



**Digital
Dialogues**

**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

Executive Summary



**Ministry of
JUSTICE**



**HANSARD
SOCIETY**

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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.