portfolios with web-exclusive content. Consumers have responded; in March 2007, *The Guardian* had over 15 million unique users, *Times Online* had eight million and *The Sun* had seven million (ABCe: 2007).

The internet has also forced UK broadcasters to rethink distribution and how to have a better level of interaction with users (who not so long ago were regarded as 'audiences'). For example, in March 2007 the BBC struck a content deal with Google's YouTube.com, a popular video sharing website. Primarily a move with promotional value for the BBC, it was also about reaching consumers who in increasing numbers are not turning on their televisions.

Businesses in Britain have realised the need to quickly adapt to the internet. In 2006, British advertisers spent over £2 billion on online advertising; this was double the global average (IAB: 2007). In the same year, UK consumers spent £10.9 billion online (Verdict Research: 2007). However, corporate enthusiasm is only partly to do with responding to changing consumer behaviours. Evidence suggests that there are significant productivity gains associated with more widespread use of the internet by employees within firms (ONS: 2007). Indeed, the Government has set the UK the target of becoming 'the best environment in the world to do e-commerce'.

As a provider of information and services, the Government has also gone to lengths to utilise the internet. Though initiatives are often criticised for their cost and the quality of delivery, satisfaction and loyalty among e-Government users is generally high. In the year to July 2005, 90% of users rated services as generally good, while 91% indicated they would continue to use e-services in the future (ONS: 2007).

There are obviously limits to this penetration of the internet into British life. There are significant digital inclusion issues that must be addressed. ICT access is lowest for those at risk of social exclusion, particularly working-age people without qualifications, those in social housing, and the elderly. In an age of supposed 'digital ubiquity', one in twelve households does not have access to any ICT facilities (ONS: 2007).

Nevertheless, the UK does have an impressive online CV in media, commerce, education and public service provision. This makes our record on online engagement - 'eDemocracy' if you will - all the more disappointing. Why, with all this potential demand and the ability to supply, is this area of our polity so underdeveloped?

1.3 WHITE HEAT OF TECHNOLOGY

Good government needs to engage its citizens. There exists a long-standing interest amongst political institutions to enhance public engagement. Of course, it is not as simple as deciding to make improvements or to do more; cultural, logistical and organisational factors all present sizeable barriers to tangible progress.

This aspiration to enhance engagement is now threatening to become a reality. A partial but significant factor in this change is the proliferation of ICT: principally the world wide web, the internet underpinning it and the computers and the accessibility of the peripheral hardware we use to access it.

A new field of theory and practice has emerged: 'eDemocracy'. The term is a contraction of 'electronic democracy', and it refers, in essence, to the practice of democratic processes using ICT. Some of these processes will be institutional, some will be political, and others will be civic. One way to understand eDemocracy is by breaking it down into three constituent parts:

1) Governance;
2) Engagement;
3) Communication.

In a rudimentary form, the web has been used to support democratic processes for over two decades. It has been used to disseminate and source information, and to a lesser extent facilitate organisation and participation.

Since 1997, there has been a rapid increase in the functionality, power and range of internet-based applications. This development has set in train some common transitions:

- **Users**…	PASSIVE	>	ACTIVE
- **Development**…	SPECIALIST	>	GENERALIST
- **Communities**…	LINEAR	>	NETWORK
- **Content**…	TEXT	>	MULTIMEDIA
- **Connection**…	SEDENTARY	>	MOBILE
- **Access**…	DESKTOP	>	WEB

These transitions are often collectively referred to as 'Web 2.0'. Although this term implies that the web has been reconfigured, in actuality much of the technological underpinning has been in existence since the inception of the web. What have changed are software standards, the uses to which people put the web, the number of web users, and the technical literacy of these users.

The important change, in the context of the *Digital Dialogues* research, is that citizens are using the web more frequently and for a greater range of purposes. Web users now expect not only to be able to access information, but to syndicate

it and add to it. In other words, the web has developed from a read-only to a read/write medium; where its users are not only consumers they are also producers.

Where internet users were once content with email, websites and search engines, there is now a long list of applications in mainstream use online. Some of these applications are static and used to provide information, others are dynamic and interactive. Some have seen long-term use in a democratic context and are almost conventional, others are more experimental and require further testing:
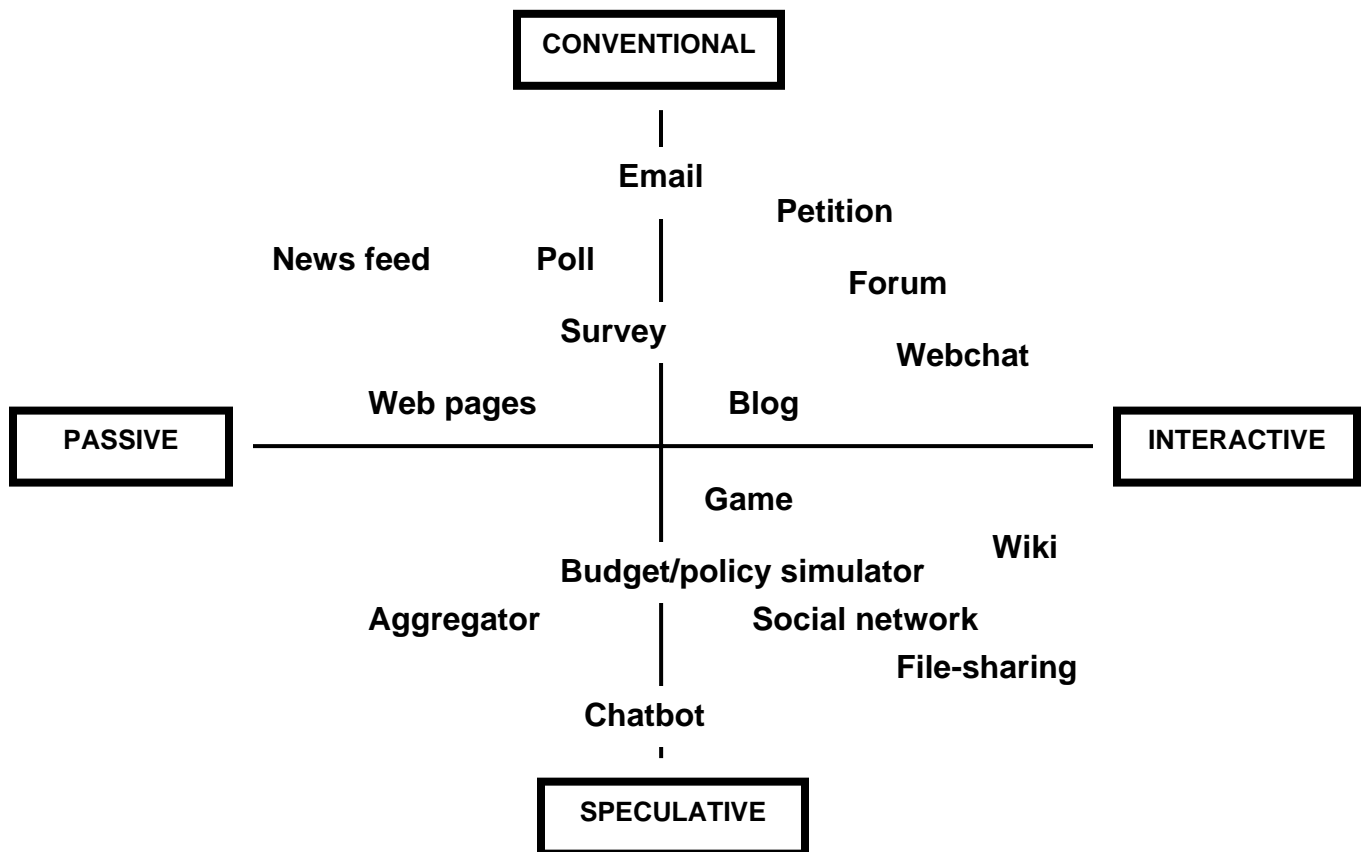
Information and communications technology options should be considered as part of a 'mixed economy' of engagement tools; they are not a replacement of conventional 'offline' options. Nevertheless, ICT-based tools offer a number of advantages over their offline equivalents, including:

- Participation is not restricted by place and time = **Asynchronicity**;
- ICT is a pervasive feature of education, leisure and work = **Ubiquit**y;
- Systems can be mobilised quickly and their modularity means that resource can be added or reduced dependent on need = **Scalability**;

- Systems routinely collect qualitative and quantitative data about user profiles and activity = **Traceability**;
- The technology need not be expensive and savings can be made as a result of the numbers of participants who can be coordinated online = **Economy**.

Of course, there are barriers to using ICT-based tools, including:

- **Cost**… per capita costs may be high as a result of the innovative nature of online engagement;
- **Literacy**... the engagement and technical skills of citizens and government staff are underdeveloped;
- **Accessibility**… despite the extent of ICT penetration, it is not universal and there is a risk of excluding marginal groups;
- **Efficacy**… low levels of citizen and institutional efficacy obstruct engagement in the short term.

The 'barriers' above, whilst significant, should be viewed by government as opportunities – reasons to push ahead with research and development of online engagement methods. There are not excuses for inaction. For example, although entry-level costs may be high (in certain cases), further research and development will bring these down (this is partly an issue about economies of scale and partly the costs associated with innovation). Besides open source solutions can demonstrably reduce costs, and in many cases the overall costs of engaging with the public online may be lower than those associated with some offline methods.

It is certainly true that government is often on the receiving end of negative criticism when it engages with citizens. Interaction is not commonly constructive or deliberative. But, again, this is a reason to do more and better engagement. Another argument might be that until ICT becomes universal and accessible to all, including the lowest socio-economic groups, there is little point in carrying out engagement online. While digital inclusion is a worthwhile concern, it is also the case that promoting ICT access and literacy amongst marginal groups could enable civic and political engagement amongst these sections of society.

We are quick to recognise that ICT has altered the way we access goods and services, consume media and spend our leisure time on a day-to-day basis. These changes are almost always regarded positively. ICT has made things cheaper, faster and more efficient. What may be less obvious is that ICT is already being used to affect democratic processes in similar ways.

For too long government has been a 'silent partner' in the UK's online polity. Its absence is to the detriment of our representative democracy. The *Digital Dialogues* initiative was launched to help central government take purposeful steps toward making amends.

SECTION TWO – **DIGITAL DIALOGUES CASE STUDIES**

2.1 INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

The policy position that ICT should be used as a means to facilitate engagement between citizens and the government is a long-standing one. However, through its assessments, the Democratic Engagement Branch deemed that there was insufficient cross-government understanding of the nature and scale of the demand for online engagement, or of central government's capacity to respond to demand.

Digital Dialogues was designed to stimulate a cross-government debate about the desirability and feasibility of using ICT to engage with citizens and stakeholders. The intention was to inform this debate through the evaluation of a series of case studies that captured the use of online engagement techniques and tools in live policy-making environments.

A general call was put out to government agencies, departments and ministerial offices for registration to become case study owners. Participation was open to those with previous experience of online engagement, or those with limited or no previous exposure.

Case study owners could be policy or communications leads, and were responsible for recruiting and managing their support team. Owners could determine at which stage of the policy cycle they applied *Digital Dialogues* - assessment, design, realisation or review - and whether the online activity was run in parallel or integrated into existing offline activity.

Three platforms - blogs, forums and webchats - were offered to the case study owners on the basis of their popularity in the consumer market and their limited previous application in the policy-making process. A budget of £3,000 was made available for the technical design, construction and support of each case study; all other costs (for example, marketing, staffing, policy analysis) were to be met by the case study owners.

The Hansard Society appointed long-term technology partners, Vohm.com, to build and support the platforms used in *Digital Dialogues*. All the sites were built using open source software system, Drupal, to minimise costs and maximise the ability to customise for the needs of the case study.

The Hansard Society prepared training based on its previous evaluations of online engagement by Parliament and local authorities; this was delivered prior to the launch of the activity. Following training, owners were encouraged to be self-sufficient and develop their own means of setting up, managing and evaluating their case study. In this way, it was hoped to awaken and develop the necessary skills amongst existing government staff.

Six case studies were completed between December 2005 and August 2006. On the basis of these case studies, the training and evaluation models were reassessed and developed where required. Between September 2006 and April 2007, a further 12 case studies were evaluated. These are contained in this report.

2.2 EVALUATION METHODS

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

- Practices developed by case study teams to set up, manage and evaluate their online engagement exercises;
- Demographics, attitudes and behaviours of the sites' user communities;
- Short-term impacts on policy processes.

Evaluation periods varied depending on the duration of the case studies.

Data about website traffic was gathered by statistical software. This captured routine information for each case study about, for example, hits, unique visitors, return visits, visit duration and popular pages.

User demographics (age, ethnicity, gender, location) were collected where registration was required to participate. As far as possible a set of standardised questions were used [see Appendix A], but on occasion policy teams adapted the questions to meet their departmental standards. In some case studies, submission of demographic data was optional. The blog-based case studies did not require registration, and therefore no demographic data was gathered.

Surveys, incorporating both closed and open-ended questions, were used to capture attitudinal and behavioural data from users [see Appendix A]. For the forums, surveys were introduced at the beginning and end of the exercise; for both blogs and webchats a single survey was available for completion toward the end of the evaluation period.

All users were invited to complete surveys (both the pre- and post-activity where applicable). Users were sent a maximum of three requests to complete surveys. Surveys could be completed on- or offline. Respondents were self-selecting and thus not representative of the entire UK population. Some questions were open-ended, others used scales; some were compulsory and others were optional.

It was not possible to pre-determine sample sizes and response rates before each exercise began. Ultimately, sample sizes differed for each case study, and in some cases were very low; no zero-response rates were recorded.

Feedback from government participants was collected through group and individual training sessions, post-activity surveys and semi-structured interviews. A minimum of two case study team members were required to complete surveys and participate in interviews; and this response rate was achieved for each of the case studies.

In some cases, it was possible to determine the short-term impact of the exercise on policy-making. This assessment was based on the testimony of the case study owners, and is referenced in the individual case study reports. However, given the duration of our evaluation periods, it has not been possible to verify or track direct influence of the online engagement exercise on policy development in this report.

Archived sites are available for viewing at the addresses provided on each case study report. The archived sites will be available for a minimum of six months after publication.

2.3 CASE STUDY EVALUATION REPORTS

In Phase Two of *Digital Dialogues*, 12 case studies were completed. The full list is as follows (in chronological order):

1. David Miliband Ministerial Blog [Defra];
2. Communities and Local Government Forum;
3. Department of Constitutional Affairs Family Courts Forums [general public and young people];
4. Funding of Political Parties Review Forum and Webchat;
5. Department for Transport Road Safety Webchat;
6. Office of National Statistics Small Area Geography Policy Review Blog;
7. Food Standards Agency Chief Scientist Blog;
8. Foreign & Commonwealth Office/European Youth Parliament Forum;
9. Planning Portal Forum;
10. Law Commission Forum;
11. Sustainable Development Commission Panel;
12. Downing Street Webchats.

Each case study has an evaluation report. The case study reports have a common structure, which is as follows:

-   **Title**... of the case study
-   **Screenshot**... from the case study website;
-   **URL** ... online location of the site;
-   **Case Study Owner**... name of the agency, department or ministerial office running the case study exercise;
-   **Lessons Learnt**... covers key learning from the case study covered in the evaluation report;

- **Overview**... contains information about the case study owner;
- **Policy Purpose**... covers background information on the case study policy area, and its translation online;
- **Model**... gives a description of the application used in the case study;
- **Duration**... states when the case study took place.
- **Publicity**... states the known ways in which the case study was marketed;
- **Other Methods**... explains alternative routes to the case study by which members of the public and key stakeholders could communicate with the case study owner, policy area or consultation;
- **User Profiles**... provides demographic information about the (public and stakeholder) users of the case study;
- **Usage Trends**... covers the user activity on the case study website;
- **User Feedback**... details the responses to users-surveys;
- **Detailed Feedback**... this section expands upon the 'lessons learnt' section;
- **Follow Up**... where possible, this section provides brief information about what happened after the evaluation of the case study exercise was completed.

Please note that common themes arising from case study owner and user feedback are covered in sections 2.4 and 2.5.

1. Rt. Hon David Miliband, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Blog

URL
www.davidmiliband.defra.gov.uk

CASE STUDY OWNER
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- This was the UK's first ministerial blog;
- Posts are written by Minister himself;
- Entries are posted regularly;
- The subject matter of entries is always topical;
- A comprehensive set of basic blog features is actively used;
- The blog has seen sustained use for over 12 months;
- Comment moderation is relaxed, in keeping with 'commenting culture' on blogs generally.

Potential for improvement
- The cost of the blog platform was higher than most;
- The blog's author rarely responds to user comments;
- Some participants pursue off-topic agendas for which other, better-suited forums exist;
- The blog does not link to or comment on discussions taking place on other relevant blogs or websites;
- The blog could make greater use of rich media content to draw and retain users.

OVERVIEW
David Miliband's first Cabinet position was as Minister of Communities and Local Government (2005 - 2006) at the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. He was appointed as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on May 5, 2006.

This blog was the first ministerial blog in the UK. It was started at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), now the department for Communities and Local Government (CLG), in December 2005.

The blog was transferred to Defra in May 2006 following the appointment of David Miliband as Secretary of State.

POLICY PURPOSE
The blog focuses on David Miliband's ministerial responsibilities, interests, research, visits, as well as reactions to developments outwith the department that nonetheless relate to its policy portfolio. The blog format allows the Minister to write on departmental and ministerial matters without the conventional intermediation that is associated with government communications. Blogging also enables readers to comment on the author's posts, thus allowing for the potential of regular dialogue between a Minister and the public.

Although the blog is authored by David Miliband in his capacity as a government minister, it was also set up to provide the department with a channel to communicate and interact with the public and its stakeholders. Therefore, the blog combines communications and consultation purposes.

The blog entries are categorised into the following themes:

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

Policy discussions relate to the UK. However, access and commenting is not restricted to the UK.

A specific disclaimer has been posted on the website to make it clear that it is not a party-political site. The Minister says that he will not publish party-political web content, and asks that those posting on the blog avoid making purely party political comments.

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

The blog is public and anyone can comment; though name, email and acknowledgement of the terms and conditions are required.

Moderation of comments is carried out prior to publication and is the responsibility of the departmental communications division.

The Minister aims to post an entry at least once a week. Entries are short and text-based – rarely exceeding a few hundred words.

DURATION
The blog has no defined duration.

The blog was publicly launched on March 16, 2006. The blog was run internally, between December 2005 – March 2006, to allow a practice period for the Minister and the support departmental team.

PUBLICITY
The ODPM undertook a 'soft launch' in March 2006, relying on word-of-mouth and interest among bloggers to generate traffic. The department linked to the blog from their corporate and satellite sites.

A similar strategy has been pursued by Defra, with the preference being to allow interest to build organically over time. One significant move under Defra has been to develop the site's permanent static links to other blogs and websites. These are divided into the following categories:

- Defra delivery partner websites;
- Key Defra website links;
- Other organisation websites;
- Climate Change and Green blogs and sites;
- Food and Farming blogs and sites;
- Politics and business blogs;
- New Media, Social Computing and eGovernment blogs;
- Local and personal blogs and sites.

The blog has been covered by mainstream, national and international media. It has also been carried by trade media, and linked to by other bloggers. There are close to 900 inbound links to the site (Source: Technorati.com, April 29, 2007).

Syndication feeds are available for the blog in its entirety or for particular individual content themes.

There has not been any paid-for marketing.

OTHER METHODS

Users of the blog are reminded that they can contact Defra using conventional methods such as email, letter and phone. Links are also provided to other departmental websites.

USER PROFILES

The *Digital Dialogues* research team distributed a survey to a randomly selected sample of blog participants. Some of these individuals published the request online; because the survey did not require registration it has potentially been completed by people who had not submitted a comment or visited the ministerial blog.

Surveys were completed by 202 respondents. No demographic data was collected (for example, age, ethnicity or gender).

Respondents were asked about their frequency of internet use. Most said that they were regularly online, gaining access from a range of places:

Figure 1: Internet access points

No answer	Home	Internet Café	Work	Mobile Phone
2%	70%	1%	26.5%	0.5%

Respondents were also asked about their interest in blogs: 35% said that they authored their own blogs; 77% said that they visit policy blogs.

USAGE TRENDS

The Minister writes an entry at least once a week - sometimes posting several times a week. Almost every entry generates comments from users. Like the frequency of posts, the comment rate varies:

Figure 2: Author entries and user comments
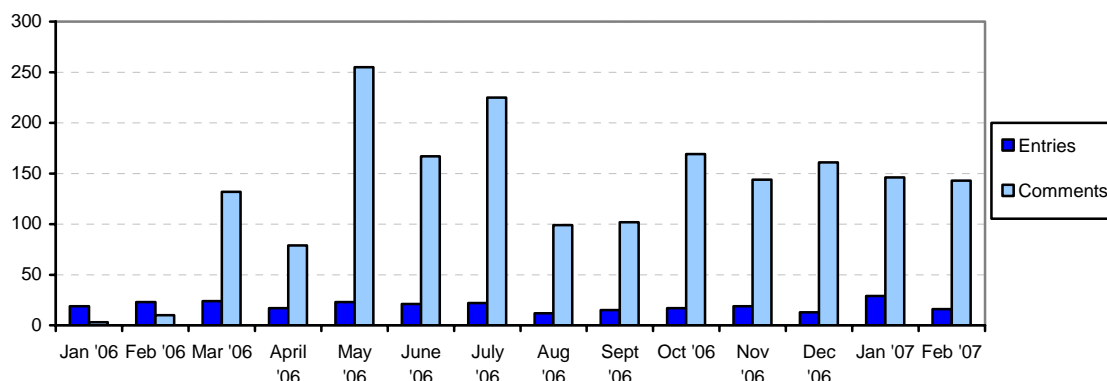
The rate of comments to entries provides one measure of interest in the blog. Another is to be found by looking at the number of visits made to the site by those who read but did not necessarily post a comment:

Figure 3: Number of site views
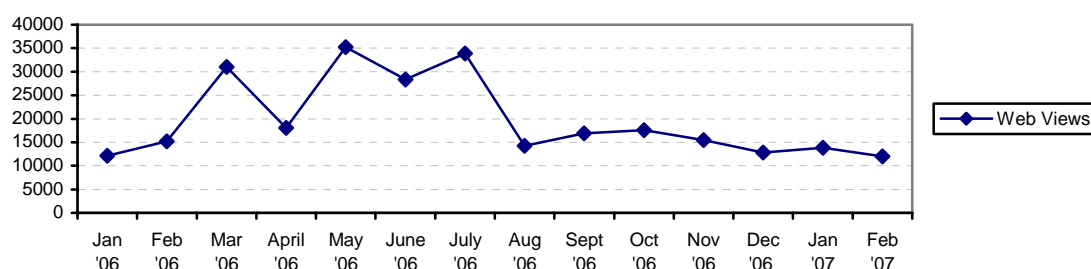
USER FEEDBACK

As can be seen from their survey responses, the majority of users were regular visitors to other political and policy-orientated blogs. We asked respondents to rate the blog in comparison to those other blogs that they read (with 1 being a low rating and 5 being a high rating):

Figure 4: User rating of blog

1 - 51%

2 - 15%

3 - 11%

4 - 8%

5 - 5.5%

Did not specify - 9.5%
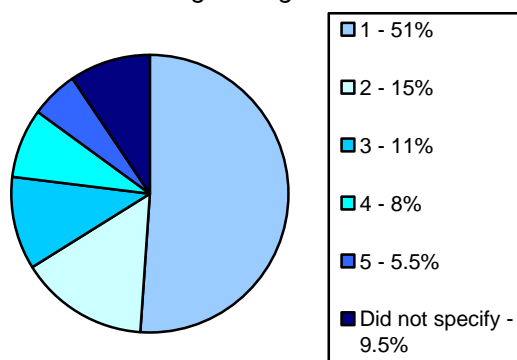
In terms of positive feedback (all respondents were asked to identify at least one positive element), the blog was welcomed because it promoted greater openness and transparency; even where users disagreed with the Minister, this blog allowed them a right-to-reply.

While some criticised the lack of interaction between the blogger and his audience, some users accepted that the Minister would have limited opportunities to respond to comments. For such individuals, the blog was less about a dialogue and more about an additional and unique channel to obtain information about a Minister, a department and their policies.

Almost half of the respondents said that they had not learnt anything about Defra policy, while nearly 50% said that they had not learnt anything about the Minister through their use of the blog. The majority of users regarded blogs as a credible method for enabling dialogue between government ministers and the public. They anticipated more blogging by government in the future, despite having misgivings about this particular example. The figures – as percentages of the responses – are displayed below:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided	No Response
Did you learn anything about being a government minister	36	62	-	2
Did you learn anything about the policy area?	50.5	48.5	-	1
Is blogging a credible form of political engagement?	78	11	10	1
Will you visit other government minister blogs in future?	72.5	27	-	0.5

DETAILED FEEDBACK

This blog was the first of its kind to be authored by a government minister. To date it has performed well. It has the necessary technical features of a blog; its content is authored by the Minister, is updated regularly, and members of the public are encouraged to comment on the Minister's posts whether they agree or disagree with the content.

The blog has had a rocky reception, however. When blogging first emerged as a communications tool in British politics in 2003, politicians were urged to use this medium to increase the frequency and depth of contact with the public. Yet, as particular notions of blogging have become more ubiquitous – it is often positioned as 'alternative' and critical of mainstream institutions and media – the blogosphere has become more sceptical of senior political figures who blog.

The Minister's blog has also been criticised for being too 'on-message', suggesting that he should divulge more about himself and his department. For some, Miliband should perhaps be using his blog as a 'confessional' to expose 'big government' and his fellow members of Cabinet. Of course, this was never the intention.

The blog does provide an insight about a Minister and his department that might not otherwise have been available in the mainstream media. Without it there would not have been a public space where members of the public could gather to criticise, debate and support the Minister's ideas, opinions and activities in such a frequent and open manner.

The cost of the blog technology has generated most of the negativity directed at it. At just over £6,000, this was (comparatively) an expensive blog - given that there is a range of free and open source alternatives on the market that are popular and widely used. Compared to government's wider spending on communications (in totality), however, it is a small sum.

The decision to spend this amount on a blog was driven by the departmental web team's desire to ensure that the application they bought enabled maximum flexibility, manageability and security. As well as hosting a blog, the website has the means to display an impressive catalogue of audio and video clips, as well as photographs.

There are aspects of David Miliband's blogging that have justified negative criticism. The most important is that, for reasons of inexperience and lack of time, the Minister rarely interacts with the comments made in response to his posts, and does not visit other blogs to comment. Perhaps one way to deal with this is to dedicate a regular entry to addressing comments posted on the site, or a section where the agenda has clearly been set by the users of the site, not the author.

FOLLOW UP
David Miliband has expressed an intention to continue blogging on a long term basis.

2. Communities and Local Government Forum

URL
http://forum.communities.gov.uk
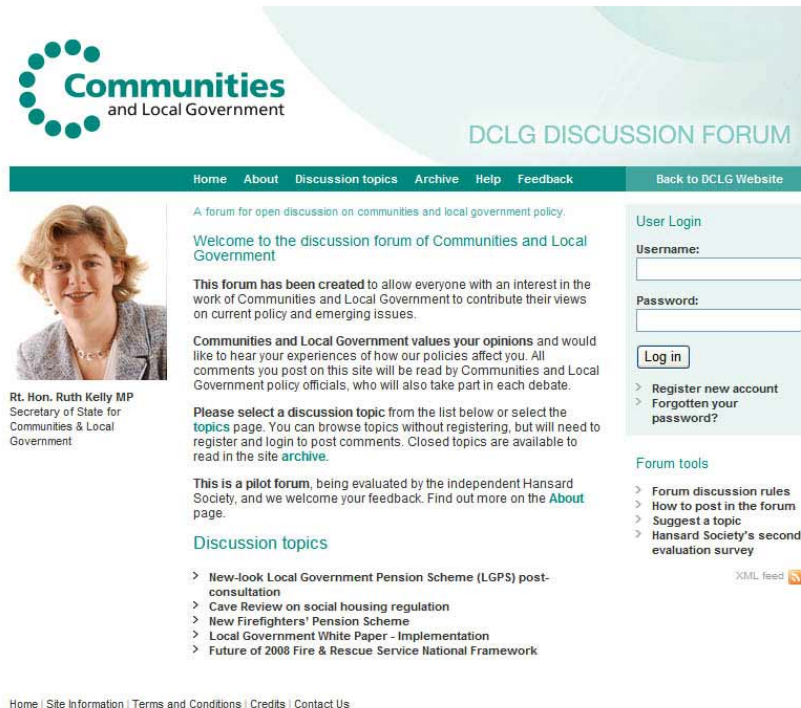
CASE STUDY OWNER
Communities and Local Government

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- This forum generated a (comparatively) large number of registrants and repeat visitors;
- There was a clear delineation of responsibilities between communications, policy and web teams for the forum;
- Active and visible linking between the department's various websites (blogs, corporate sites, forum, webchats) and offline channels made good use of audiences and participant bases;
- The range of discussion themes reflected the policy areas of the department;
- Forum was used to consult at various stages of the policy cycle, and users were given opportunities to respond to reports and revisit discussions.

Potential for improvement
- Moderators could have intervened more often as facilitators to maintain momentum in deliberation between peers;

- Measures to discourage participants from referencing and pursuing localised disputes, as these are isolating to others;
- There was inconsistent marketing from one forum topic to the next.

OVERVIEW
Communities and Local Government was created on May 5, 2006, to promote community cohesion and equality. It also has responsibility for housing, urban regeneration, planning and local government.

It unites the communities and civil renewal functions previously undertaken by the Home Office, with responsibility for regeneration, neighbourhood renewal and local government previously held by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Communities and Local Government also has responsibility for equality policy, including policy on race, faith, gender and sexual orientation. These functions were previously split between several government departments.

POLICY PURPOSE
The online discussion forum was set up to enable those with an interest in local government to discuss a number of related issues, to respond to set consultations and to exchange ideas about best practice amongst peers.

Initially launched as the 'local:vision' forum, the site was set up for those with an interest in the Local Government White Paper. This phase of the site was evaluated up to June 2, 2006 (a full evaluation can be found in the *Digital Dialogues Interim Report*).

The forum was relaunched in July 2006 to incorporate discussions on a broader range of departmental policies. These have included:

- Core Cities, Smaller Cities and Larger Towns;
- New Firefighters' Pension Scheme – options and implementation;
- Sites for Gypsies and Travellers;
- Achieving Building Standards;
- New Look Local Government Pension Scheme;
- City Development Companies;
- Local Government White Paper – Implementation;
- Commission on the role of local councillors;
- Cave Review of Social Housing Regulation;
- Commission on Integration and Cohesion;
- Future of the 2008 Fire and Rescue Service National Framework.

Most of these discussions have fed into specific consultations. In some cases, a follow-up (post-consultation) discussion has been started to provide feedback to participants and enable further debate.

Some of these discussions were closed before the evaluation was completed; others were ongoing.

MODEL
Online deliberative forum.

The policy areas directly impact on England and Wales. However, access and participation was not restricted to England and Wales. The forum was readable by anyone but registration was required to contribute.

The forum was pre-moderated by Communities and Local Government policy staff.

Representatives from policy teams logged into relevant areas of the forum to promote deliberation, respond to queries and to summarise discussions.

DURATION
Individual forum topics had particular opening and closing times.

PUBLICITY
The forum was publicised on the Communities and Local Government website, www.info4local.com and in local government newsletters and email alerts.

Each forum topic received its own promotion: some of the policy staff promoted their forum topics by incorporating links in their email signatures; in some cases, ministers promoted the forum topic that related to their consultation in speeches and at public appearances.

There was no paid-for marketing.

OTHER METHODS
Consultation participants could email or post hard copies of their submissions.

Users with specific queries could email, phone or write to the department.

USER PROFILES
2,210 registrants: 64% male, 28% female; 8% did not say.

Figure 1: Age of registrants

Legend:
- 18-23 - 2%
- 24-30 11%
- 31-45 - 35%
- 46-60 - 37%
- Over 60 - 8%
- Did not specify - 7%
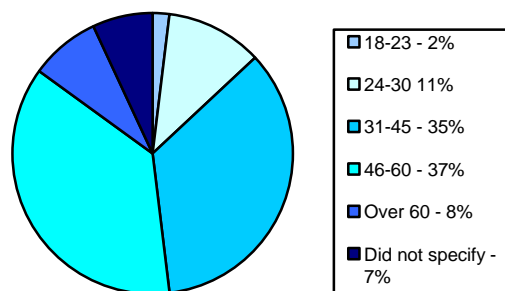
Of the 275 participants who responded to our pre-consultation survey, 96% said that they were regular internet users, accessing the web from a range of locations:

Combination	Home	Work	Other
35%	38%	23%	4%

Despite being active internet users, the majority (64%) had not participated in online consultations before registering on the Communities and Local Government forum.

Many of the users had been in touch with their local MP previously (69%). Prior to registering with the forum, 40% had taken part in a government consultation, and 13% had submitted evidence to a parliamentary inquiry.

USAGE TRENDS
Participants made a total of 411 posts by the close of the evaluation. The following graph shows the number of visitors to the website, the number of registrants and the number of posts:

Figure 2a: Numbers of visitors, visits and registrants
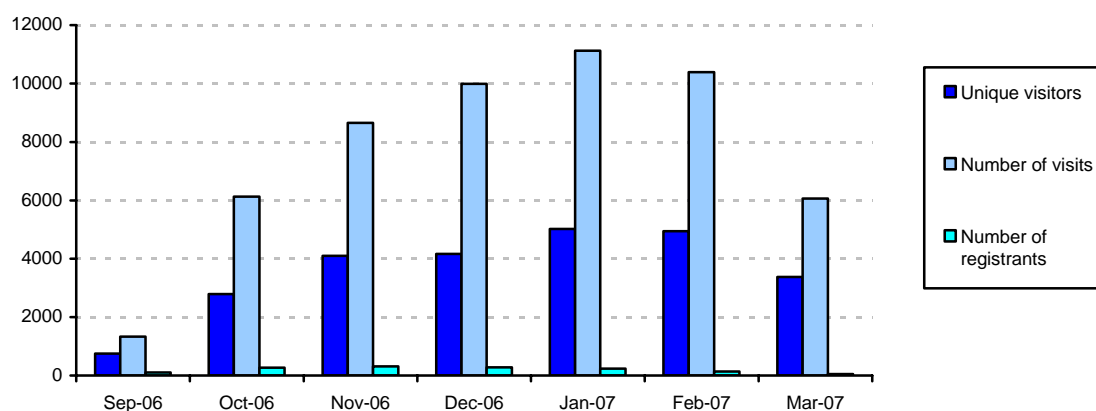
Figure 2b: Frequency of posts
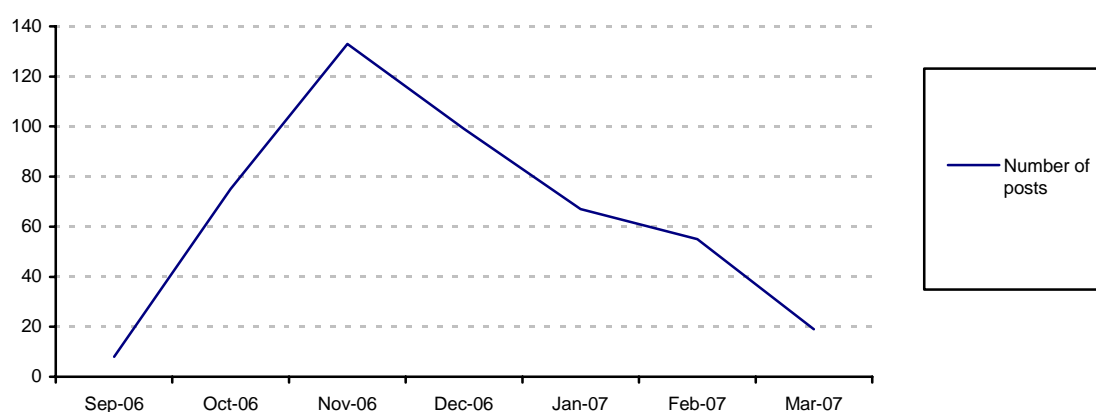
As is the norm in discussion forums, the viewing figures were significantly higher than the number of comments posted: people made a number of repeat visits and traffic levels rose even when the number of posts was constant. Registration rates remained consistent, highlighting that deliberations were attracting interest throughout the forum's existence, most probably on account of the regularity of new topics being uploaded.

USER FEEDBACK
We received post-activity feedback about the forum from users who had taken part in the consultations or discussions that occurred over its duration (n=141).

In general, users were positive about their experience of the forum and engagement online in a general sense. The responses – as percentages – are summarised in the table below:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided	No Response
Are online consultations useful?	69	8	22	1
Would you participate in future online exercises?	86	1	11	2
Would you recommend them to others?	83	2	13	2
Were contributions of government representatives useful?	26	29	43	2
Did you learn about the policy area?	31	53	14	2
Did you learn from other participants?	62	26	9	3
Did the pilot fulfil its remit?	40	12	45	3

Users suggested that online consultations offered a more transparent form of communication than conventional consultation methods. For example, people's comments were visible to others, as was their dialogue with government officials.

In their qualitative feedback, users said that they hoped to influence policy. Others believed that online deliberations would attract a broad range of perspectives (although some voiced a concern that this could mean that deliberation would lack depth). Many anticipated little government feedback.

The majority of participants reported reading forum contributions, but not necessarily making any posts of their own.

Figure 3: Users' perceptions of forum activity
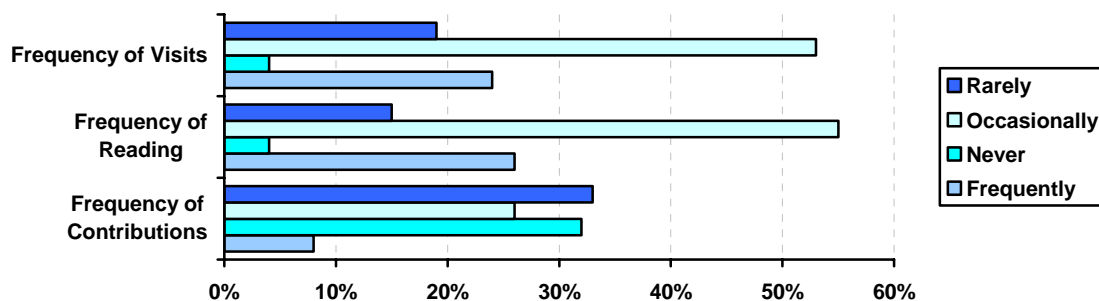
Users perceived that the majority of the deliberation was taking place between participants; they perceived there to be significantly more posts made by other users that addressed the policy officials, than posts from policy officials addressing users.

Figure 4: Flow of communication in the forum
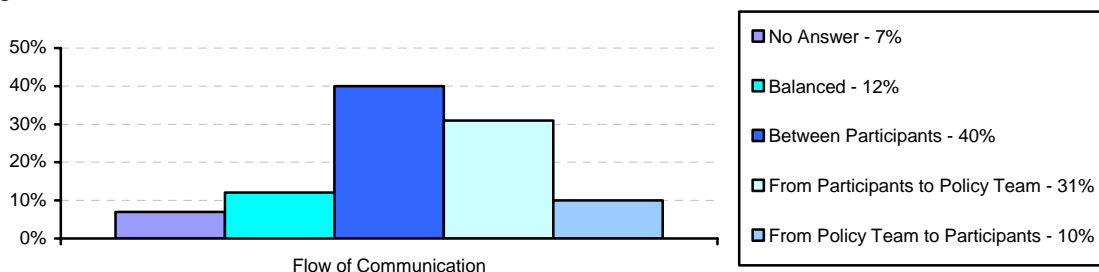
DETAILED FEEDBACK

The Communities and Local Government forum is the closest any department has come to having and sustaining a truly 'departmental public forum'. The

Communities and Local Government forum opened up discussions on a range of topics at various stages of the policy cycle. The communications division coordinated the forum, but policy teams were given ownership of particular topics. Most topic spaces had a core participant base in mind but, in the main, any member of the public could register and get involved. This was the biggest, best-established and widest ranging of the *Digital Dialogues* case studies, and deserves close attention.

The forum received some criticism: users claimed that policy members did not provide enough feedback or stimulate discussion sufficiently – this despite a concerted effort on the part of moderators to be visible and to contribute regularly. Policy officials made the most individual posts (an average of three per team member). The highest number of posts for a user was 17; the highest number of posts for a moderator was 26.

Pre-moderation was used to ensure that posts did not contravene the site's terms and conditions, but this often resulted in a delay between submitting comments and seeing them published. This made some participants reluctant to post; some worried that 'pre-moderation' was jargon for 'censorship' even though the difference was explained on the site. Others simply found that the time lag reduced the quality of their user experience. Nevertheless, users were positive about the role the moderators could play in preventing polarisation of opinion, keeping discussion on-topic and managing disruptive participants.

The low-commitment nature of the website appealed to those who wanted to see what others were saying without being obliged to contribute. For many, the ease and openness of online engagement was the biggest draw: people could look at the website at their own convenience and observe the unfolding discussions, possibly even tracking the way that their own contributions had in some way influenced policy decisions. However, the informality of forum deliberations, combined with a perceived disconnect between citizens and policy officials, led some users to worry that online deliberations would not be valued as highly as offline submissions.

FOLLOW UP

Communities and Local Government plans to make online routes available for most of its consultations. It is inviting the forum community from the site used in *Digital Dialogues* to use its own platform, which will provide greater control over the forum format and improved community management tools.

3a. Department for Constitutional Affairs Family Justice Division Forum
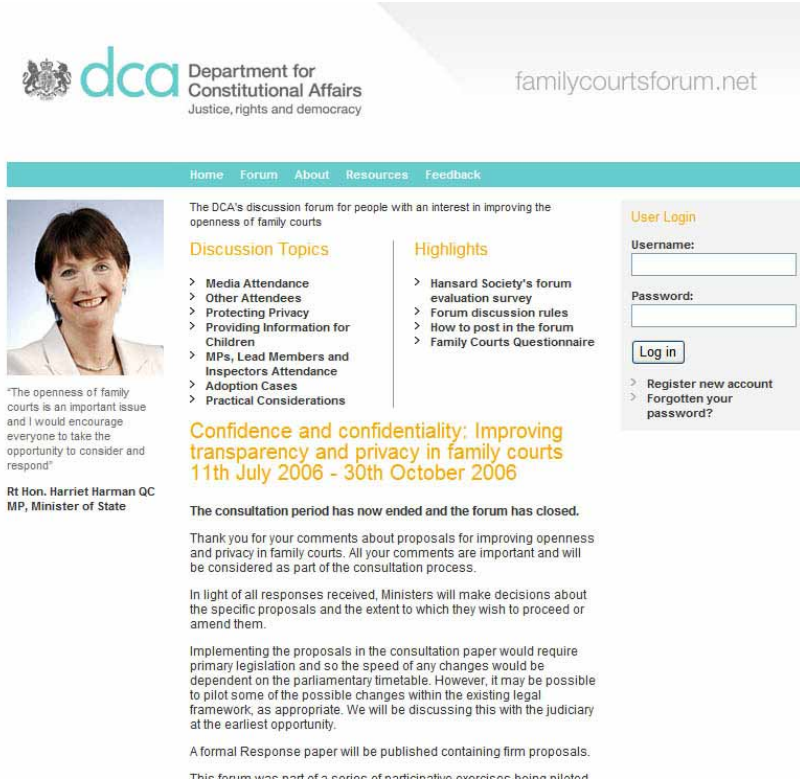
URL
www.familycourtsforum.net

CASE STUDY OWNER
Department for Constitutional Affairs (now the Ministry of Justice)

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths:
- The forum engaged people who had experience of family courts;
- Discussion remained open, even when contentious views were being put forward;
- The consultation report made specific references to the online deliberations;
- Participants were informed when the consultation report was published.

Potential for improvement:
- The forum would have benefited from better planning and consistency of moderation;
- Staff and resource allocation were insufficient to support the forum;
- Consultation team could have recruited experts and opinion leaders to participate and facilitate discussion;

- Regular feedback to participants via summaries should have been more regular and consistent;
- More background information for participants and clearer guidance about policy process could have been provided to orientate users.

OVERVIEW
The Department for Constitutional Affairs was responsible in government for upholding justice, rights and democracy. Its stated objectives were to:

- Provide effective and accessible justice for all;
- Ensure people's rights and responsibilities;
- Enhance democratic freedoms by modernising the law and the constitution.

Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS) was an executive agency of the DCA. Its purpose was to deliver the administration of the civil, family and criminal courts in England and Wales.

The Family Justice division of the DCA covered the national policy on family law.

POLICY PURPOSE
The forum was set up as part of the DCA's consultation on proposed changes to the workings of the family courts. These aimed to:

- Improve confidence in the family courts through public scrutiny;
- Improve public understanding of court decisions;
- Protect the privacy of those in court;
- Provide rigorous enforcements of sanctions where privacy is breached;
- Make simple, easily understood, consistent and workable arrangements.

Discussion topics in the forum were set out by the policy team; they were:

- Attendance of MPs, Lead Members and Inspectors in court;
- Adoption Cases;
- Media Attendance;
- Providing Information to Children;
- Protecting Privacy;
- Practical Considerations.

MODEL
Online deliberative forum.

Discussion was structured around topics that related to the consultation. Pre-moderation was carried out by the consultation team who logged on to the forum to post follow-up questions and address issues raised by participants.

The forum was readable by anyone, but registration was required to contribute. The intended core user-group was court users from England and Wales.

DURATION
The forum ran from July 11 to October 30, 2006

PUBLICITY
The forum was advertised on the DCA and Family Courts websites and via stakeholder meetings.

Press releases were sent out by the DCA and Family Justice division to trade and mainstream press.

There was no paid-for marketing.

OTHER METHODS
People were invited to attend meetings or provide written submissions (via letter or email) to the consultation team.

USER PROFILES
170 registrants: 42% were male; 52% were female, 6% did not specify a gender.

Figure 1: Age of registrants

Under 18 - 2%

18-24 - 4%

25-30 - 9%

31-44 - 46%

45-60 - 31%

Over 60 - 7%

Did not specify - 1%
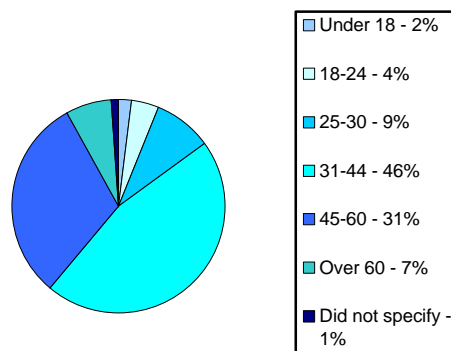
The majority of registrants classed themselves as frequent users of the internet (which they accessed from home) and discovered the forum through existing online communities that they were part of.

In responses (n=35) to the pre-consultation survey, 80% said that they had not been involved in online policy deliberations previously. Seventy one per cent had been in contact with their MP, but only 11% had given evidence to a

parliamentary inquiry, and less than a third had taken part in previous government consultations.

For the majority of the respondents (68%), participation in the forum was the only means by which they contributed to the consultation: 8% did not say whether they contributed by other means. Four per cent said that they filled in a survey; 8% wrote a letter and 12% took part in a discussion on another website.

USAGE TRENDS

A total 210 comments were posted - 172 by participants, 38 by moderators.

Figure 2a: Numbers of visitors, visits and registrations
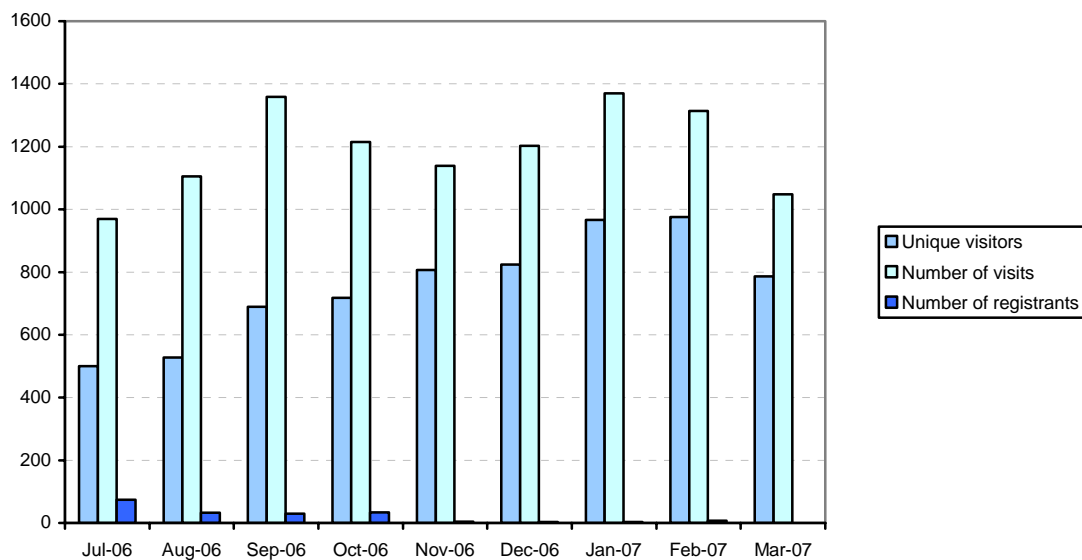
Figure 2b: Frequency of posts
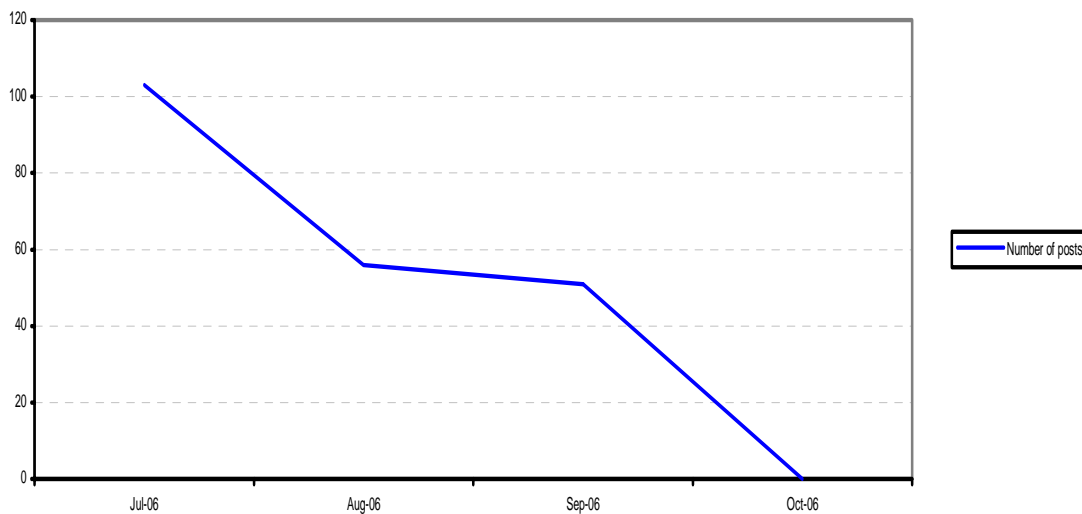
Registrations were sustained throughout the consultation period. The number of participants tailed-off towards the end of September, but people continued to visit the forum even after the consultation ended.

USER FEEDBACK

Respondents to the post-evaluation survey (n=26) were positive about online consultations in general, but ambivalent about the experience of using this specific Family Courts forum.

User feedback responses are represented as percentages below:

|	Yes	No	Undecided	No Response
Are online forums useful for deliberation?	84	4	12	-
Would you participate in similar forums in the future?	76	8	8	8
Will you recommend them to others?	80	8	12	-
Were the contributions of government representatives useful?	34.5	30.5	27	8
Did you learn about policy?	40	40	12	8
Did you learn from other participants?	68	20	4	8
Has the forum fulfilled its remit?	48	16	36	-

While some participants were hoping to influence policy, others believed they could learn from other contributors. Participants were also motivated by a desire to air grievances that they felt they were unable to express by another means.

In the event, a large proportion said that they appreciated other people's posts but that they did not learn anything about the policy area or were dissatisfied with interventions by the policy team. Despite this, the majority (over 70%) said that they would take part in future online deliberations and that they would recommend them to others.

Participants noted that opinions got published – even when they were not favourable towards the current system and the government. They recognised that most of the dialogue was taking place between users:

Figure 3: Communication dynamics within the forum
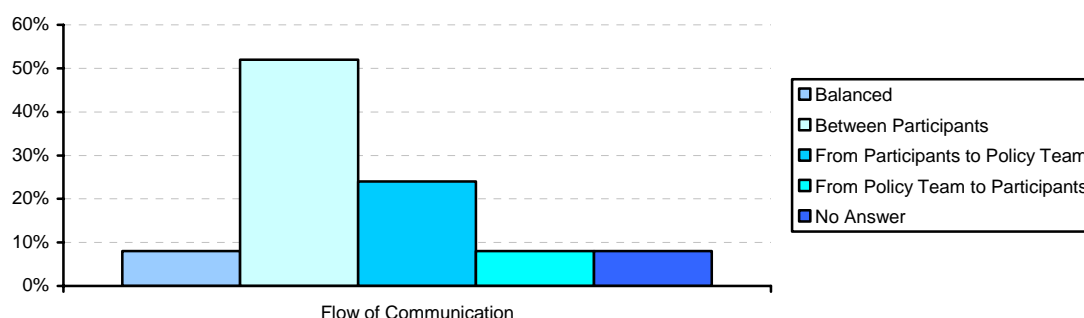
DETAILED FEEDBACK

This forum was open to the general public, but did have in mind a core participant base of family courts users. The forum was successful in attracting

registration from these users, and encouraging participation by individuals who had little previous experience of the policy process.

It is important – particularly where the subject focus of deliberation is emotive – that moderation is consistent and visible. Due, in the main to a lack of experience and staff availability, moderation in this forum was irregular. Contentious viewpoints were expressed by participants but the moderators were not confident in dealing with these and their reluctance to engage with users led some discussions to become skewed or important threads and questions being left unattended.

The task of moderation could have been made less onerous through the provision of a range of background information resources to orientate participation. The consultation team may have also considered the value of recruiting expert stakeholders to participate in the forum and respond to discussions that were otherwise felt to be inappropriate for policy officials to intervene in. Fundamentally, the more facts and figures are used to support deliberation, the more open and inclusive deliberation tends to be.

Some registrants were interested in the prospect of the forum but chose not to participate in the event. These users showed a general enthusiasm for online participation routes and could have been offered other online means of contributing – for example, surveys or closed areas where they could have engaged with policy officials.

Users of online engagement tools often complain that they are given little guidance on how their contributions have been used in the policy process. Although not entirely clear, the policy team in this case study did go to lengths not only to include participant submissions in their consultation response document, but also to inform forum users of the availability of their response paper.

FOLLOW UP
The Family Courts Division published a consultation response document on March 22, 2007. The document summarises responses to the consultation; it also includes discussions of views expressed at stakeholder events and in the online discussion forum for adults, children and young people.

3b. Department for Constitutional Affairs Family Justice Division Forum (Children and Young People)

URL
www.ofcf.net

LESSONS LEARNT

Strengths
- The consultation team recognised the value of input from children and young people and the aim of the forum was to provide them with a dedicated space to get involved;
- The forum copy used plain language and avoided jargon or colloquialisms;
- Participation could be on an anonymous basis;
- The consultation report made specific references to the online deliberations.

Potential for Improvement
- With greater lead-in time, users could have been involved in the design of this forum;
- The forum's subject matter was emotive – greater participation could have been encouraged by closing the deliberation to spectators;

- Registrations and participation could have been increased by working with representative organisations to promote the availability of the forum and support its users (with access to ICT, for example);
- Staff and resource allocation were insufficient to support the forum;
- Consultation team could have recruited experts and opinion leaders to participate and facilitate discussion;
- Regular feedback to participants via summaries should have been more regular and consistent;
- There should have been more background information for participants and clearer guidance about policy process.

OVERVIEW
See DCA's Family Courts Forum (General Public) case study.

POLICY PURPOSE
See DCA's Family Courts Forum (General Public) case study.

The forum for children and young people was set up during the consultation period to capture their experiences and views on proposals to improve the openness of family courts.

MODEL
Online deliberative forum.

The forum was readable by anyone, but registration was required to contribute. Registration was encouraged from young people under the age of 18 years old in England and Wales.

Discussion was structured around specific topics that related to the consultation. Pre-moderation was carried out by the consultation team.

Forum discussions in the young people's forum were structured along the following discussion themes:

- Providing information to adults when they had been involved with family courts as children;
- The media attending family courts;
- Other people attending family courts;
- Separate representation of children;
- Protecting people's privacy.

DURATION
The forum ran from September 1 to October 30, 2006

PUBLICITY
The forum was advertised on the DCA website and the Family Courts website.

Press releases were also sent out by the DCA and Family Courts division to trade and mainstream press that had a youth audience.

The Family Justice Division, in conjunction with the Office of the Children's Commissioner, held a 'mock trial' event for young people at which the forum was promoted. The forum was also promoted at other appropriate events.

A number of organisations, such as the NSPCC and Children's Rights Alliance for England, put a link on their website to the forum.

The Family Justice Division also wrote an article for the HeadsUp.org.uk newsletter.

OTHER METHODS

Respondents were invited to make submissions by attending meetings, or making written submissions (via letter or email).

Adults were encouraged to register with the forum for the general public (see previous case study 3a.).

USER PROFILES

35 registrants: 17 were male; 17 were female, 1 participant did not specify gender.

Various age groups were represented within our sample, including adults over 18 years (please note that participation was anonymous, no personal information was shared between participants, the forum was pre-moderated by staff who had undergone checks with the Criminal Records Bureau):

Figure 1: Ethnicity and age of forum registrants

Pie chart legend:
- 5-10 = 4
- 11-18 = 18
- 19-23 = 4
- 24+ = 8
- Did not specify = 1
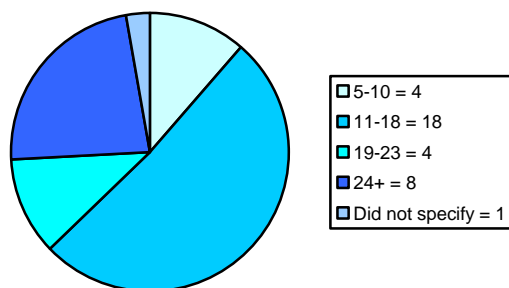
The majority of registrants (26) had not taken part in online consultations or political deliberations previously. Only 4 had given evidence to Parliament

previously and only 10 had taken part in government consultations, although about 26 had been in contact with their MPs previously.

All were frequent users of the internet (32 of them accessing it from home).

USAGE TRENDS
36 posts - 26 by users, 10 by moderators.

Despite the low registration and participation rate, there was a large amount of visiting traffic - even after the consultation had closed:

Figure 2a: Number of visitors, visits and registrants
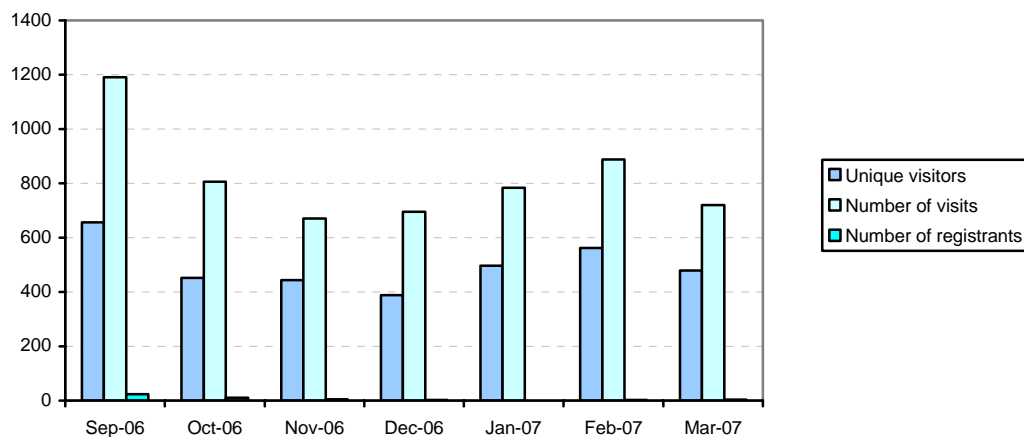
Figure 2b: Frequency of posts
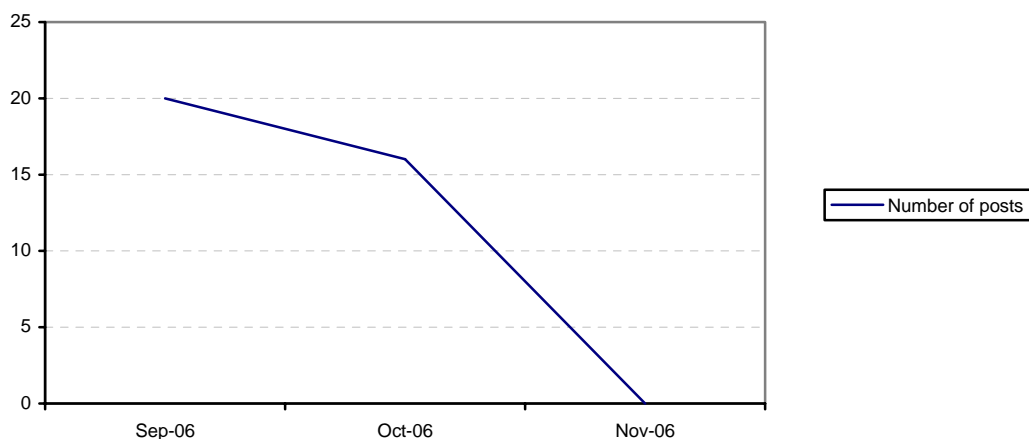
USER FEEDBACK
Feedback from participants was very limited (n=3).

Online consultations were viewed positively in general, but respondents to our evaluation survey were ambivalent about this particular forum. They claimed that they sought more input from members of the policy team. The respondents said

that they did not learn about the policy area from participating but appreciated the posts from other contributors.

Referring to the low post-count on the forum, respondents said that they often read other posts but did not contribute. When they did, however, they appreciated the fact that they could express their opinions freely and anonymously, at their own convenience.

User feedback survey responses are illustrated below:

|	Yes	No	Undecided
Are online consultations useful?	3	-	-
Would you get involved in future consultations?	3	-	-
Would you recommend online engagement to others?	3	-	-
Were the contributions from policy representatives useful?	1	1	1
Did you learn about the policy area?	-	2	1
Did you learn from other participants?	2	1	-
Did the forum fulfil its remit?	2	1	-

DETAILED FEEDBACK

The aim of this forum was to create a dedicated space for young people to talk about their experiences and views in relation to government's proposals to improve the openness of the family courts. Registration and participation were low, however. The young people being targeted by the forum may have lacked confidence in their ability to use such a site, or articulate their views effectively. They may have lacked access to ICT.

Many of the core users of this forum are vulnerable: creating a safe community is a priority in such contexts. Moderation is key to building a sense of community, ensuring that discussions keep a momentum and are as inclusive as possible. This posed a problem for the moderators in this case because of their lack of experience and resources.

Young people would seem to be an obvious group to engage online. While it is the case that young people are confident and regular users of the internet, it must be remembered that they have sophisticated tastes and are marketed at constantly by other community and commercial sites. To compound the challenge of holding their attention, is the fact that young people are rarely involved in policy exercises like this and are often distrustful of genuine opportunities and lack the skills to contribute as a result.

Although all engagement exercises would benefit from the involvement of users at the design stages, this is particularly true for those seeking to appeal to young people. Just such a process – had the opportunity been available – may have helped this case study increase its visibility and usage. It may have also brought unique factors to the attention of the consultation team, such as the need to restrict viewing to only those who have registered, in order to promote the sense of the forum being a dedicated and secure platform for experiences and views.

FOLLOW UP
The Family Justice Division published a response paper on March 22, 2007. The document summarises responses to the consultation; it also includes discussions of views expressed at stakeholder events and in the online discussion forum for adults, children and young people.

4a. The Review of the Funding of Political Parties Forum

URL
http://forum.partyfundingreview.gov.uk/
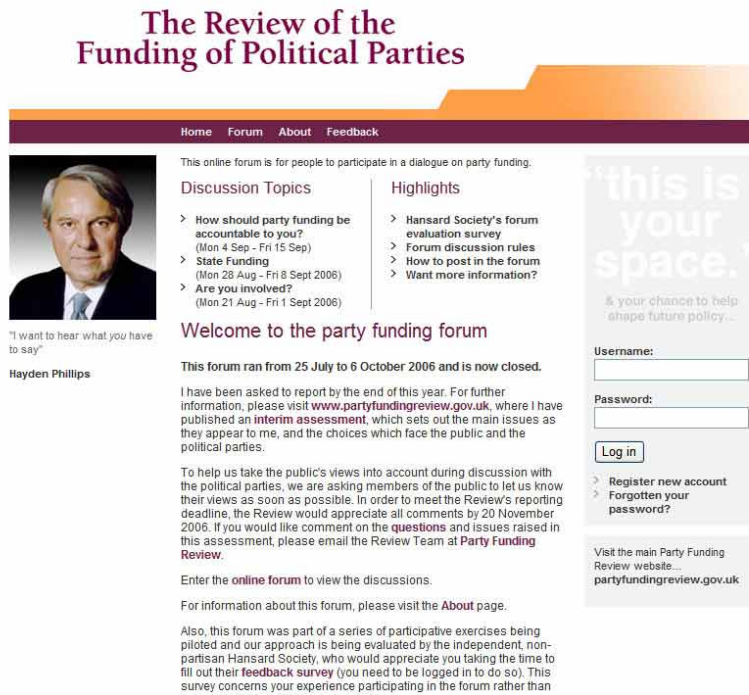
CASE STUDY OWNER
The Review of the Funding of Political Parties

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- The Review's methods were independent of the Cabinet Office Code of Practice on Consultations;
- Input from public and stakeholders was sought early on in the Review;
- Public and experts were invited to deliberate together;
- The Review team provided feedback to participants and contributed to the discussions in a facilitation role;
- The Review team posted regular discussion summaries;
- The weekly initiation of new discussion topics maintained momentum;
- There was continuity between discussion topics.

Potential for improvement:
- Frequency of input from experts was lower than anticipated by Review team;

- More encouragement to get involved should be given to those who are not politically motivated. This could have been achieved through more strategic communications and marketing;
- There should have been greater use of links to related websites, blogs and forums as on the main Party Funding Review website;
- More background information should have been made available to users on the forum site itself.

OVERVIEW

Sir Hayden Phillips was asked to conduct an independent review of the funding of political parties. In particular, the Review was to look into:

- The case for public funding of political parties;
- The transparency of political parties' funding.

The Review was asked to report to the government by the end of December 2006 with any recommendations for change.

POLICY PURPOSE

The forum formed part of the engagement and opinion-seeking activity undertaken by the Review.

The purpose of the forum was to allow Sir Hayden Phillips and his team to engage with members of the public in a dialogue on the key issues. The forum was run prior to the formation of policy proposals, and afterwards following publication of an interim report.

MODEL

The website was an online deliberative forum.

Registration was required by those seeking to contribute, but the forums were available for general reading. The core user base was UK citizens.

Pre-moderation was carried out by the Review team, members of which also posted into the forum to facilitate deliberation.

Discussion on the website was structured around themes set by the Review. New themes were opened each week; there were only two themes live at any point: these were:

- Objectives of the Review (July 25 to August 4);
- Caps on donations (July 31 to August 11);
- Trade unions and party finances (August 7 to August 18);
- Limits on expenditure (August 14 to August 25);
- Are you involved? (August 21 to September 1);
- State funding (August 28 to September 8);

- How should party funding be accountable to you? (September 4 to September 15);
- What do you think the future party funding system should look like? (September 18 to October 6).

In addition to public and stakeholder participants, the Review invited subject experts ('Opinion Leaders') to participate in the forum by providing information and assisting in the facilitation of debate.

DURATION
The forum was open from July 25 to Oct 6, 2006

PUBLICITY
The forum was linked to from the main Review website.

It was also linked to from a range of interest group websites and by bloggers.

Press releases were distributed to mainstream media and via the Government News Network.

There was no paid-for marketing.

OTHER METHODS USED
Submissions were also encouraged by post and email.

USER PROFILES
358 registered users: 77% male; 12% female, 11% unspecified.

Figure 1: Age of registrants

- 17-23 - 5%
- 24-30 - 9%
- 31-45 - 28%
- 46-60 - 29%
- Over 60 - 19%
- Did not say - 10%
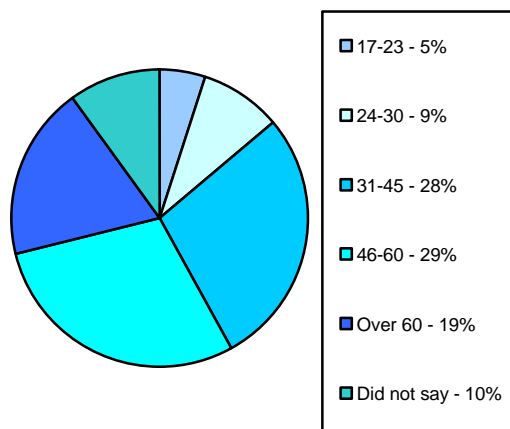
Of respondents to the pre-forum survey (n=69), around 95% said that they were regular internet users: the majority (67%) said that they accessed the internet from home.

Forum registrants had a high level of previous political engagement offline. However, 65% had never taken part in an online consultation, review or engagement process previously.

Figure 2: Political engagement off- and online
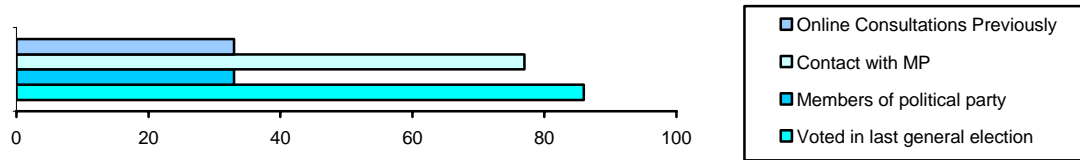
A significant proportion (42%) of those who had taken part in online forms of engagement previously were members of political parties.

Despite previous political participation in one form or another, efficacy was low in our pre-forum sample: 69% did not believe that the government listens to ordinary people. The same percentage believed that they had no influence on those making policy.

USAGE TRENDS
135 participants made a total of 217 posts.

Five opinion leaders posted 10 comments. The other five opinion leaders who had accepted the Review team's invitation to take part in the forum did not post. Meanwhile, the five members of the Review team made 35 posts.

Most registrations and posts were received in the first full month of the forum's existence. Where the rate of registrations and posts decreased, the rate of visitors and traffic remained consistent and was sustained long after the close of the live forum:

Figure 3a: Number of visitors, visits and registrants
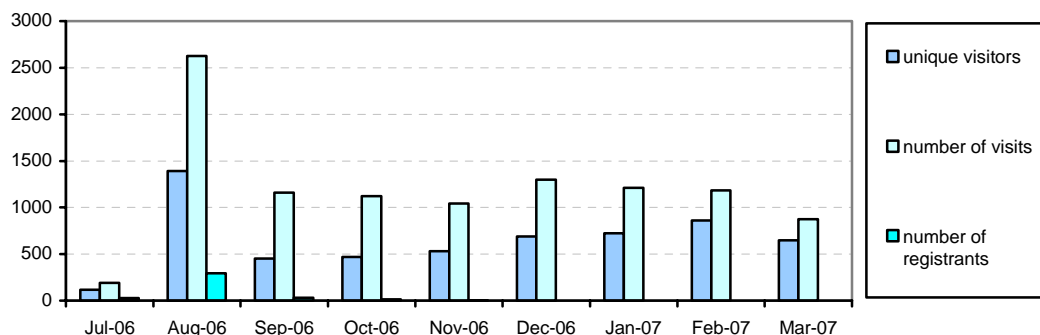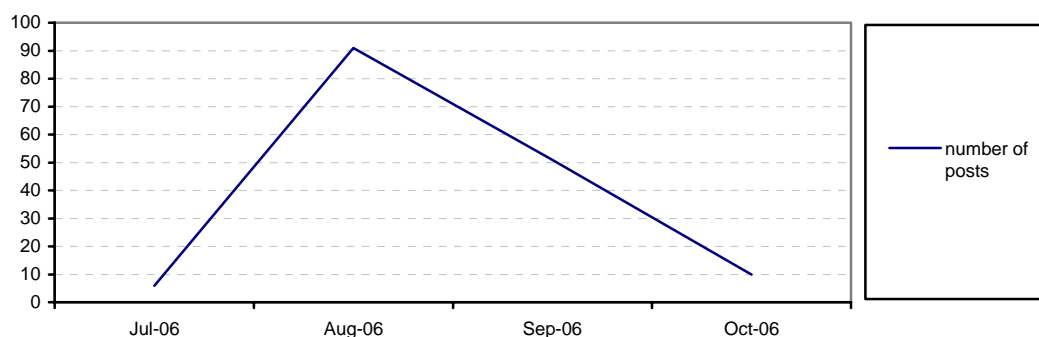
USER FEEDBACK

For the majority of participants (65%), the forum was their only means of engagement with the Review: 4% contributed to another forum; 19% wrote a letter and 8% submitted an email to the Review; 4% attended a private meeting.

Despite the low efficacy of participants, many believed that online deliberations provide a good form of engagement. A large proportion said that they would be happy to participate in online deliberations in the future and would recommend them to others. With regards to the Party Funding forum, some ambivalence was apparent. Participant evaluations are represented as percentages below:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided
Do online forums provide a good means of engagement?	66	15	19
Would you participate in similar forums in future?	85	-	15
Would you recommend online engagement to others?	85	-	15
Were the contributions by the policy team or experts useful?	23	35	42
Did you learn about the policy area?	42	50	8
Did you learn from other participants?	46	30	24
Did the forum meet its objectives?	46	8	46

Respondents to the post-activity survey (n=26) reported that they used the forum to read through the debate rather than contribute to it:

Figure 4: Perceptions of user activity within forum
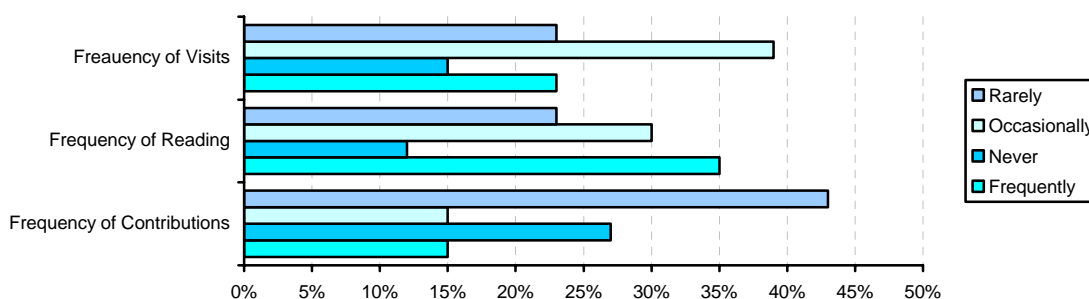
Respondents perceived that the majority of the deliberation was between peers:

Figure 5: Perceptions of flow of communication

Legend:
- Balanced
- Between Participants
- From Participants to Policy Team
- From Policy Team to Participants

Flow of Communication
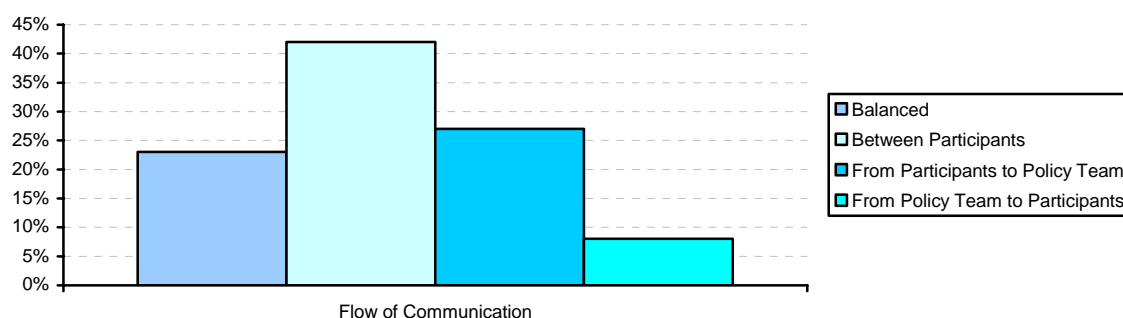
DETAILED FEEDBACK

Public engagement was viewed as vital to carrying out an effective review. The Review team, however, was small and had minimal resources at its disposal. Online engagement methods, therefore, offered some distinct advantages. The Review team believed that an online forum could bring together diverse stakeholders and members of the public more easily than could be achieved via an offline meeting. Crucially, it could also maintain a structured deliberation that would make contributions easier to analyse.

The Review team made concerted efforts to engage citizens via the forum: prior to its launch, they took a considered approach to marketing and recruitment. The Review team went to lengths to moderate the forum in an open and responsive manner, to recruit expert stakeholders alongside public participants, and ensure that the online discussions were structured in such a way that maintained a consistency with other consultation routes.

As an independent review, it was not bound by the same consultation processes that a department would have had to adhere to. This flexibility of methods and depth of interaction certainly benefited the Review. Nevertheless, the Review did find itself dealing with similar obstacles to effective online engagement experienced by other case studies in *Digital Dialogues*.

Online consultations carry a risk that only the outspoken or the already engaged will take part. Effective recruitment strategies need to be in place to ensure that a range of perspectives is solicited. Interest groups took out high-profile media marketing to engage the public in their campaigns on party funding; the Review team was reluctant to undertake similar marketing (and was short on funds to do so) but could have used the media interest as a vehicle to bring a greater number and range of participants to the forum.

This case study illustrates how – at a general level – the use of new media can enhance democratic engagement. However, the public will remain sceptical unless systems of accountability and transparency are in place to reassure participants that their responses are not being skewed to suit particular policy objectives – perhaps an even more important factor in the case of independent

reviews. The public also needs to be convinced that the system is safe in terms of data protection and privacy.

FOLLOW UP

The Review team undertook analysis of submissions, which fed into an Interim Assessment (published in October 2006). Further engagement on the key issues in the Assessment was carried out (see case study 4b.).

4b. The Review of the Funding of Political Parties Webchat

URL
http://chat.partyfundingreview.gov.uk/

LESSONS LEARNT

Strengths

- The webchat followed on from the online forum, allowing participants to respond to interim assessments based on the previous engagement activity;
- Forum registrants received direct invitations to participate in the webchat;
- Every question submitted received a direct, personal response from Sir Hayden Phillips;
- Participants could follow up on the responses from Sir Hayden Phillips;
- There was a sense of the webchat being an event;
- A touch typist was present to allow quicker upload of answers;
- There was no need for the users or the managers to download or install software to take part;

Potential for improvement

- It was hoped that a greater number of participants would have been attracted to the webchat than who turned out in the event;

- Rather than a isolated event, more than one webchat could have been held and at different times to accommodate different types of user lifestyle;
- Pre-submitted questions could have been encouraged ahead of the webchat for those not able to participate in actual event.

OVERVIEW
See The Review of the Funding of Political Parties Forum case study (4a.).

POLICY PURPOSE
The webchat was held following the publication of an Interim Assessment from the Funding of Political Parties Review. The Interim Assessment set out core issues and choices that face the public and political parties.

This online question and answer session was designed to provide stakeholders, members of the public and participants in the online forum with an opportunity to put questions to Sir Hayden Phillips questions about the Interim Assessment.

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

The webchats were readable by anyone, but registration was required to contribute. Registration was restricted to those who had participated in the online forum.

This webchat was run on a 'question and answer' format. Participants could post a question and follow up on the response from Sir Hayden Phillips. There was no technical limit to the number of questions a participant could ask. Participants could not respond to questions posted by other participants, or to Sir Hayden's response to these questions.

The site was real time but pre-moderated. Moderation was carried out by the Party Funding Review team. Moderators checked each question against the terms of the site before publication. Moderators staggered submitted questions to ensure that all participants had at least one question published and answered.

DURATION
October 30, 2006, between 13:00 and 14:00.

PUBLICITY
Those who had taken part in the online forum were contacted directly and invited to participate in the webchat.

The Party Funding Review website linked to the webchat.

It was also publicised via press releases and through contacts with stakeholders.

OTHER METHODS

Participants could contribute to the review by letter, email or via meetings that were held following the publication of the Interim Assessment.

USER PROFILES

13 people registered with the webchat. All the participants were male.

Figure 1: Age of registrants

■ 18-24 - 1	
■ 25-29 - 4	
■ 31-44 - 1	
■ 45-59 - 3	
■ Over 60 - 2	
■ Did not specify - 2	
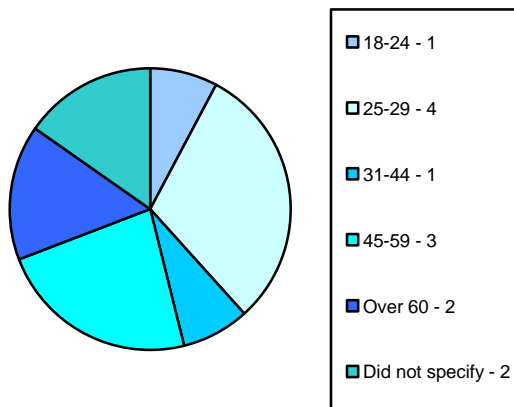
All evaluation survey respondents (n=5) said that they were frequent internet users - the majority accessed the internet from home.

A high proportion of webchat registrants were politically engaged – 4 had voted in the last general election and 2 were members of political parties. Around half of the respondents had participated in deliberations online in the past (note that not all the webchat participants participated in the Review's forum); 2 said that they had participated in webchats previously.

USAGE TRENDS

13 registrants submitted nine questions and four follow-up comments. Sir Hayden Phillips made nine responses and posted two comments.

The event attracted a high number of spectators and the website attracted traffic in the months following the webchat:

Figure 2: Number of visitors, visits, posts and registrants
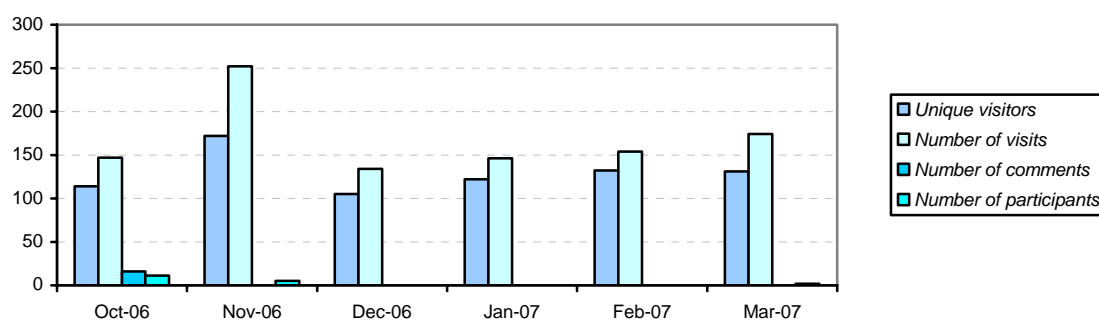
USER FEEDBACK

User feedback was limited. Those who did respond said that they found the webchat useful and that they believed that the online process could make politics and deliberations more accessible to the public. All said that they would participate in a similar exercise in the future.

DETAILED FEEDBACK

One factor about this webchat that stood out to the *Digital Dialogues* team was that the Review team were very clear on the functions they wanted this exercise to perform. It was to allow forum participants the 'right-of-reply' on the Review's interim assessments; and to allow the Review team to clarify these responses. This clarity of purpose was sometimes lacking in other case studies.

An invitation to participate in this webchat was open to all those who had registered with the Review's previous online forum. In the event, very few people took up the opportunity to submit a question (although a significant number of spectators did visit the chat as it took place). Those who did participate appreciated having the opportunity to discuss party funding and the Interim Assessment Report with Sir Hayden directly.

The informal and interactive dynamics of a webchat allows for a more fluid type of participation but only where the moderation and software permits it. It is important to maximise this by enabling a faster turnaround of questions and answers to prevent participants from wondering about the status of their submissions. This could have been achieved here by allowing a live question and answer session without pre-moderation by the consultation team on the basis that participants were registered and had been involved in previous engagement activity. However, it should be noted that in the case of this webchat, the intention was not to vet questions; it was to stagger questions to ensure that participants had at least one question answered.

FOLLOW UP

The Party Funding Review has now been completed and its final report was published in March 2007.

5. Department for Transport Road Safety Webchat
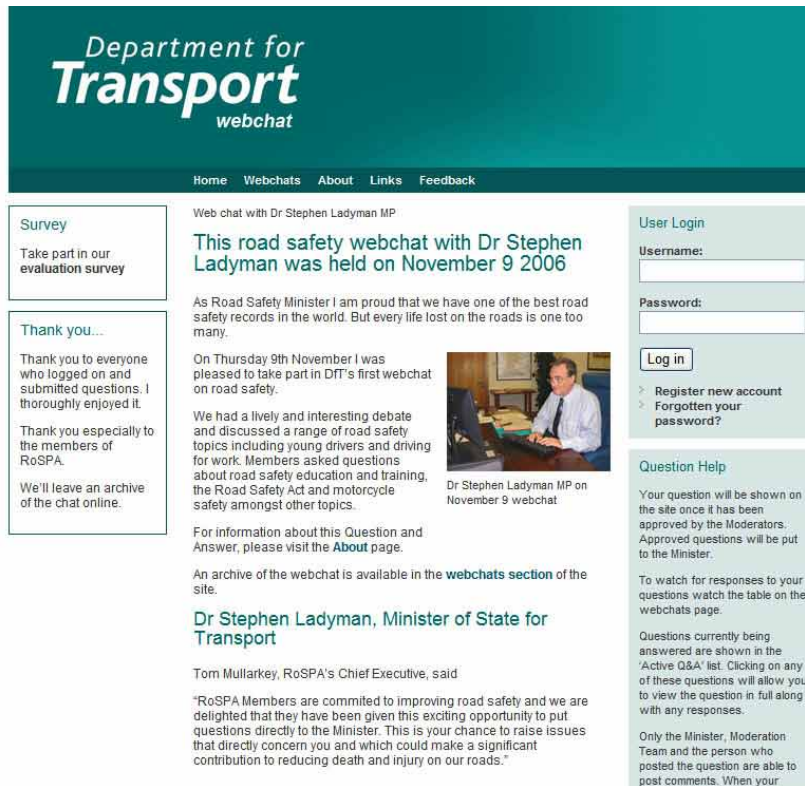
URL
www.dftwebchat.net

CASE STUDY OWNER
Department for Transport (DfT)

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- The interaction between the Minister and the users was in real time;
- There was no need for the users or the managers to download or install software to take part;
- Discussion was structured but the Minister could participate in more than one webchat simultaneously;
- The case study team had a specific audience they wished to engage, and worked with an appropriate partner organisation for promotional and recruitment purposes;
- Practice sessions were held to familiarise the case study team with the platform;
- There was a good depth and breadth of discussion – even when simultaneous conversations were taking place;
- There was a sense of the webchat being an event;

- An instant transcript of the discussions was available to anyone who required a copy.

Potential for improvement
- The Minister was initially unfamiliar with the webchat dynamics and platform, and would have benefited from a simulated practice exercise beforehand;
- Over time, an increased familiarity with the platform will enable the department to reduce the size of the ministerial support team even further;
- The length of the moderation process could be reduced where known stakeholders are the only users, by switching to post-moderation.

OVERVIEW
Dr Stephen Ladyman MP is Minister of State for Transport. On November 9 2007, the Minister responded to questions from members of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) about a range of road safety issues.

This was the Department's first webchat.

POLICY PURPOSE
The webchat was not held as part of a formal consultation. Its aim was to engage a key group of stakeholders on a topic that concerns them and to gather experiential feedback on policies.

Issues discussed included:

- Young drivers;
- Driving for work;
- Safety education and training;
- The Road Safety Act 2006;
- Motorcycle safety.

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

The webchats were readable by anyone but registration was required to contribute and restricted to RoSPA members.

This webchat was run on a question and answer format. Participants could submit a question and follow up on the response to it from the Minister. There was no technical limit to the number of questions a participant could ask. Participants could not respond to questions posed by other participants, or to the Minister's response to these questions.

The site was real time but pre-moderated. Moderation was carried out by the DfT web team. Moderators checked each question against the terms of the site before publication. Moderators staggered submitted questions to ensure that all participants had at least one question published and answered.

DURATION
November 9, 2007, between 16:00 and 17:00.

PUBLICITY
Invitations to participate were issued in advance via the RoSPA member newsletter and email list.

The webchat was advertised to a general viewing audience on the DfT and RoSPA websites.

OTHER METHODS
N/A

USER PROFILES
26 registrants: 13 were male, 7 were female; 6 did not say.

Figure 1: Age of registrants

- 18-24 - 1
- 25-44 - 11
- 45-60 - 10
- Did not specify - 4
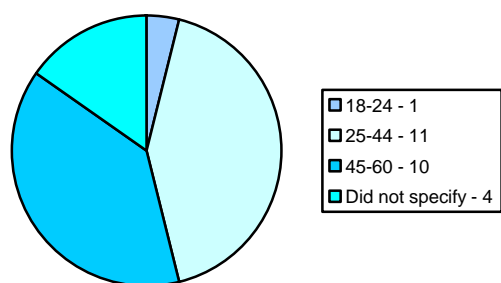
Webchats were new to the majority of users, who were drawn into this particular exercise because of their professional interest in the subject being discussed: 21 said that they had never taken part in a webchat before.

All those who responded to our evaluation survey (n=9) said that they were frequent internet users; and the majority said that they had access from a range of locations.

USAGE TRENDS

The Minister and participants took part in 12 separate discussions. Twenty-six comments were posted in the discussions over the course of the hour-long chat – 17 by the Minister.

There were significantly more spectators than registered participants, as the table below illustrates:

Figure 2: Number of visitors, visits, registrants and comments
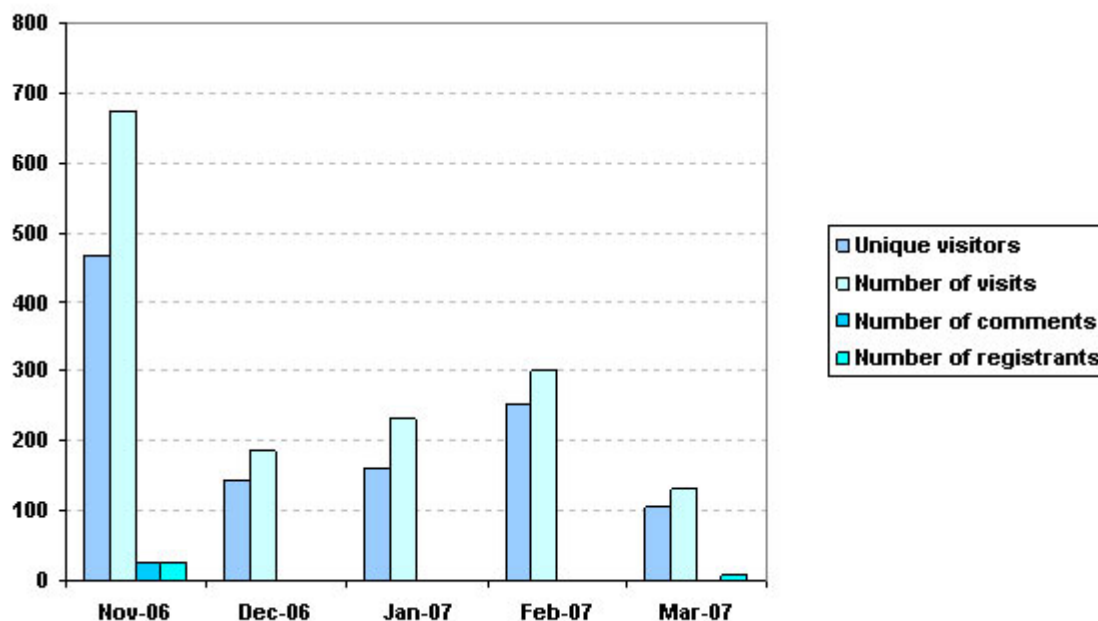
USER FEEDBACK

Responses to the feedback survey (open to participants and spectators) were limited.

The majority saw webchats as a useful engagement method. On the whole, respondents said they would consider participating in a similar webchat in the future (although they were not unequivocal in this belief). The following table illustrates users' attitudes about the webchat and further engagement online in more detail:

	Yes	No	Undecided	No Response
Are online consultations useful?	5	1	-	3
Would you participate in further online consultations in future?	4	1	-	4

DETAILED FEEDBACK

The time between deciding to hold a webchat, the site being built, the event being advertised and the chat actually taking place was too short (under a month). A longer lead-in time would have undoubtedly benefited this webchat. Nevertheless, the ministerial support team used their limited resources and time well by coordinating closely with one another. The team avoided the temptation to forego practice sessions, as a result the webchat proceeded without technical error.

Pre-moderation was used in the chat; this meant that all questions and participant comments were checked against the site's terms before being published. This moderation strategy diluted the 'real time' pace to the interaction. Participation in the webchat was by invitation-only; therefore, it may have been possible to adopt a post-moderation strategy to improve the interactivity of the webchat. Similarly, it may also have been possible to open up each question and answer discussion to all participants because of the participants' level of expertise.

In feedback, users welcomed the opportunity to enter into dialogue with the Minister online. Many said that they had expected to post to the chat but not to receive a response and were surprised by the nature and number of discussions eventually taking place.

FOLLOW UP

Following the road safety webchat, the Minister participated in a webchat convened by the Prime Minister's Office on the subject of road pricing. This webchat was arranged in response to an online petition on the Downing Street website in opposition to any proposals for road pricing. The chat attracted over 6000 questions. Over the course of one hour the Minister answered 32 questions.

6. Office of National Statistics Small Area Geographies Consultation Blog

URL
www.onsgeography.net

CASE STUDY OWNER
Office of National Statistics (ONS)

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- This exercise was an innovative use of a blog application in a consultation context;
- The blog's purpose was clear to both its managers and users;
- Driven by the innovative medium, the tone of the consultation was unique;
- Respondents were provided with a choice of online submission routes (blog, email and survey);
- The consultation team had a clear idea of who respondents and blog users would be;
- The blog generated a good quantity and depth of user comments in a short time-frame;
- The blog had a comprehensive set of basic technical features in place.

Potential for improvement
- The initial intention to structure blog entries around consultation themes (in the consultation paper) was not pursued;
- To sustain initial interest the blog required more frequent interactions between users and the author;
- More should have been made of the stakeholder community that formed around the blog. Providing direction on where users could follow-up on this activity should have been the minimum.

OVERVIEW
The Office for National Statistics is the principal provider of official statistics about the UK; its information is used by government to make decisions about society and the economy. Its material is also available to members of the public.

POLICY PURPOSE
The ONS is keen to establish a long-term small area geography policy which will be used for Census 2011 and the development of Neighbourhood Statistics. The aim is to support the production of coherent and useful data that can be used with confidence by a range of organisations. To this end, the ONS produced a policy proposal and opened it out for consultation. The proposal was to develop stability with the existing Super Output Area geographical hierarchy, meaning that where there has been significant population gain or loss, areas will be subject to simple maintenance changes at the time of the Census.

The blog was launched alongside the conventional consultation response routes and an online survey. The blog entries were to follow the structure of the main points of the policy proposal, but it also provided the consultation team with a place to react to what they had read, heard or seen as the consultation moved forward.

The team was keen that stakeholders - and members of the public - used the blog to keep up to date with the progress of the consultation, and as a means of drawing the ONS' attention to particular issues related to their proposals.

The proposed policy affects the whole of the UK.

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

The blog author (Nick Stripe) was a policy official. He was supported by the ONS communications division, which was responsible for promoting the blog; the communications team was available to moderate comments when the author was unavailable.

Moderation of comments was carried out prior to publication; this was principally the responsibility of the blog author.

The blog was public and anyone could comment; although name, email and acknowledgement of the terms and conditions were required.

DURATION
The blog ran from November 21, 2006, to February 20, 2007.

PUBLICITY
The blog was marketed on the ONS corporate website as well as through the national and trade media.

Email alerts and letters were sent to an existing database of stakeholders.

There was no paid-for advertising.

OTHER METHODS
Consultation submissions were invited: people could respond by email, letter or through an online survey (linked to by the blog).

USER PROFILES
No demographic information was collected.

Respondents to the pre-consultation survey (n=30) defined themselves as regular internet users, with 77% accessing it from work and 23% from home. The majority were not regular readers of blogs and were infrequent visitors to policy-related blogs:

Figure 1: Frequency of visits to general and policy blogs
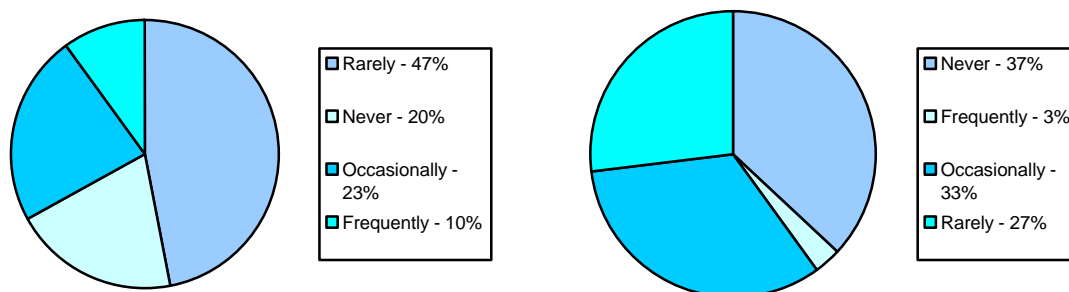
Fifty per cent of respondents had been in touch with their local MP. Only 13% had given evidence to a parliamentary inquiry; but 66% had participated in government consultations previously.

Efficacy was high by one measure: 73% of respondents believed that Parliament listens to them. However, by another it was low: only 43% believed that their participation would have any influence on the way the country is run.

USAGE TRENDS

The author made 10 blog entries. 65 comments were posted - 11 were made by the blog author in response to users.

The number of comments tailed-off after an initial surge when the blog first launched. However, the viewing traffic rose over the duration of the consultation, with the highest number of visits received in the final month:

Figure 2: Numbers of visitors and visits
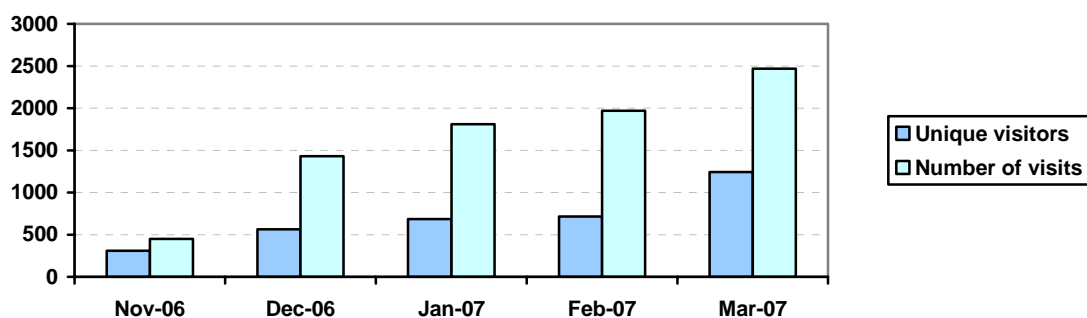
Figure 2b: Frequency of comments
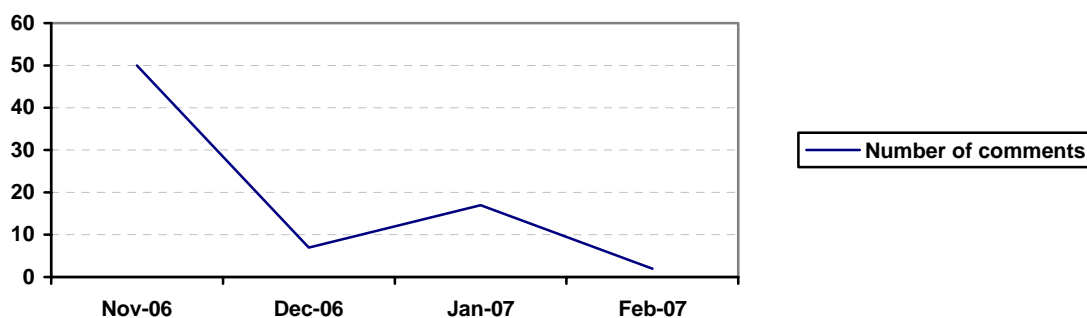
The consultation's online survey (linked from the blog) was completed by 362 respondents (although 150 of them were incomplete).

USER FEEDBACK

Post-consultation surveys were completed by 22 blog visitors.

Respondents were asked to rate the blog in comparison with others that they had visited (with 5 being the highest rating and 1 the lowest). In general, the blog received a positive rating:

Figure 3: Participant ratings of blog
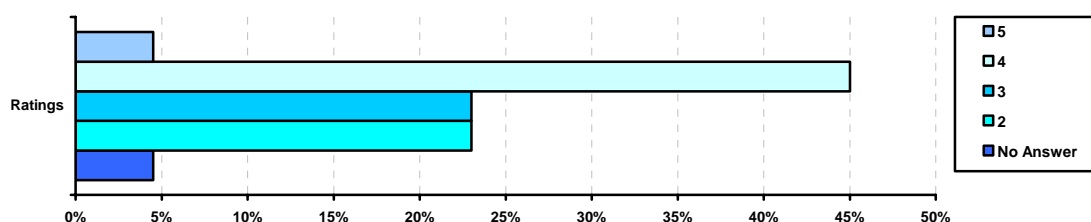
Despite being compared favourably with other blogs, respondents were unsure whether it was a useful engagement tool:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided
Did you learn about the ONS from the blog?	54	23	23
Did you learn anything about the policy area?	41	41	18

Respondents said they were motivated to visit the blog because they wanted to engage with a government representative on a specialist area of policy. However, many were disappointed by the author's frequency of interaction with the users. Although the blog received a reasonable rate of traffic, visitors rarely made repeat visits:

Figure 4: Perceptions of engagement with the blog
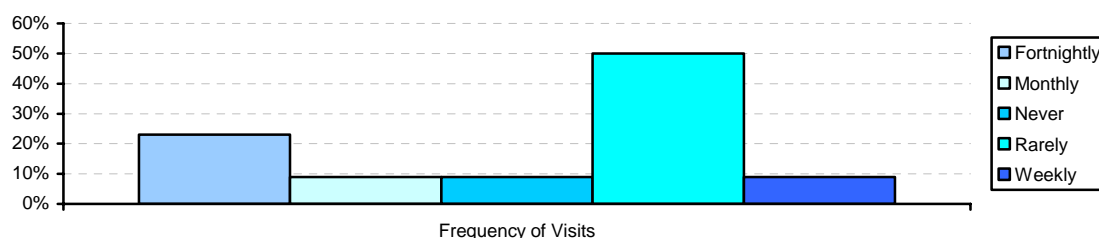
DETAILED FEEDBACK

This case study made innovative use of a blog application by applying it to a consultation context. Where the convention is for blogs to be maintained on an ongoing basis with entries drawing on personal experiences and views for profile-raising purposes, this blog was used as a consultation tool with a finite lifespan with a fixed structure (each entry focusing on a theme from the consultation paper).

The blog appealed to policy stakeholders and, when it launched, attracted a large number of comments. These user contributions were detailed and focused on the consultation and the theme of the particular entry. Initially, the blog author interacted with participants on a fairly consistent (if cursory) basis. However, this interaction was not sustained and never went into particular depth. This was picked up on by users in their feedback surveys as a disappointing feature of the exercise – especially because many had been motivated to visit the blog on the basis of interacting with the policy expert.

Traffic to the blog built over time and was at its highest when the consultation and blog closed. Online communities take time to build up momentum and there is a risk in using blogs as a consultation tool because government consultations have a finite duration (usually 12 weeks). However, in recognising that there was interest in this consultation, policy and blog, the ONS had an opportunity to build and facilitate a useful stakeholder community. Although the consultation submission period had ended, the policy process was ongoing and the blog's content – and indeed its authorship – could have been modified as the process moved into a new phase to take advantage of the interest and expertise put at its disposal.

FOLLOW UP
It is not clear how the ONS will develop its use of digital forms of engagement in a similar manner.

7. Food Standards Agency Chief Scientist Blog
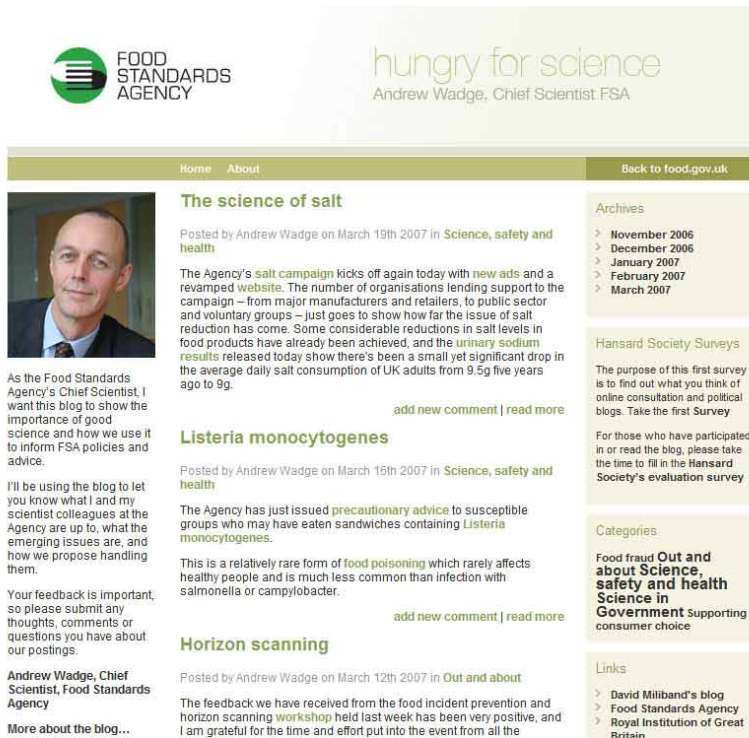
URL
www.fsascience.net

CASE STUDY OWNER
Food Standards Agency (FSA)

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- The purpose of this blog was clear to those managing and using it;
- The author of the blog made regular, detailed and diverse entries (appropriate to the scope of his agency and his specific role within it);
- The author frequently responded to user comments;
- The author frequently linked to external sites in blog entries;
- The design and tone of the blog was appropriate to a general audience, followed Agency guidelines, but was also unique;
- The Agency experimented with tag clouds to aid navigation;
- The communications and policy teams in the FSA provided a consistent level of support to the author;
- The blog had a prominent link from the FSA corporate website.

Potential for improvement
- Entries could have been more responsive to public interest generated by media coverage;

- Blog could have made greater use of rich media (photos, audio and video) to reduce dependency on text;
- The link between the blog (and discussions it generated) to policy making was unclear;
- Blog should have made more effort to locate and link to other relevant sites, communities and resources online.

OVERVIEW
The FSA is an independent government agency. It provides advice and information to the public and government on food safety, nutrition and diet. It also aims to protect consumers through effective enforcement and monitoring of food hygiene.

POLICY PURPOSE
The blog coincided with the appointment of Andrew Wadge to the role of Chief Scientist at the FSA. The purpose of the blog is to:

- Provide an unmediated form of public engagement and to raise the public profile of the role of the Chief Scientist;
- Promote the role of science in food standards, explaining how the Agency uses it to inform its policies and advice.

Themes covered in the blog were categorised as follows:

- Food fraud;
- Out and about;
- Science, safety and health;
- Science in government;
- Supporting consumer choice.

The blog is not tied to a specific consultation but is used to mark several initiatives: the first seeks to increase the amount of folic acid in food; the second is a consultation on official meat controls. Finally, the blog brings to its readers' attention to the FSA's strategy on fats and sugars.

Policy discussions relate to the UK. However, access and commenting is not restricted to the UK.

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

The blog is public and anyone can comment on entries contained in it, though name, email and acknowledgement of the terms and conditions are required.

Reader comments are pre-moderated against the terms and conditions (published on the blog). Comment moderation is carried out by FSA's communications team.

DURATION
The blog launched on November 20, 2006, and is ongoing.

PUBLICITY
The blog is marketed on the Agency's corporate website and press releases were sent to the national and trade media to coincide with its launch.

OTHER METHODS
Public and stakeholder perspectives on policy areas (referenced in the blog) are regularly solicited. Submissions are invited via email or letter.

USER PROFILES
No demographic data has been collected.

Respondents (n=39) reported having regular access to the internet from a range of places.

Home	Mobile Access	Other	Work
62%	3%	3%	32%

The majority (85%) of those visiting and commenting on this blog did not have a blog or website of their own. Users were interested in blogs generally, but were not inclined to visit policy-related blogs.

Figure 1: Frequency of visits to general blogs and policy blogs
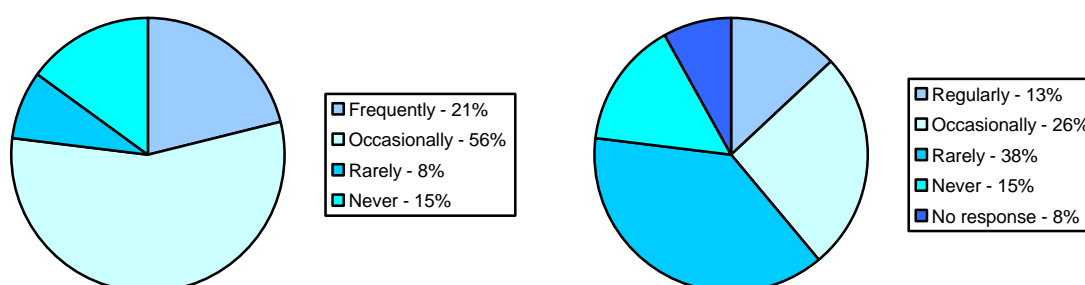
In terms of prior political engagement, 44% of our respondents had been in contact with their MP prior to taking part in the blog; 54% had not (2% did not say). Meanwhile, 10% had given evidence to a parliamentary inquiry previously; 12% of participants had taken part in government consultations.

These figures suggest that while respondents were politically engaged and efficacious (the majority believed that they would be heard and that they could make a difference - 51% and 49% respectively), they were not used to engaging formally with Parliament or government – particularly online.

USAGE TRENDS

In terms of blog traffic, there was a far higher rate of visits to the site than there were posts:

Figure 2a: Frequency of visitors and visits
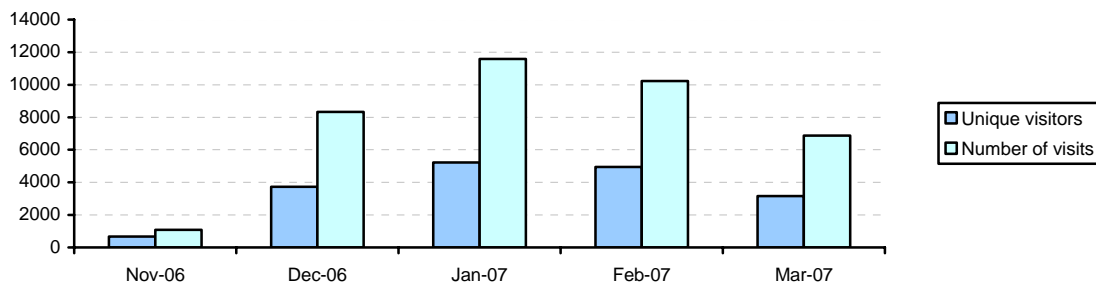
Figure 2b: Frequency of comments
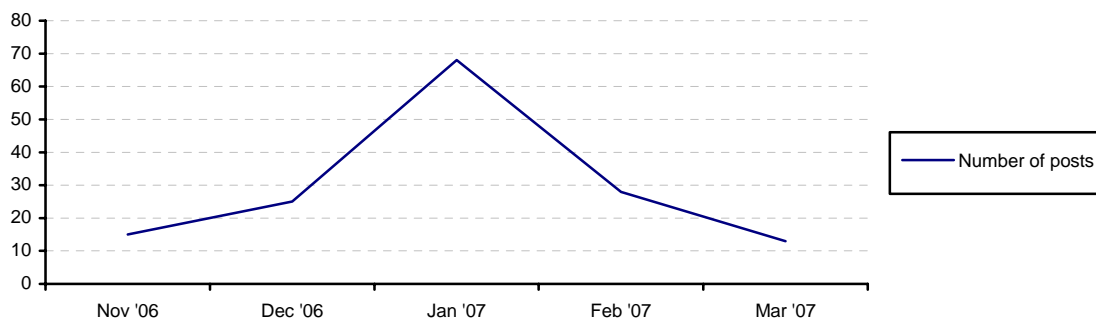
The blog's appeal seems closely linked to media coverage of policy areas and food related issues. For example, the peak in traffic (January 2007) corresponds with the well publicised launch of the FSA's initiative to provide 'traffic light' labelling on food. The interest in the blog continued in February, during the 'bird flu' outbreak, and picked up again following an entry on food additives and children's additives after the collation of our evaluation surveys.

USER FEEDBACK

In their feedback, users said they had learnt about the work of the FSA from the blog, and felt that it explained policy areas and processes. User feedback responses are illustrated as percentages below:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided	No Response
Were the Chief Scientist's contributions useful?	35	40	20	5
Would the blog have benefited from more reader comments?	70	10	15	5
Did you learn anything about the FSA?	65	30	-	5
Did you learn anything about the policy area?	40	30	25	5

While users claimed to be motivated by the desire to influence policy, they were aware that the primary function of the blog was less to capture public opinion and more to disseminate information and explain processes.

Figure 3: Levels of engagement with the blog
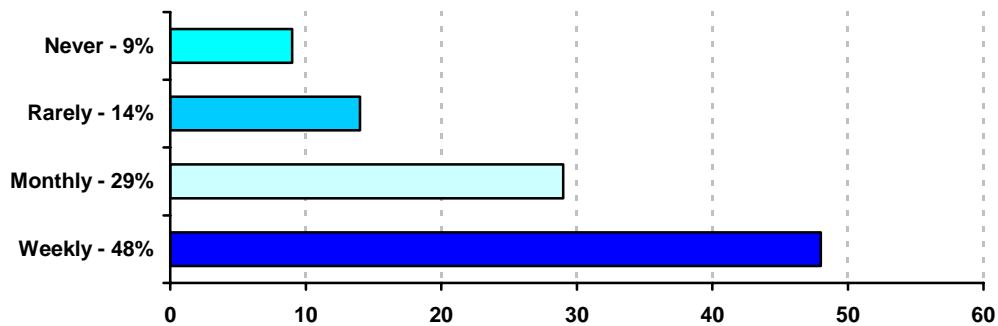
A significant number of users reported visiting the blog on a weekly basis. Their interest was stimulated by the regular entries made by the Chief Scientist on a range of subjects; the fact that he also responded to comments from readers was appreciated by participants. Of the 30 comments posted, 13 were made by Andrew Wadge (in addition to the 32 entries he had made by the time the evaluation period closed). However, users also said that the blog would have benefited from comments from other visitors.

Survey respondents were asked to rate the blog in comparison to other blogs they had visited (with 5 being the highest rating and 1 being the lowest). The majority of our respondents gave the blog an above average rating (although almost half did not provide a score):

Figure 4: Blog ratings
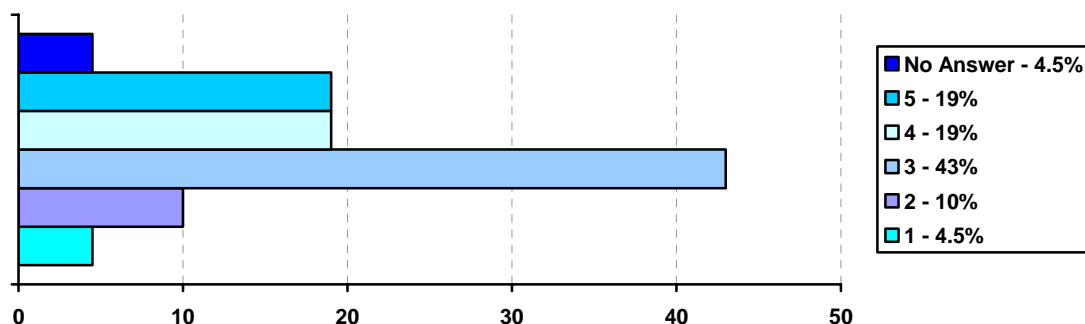
DETAILED FEEDBACK

This case study demonstrates how a blog can be used to distribute information and solicit public feedback on a manageable, ongoing basis. Blogging is often associated with 'personality', and the FSA tapped into this in an effective manner to promote the profile of their Chief Scientist. Andrew Wadge is confident about explaining food science to general and specialist audiences, which proved an important factor in the blog's positive reception. Nevertheless, while blogs are often text-based, the applications can handle rich media content. In the case of the Chief Scientist blog, using audio and video clips may have been a more effective means of explaining complexity or detail.

As a community of interest builds around the blog over time, the FSA may consider bringing more formal consultative elements directly onto the blog as a means of tapping into the apparent interest on the part of many users to provide feedback on policies. That a clear link to many policy decisions was not available disappointed some of the blog's early users.

There may also be the potential to segment the audience by providing a range of blogs – some for a general audience and others for particular stakeholder groups. Such an approach may help to satisfy those who came to the FSA blog looking for answers to specific questions about food safety. Although this information was often provided on the Agency's corporate website, these users preferred to ask a direct question to a 'real life' expert.

FOLLOW UP

The FSA is still running the Chief Scientist blog. The Agency is monitoring emerging technologies for their consultation and engagement potential.

8. Foreign and Commonwealth Office European Youth Parliament Forum, in association with the European Youth Parliament UK

URL
www.eyptalk.net

CASE STUDY OWNER
Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- This forum set out to achieve and delivered a good geographic spread of users;
- There was close and well-managed collaboration between staff at the FCO and EYP;
- The forum raised an impressive range of discussion themes, with opportunity for further suggestions from users;
- Several experts and politicians were recruited to contribute to the forum;
- Summaries of discussions were produced at the close of forum and distributed to registrants and the media.

Potential for improvement
- The depth and frequency of interaction by experts and politicians was not consistent;

- Closer link-up with other outreach activities (such as offline summits) would have bolstered the purpose and usage of the forum;
- Rate of registrations and volume of posts were low;
- There was insufficient time was given for the forum to develop a sense of community;
- Greater use could have been made of rich media content;
- Given the core user group, the registration and participation rates may have benefited from inclusion of a translation service.

OVERVIEW

The European Youth Parliament (EYP) is a pan-European educational foundation that seeks to promote young people's skills in communication and team-building. Its members are encouraged to take a practical interest in current affairs and the democratic process.

The European Youth Parliament has a UK Division (EYP UK). The EYP UK Outreach Programme is funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

POLICY PURPOSE

This forum was not part of a formal consultation exercise.

The EYP seeks to foster young people's awareness of European citizenship and politics through events that involve young people in more than 30 countries at a local, regional, national and international level.

The FCO wanted to support the EYP UK, which was aiming to supplement its offline events with an online forum. The forum sought to enhance engagement by discussing a series of topical themes:

- Climate change;
- Employment skills;
- European enlargement;
- International aid;
- Movement of labour;
- Security.

There were also discussions about the experience of being an EYP member, and which discussion topics should be raised on the forum.

MODEL

Online deliberative forum.

The forum was readable by anyone but registration was required to contribute. The core user group was young people aged between 16 – 22 years from across the European Union.

The forum was pre-moderated. Moderation was carried out by named members of the EYP UK alumni.

Each discussion was initiated with a statement and questions from a member of the moderation team, or a contributing expert or politician. The FCO's communications division helped to find experts and politicians who could get involved in the forum. It supported the EYP moderators as they developed content and promotional activity for the forum.

DURATION
The forum ran from January 9 to February 26, 2007.

PUBLICITY
The forum was advertised via EYP and FCO email alerts, newsletters and websites. EYP members also promoted it at their schools and colleges.

Press releases were sent to other websites that promote civic and political engagement amongst young people.

There was no paid-for marketing.

OTHER METHODS
The forum was one element of the EYP UK's broader Outreach Programme, which includes workshops and events held regionally and nationally.

USER PROFILES
216 registered users: 42% were male, 58% female.

The diagram below gives an overview of the demographic breakdown of the FCO-EYP forum registrants.

Figure 1: Nationality and age of registrants
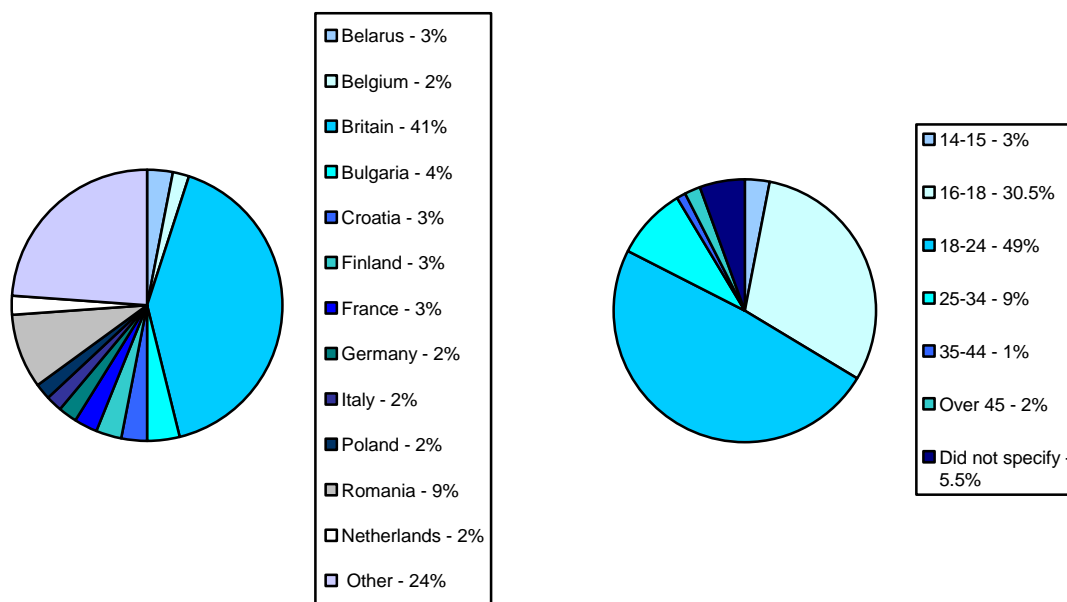
Users accessed the internet mostly from home and regarded themselves as regular internet users.

The majority of registrants had not voted in European elections (65%) and had had no contact with their MEP (59%). Meanwhile, a slight majority had not taken part in a political or policy discussion online previously (52%).

Overall, political efficacy and knowledge were high amongst registrants, perhaps explained by their previous engagement with the EYP (either as members or having attended organised events).

USAGE TRENDS

Participants made 57 posts. An additional 15 were made by moderators and 22 were made by (recruited) experts.

Most registrations came in the first month; the rate dropped away in the second month, though the number of visits to the site rose. The spectator rate amongst registrants and 'passing' visitors remained high compared with the participation rate, as demonstrated by the following table:

Figure 2: Numbers of visitors, visits and registrations
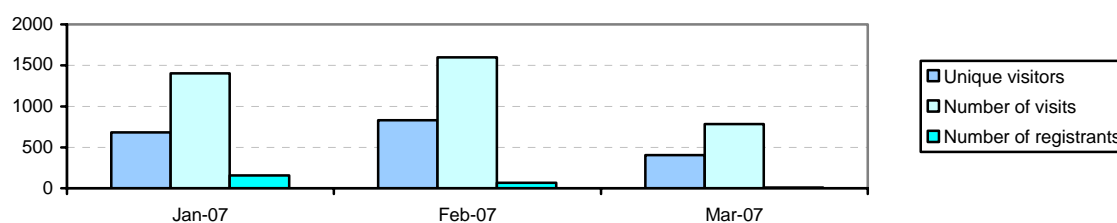
Figure 2b: Frequency of posts
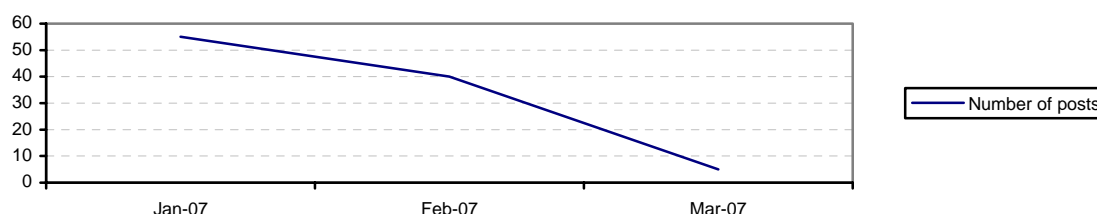
USER FEEDBACK

Responses to post-activity feedback were limited (n=11). The responses received were positive about the experience of using the forum and for the prospect of using online tools to promote political engagement generally:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided
Are online deliberations useful?	91	9	-
Would you get involved in similar online exercises?	91	-	9
Would you recommend online deliberations to others?	100	-	-
Did you learn about the policy area being discussed?	64	27	9
Did you learn from other participants?	91	-	9
Has the forum fulfilled its remit?	82	-	18

The users did not register with the forum with the expectation that they would be able directly to influence policy. The opportunity to deliberate with policy makers was a prime motivation.

Respondents reported that most of the forum's dialogue took place between users. Interaction between moderators and users was reported favourably, but there was felt to be insufficient participation on the part of either experts or politicians.

Figure 3: Participants' experience of communication flow
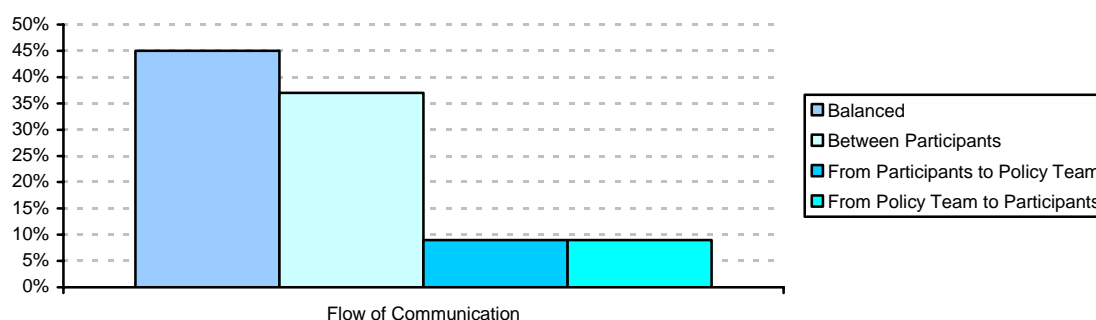
Despite the predominance of peer-to-peer interaction, a number of users said that they expected a greater depth of deliberation. These users complained that the linear structure of the discussions made it difficult to develop arguments and, as a result, the volume of contributions fell away over time.

DETAILED FEEDBACK
The forum was a good addition to the EYP UK's Outreach Programme. The asynchronous nature of the forum facilitated interaction between young people who would not otherwise have met because they lived in different countries.

Users rated their experience of the forum positively and the collaboration between the EYP UK and FCO was successful, enabling them to host discussions by young people from around Europe on a range of topical issues. These discussions were archived, the themes condensed and a record distributed widely with the intention of promoting the inclusion of young people's views in debates about Europe happening elsewhere.

There were, however, a number of elements missing from this forum, which could have increased engagement. Given that registrants were politically aware and efficacious, it makes sense to consider how the forum could have converted passive engagement into active participation. Greater involvement by experts and politicians would, undoubtedly, have benefited this forum – particularly as the prospect of talking to them was an important motivating factor behind user registrations. All the deliberation was in English; having translation services available or multi-lingual moderators may have also boosted (or sustained) the numbers of non-English speaking participants.

Another important factor to consider is that these young people use the internet regularly for leisure, educational and work purposes. As a result, they have come to expect a high standard of website and that certain rules of engagement are observed. Given the available budget and time, the forum would never have been able to match the design standards of many of the more established and popular online communities that participants visit. However, it could have made more use of audio and video content, and could have been marketed through existing social network sites.

The forum lacked a 'sense of community'. Other social network sites build this through interactions between users that are based on allowing individuals to control the amount of information they share with one another. Generally, users will share quite a lot (through their profiles), in the knowledge that if they share, others will reciprocate. This encourages the quick formation of bonds based on shared interests, rather than waiting for these to build over an extended period of time, or on the basis of only rough impressions.

The forum benefited from its link with offline workshops and events organised by the EYP. In this instance, it was not possible to make the most of this opportunity due to short lead-in times and limited resources. However, it is evident that using online forums to build connections between young people, who might then be able to meet at EYP 'offline forums', holds great potential. It would also be a useful agenda-setting tool in the run-up to an event, or as a means to support follow-up activity.

For the purposes of evaluation, there is also scope for the FCO to encourage the further use of forums by the EYP in the future to facilitate open feedback from its members and users.

FOLLOW UP
EYP has its own website with some social networking functionality. The EYP UK is hoping to develop a similar functionality on its website.

The FCO has previously run online forums; this forum was welcomed as an opportunity to update knowledge and skills. The FCO is exploring participative media further for the benefit of future engagement exercises.

9. Planning Portal Forum, in association with Communities and Local Government
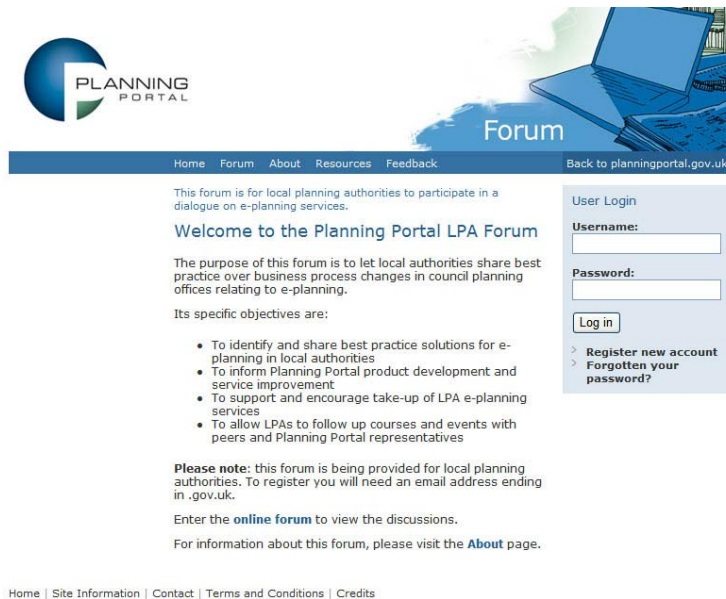
URL
www.planningportalforum.net

CASE STUDY OWNER
Planning Portal/Communities and Local Government (CLG)

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- The online consultation had a clarity of purpose and a defined user base;
- The forum provided a dedicated 'safe space' to discuss policy in open, transparent terms;
- Moderators were responsive to user input;
- Background information was made available in a resources section;
- The rate of registrations was high;
- The rate of posts retained a consistency.

Potential for improvement
- The participation rate was low when compared to stated user interest;
- The community had limited time to coalesce and build momentum;
- The forum used a pre-moderation strategy, which slowed the dialogue amongst a known stakeholder group;
- The exercise would have benefited from involvement of policy leads who had the knowledge to be able to respond on specifics about policy (in support of moderators);

– A greater range of means by which users could respond to consultation would have accommodated different levels of expertise and tastes.

OVERVIEW
The Planning Portal is the UK government's online planning and regulation resource. Oversight is provided by Communities and Local Government.

POLICY PURPOSE
The Planning Portal recently developed a specific product (the 1APP, National Standard Planning Application Form) and invited local planning authorities (LPAs) to take part in a consultation about its implementation.

The forum was set up to feed into the consultation about IAPP. Its specific objectives were to:

– Identify and share best practice solutions for e-planning in local authorities;
– Inform Planning Portal product development and service improvement;
– Support and encourage take-up of LPA e-planning services;
– Allow LPAs to follow up courses and events with peers and Planning Portal representatives.

MODEL
Online deliberative forum.

The forum was established for a core stakeholder base – the 410 local planning authorities in England and Wales. Those wishing to read or contribute to the forum required a gov.uk email address to register.

The forum was pre-moderated by Planning Portal staff. Representatives from the consultation team logged-in to promote deliberation and respond to queries.

A number of discrete themes were opened up for discussion and feedback. Some were broad; others more detailed:

– National Register Feasibility study;
– Take-up;
– LPA forum events 2007;
– Storing PDFs in Idox document management systems;
– IAPP, The National Standard Planning Application Form;
– Adobe measurement tool;
– [Open] Suggestions.

DURATION
The forum ran from January 16 to May 14, 2007.

PUBLICITY

The forum was advertised to all members of planning departments in local government via email and newsletters.

OTHER METHODS

People wishing to submit comments about 1APP or any other subject discussed in the forum could do so by email, letter, phone or by arranging a meeting.

USER PROFILES

426 registrants: 53% were male, 47% female.

Figure 1: Age of registrants

18-24 - 3%
25-34 - 18%
35-44 - 30%
45-54 - 21%
55-64 - 11%
Did not specify - 17%
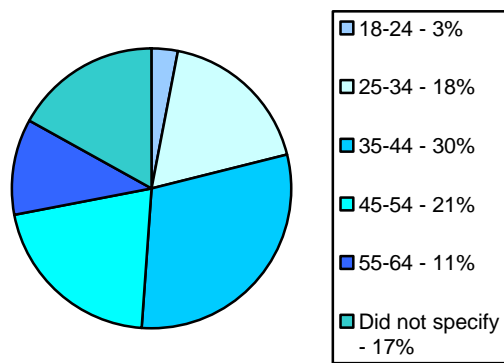
Despite the fact that around 95% of forum registrants said that they were regular internet users (with 67% of them accessing it from home), only 32% had been involved in any previous online consultations (65% had not; 3% did not say).

Some participants said they had been involved in political activity offline:

Figure 2: Offline forms of political engagement

Contact with local MP
Participated in previous government consultations
Voted in last general election
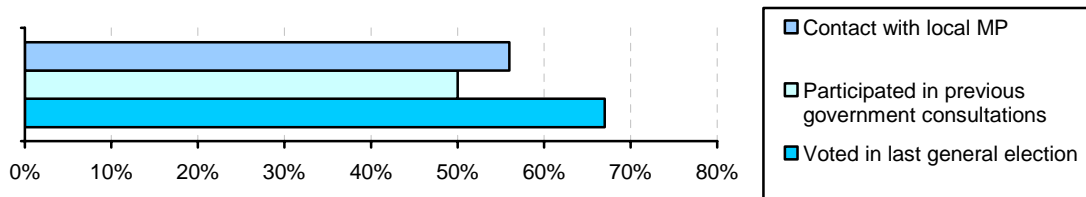
Participants demonstrated a high level of efficacy - only 18% indicated that they did not believe they could have any influence over the way the country was run.

USAGE TRENDS

82 posts were made overall - 15 by the policy team.

Figure 3a: Numbers of visitors, visits and registrations
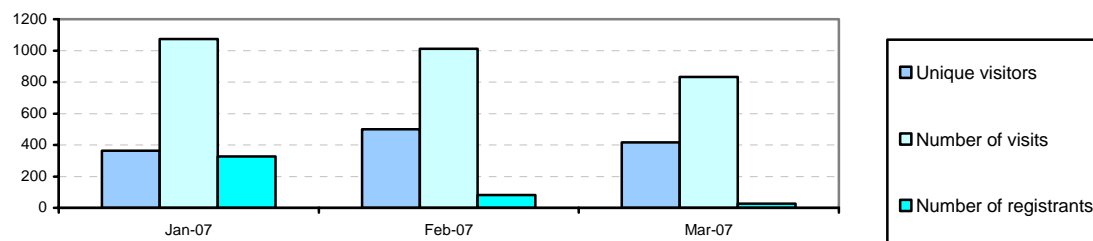
Figure 3b: Frequency of posts
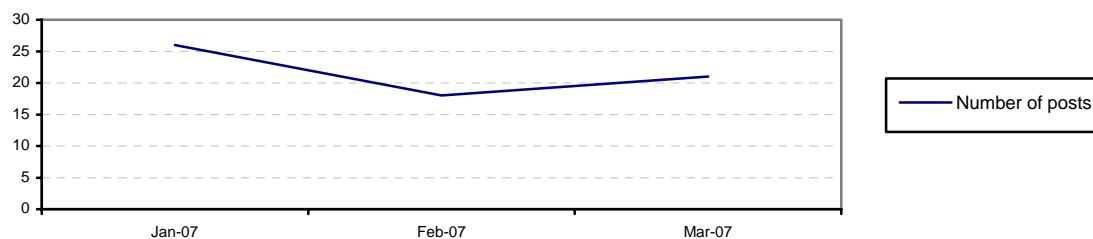
Nearly all of the forum's registrations occurred in its first month, tailing-off in the second. Throughout the three months of the forum's evaluation, it attracted a significant proportion of repeat visits: the post-count remained stable (and low) during our evaluation period.

USER FEEDBACK

Many respondents to our evaluation survey (n=26) said that their involvement in the website was motivated by the desire to influence policy by sharing knowledge. Others hoped that the forum would lead to improvements in services and e-planning. There was an expectation of a regular, detailed dialogue within the forum.

Participant evaluations are represented as percentages below:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided	Did not specify
Are forums a good way of engaging with stakeholders?	75		25	-
Would you participate in online forums in future?	88		12	-
Would you recommend such forms of engagement to others?	75		25	-
Were the contributions of government representatives useful?	25	12.5	62.5	-
Did you learn about the policy area?	38	31	31	-
Did you learn from other participants?	38	25	31	6
Has the forum fulfilled its remit?	44	6	50	-

Having used the forum, users were unambiguously positive about online forms of engagement and thought forums are a good way of communicating. The majority said that they would participate in online deliberations in future (only 32% of the forum's registrants had done so previously). Over 70% said that they would

recommend online consultations to others, but qualified this by suggesting that they were only useful and feasible for expert stakeholders.

While over 40% of respondents felt that the forum had fulfilled its remit, even more were uncertain that it had. Participants were ambivalent about the usefulness of government consultations generally, with over 60% being unsure that they served any real policy function. Respondents were also divided over whether they had learnt anything new about the policy area through their involvement in the Planning Portal forum.

The ability to see what other people were saying to government appealed to forum users, although respondents were split on the question of whether they had learnt from one another. We asked participants about the dynamics of the forum: the majority (almost 60%) thought that the deliberation was led by stakeholder participants.

While users noted that the consultation team submitted posts frequently to provide information and answers to queries, some respondents to our feedback survey were disappointed with the depth of interaction between participants and moderators. Ultimately, users reported reading the forum more than participating in it:

Figure 4: Perceptions of engagement with the forum
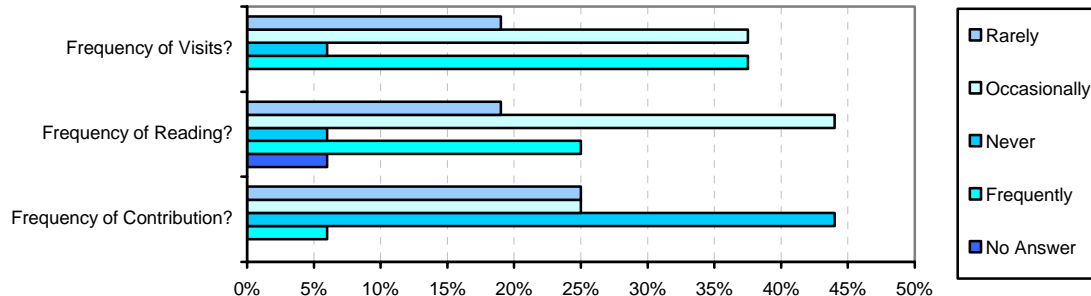
DETAILED FEEDBACK

The Planning Portal forum differed from most of the other *Digital Dialogues* case studies because it restricted participation to a specific group of stakeholders (and was not open to public viewing). It demonstrated that online platforms can attract stakeholders who already have established routes by which they can engage with government. It can facilitate their interaction with one another and it can provide a useful tool for dissemination of documents and information updates.

While it is true that this case study has shown potential, it has also demonstrated some of the obstacles to establishing a cohesive, purposeful online community. Registrations were high (particularly given the size of the pool of potential participants), but participation was low. Evaluation of this exercise makes a few suggestions of why this might be.

Stakeholders expect a high level of discussion and require involvement and dialogue with specific members of the policy team during consultation – not only those who are moderating a discussion forum. While the look, feel and tone may be less formal, it is essential that the depth of online processes is comparable with that of offline consultation methods stakeholders are accustomed to. It is also worth considering the value of post- over pre-moderation where a named, experienced stakeholder group are the sole users of the forum. This would demonstrate trust, openness and ensure deliberation built a natural momentum.

Limited time to participate could also discourage participation; however, because there is no fixed date for a meeting, there is a sense with online consultations that there is no urgency to get involved. Therefore, more incentives to contribute on an active basis are required. Using multi-modal platforms (incorporating webchats and polls) and email updates from the site could focus the attention of users and motivate those who prefer one-to-one, rather than group interaction.

An advantage of online engagement in this context is that registrants can be informed of changes to planning applications (for example) before they are introduced. User profiles could be created and used to encourage exchange of practice. Such advantages should be actively marketed to participants.

Ultimately, to establish and motivate a stakeholder group, particularly via an innovative method, takes time, careful evaluation and the conversion of evaluation feedback into tangible actions. In this instance, the forum was only just picking up pace when it was wound down and closed.

FOLLOW UP
Following the close of the forum and consultation, the Planning Portal is analysing responses. A report will be published in 2007.

10. Law Commission Tenth Programme of Law Reform Forum

URL
http://forum.lawcom.gov.uk/
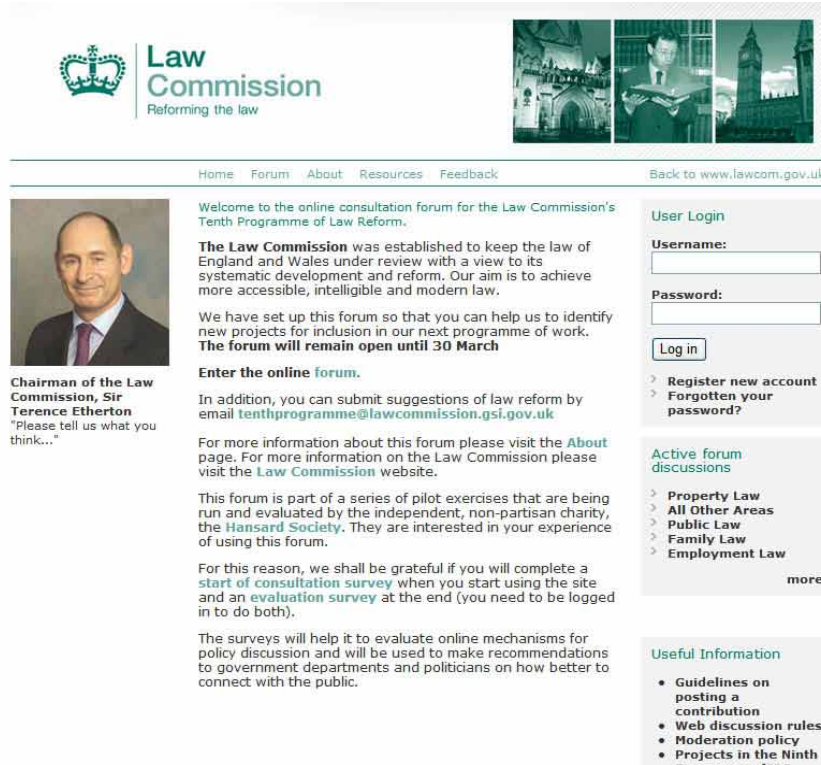
CASE STUDY OWNER
The Law Commission

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
  - The forum encouraged participation of lay public;
  - The Commission approached the exercise with a genuine openness to suggestions;
  - The Commission provided a criteria framework to guide submission content and structure;
  - The case study team generated support for public engagement (and the online forum) throughout the Commission;
  - The Communications division developed a promotional strategy and implemented it;
  - The forum and Tenth Programme were positioned within the context of previous Programmes and engagement activity;
  - The case study team undertook their own research into online engagement theory and techniques and attended seminars and workshops to supplement those offered by the *Digital Dialogues* initiative.

Potential for improvement
- The forum had a low registration and participation rate;
- The extent of engagement of expert stakeholders with the forum was limited;
- The participation on the part of Commissioners was too infrequent and lacked depth;
- Partnerships with media organisations, and taking advantage of media coverage that generated public interest, could have improved the visibility of the Programme and encouraged participation in the forum.

OVERVIEW

The Law Commission was established to keep the law of England and Wales under review with a view to its systematic development and reform. Its stated aim is to achieve more accessible, intelligible and modern law.

POLICY PURPOSE

The Law Commission was established in 1965 and is required from time to time to submit programmes of law reform to the Lord Chancellor. There have been nine programmes of law reform to date.

The Tenth Programme of Law Reform was opened on February 5, 2007. In formulating this Programme, the Commission wanted to identify projects that would benefit the public.

Anyone can suggest to the Commission an area of the law that is in need of reform. The Law Commission tends to consider reform of particular branches of the law, but will consider any proposal within a set of basic criteria. The online forum was established to give key stakeholders and the public an opportunity to propose and discuss reforms of existing law in a structured manner.

The forum began with an open space for initial suggestions. Once several discrete areas of law had been identified by contributors, separate topics were established to allow deliberation on each: these included:

- Family law;
- Public law;
- Property law;
- Employment law;
- Commercial law;
- Criminal Law.

The reform programme impacts on residents of England and Wales.

MODEL

Online deliberative forum.

The forum was readable by anyone, but registration was required to contribute. The forum was pre-moderated by Law Commission policy staff.

Representatives from the Commission logged into the forum to promote deliberation, respond to queries and to summarise discussions.

DURATION
February 5 to March 30, 2007

PUBLICITY
The forum was advertised on the Law Commission's corporate website.

The Law Commission also promoted the forum through other local and national government bodies, networks and departments. Unions and representative groups were also told about the forum's existence, as were interested stakeholders, identified by the Law Commission's communications team.

Academic and legal bodies were informed of the forum's existence, and a link to it was distributed within a loosely-defined eDemocracy community.

Press releases were also sent out by the Commission to trade and mainstream media.

There was no paid-for marketing.

OTHER METHODS
Individuals or organisations could make suggestions for incorporation in the Programme by email or by sending in a written response by post.

USER PROFILES
77 registrants: 64% male, 36% female.

Figure 1: Age of forum registrants

Legend:
- 18-24 - 10%
- 25-34 - 10%
- 35-44 - 13%
- 45-54 - 26%
- 55-64 - 25%
- Over 65 - 16%
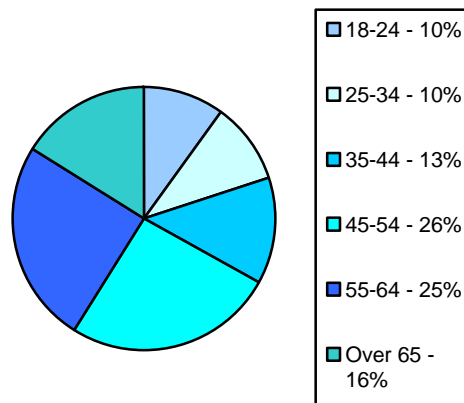
The majority (96%) of registrants claimed to have regular access to the internet - a significant proportion did so from home:

Home	Work	Public Access	Library	Combination
70%	18%	1.5%	1.5%	9%

A small majority of participants (51%) said they had participated in online consultations or forums previously, but these were not related to government policy exercises.

For 65% of the forum's registrants, this was the first time they had participated in a government consultation exercise. Ten per cent of the registrants said that they had given evidence to a parliamentary inquiry previously.

Eighty-four per cent of the site's registrants said that this was the first time that they had ever been involved in a Law Commission consultation. However, 25% said that they had been in contact with the Law Commission previously.

Political efficacy of respondents to our pre-consultation survey (n=17) was generally low. The majority (65%) felt that they would not be listened to by those in power, although 59% believed that their participation (in a general sense) could have some influence over the policy making process.

USAGE TRENDS

47 comments were posted - 43 by participants, two from the review team and two were posted by 'Opinion Leaders' (identifiable subject experts) recruited by the Commission.

The majority of contributions were made in the first month of the forum. The number of registrations and contributions tailed off in the forum's second month, as did the number of posts:

Figure 2: Number of visitors, visits and registrations
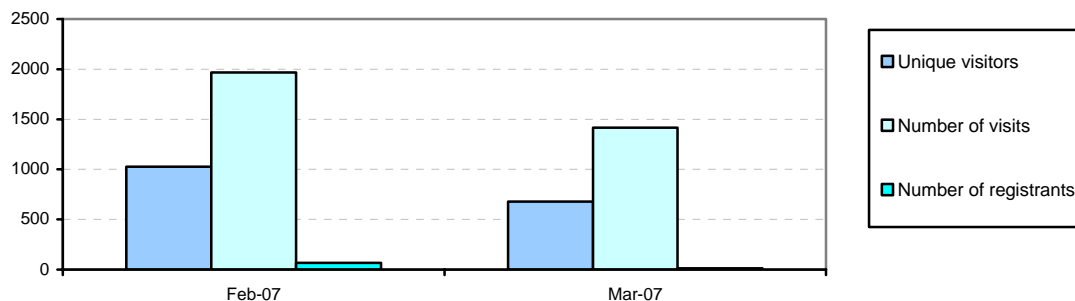
Figure 2b: Frequency of posts
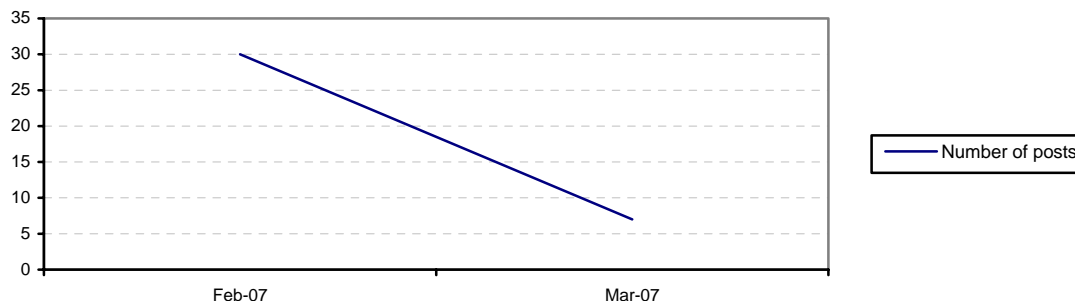
USER FEEDBACK

Nine respondents completed our post-activity evaluation survey. Responses are illustrated as percentages below:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided	No Response
Do online deliberations offer a good means of engagement with the public?	67	-	33	-
Would you participate in similar exercises in the future?	100	-	-	-
Would you recommend it to others?	100	-	-	-
Were there sufficient contributions from the Law Commission?	-	56	44	-
Did you learn anything about the Law Commission?	22	45	22	11
Did you learn from other participants?	56	44	-	-
Did the forum fulfil its remit?	22	33	45	-

Despite some uncertainty about the value of online consultations (around a third expressed some ambivalence toward them in the evaluation survey), all respondents said that they would use similar opportunities in the future, and that they would recommend participation to others.

Participants had registered with the forum with a view to influencing policy and engaging with representatives of the Law Commission. Respondents noted that the majority of the posts involved peer-to-peer interaction and said that there were insufficient contributions from Commission staff. As a result, they claimed that the forum did not significantly enhance public understanding of the Law Commission.

DETAILED FEEDBACK

This online forum had great potential. It invited potential participants – lay and expert – to log-in to make suggestions for law reform and get involved in discussions about their own ideas and those of others. At the close of the consultation period, the Commission would draw together the submissions – received on- and offline – and base its recommendations on this input.

The consultation team consisted of communications professionals and policy leads. Both collaborated well and developed a ground-swell of support within the Commission for this activity. The team carried out preparatory research into online engagement to inform themselves about its benefits and shortfalls. A promotional strategy was devised and implemented in advance of the forum's launch to attract participation from a range of users.

In the event, registrations were low and the forum received few submissions. Despite its openness and potential, the Programme and the forum did not capture the public's attention and attract their participation. The secondary value of this forum to the Commission – which was to promote awareness of its role – was also not as effective as hoped.

Feedback about the forum from users was very limited. Some, while interested in an online submission route, were less keen to have their ideas deliberated over and thought that online submissions were at risk of being regarded by the Law Commission as less important than offline contributions.

Respondents suggested that the lack of real interaction with the policy team also deterred participation. The extent of the team's involvement was limited because at this stage the Commission was inviting submissions rather than enabling discussion of their decisions on which areas of law were open to reform. However, there was scope for more facilitation of the discussion by the team – especially because of the low participation rate.

Finally, although it is true that the Commission devised a promotional strategy and implemented it, more could have been done to capitalise on media debate and appeal to single-issue communities. The Commission chose not to go with a 'responsive' approach to prevent the discussion being 'hijacked' by interest groups, and to try to ensure a high-level of submission quality. However, their use of moderation and a submission criteria framework would have helped to

guard against such eventualities. A mainstream media partner may also have helped open this opportunity out to a greater number and range of the public than was ultimately achieved (particularly as at the time a number of national newspapers and broadcasters covered activity directly and indirectly related to law making and reform).

FOLLOW UP
The Tenth Programme of Law Reform is due to commence in April 2008.

The Law Commission intends to continue exploring the use of targeted forms of online engagement methods for future consultations.

11. Sustainable Development Commission Panel

URL
www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/sd_panel.html

CASE STUDY OWNER
Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- This engagement activity benefited from clear objectives and detail on how the results of the consultation would be used;
- A core stakeholder panel was recruited with broad sustainable development knowledge, promoting the conditions for motivated and well-informed debate;
- There was a sense of community amongst panel members: for example, participants could see how many people agreed with their response;
- Users were given more than one means of participating in the consultation online.

Potential for improvement
- More resources could have been put into encouraging more frequent and in depth participation by panel members;
- Offline and online engagement with the panel earlier about what was involved (in the consultation process) could have encouraged members to

familiarise themselves with their peers and the SDC consultation process in advance of participation;
- Deliberative elements of panel would have benefited from engagement with government policy makers;
- Availability of other routes by which panel members could engage in the consultation, including via written submissions, offline workshops and meetings.

OVERVIEW

The Sustainable Development Commission is the government's independent watchdog 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 core of government 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 nearly 600 members, and aims to recruit a further 400 by 2008. It is a UK-based stakeholder panel - i.e., people are selected for their interests and expertise, rather than as representative members of the public. All panel activity takes place online.

POLICY PURPOSE

One of the main ways the SDC engages with the panel is through online consultations. The aim of engagement using this method is to:

- Allow for breadth and depth of participation and dialogue;
- Provide a transparent means of consultation;
- Offer a systematic method of consultation.

Online deliberative panels are accompanied by an ongoing open forum that is used to discuss concerns relating to the consultation themes.

The consultation being evaluated in this case-study was entitled 'Redefining Progress'. Themes covered included:

- What should progress mean?
- Economic growth as progress;
- The concept of wellbeing;
- Defining and measuring wellbeing;
- Wellbeing use and implications in policy making;
- Government's role in shaping progress.

MODEL

There were three structured panel sessions (running for three weeks each) and a simultaneous open forum.

The first session was held in September 2006. Panel members were required to answer a number of open-ended questions, which focused broadly on defining progress and wellbeing. Panel members were entitled to give one answer to each question but they were not obliged to do so.

The second session took place between October and November 2006. Before taking part, participants could read a summary of contributions made by panel members during the first session. They were asked to comment on these and then asked a further set of more focused questions on measuring wellbeing. For the second session, a deliberative forum ran alongside the panel. Its purpose was to allow participants to discuss areas that had not been raised in the consultation questions.

The third (final) session occurred in November and December 2006. Participants were asked to review the points raised in the second session. At this stage, they were also asked to evaluate the consultation process.

Registration was required prior to participation and was limited to panel members.

SDC staff facilitated the discussion, but the website design and panel recruitment were undertaken by a third party external provider, Dialogue by Design, who developed the consultation with the SDC. Dialogue by Design also collected feedback on panel members' experience of the consultation, focusing on its clarity and the design of the website. The *Digital Dialogues* research team appended evaluation questions about political engagement onto the feedback survey.

PUBLICITY

Panel members were recruited specifically for the exercise and given an information sheet by the SDC to specify the terms of their commitment when they joined.

The work of the panel is publicised and explained on the SDC website (address given at top of the case study).

OTHER METHODS

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

USER PROFILES

577 registered panel members: 61.5% were male, 33.5%, female. 5% did not specify gender.

Figure 1: Ethnic background and age of panel members
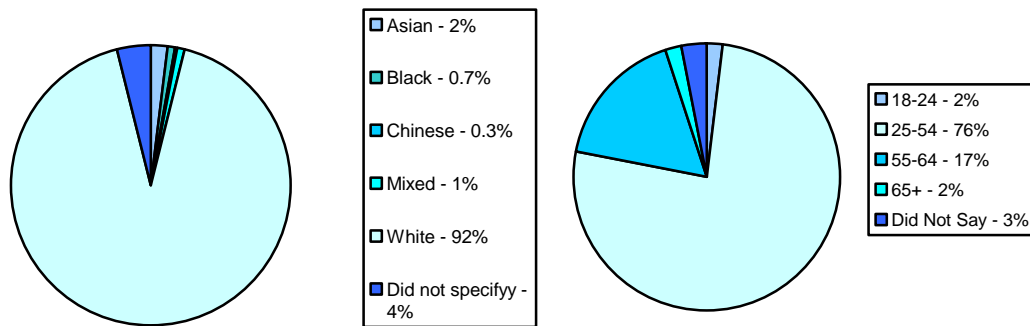
Panel members were asked about their political engagement outside of the panel. All were politically engaged, but some forms of participation were more popular than others:

Figure 2: Levels of political engagement
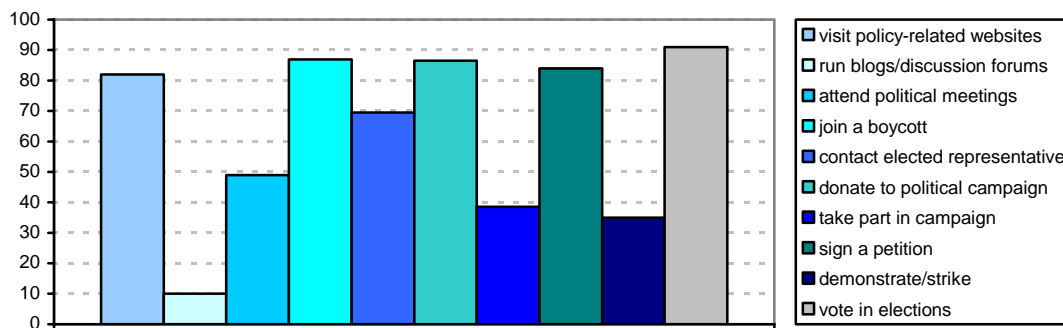
Efficacy amongst panel members was high: over 80% of the feedback survey's respondents said that they felt that their involvement in political processes could have an impact.

Visiting policy-related websites was a popular activity, but only 10% ran (as an organisational or individual activity) a policy-related blog or discussion forum. Around 80% believed that online consultations are a credible way for policy makers to engage with the public. Almost 90% said that they would recommend participation in web-based consultations to others.

USAGE TRENDS

318 members (from 577) participated in the first panel session.

130 members participated in the second session - 34 of whom had not taken part in session 1.

147 participants contributed to the third session.

In the forum, 18 contributors made 43 posts. These posts were within seven threads, of which four were initiated by the SDC and three by panel members

USER FEEDBACK

Participants were asked for feedback on the forum and their experience of using it (rating was done on a scale, with 1 being 'poor' and 5 being 'very good'). Evaluations are represented as percentages below:

	1	2	3	4	5	No response
How clear were the objectives of the consultation?	1	5	19	53	21	1
How interesting was the consultation topic?	-	4	12	39	43	2
How clear were the preamble and questions?	-	5.5	16.5	52	23	3
How did you feel about the collation of answers?	1	5	14	52	25	3
How did you feel about being able to view your comments?	1	6	10	41	37	5
What did you think of the summary report?	-	2.5	4	45	45	3.5
How did you rate the discussion forum?	10	17	35	25	7	6

As can be seen from the above chart, respondents were positive about the format of consultation and the design features of the website.

Respondents were less favourable, generally, about the open forum which ran alongside the structured panel sessions.

DETAILED FEEDBACK

This SDC panel presents an alternative method of engagement to many of the other case studies in our sample. Whereas other case studies have opted to try to engage a general or self-selecting sample of public stakeholders, the SDC has built a panel of defined expert, professional stakeholders.

Given that the panel meets online (means that) greater numbers can be brought together more regularly than is possible offline. The consultation structure allows for a broad range of relatively in-depth views to be discussed. Having a defined group also helps to create the conditions in which an engaged and interactive community can develop between the participants (and SDC staff) over time.

In online engagement, there is a tension between providing too much structure and not providing enough: too little and contributions fail to meet the objectives of the process; too much, and the ability to express opinion is reduced, or removed. This consultation alternated between broad topics in the first session and specific topics in the second: the process proved disorientating for some panel members, who were also concerned about the time commitment required for participation.

Meanwhile, some stakeholders expect to have a reasonably high level of contact with policy makers. While the SDC's style of consultation develops a holistic approach to complex deliberations, an online panel with a range of stakeholders restricts the extent to which the individual member's expert view is heard. Online deliberations may, therefore, be deemed by some to be a less effective means of engaging with policy than traditional channels.

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 wellbeing, the SDC has run a further discussion forum on tidal power (which received 59 posts). The forum was used to scope out key issues and identify potential stakeholders.

The SDC is planning to run future online consultations and forums with the panel, and is exploring other ways of harnessing the internet to enhance engagement.

12. 10 Downing Street Webchats
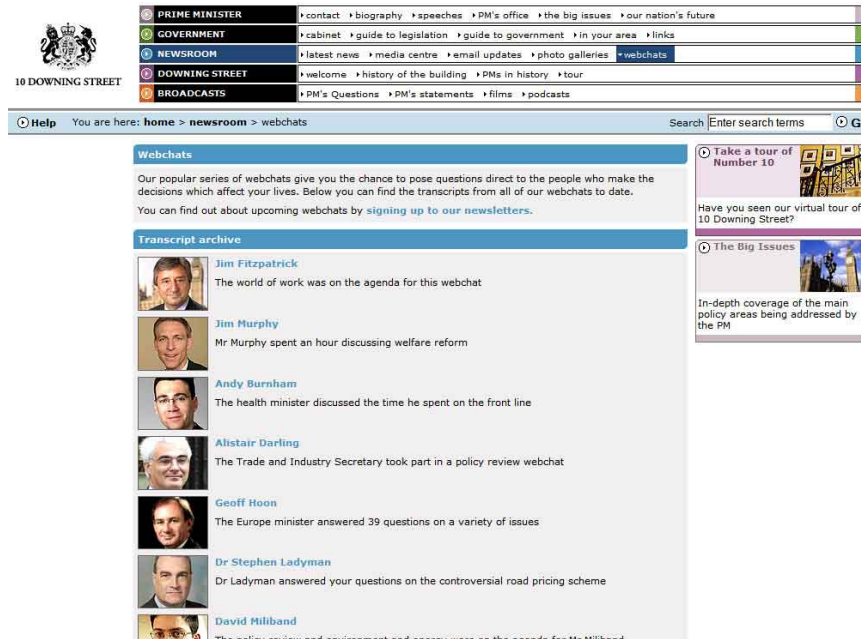
URL
www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page11249.asp

CASE STUDY OWNER
Office of the Prime Minister

LESSONS LEARNT
Strengths
- – Questions could be posed by anyone, and the chats were open to public viewing;
- – These webchats all took place on a prominent government website;
- – Senior ministers and government representatives took part;
- – The webchats were topical and generated the sense of being an 'event';
- – A range of topics was discussed;
- – Webchats were archived for future viewing;
- – Users were given direction to further information resources.

Potential for improvement
- – The webchat users would have benefited from a greater use of background information to inform participation;
- – Users would have been better served by the provision of information about the nature of the policy process surrounding discussion topics, and how people can 'have their say' beyond the webchats;
- – Users expected a quicker roll out of responses;

- Actual interaction was limited; the webchats would have benefited, for example, from allowing those who had submitted questions to respond to ministerial answers;
- Use of webcams or audio would have increased and sustained participation;
- On a general level, visibility and participation in webchats would be boosted by pre-publicity or by marketing a programme of chats.

OVERVIEW
The Downing Street website was set up to provide the public with information about the role and activities of the Prime Minister (PM).

Gradually the functionality of the site has developed from performing a purely information-provision function, to allowing users to engage in more interactive ways – for example, by taking virtual tours, or submitting and signing petitions. This development has also included the availability of webchats.

POLICY PURPOSE
The Office of the Prime Minister invited senior government ministers and officials to utilise the webchat facility on the Number 10 website.

The webchats have no direct policy impacts. They are used to provide an opportunity for questions to be set by members of the public, and for these to be answered collectively by an appropriate government representative.

Policy areas relating to the work of the participating Minister or senior official are discussed in the webchats. By the close of the Hansard Society evaluation, a range of topics had been covered including employment, identity cards, multiculturalism, the environment and welfare reform.

MODEL
The webchats are held on the 10 Downing Street website

Ministers and senior departmental officials are asked to participate in a webchat by Downing Street staff, who organise and facilitate the events. It is then advertised and members of the public are invited to pre-submit questions, which are moderated by Downing Street staff prior to the webchat.

Anyone is able to participate in and view the webchats. Members of the public who have submitted questions (or simply wish to spectate) are invited to visit the website at a pre-set time to view the answers to submitted questions. A transcript of the chat is archived on the site for reference.

DURATION
The webchats have been held at various times for various durations

Twenty-four webchats have been held to date. Those evaluated in this case study took place in early 2007. We have received feedback for four evaluations of webchats held with Alistair Darling MP, Jim Fitzpatrick MP, James Hall (Chief of the Identity and Passport Service) and David Miliband MP.

PUBLICITY
The webchats are publicised on the 10 Downing Street and on departmental websites.

Press releases containing information about the webchats are sent to trade and mainstream press.

OTHER METHODS
People can contact the Prime Minister's office and specific departments using conventional routes (email, phone or letter).

Webchat users are occasionally directed to resources where they can find more information about the issues and policies they are interested in.

USER PROFILES
The survey was completed by 36 webchat users.

No demographic data was collected.

Of our respondents, only 40% had taken part in webchats previously. Many had already visited the 10 Downing Street website to find information or sign petitions.

The routes by which participants found out about the webchats suggest that they were already politically engaged – most discovered them through departmental websites or emails from established interest groups.

91% of the respondents were regular users of the internet and accessed it from a combination of places:

Combination	Home	Work	Library	Other
39%	36%	16%	6%	3%

USAGE TRENDS
No data available.

USER FEEDBACK
Respondents to the feedback survey spoke of different motivations for participating. Some wanted to observe; others wanted to see if ministerial responses in the webchats would differ from previous pronouncements on the subject matter.

The Downing Street website made clear that the webchats were part of an engagement, rather than consultation exercise. Despite this, many participants hoped to have a policy impact.

After the event, participants said that they appreciated having the chance to interact with a senior representative of government, but felt that they learnt little about the topics that concerned them. The principal reason for this was that there was too little detail in answers and not sufficient interaction. There was a general concern that ministers were only answering 'easy questions' and not taking on more challenging lines of questioning.

Despite a degree of dissatisfaction with these particular webchats, most respondents said that they would take part in similar engagement exercises in the future. They also believed that government would benefit from continuing to make such opportunities available, since they provide a means of gauging public opinion. The responses are presented as percentages below:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided	No Response
Have you taken part in previous webchats?	44	50	6	-
Are webchats useful for government?	58	30	11	1
Are webchats useful for the public?	55	28	14	3
Would you participate in similar webchats in the future?	61	14	19	6

DETAILED FEEDBACK

The users of these webchats were not been wholly satisfied with the experience. They variously questioned the quality of the webchats, the interactivity and, indeed, if ministers and officials have genuinely participated. The webchats would have perhaps been more accurately described as an opportunity to 'ask an expert', rather than a webchat with the 'real time', deliberative associations that the term usually carries.

A greater degree of interactivity and debate between the government representative and the public would certainly be well received. If there is a concern about the manageability of a 'genuine' webchat, there are moderation processes that can be put in place. Downing Street may also consider using the same format of pre-submitting questions, but then having an independent interviewer there on the day to deliver the questions. This could be delivered using text, but would be more engaging via audio- or video-stream.

Several webchats have been held on the Number 10 website since 1997. However, until recently, their occurrence has been infrequent. In the last year, a significant number of webchats have been held on the site involving high-profile government figures and covering a range of policy areas. It appears that these have piqued the interest of the public – particularly where they have coincided with broader public debate (for example, the DfT webchat took place following the submission of a popular petition on road pricing).

Although the format needs to be developed, as an initial pilot exercise Downing Street should be positive about the webchat experience and confident about the reception of similar activity in the future.

FOLLOW UP
The intention is to continue holding webchats on the 10 Downing Street site and to continue developing online engagement routes.

2.4 CROSS-CASE STUDY USER FEEDBACK

The second phase of *Digital Dialogues* piloted 12 case-studies – the unique features of each are described in specific case study evaluation reports in the previous section of this report (2.3). However, common themes were identified across the sample and these are discussed here.

Through the *Digital Dialogues* case studies a number of interesting themes appeared - some of these relate to demographics, others to the experience of using a particular web application for deliberation. As elsewhere in this report, users are defined as those who visited, registered or participated in the website; case-study owners are those who developed the online deliberation.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Across the case studies, users consisted of a mix of demographics. They were a range of ages, ethnicities and genders. Though, in general, men were more likely to use the sites than women; those between the ages of 25 - 60 years old were the most active.

Figure 1: Breakdown of Age of participants across the case studies (n=4116)

- Under 18 - 2%
- 18-24 - 5.5%
- 25-44 - 47.5%
- 45-60 - 31%
- Over 60 - 7%
- Did not specify - 7%
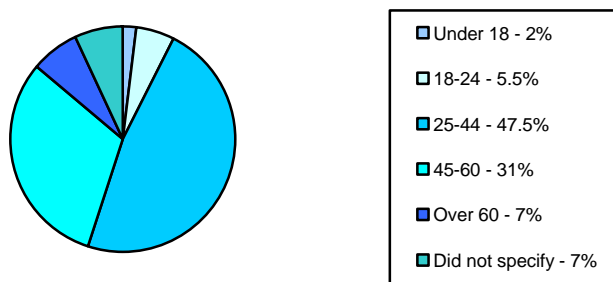
Men were more likely to get involved in online deliberations than women, although certain case-studies appealed to larger numbers of women (e.g. Family Courts and the European Youth Parliament) and others were disproportionately male dominated (e.g., Party Funding Review forum) despite attempts to address gender bias during recruitment.

Figure 2: Breakdown of Gender of participants across the case studies (n=4116)

- Male - 61.5%
- Female - 32%
- Did not specify - 6.5%
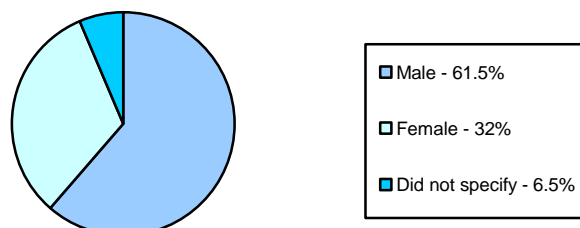
Although the case-studies attracted users from a range of ethnic backgrounds, the majority defined themselves as British or English:

Most users (96%) regarded themselves as regular users of the internet (n=1559). The majority of users accessed the internet from home:

Figure 4: Internet Access Points (n=1434)
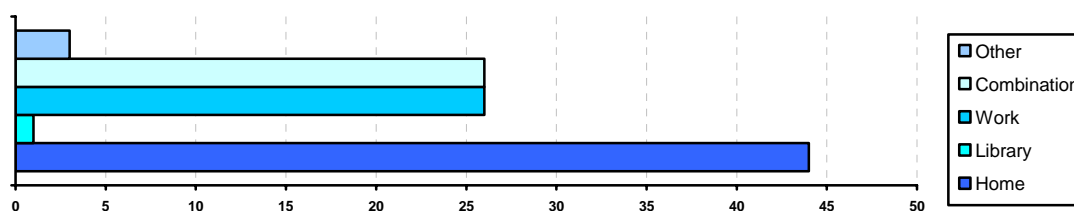
POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND ATTITUDES

In general, users were more politically engaged than the average UK citizen – particularly with regard to the issues under discussion – even before registering with the website. For example, 85% of those taking part in the Party Funding website had voted in the most recent general election; 43.5% of those visiting the Food Standard Agency's blog had written to their MP.

Despite this, efficacy prior to participation was low amongst most users of the case-study websites. The exceptions were the Planning Portal and the FCO–EYP forum (where one group were government employees and the other were associated with a political-interest organisation). Particular websites attracted more sceptical users; those taking part in the Family Courts forum, for example, were less likely to believe that policy makers would listen to them than those taking part in the ONS blog.

Most users said they had an existing interest in the subject matter being raised in the case study they took part in. This was borne out in the routes people cited that they took to get to the online engagement activity. These were often established networks and sources, such as email newsletters and departmental websites.

Despite being comfortable with technology, interested in the subject matter and even having undertaken some form of political participation previously, for the vast majority of users taking part in a *Digital Dialogues* case study was their first engagement with a government policy consultation exercise. These users had never engaged with the policy process through a formal route until an online option was made available.

For most, online engagement was their sole means of interacting with the consultation, with only a quarter contributing by another means where it was made available (for example, by attending a citizens' jury, writing a letter or sending an email). Survey respondents highlighted a number of advantages they saw as being unique to online engagement over other available routes. These included:

- Taking part anonymously;
- Taking part without having to be in a particular place at a particular time;
- Forming an opinion over time;
- Finding out what other people were saying;
- Engaging with government representatives.

USERS ON USER EXPERIENCES

Each case study attracted a high number of unique visitors who made repeat visits. However, most of these people took part only as spectators (this reflects the usage trends of online engagement generally). Despite this, the majority of users believed that online methods are a credible form of engagement:

	Yes (%)	No	Undecided	Did not specify
Have you taken part in online deliberations previously?	40	57	-	3
Are online deliberations a good way of engaging the public?	74	10	14	2
Would you participate in similar exercises in the future?	78	14	6	2

Of those providing feedback on this measure (n=639), 74% said that they were useful, whether or not many people contributed to discussions. Similarly, 78% said that they would engage with the government online in the future (n=484). A similar number said that they would recommend online engagement to others, and in open-ended questioning, many suggested that the rate of involvement is likely to grow as opportunities become more widespread and regular in their occurrence.

… ON MOTIVATIONS

In terms of their motivation for using the sites, users arrived with mixed goals. They wanted to have their say on the issue or policy, but also to learn about the experiences, knowledge and ideas of others. To engage in a two-way exchange of information was the core dynamic driving these exercises.

Few took up the opportunity to actively contribute, and the majority chose instead to visit the site and read the submissions made by others, rather than make their own contributions. However, as noted earlier, community websites of all kinds receive more spectators than contributors, and spectating is a credible (if passive) form of engagement.

… ON MODERATION

On average, about half of the respondents felt that they had not learnt anything new about the policy area, process or the sponsoring department from the contributions of case-study owners. Users also expressed disappointment with the quality of discussions that took place overall. Most perceived that the majority of interaction was between participants and that there should have been more frequent contributions from policy officials and government experts. Consequently, users said they learnt more from other users than government.

In each case, policy and communications staff were visible on the sites and made contributions. On each site, the nature of their participation was explained as 'moderation'. Interestingly, this was taken to mean different things by different users and a range of opinions emerged about what function these moderators did or should fulfil. These included:

- Chair or facilitate the debate;
- Check comments for suitability (against the discussion rules);
- Provide knowledge and respond to questions;
- Account for policy implications;
- Represent the views of government.

… ON PEERS

Although our surveys did not expressly ask for the views of users about their peers, feedback of this nature did come through when we asked about advantages and disadvantages of online engagement activity.

Users were asked to state in which capacity they were taking part; those who replied, in the main, said they had a direct stake in the policy area but were engaging as private individuals.

Users perceived others - particularly those who posted - as articulate and well-informed but also opinionated and self-serving. This lead to concerns about the representiveness of the user-base, something users said could be addressed by better publicity (which across all the case studies was regarded as being poor).

Anonymity, while welcomed by users, was seen to have a potentially detrimental effect: it could allow people to misrepresent themselves. Meanwhile, some users were concerned that the government would not take their views seriously because of the informal nature of anonymous online deliberation. Conversely, some users emphasised data-protection issues and the possibility that online deliberations and the associated surveys (whether evaluative or linked in to consultation) were being used to track individuals.

User surveys also revealed insights relating to the dynamics of particular applications:

… ON BLOGS

Only a third of those who used the blogs in our sample were bloggers themselves. However, about three quarters regularly visited blogs with policy or political content. When comparing the government blogs to others they used, the users rated the blogs' content as below average, and the interactivity of the bloggers as significantly below that of what they were used to on other blogs.

However, overall, blogging by government ministers and officials was welcomed. Users were pleased to have an additional means of accessing information about

departments, individuals and policy areas, and a new means of interacting with government.

Thinking long-term, users recognised that government was new to blogging and that there were many ways in which it could develop given the time. However, there was scepticism about the sustainability of government blogging after the initial public relations value had run its course.

… ON FORUMS
Forums are good for engaging large groups on an asynchronous but structured basis. Feedback from the users suggested that the forums in our sample achieved a mixed record of success.

Users were drawn to the forums because they offered an opportunity to directly contribute their own views to the policy process. Nonetheless, the majority were also motivated by the prospect of engaging with experts and other stakeholders and hearing about a broad range of experiences, ideas and opinions.

Users expected a high standard of detailed deliberation. Yet, they also appreciated that, on account of the asynchronous dynamics, the discussions would have an elasticity that would make them difficult to follow. Structure and facilitation were, therefore, identified as being of great importance to the forums. Unfortunately, it seemed that in most cases the interaction from moderators was seen as too infrequent, and the topics and questions were regarded as being inaccessible.

Fundamentally, these users wanted to be listened to and, on the basis of being invited to participate, expected to have some form of influence on the policy process. The extent of this influence and the link between this exercise and the policy decisions was unclear, and this made users sceptical about participation. Almost all said that they expected feedback on what would happen with their contributions.

… ON WEBCHATS
Users recognised that webchats provide a unique opportunity to engage in 'real time' interaction with a government or policy representative. Although many saw webchats as an opportunity to express their ideas, few expected to have their questions answered. In the event, almost all the questions posed were responded to: this was a pleasant surprise for the users. Some, however, expressed doubt that the ministers or policy representatives who were supposed to be answering questions were actually doing so: they believed that other people were responding on their behalf.

SUMMARY
What we can see is that the public are keen on the government engaging more online. Yet, it is not clear that the government doing more online will result in

greater levels of active participation in the policy process. Instead, from the feedback, this seems to be more dependent not on the quantity of government's online engagement activity but its quality.

Users are clearly proficient and regular internet users. It is likely that these users are making extensive use of other public and private services online and have become accustomed to certain levels of interaction and quality. Government needs to accept that it is playing catch-up and be mindful that it has to make an extra effort to adhere to established 'rules of engagement' online. At the same time, the public should welcome government's activity over the last year, and while encouraging them to step up their efforts, should be forthcoming with altruistic and clear feedback on what government could do better.

2.6 CASE STUDY OWNER FEEDBACK

Each of the *Digital Dialogues* case studies was evaluated in its own right, having been run as a distinct exercise. Each case-study had an 'owner', who was the principal point of contact between the researchers and a particular case-study. Case study owners tended to be policy officials, though some were from communications divisions. They coordinated a 'team' made up of policy officials, communications professionals and, in a few cases, IT delivery staff (who were either directly involved with the activity or providing some routine support).

As part of the evaluation, case-study owners were interviewed and feedback was solicited via a structured survey distributed to those involved in setting up and running the case-study website. General themes materialised from the feedback; these are summarised below. Where case-study specific feedback was obtained, we include it in the relevant report.

CASE STUDY OWNERS ON… INNOVATION

Case study owners tended to be highly motivated by the opportunity to enhance public engagement in their area of policy. Most either discovered *Digital Dialogues* through their own research or were encouraged by senior managers to get involved in the pilot.

Prior to participating in the project, case-study owners recognised that ICT offered a way of facilitating public engagement. However, a lack of specialist knowledge, concerns about the unclear risks associated with online discussions and the limited availability of resources had prevented them from exploring the extent of this potential in relation to their agency, department or office.

Digital Dialogues provided a space in which case-study owners could explore the potential of ICT in a 'live' pilot without having to undertake procurement or without needing to allocate or divert significant resources. Moreover, their work would be evaluated, which could inform future approaches.

… ENGAGEMENT ONLINE

Case study owners understood different things by the term 'public engagement online'. For some, it was primarily about communicating key policy messages to the public; the use of 'next generation' web technology came into play in that it allowed the public a 'right to reply'. Others wished to experiment with tools that would provide an additional route for public responses to government consultations.

For others, the proliferation of 'read/write' web technologies coincided with an aspiration to engage the public in a more constructive and ongoing manner than had previously been achievable through the use of established, mainly offline, consultation methods. Applications such as blogs, forums and webchats, they suggested, were a means for government to put its case forward, for the public to put across theirs and for there then to be a dialogue on that basis.

This latter approach to encouraging the participation of the public in policy making was important to these case study owners as a way of raising confidence in government, promoting active citizenship, and enhancing the quality of policy making by engaging with a broader participant base in a deliberative environment. These case study owners believed this form of engagement would be a departure from the norm:

> 'The public are distrustful of formal consultation exercises so it doesn't help public confidence. Both the public and government officials need to be re-educated about the role the public can play in policy making... Technology can help government think of more creative ways of involving the public in the different stages of the policy making process. It is quicker, so consultation can be more responsive and potentially more public participation exercises can take place. I would hope that as a result the quality of policy making improves and the public feel genuinely involved in the policy making process and understand how they can contribute.'

… ONLINE CHALLENGES

Case study owners were aware of some of the challenges they faced when using online tools. Prior to launching their pilot websites, they expressed concern about the reception they would get from the public: would it be hostile? Would anyone want to talk to them? They accepted their inexperience of using the web as an engagement tool and that government had been - to date - a 'silent partner' in the development of the UK's online polity:

> 'I think that potentially it could help to create a much greater feeling of empowerment on the part of citizens. People have much greater access to information, and are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their relationships with sources of information, whether this is the mainstream media, the government, or the new communities that are being created online. Whether they agree or disagree with government policy, the public are now in a much better position to engage critically with it. I believe that this is generally a good thing for democracy.'

There was concern that motivating and maintaining the interest of the public would be difficult because there would be a level of cynicism about government's commitment to engaging online, and because government would be competing for people's attention in an already busy world wide web.

Cynicism they could deal with, but what made the case-study owners most apprehensive was that their first attempts to use the web for engagement would be hijacked by interest groups or vandalised with abuse. Given the nature of their policy areas, some of the case-study teams were also concerned that the policy or discussions might be too technical for non-specialists and this complexity might be viewed by some as a deliberate attempt to discourage participation.

… PARTICIPANT NUMBERS
All the case study owners reflected that although they had not known how many participants to expect, they had envisaged more contributions than were eventually received. Most, however, welcomed the low numbers given the limited resource availability for these exercises and their own levels of experience.

Although they had envisaged more participants and more deliberation, in their feedback the teams also said they had underestimated the time required to moderate and facilitate the sites. It took time to read through the submissions, and although they did not respond to every single post, making sure that their responses were of sufficient quality also meant that officials had to take time to research and compose their own contributions. Some case study teams also reported that they saw a direct link between their participation and levels of participant interaction, return visits and the quality of contributions.

… USER DEMOGRAPHICS
All case-study owners reported that group and individual stakeholders with whom they had already established contact did not take part in the online deliberations. In some cases, the case-study teams invited subject experts and specialist stakeholders to participate who, it was hoped, would deliberate alongside the lay public. A few did log on and made positive contributions to the exercises, providing participants with the benefit of their knowledge and raising the bar in terms of the quality of submissions. Most, however, did not take up the invitation, to the disappointment of the case study owners. Reflecting on the reasons for this, the case study owners believed that the experts and stakeholders did not perceive value in these new routes over that which they derived from established means, such as calling, writing a letter, submitting a formal consultation response paper or even simply using email.

… USER GENERATED CONTENT
Many participants made well-argued and carefully researched contributions to the online deliberations, which policy officials found insightful and useful. However, the quality of submissions was not consistent and case study owners complained that they often read posts that were irrelevant, badly structured or

which made generalisations based on personal experience: the 'media effect' was also cited as an influence on public opinion, with submissions often seeming to reflect dominant headlines.

It was not felt that the majority of users were abusing the opportunities presented by the case study websites. Case study owners believed that those taking part felt connected to the issues being discussed but did not necessarily know how to get their views across effectively. This, in turn, meant that the policy teams found it difficult to respond or to find ways of incorporating such submissions into their own policy making processes.

Some of the case-study owners felt that just as they received guidance on how to contribute to blogs, forums and webchats, there was a need to provide citizen participants with similar tips on submitting responses. Encouraging more use of background facts and figures was highlighted as a way to deal with this problem (though not all sites made such information available for participants).

… INFLUENCING POLICY
Despite there being some factors which disappointed the case study teams about the interaction with the participants, it was recognised that the online routes being piloted were bringing people and communities into the policy process who had not previously participated. These new participants had the potential to bring new experiences and information into the orbit of the policy officials, and this was identified as the most conspicuous advantage of online engagement.

As part of the evaluation, case-study teams were invited to talk about how they used the input they received via the sites. Each said that it was too soon after the activity to say for definite what the impact had been on policy or their engagement processes. In terms of policy making, case study owners cautioned that although there were benefits to be found in the immediacy of online engagement, it did not necessarily mean that the result would be faster policy making. But they said it did, perhaps, enhance openness and transparency and therefore, the quality of the policy making process.

Within the duration of *Digital Dialogues*, there were some cases where blog, forum and webchat contributions were added into consultation response documents to provide insights into public views behind the statistics. In other cases, where there was not a paper or report, contributions were collated and distributed to relevant policy teams to provide them with experiences, ideas and views they might not otherwise have had access to.

It follows that, in some instances, there was a direct and short-term application for the material derived from the online channels and, in others, that material was 'banked' with the potential to have a more indirect, long-term influence on policy making. In either circumstance, the case-study owners emphasised that the

online input was treated as credible data and not viewed as being any more or less valuable than that which had been received through other channels.

… PROCESS MANAGEMENT

In terms of process, some interesting common themes appeared relating to what worked well. It was made clear that while engagement needed to be based on good communications principles, the activity had to be led by policy officials with the depth of subject knowledge. The dynamics of online engagement were felt to benefit from a 'short chain of command' that allowed the managers of the activity to deliberate in a responsive and substantial manner:

> 'We feel that a short chain of command helped us get the most out of the forum. We had senior commitment to the general principle, but day-to-day control was delegated to us. This helped us evolve the content over time, post things as they were necessary and change the topics if we felt something more appropriate was needed. We still made sure more than one person looked at everything before it went up, but this was about getting a second opinion, not about 'sign off'. We found it was important to keep the momentum going on the forum and for participants to know we were listening.'

Therefore, to ensure these conditions were present and the resources were in place, successful online engagement exercises were those that established close and efficient coordination between communications, delivery and policy teams. Indeed, the *Digital Dialogues* research team were struck that, through these small practical pilots and the emphasis placed on good collaborative processes, the case study teams made new connections with their departmental peers and structures:

> 'I think the team worked really well together, especially as it was all done at short notice (about 2 weeks), so no-one had had the chance to allocate time to this work, but it all still got done.'

The themes above were common across all the case studies, but feedback also revealed insights relating to the dynamics of particular applications.

BLOGS

Those running blog-based pilots saw some distinct advantages in the medium. Blogs were easy to manage in a technical sense and they were popular (and therefore familiar) amongst the public. Blogging encouraged brief interaction but on a more regular basis and in a more conversational tone. This was appealing to case-study owners with limited resources who wanted to talk directly with the public about developments and issues that might not have been carried by the media.

The risk, however, lay in the 'culture' of politically-orientated blogging. The case-study owners perceived this to be confrontational and anti-establishment: they were concerned that their blogs would not be welcomed on account of their government authorship.

FORUMS

Case study owners who used forums highlighted that their asynchronicity was key to their decision to use this particular application over others. Large groups of participants could be brought together without needing to be in a particular place at a particular time. The format of forums was also seen to be an advantage, in that they allowed teams to structure questions and themes in a comparable way with conventional methods, but also enabled them to encourage an open dialogue which was not possible with conventional tools.

Deliberation was difficult to manage, the teams said. They warned that the time and effort required to moderate and facilitate the forum community should not be underestimated. They also found it difficult to know when to step into deliberation. Case study owners said that they tried to get a feel for the rhythm of discussion and to know when not to intervene so as to allow space for peer-to-peer discussion between participants:

> 'We interacted with participants by posting an initial comment from the team at the commencement of each new theme. When there were some participant comments, we would post a new comment, which may be either an 'administrative moderator'-type comment or a more 'facilitative moderator'-type comment. The former attempted to keep participants on the relevant topic, keep the tone respectful and respond to any direct process queries. For example, in the opening topic I responded to a query one participant posted about why the forum is moderated. The latter attempted to summarise the views expressed, ask supplementary questions to the whole forum to further explore the issues or respond directly to particular posts. We also posted additional factual information as separate posts when we felt this was necessary for an informed debate.'

As moderators, the case-study owners also felt that their role was not adequately explained and, at times, participants had different interpretations. For example, although the moderators were in a position to explain current policy and practice, they were not in a position to speculate on policy change following consultation.

WEBCHATS

For the teams using webchats, there was a concern that the numbers of people involved and the depth of deliberation - given the 'real time' dynamic - made webchats of limited value to the policy process. They were, however, identified as having communications value. They could be run as one-off events, to pique interest and help deliver key messages about departments, policies or ministers.

SUMMARY

Whether they used a blog, forum or webchat, all the case-study teams were enthusiastic about using online methods in the future to bring the public into the policy making process. However, they all said that more pilot work would need to be undertaken to build up experience and refine processes. It was acknowledged by all that technology should not just be used for technology's sake, and that it should be deployed strategically as one part of a multi-channel approach.

SECTION THREE – **CORE GUIDANCE**

3.1 INTRODUCTION TO CORE GUIDANCE

It is clear from reading the *Digital Dialogues* case studies that online engagement is challenging and innovative. It has its own unique advantages and risks, as well as reflecting those encountered in any other form of engagement activity.

Online engagement should not be undertaken lightly; the scale of the tasks involved can be demanding. However, nor should they be overstated; good online engagement is achievable even where experience and resources are limited.

This section of the *Digital Dialogues* report presents a collection of core guidance resources. These have developed from the training materials provided to case study owners, and on the basis of the case study evaluations.

The guidance is not definitive; online engagement methods and theory are in their formative stages, and terms such as 'best practice' must be regarded as fluid and open to interpretation. However, we are confident that this guidance will prove of value to those in government who wish to plan a form of online engagement that is efficient, effective and sustainable.

3.2 SELECTING A TOOL

Government engages citizens and stakeholders for one or more of the following purposes:

1. To inform – by communicating key information, policies or statements;
2. To be informed – by receiving facts, figures, experiences and views through consultation exercises;
3. To deliberate – for the purpose of reaching compromise, codesigning or promoting collaboration.

There are a range of methods that can facilitate these ends – but some are more effective than others.

Digital Dialogues was interested in web-based applications. Over the course of the project, we tested three in a policy making context. These were blogs, forums and webchats; each of which were found to have particular strengths and weaknesses as engagement tools:

Blogs
Blogs are websites that present content to users as a list of entries running in reverse chronological order (rather like a diary in appearance, but backwards). Blogs usually have one author, but they can have more. They are conventionally

text-based but can incorporate audio, images and video. It is also commonplace to allow users to comment on entries if they wish.

Blogs have a 'no-frills, no-fuss' approach to content management. The interface is usually based on a text-editor similar to that of word processing software, requiring little or no knowledge of web programming. Authors are also able to moderate user comments through the same content management system (CMS). Some types of blog software also incorporate web statistics, allowing the author to monitor traffic to and within the blog.

Because of the widespread availability of software, its low cost and ease of maintenance, blogs have become popular with web experts and novices alike. There are many millions of blogs online, which focus on all manner of lifestyles and interests. Blogging has made an impact on politics, in the main because it has allowed citizens to directly publish their experiences, reactions and views online. Publication is quick and by linking up with other blogs can be high-profile.

'Political blogging' is often associated with an activist, confrontational and often anti-establishment form of discourse. However, it presents political institutions with a great many benefits and should be considered seriously as an engagement tool.

It is cost-effective and simple to use, content is concise, and users have the right-to-reply. Blogging is also very flexible; a blog could be set up to raise the profile of a ministerial role, it could be used as a tool to gather submissions to a consultation, or to report on the development of a policy. A blog could be authored by one person, or a number of different individuals or teams within a department. It could be written, but could just as easily incorporate photographs or videos.

The blogs that will work best are those where the purpose is unambiguous. A user base takes time to build, and therefore a blog should be viewed as a long term project – although its function can evolve over time (depending on the phases of a policy cycle, for example).

Another feature of a blog's success will be its network visibility. Bloggers should be prepared to link to other blogs and resources on the web, comment on other relevant blogs, and to keep their own content up-to-date and topical.

Picking up on user comments is very much encouraged. Although, blogs are not particularly suitable for deliberation and there is not an expectation that every comment will receive a reply, authors can respond to user comments either by adding their own comments, or by highlighting themes in a distinct blog entry.

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 anonymously but can also 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.

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.

3.3 END-TO-END PROCESS

The following material provides an overview of the key steps of an online engagement exercise. This has been informed by drawing on existing practice at parliamentary and local government levels, and the experiences of the central government case study owners in *Digital Dialogues*.

The steps have been divided into three sub-sections:

- Pre-launch;
- Live;
- Closing.

Under each step, key considerations are outlined. These are deliberately designed to be broad and generic in order to cover the range of techniques, tools and users potentially involved in an engagement exercise.

PRE-LAUNCH

1. Aim and Objectives

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Remember that many website statistics can be misleading. Disregard 'hits' and concentrate on registrations, posts/comments, unique visitors and repeat visits. Page rankings in search engines are also useful indicators of the penetration and visibility of your consultation online, so carefully determine what search words the public and stakeholders will use to find the site.

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

Ultimately, web statistics make for inadequate key performance indicators but provide useful contextual data. Much more substantial are indicators relating to who participated and what happened as a result.

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

- Blogs are useful for ongoing, low-intensity consultation;
- Forums are good for episodic usage;

- Webchats are useful for one-off event-style stakeholder engagement.

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

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

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

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

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

Consult existing branding guidelines to ensure you are meeting departmental requirements.

6. Copy/Content production
Choices about vocabulary and syntax are crucial to a successful consultation online.

- What are the key messages and priority questions?
- Do these need to be adapted from a consultation/policy document for publication on the web?
- At what stages of the consultation could/should content be updated?
- Whose responsibility will this be?
- Is there a lot of technical language? Does the site need a glossary?

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

7. Resources

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

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

8. Legal

Always ensure that consultation rules and guidelines are available to participants.

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

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

9. Technical support

Technical problems may arise for the administrators of a site, which are often quickly spotted, or for the users, which often take longer to be drawn to the attention of those who can rectify them.

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

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

Provide an email address that users can use to report problems.

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

10. Testing

Testing can seem like an unnecessary hassle that can be left as a responsibility for a supporting technical team or dispensed with where time is in short supply.

This would be misguided; testing should always be carried out, and it should be task-orientated.

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

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

11. Marketing
Communications teams should be consulted on this aspect.

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

A balance of direct marketing and media relations techniques works well. Give consideration to how the marketing and publicity of the consultation will be managed as it progresses and once it has closed.

Remember, it will not be enough to do one push at the launch of the consultation; marketing can be staggered but it must be ongoing.

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

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

You should also consider:

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

- Are your participants in a 'hard-to-reach' group?

LIVE

13. User community management
Key considerations concerning management of a community of participants are:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Participants will deliberate amongst themselves, but the participation of the government representatives is the glue, and in its absence the participants will

lose interest and become frustrated. At best, participants will voice their criticism to you; more likely they will drift away and tell others about the experience.

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

16. Summarising

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

As a guide, the more regularly the policy team visit the 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

17. Archiving

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

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

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

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

18. Analysis and Reporting

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.

The considerations for this stage relate to:

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

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

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

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.

19. Response management
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. Consider when you will be able to make a 'final' response, who will make it and where it will be distributed from.

Not having sufficient feedback processes will frustrate users and discourage participation in future engagement activity.

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

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

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

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

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

For more detailed guidance on the process points above, consult the 'Useful Resources' section of this report.

3.4 CONTENT PRODUCTION

The following guide provides a basic outline of the copy (text) required for a generic online forum. 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.

We do not provide guidance on producing audio, photographic or video content because none of the *Digital Dialogues* case studies incorporated rich media. This is something that will be included in future phases of the initiative, but some existing resources are referenced in the 'Useful Resources' section of this report.

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

- User... this is content generated by users of the site. It is almost always restricted to the posts made in the forum.

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:

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

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

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

- Name of the forum;
- Summary of the consultation aim in a sentence;
- A note about success criteria for the exercise, start and end dates of the forum consultation;

- Welcome message (ideally from a senior figure/representative). To be replaced by a closing 'thank you'/next steps message at the close.

Forum
The first page of the forum is the orientation and entry point for the 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
The 'Resources' section can be approached in three ways:

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

3. Provide key facts and figures and background reading as printable webpages.

The decision on how much material to provide will be determined by who 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.

3.5 GENERIC LEGAL ADVICE
This guidance aims only to give a brief summary of some of the legal issues that may arise over the course of an online engagement exercise.

Almost all legal issues are avoided by exercising commonsense and observing existing codes. However, the rapid pace of development and some of the unique dynamics of online engagement may result in some unfamiliar or ambiguous legal debates that government departments will need to grapple with as the hosts, authors or moderators of an exercise.

Wherever there is doubt, seek specific legal advice from departmental legal teams.

Existing Codes

Before launching a blog, forum, webchat or a similar site, familiarise yourself with the following codes:

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

Consider the value of reproducing these codes on the sites for the benefit of users.

Commenting/Discussion/Posting Rules

Rules for users should be provided at the point of registration (or posting), and require explicit acknowledgement (usually through a tick box).

The following are a generic set of discussion rules from a *Digital Dialogues* forum 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 1000 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.

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.

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 (see Section 3.6) 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.

3.6 MODERATION AND FACILITATION
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 forums - 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 an online forum may resemble the following:

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.

SECTION FOUR – **CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 CONCLUSIONS

Our political institutions have been slow to pick up on the internet, the new communicative spaces it is enabling and the new interactions that are developing therein. But we are still in the formative stages and opportunities are by no means gone. Government has made good progress since 2005 not only in terms of using ICT to provide information but also in engaging with citizens as part of drives to enhance policy making and improve service provision.

There are a great many websites already established that have direct and indirect political interests. Government can use and add value to some of these. However, there is also a case to be made for government to build and facilitate its own sites and online communities. This is particularly true while government is learning about online engagement and may well continue to be the case when there is a need to provide authoritative and sometimes closed and secure online platforms for citizen-government interaction.

What is clear at these formative stages is that there are a great many technologies available that are flexible enough to be applied to the ranging needs of online engagement and the various user groups involved. However, *Digital Dialogues* has revealed that government's concerns should be less about sourcing the right technology and more about the availability of suitable content, facilitation skills and persuading the public that it is worth engaging with the government.

There are lots of groups - commercial and otherwise - who will sell 'good' engagement to government. However, there have not been enough attempts at online engagement yet, or sufficient longitudinal evaluation of those exercises that have taken place to inform definitive 'best practice'. Before anyone on the outside of government can supply its demands, government must first know what government needs.

Digital Dialogues has helped in this regard. *Digital Dialogue*s found central government in a static position online. Over the course of 18 months the conditions were created in which previously uninitiated agencies, departments and ministerial offices could try their hand at setting up and administering online engagement tools without undue risk or financial commitment. Having done so, these teams were then in a position to better understand politics online, the technology that underpins it and how they could be involved. We were able to observe this process and produce case studies so that others inside - and outside of - the government could learn from the experience.

Because the case studies we covered invited citizen participation, we were also able to find out who will engage with government and the policy process online, and why. This information about demographics, attitudes and behaviours is as

important in terms of informing engagement policy and practice, as the observations about the government participants and processes.

During the case study exercises, citizens were asked to engage in complex issues, deliberate and begin to solve problems. Those participating were from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, and represented various profiles - from the curious onlooker to the front-line service deliverer. They tended to already be active online, but most had not directly interacted with government processes or representatives before - this includes many local government staff, academics and expert practitioners.

The vast majority of users reacted positively to the availability of online engagement routes and expressed interest in future opportunities. Enthusiasm was tempered with a healthy scepticism. Whilst the opportunity to interact directly with policy makers and deliberate amongst peers was welcomed, there remains wariness about how genuine these government efforts are and what degree of influence the public can have on the decision-making process. This has directly influenced levels of take-up and participation.

Even if the influence of these online engagement exercises on specific policies has been small, it has had substance and credibility. Based on qualitative feedback, the more that government is able to show that it takes public participation seriously the more people will be prepared to get involved in the future - whether on- or offline. Sustaining opportunities will also help participants develop deliberation skills that will improve the content and structure of their contributions.

With *Digital Dialogues* there has been deliberate avoidance of a 'big bang' approach to online engagement; instead the intention has been to start small and steadily build toward effective and sustainable practice. Ultimately, it has benefited government to explore alternative routes, develop new skills and send out a statement about its commitment to better engagement and more transparent decision-making processes.

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

The research team behind this report has now completed two phases of *Digital Dialogues* to date, has extensive experience of working with both Parliament and local government on related initiatives, and has consulted with experts in other fields, such as education, science and commerce.

On these bases, the *Digital Dialogues* team would like to put forward the following 10 recommendations of how the UK's central government could proceed with its aim of getting the most from the engagement opportunities presented to it by digital information and communications technologies:

1. **Innovate…** Government needs a culture of innovation in lots of areas of its work, but particularly in relation to how it engages with the public. Investing in innovation will help government to learn, make informed decisions and motivate the public to interact with its agencies, departments and representatives;

2. **Be scalable…** Launch exercises as pilots (or betas), and keep the conditions of the exercise limited. Carry out evaluations and if the demand exists, and an ability to supply is in place, release more budget and resources to support expansion. Conversely, scale-down and reallocate resources if evaluation demonstrates little return or a need to start afresh;

3. **Observe the rules of engagement…** If government is to convince citizens that it is serious about engaging online, it must build up an understanding of how people currently interact with one another and other public and private sector bodies online. Government must not colonise online spaces and avoid the temptation to impose its way of doing things;

4. **Design with users…** Before launching an online engagement exercise, government should consult with the intended users: ask them what sort of engagement exercise they want, what manner of discussion should be had, and on what kind of platform. Balancing this user input with the needs of policy makers will result in a more engaging and productive exercise than would otherwise be achieved;

5. **Train staff…** Successful online engagement is more about content, interactivity and skills than it is about technology, which means it needs people. In some cases this may mean that government needs to recruit, but it should also invest in the staff currently in place. Take advantage of transferable experience and skills, provide training and design refresher courses to plug the online engagement skills gap;

6. **Be strategic…** The best online engagement exercises will be those that make the most strategic choices: about who to target, which offline methods to combine the online with, and at what points around the policy cycle. The advice is to make use of a 'mixed-economy' approach, so as to avoid dependence on any one method;

7. **Be interactive…** It is not enough for government to convene online engagement at arm's length; it needs to be an active, enthusiastic and visible participant. Asking people for their views and then ignoring them risks the loss of their confidence in both the process and the sponsoring institution;

8. **Show your working…** In some exams marks are awarded for explaining how you came to an answer. A similar approach should be taken to

demonstrating what happened with the input arising from an online engagement exercise. If the input was not especially useful, explain why; do the same where it had an influence on the decision making process.

9. **Evaluate…** Government should ask difficult questions of its online engagement activity. It should keep a constant review of exercises, carry out its own evaluations but also invite the assistance of independent outside bodies. Government should share its experiences and evaluations. This means that departments would learn from one another's success and failures; but also that the public would be able to follow government activity and make its own judgements about what is working well.

10. **Team up…** There are a number of different government networks and funding streams specialising in discrete engagement fields. This fragmentation is leading to replication and inefficiency. Government should establish a cross-departmental 'community of practice' to provide leadership, coordination and resources in order to maximise the effectiveness and sustainability of on- and offline engagement activity.

These recommendations are by no means exhaustive but we are confident that these provide the founding principles for government to perpetuate government's online engagement momentum and begin turning around the fortunes of democratic engagement generally.

Development of these recommendations, with suggestions on their delivery, will be provided in the Phase 3 *Digital Dialogues* report.

4.3 DIGITAL DIALOGUES 3

A third phase of *Digital Dialogues* will take place over 2007 – 2008. Our case study sample in Phase Three will consist of up to six government agencies, departments and ministerial offices. Case study owners will be undertaking a programme of public engagement around development of a policy area - at the design, implementation or review stages.

Digital Dialogues is particularly interested in innovative processes and tools. It is envisaged that case study owners will make use of technology or combinations of technology that have not previously been used by government in an engagement context.

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

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

USEFUL RESOURCES

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

The publications in this list discuss ICT-led participation alongside broader debates about political engagement. These are well-regarded but this list is not definitive.

- Better Regulation Executive, Consultation Guidance, www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation/, (last accessed August 2006)

- Cabinet Office, Transformational Government - Enabled by Technology, Cm6683, (2005)

- Coleman, S. Direct Representation - Towards a conversational democracy, (IPPR, 2005)

- Coleman, S. & Gotze, J. Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation, (Hansard Society, 2001)

- Electoral Commission & Hansard Society, An audit of political engagement 4 (2007)

- Ferguson, R. et al. TellParliament.net - Interim Evaluation Report, 2003 - 2005 (Hansard Society, 2006)

- Gibson, R.K., Rommele, A., & Ward S.J. (eds.) Electronic Democracy: Mobilisation, organisation and participation via new ICTs (Routledge, 2004)

- Involve, People & Participation, (2005)

- Smith, G. Beyond the Ballot - 57 democratic innovations from around the world, (The Power Inquiry, 2005)

- Stoker, G. Why Politics Matters - Making Democracy Work, (Palgrave, 2006)

APPENDIX A

The following are sample questions from pre- and post-consultation surveys used by the Hansard Society to capture feedback from site users and registrants, on which the surveys used in *Digital Dialogues* were based. Questions without a pre-set scale were open and required a written response.

PRE

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

POST

1. Are online consultations a credible means of interaction between the government and the public?
2. Would you participate in government consultations online in the future?
3. Would you recommend participation in government online consultations to others?
4. Briefly, what are the advantages of online consultation as you see them?
5. Briefly, what are the disadvantages of online consultation as you see them?
6. How often did you read other participants' posts?
7. How often did you visit the forum over its duration?
8. How often did you post a contribution in the forum?
9. If you registered but did not post, briefly tell us why.
10. Did government representatives make sufficient contributions in the forum?
11. In which direction was the main flow of deliberation in the forum?
12. Did you learn anything about X policy from participation in this forum that you did not know previously?
13. Did you learn anything from the other participants in the forum? If yes, outline briefly.
14. What was the main objective of the forum as you understood it?

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

GLOSSARY

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

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

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

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

Beta
A version of an application or exercise that is made available for testing prior to the official release or roll-out;

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

Blogger
Someone who has a blog;

Blogosphere
Describes the interconnected nature of blogs or the blogging community;

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

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

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

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

Convergence
The coming together of two or more disparate disciplines or technologies to produce something new;

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

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

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

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

*eCommerc*e
The process of buying or selling products via the web;

eDemocracy
The use of ICT to conduct political processes;

eGovernment
The utilisation of ICT to conduct the business of government;

eVoting
Voting enabled by ICT;

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

Engagement
Refers to a transaction between government and a member of the public or a stakeholder group;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IT
Abbreviation of information technology - commonly refers to hardware;

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

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

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

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

Microsite
Satellite site attached to but independent of a corporate site;

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

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

MP3
An audio file type;

Narrowcast
The process of delivering data to a specific audience segment;

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

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

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

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

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

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

Proxy blogging
When someone produces a blog pretending to be someone else;

RSS
Abbreviation for really simple syndication- an alternative means of accessing the vast amounts of information that now exist on the world wide web. Instead of

browsing websites for information of interest the information is sent directly to the user via an aggregator or feeder;

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

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

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

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

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

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

Social networks
Term often used to refer to the websites used to connect and interact with other individuals. Interaction is often informal and entirely web-based;

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tags
In HTML, tags are the codes that determine the structure and presentation of information within a document. Tag codes are enclosed in brackets, for example, <H1> Introduction</H1> is a tag indicating that the word 'introduction' should be treated as a level 1 heading. 'Tags' are also used to refer to keywords used to summarise a website or the content of page;

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

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

UGC
Short for 'user generated content'. Content on websites that has been created and uploaded by the users of that site;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Webchat
Form of instant messaging application allowing real time interaction;

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

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

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

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

XML
Short for 'Extensible Markup Language' - is a system for structuring information and services in a way that computers and humans can understand.