E-consultation and e-participation: Learning from Experience

A summary of Dialogue by Design's experience and learning from 15 online consultations, 2001-3

1.   Introduction and purpose

1.1   Dialogue by Design provides an expert consultation and participation service to the public, private and voluntary sectors. This service includes designing and facilitating stakeholder dialogue meetings, utilising our innovative software for electronic consultation processes, and delivering training courses in the design and management of public consultation and participation processes.

1.2   In the course of the past three years we have run 15 e-consultation processes for central and local government, government agencies and the private sector, including with strategic stakeholders on future energy policy for DTI, on policing priorities for the Metropolitan Police and on e-government for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The latter has been used as a case study in the Audit Commission report *Connecting with Users and Citizens*.

1.3   The purpose of this paper is to:
- summarise our experience to date
- list what we have learned
- suggest to others key points to remember when commissioning future e-consultation and participation processes.

1.4   Before doing this, however, it is useful first to put this experience into the context of our thinking on e-democracy generally.

2.   Context

2.1   The 'e' in e-democracy should be about enhancing democracy, not replacing its current processes with technological ones. In other words, the use of technology is incidental to the more fundamental question of whether the enhanced process enables an elected government and its officers to serve citizens better.

2.2   In developing e-consultation and participation methods a similar question arises: how can information and communications technology (ICT) be used to do things better, or to do things that would otherwise not be possible? The challenge for us is to use ICT to enhance existing methods of facilitating dialogue among citizens and stakeholders.

2.3   Computers are no more a substitute for human contact than an interactive website is a substitute for responsive government: we should always be clear about the limitations of this technology, however remarkable its capacities. Likewise, it is these capacities that enable computers to do things that people cannot. In the context of e-democracy, we are interested in the capacity of the technology to involve very large numbers of people in the processes of creating, examining and refining policy and decision making.

2.4   E-consultation and participation need to be understood in the wider context of contact and relationships between consulters and consulted. In the case of contact between government and citizens, there are three basic modes of contact: information-giving, consultation and participation[1]. All three can be performed both conventionally and electronically.

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[1] Macintosh, International Teledemocracy Centre 2003

2.5   The following table summarises both modes and methods.

Mode	Conventional methods (examples)	Electronic methods (examples)
Information-giving (Government ⟶ Citizens)	Leaflets	Website providing information
Consultation (Government ⟵ Citizens)	Questionnaires Surveys Responses to consultation documents Deliberative workshops	Electronic surveys Electronic consultation paper/e-mail response
Participation (Government ⟷ Citizens)	Stakeholder dialogue processes Community involvement workshops	Threaded forums Structured templates

2.6   Dialogue by Design has always based its work on experience in the 'real' as opposed to the 'virtual' world – running face-to-face stakeholder and public workshops. This experience indicates strongly that the future of relationships between 'decision-makers' and 'others', such as government and citizens, lies not in occasional uses of surveys or questionnaires, or in responses to consultation documents, but in a transparent, two-way flow of information and opinion.

2.7   There will still be occasions when the conventional consultation process is appropriate – seeking detailed comments from trade associations or technical experts on the minutiae of proposed legislation, for example. But most future relationships will evolve through a more fluid and regular exchange of information and understanding.

3.   Methodology

3.1   Dialogue by Design uses an approach to online consultation that is somewhat different from either the conventional 'presentation/response' or 'threaded forum' approaches.

3.2   As mentioned in 2.6 above, the Dialogue by Design approach is based on the experience of designing and facilitating interactive and participative meetings. Each process is divided into a series of stages, with an electronic template for each stage to achieve specific results.

For example:

- The 'issues identification' template allows participants to summarise the issues that concern them and supply additional explanatory notes. This template is designed for the first iteration of an interactive process and is similar to an agenda-building session in the opening stages of a participative workshop.

- The 'prioritisation' template allows participants to indicate the relative significance they attach to different issues; this mirrors the later stages of agenda-building processes.

- The 'detailed comment' template allows participants a pre-determined number of words to explain their point of view, usually in response to a specific question. Limiting the number of words available to them assists focused responses.

- The 'leading questions' templates allows the consulter to ask specific questions and provides a text box of pre-determined length to capture responses.

- 'The 'document review' template divides a document into discrete sections and allows the participants to comment on each section in turn or respond to specific questions tailored to each section.

- The 'evaluation' template allows participants to comment on the process and suggest improvements to it.

3.3 Participants, who are identified and registered in advance of the process so that they can be sent background information and offered technical support, participate during scheduled 'time windows' lasting on average three weeks for each stage of the process.

4. Experience to date

4.1 Since April 2001 the following projects have been completed.

- **Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea**
The Council wanted to consult residents, strategic partners and members of staff on plans for implementing electronic government. Approximately 250 people read and commented on the plans. Their comments were collated and a summary prepared in a two-session process.

This project was used as a case study in the recent Audit Commission report, *Connecting with Users and Citizens* (www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports), which commented: ''[It] showed that members of the public are willing and able to participate in well-structured discussion using Internet facilities, even where the topic is complex."

- **Department of Trade and Industry: Energy White Paper**
Submissions from over one hundred and fifty stakeholders from across the energy sector (industry, NGOs, academics, local authorities etc) were collated and analysed for the DTI's consultation on future energy policy (prior to the publishing of the Energy White Paper).

The process involved three sessions. The first asked a series of questions around key energy issues. The responses were collated and grouped and a summary document prepared. In the second session participants could see all the results and the summary document. They were then able to comment further and make recommendations on what they wanted to see in the Energy White Paper. The final session allowed participants to see the results and participate in an evaluation process.

- **London Waste Action**
London Waste Action consulted with strategic stakeholders in London and prepared a response to the Mayor of London's 240-page draft strategic plan for dealing with municipal waste. 100 people from all sectors reviewed the plan. 1000 detailed comments were collated and sent to the Mayor's office in addition to a summary response document.

- **Metropolitan Police**
The Metropolitan Police has previously used traditional consultation methods to involve community organisations in the development of annual policing plans. This pioneering project invited community organisations across London to participate in a two stage electronic process.

In the first stage organisations identified the issues of most concern to them, some of them providing extensive notes and details of their experience. In the second, they used the prioritisation template to indicate where they wanted police resources to be focused.

- **Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP)**

WRAP wanted to consult a large number of stakeholders on the development of a new waste programme, ranging from which celebrities might best help promote recycling to details of best practice in encouraging home composting.

A three-stage process collected several thousand comments and provided a detailed picture of how people in the waste and recycling industry want to see WRAP develop.

- **Environment Agency**

The Environment Agency initiated a project called 'Modernising Consultation' to produce guidelines on conducting consultation processes and a specification for electronic consultation systems.

Following extensive interviews with many frontline consultation managers to identify the Agency's diverse needs, guidelines were drafted and evolved through three online iterations. Once the participants had experienced using the process, a technical specification was drafted to indicate the minimum requirements of an electronic consultation system.

- **Energy Saving Trust**

100 strategic stakeholders were consulted on their expectations and requirements of a new government programme on energy efficiency. The results of people's comments were collated and the EST drafted a plan for the new programme.

Participants were then able to comment on the draft plan, respond to a number of additional questions relating to priorities, see each other's comments, and consider to what extent the plan reflected their views.

- **Smiths Group plc**

Smiths Group comprises many companies operating all over the world. The Group wanted to involve its plant and site managers in the development of a comprehensive Environment, Health and Safety (EHS) report.

Following two face-to-face workshops in London and the United States to identify key issues, a draft report was circulated to collect comments and additional information.

- **United Kingdom Offshore Operators' Association**

This project enabled some 80 key stakeholder organisations to share and discuss technical research information about the disposal of drill cuttings in the North Sea.

This was followed by a face-to-face meeting to discuss the options open to the oil industry.

- **British Wind Energy Association**

The BWEA wanted to work with stakeholders to produce guidelines for consultation about the development of offshore wind farms. An initial draft was reviewed and re-drafted through several Internet sessions before being endorsed by 32 organisations that represented diverse interests.

This project was also useful in that it allowed direct comparison with a similar project conducted using conventional methods. The electronic process achieved savings on time and cost of approximately two-thirds.

- **Small Business Service**

The Small Business Service consulted nearly 400 small businesses about the Department of Trade and Industry's policies on workplace equality and diversity, and in particular about the institutions and legislation to support them.

The consultation provided a vivid picture of small business people's attitudes to issues such as race and gender discrimination, how best to communicate changes in policy and legislation, and what small business can do to remove discrimination from the workplace. The project is being used by the SBS as a pilot for a way to consult with and understand the needs of small businesses on an ongoing basis.

- **InterAct**

InterAct, an alliance of practitioners, researchers, writers and policy makers involved in participatory decision-making, used an electronic process to respond to the Cabinet Office consultation on e-democracy.

Rather than ask the same questions posed on the government's e-democracy website, the discussion document was divided into a number of sections and participants were asked people to comment on each section. The results were collated into a response document and forwarded to the Cabinet Office.

- **US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**

The National Advisory Council for Environmental Policy and Technology (NACEPT) of the United States Environmental Protection Agency is involved in a process designed to build consensus around recommendations to the US government on better ways to measure programme performance.

Committee members were able to access the draft report online and indicate the changes they would need to see in order to endorse the report.

- **National Waste and Resource Forum (NWRF) Guidelines**

NWRF asked The Environment Council to manage a project producing a set of guidelines on best practice in community engagement around waste issues.

Following an initial meeting to create the scope and structure of the document, it was reviewed through three re-draft stages before being endorsed by participants.

- **Environmental Resources Management (ERM)**

Dialogue by Design conducted a survey of delegates before the 2003 Business Integration Forum. Delegates were asked to assess their respective companies' activities in four key areas: emerging risks; performance improvement; governance and assurance; and communication and reputation management.

The results enabled the sponsors to assess current trends and focus the workshop and plenary discussions at the Forum.

5. Learning

5.1 Each project described above was extensively evaluated with both participants and sponsors, leading to changes in both approach and methodology in subsequent projects. This section summarises the cumulative learning and conclusions drawn, starting with the conceptual and progressing to the operational. Key learning points are in **bold**.

5.2 The most fundamental learning point is to realise that electronic processes can be much more than the mere translation of conventional face-to-face or paper-based methods onto the Internet. The technology enables large numbers of individuals to participate and to explore each other's contributions in a way that would be impossible without it. **It is therefore important, when designing a project, to think outside the confines of existing consultation or participation processes and see how the electronic process can be integrated as one stage towards, for example, the implementation of a project or the building of ongoing relationships.**

5.3 It follows from this that the key challenges in electronic consultation are not technical but conceptual. This is true also of many public consultation processes that use conventional methods, but electronic processes have the effect of magnifying conceptual and design failures. **Absolute clarity of purpose and process is therefore essential.**

5.4 For example, if either a closed or open process is to involve any form of poll or vote by the participants, then to be meaningful the participants must be statistically representative and this representativeness must be open to scrutiny before, during and after the process. **If the consulters want to draw quantitative inferences from qualitative processes, then this must be designed into the process from the outset**.

5.5 One of the great advantages of electronic participation is that people can see how others have responded to the same task, thereby encouraging mutual understanding and participation in subsequent stages. **Multi-stage processes best exploit this potential.**

5.6 This value becomes apparent to participants as soon as they are able to find their own submissions and see how they have been used or collated, so the database of participant responses must be easily navigable, multi-threaded and cross-referenced. **Participants' willingness to read and explore responses is proportional to the care with which they are collated and structured, and the ease of navigation around them.**

5.7 The sooner the results are available, the more likely participants are to read them. This means that the facilitators need to be able to collate and re-post submissions quickly. A reasonable target is to have **up to 1,000 *qualitative* responses available to participants within 72 hours of closing the site. If the consulters or facilitators are producing a response document, it should be on the site within 7-10 days of the close of each stage or of the end of the consultation.**

5.8 The tension between facilitation (process intervention only) and moderation (process and content intervention) needs to be recognised. Electronic processes require both facilitation skills, primarily in process design, and moderation skills around the summarising of content. These two roles should never be confused and ideally should be performed by two different people cross-checking each other's input. In particular, **content summaries need to be checked for unwarranted emphasis before being posted.**

5.9 While 'open' recruitment processes can work, they are very resource intensive, and **active identification and invitation of participants produces higher participation rates.** The resultant database also has greater potential as a basis for other communications initiatives.

5.10 Some participants value online consultations because they feel they will be secure from any form of intimidation or domination by others. A **secure login process**, apart from its intrinsic value, **helps to reassure both clients and participants that the process as a whole will be securely and professionally run.**

5.11 This sense of security can be emphasised by the establishment of ground rules published from the outset. **It is essential the ground rules give the facilitators the right to remove submissions deemed to be offensive.**

5.12 To date all online consultations run by Dialogue by Design have provided anonymity for participants. While this need not always be the case, **it is essential that either *all* participants are named, or *all* are anonymous**. The decision about attribution is a design decision to be taken at the outset; it should not be left to participants.

5.13 Written and e-mail invitations with background information allow fuller explanation of the purpose of the process and how the results will be used. **People need to be convinced there is value for them in participating.**

5.14 Written support materials describing the technical process also reassure participants and encourage participation. There is a risk that more accustomed users may feel patronised by detailed instructions, but this has to be set against the sense of achievement felt by novices and the need to overcome lack of confidence **-** one aspect of the digital divide. **There should also be a telephone helpline staffed by people who are able to empathise with participants who have little or no previous experience with computers.**

5.15 If multi-stage processes use time 'windows' (meaning that each stage of the process is live for a certain amount of time), there is a balance between allowing enough time for maximum participation in each stage, and maintaining the momentum of the process. **Experience suggests that windows should normally be live for three weeks, extending to at least four weeks during holiday periods, and there should not be more than about ten days between windows.**

5.16 Participation needs to be run according to a timetable, with participants notified if the schedule changes. **E-mail reminders help to maintain participation rates**.

5.17 Participation must be possible from any e-mail/Internet enabled computer (i.e. PC or Mac) using a dial-up connection, with **pages loading in less than 30 seconds**.

5.18 Wherever possible stakeholders as well as consulters should be able to identify and prioritise issues to establish consultation agendas. In addition, **qualitative systems must be capable of both 'closed' and 'open' processes** (the 'closed' defined as asking people specific questions and giving them boxes to tick; the 'open' as giving people space to formulate their own replies); the 'open' produce richer responses.

5.19 Where collecting responses to written consultation processes, **the clearer and more specific the questions, and the closer their relation to the text, the higher the quality of responses**.

5.20 Task instructions should be as simple as possible, and participants should be given **a realistic estimation of how long the task will take**. In particular, if a task is likely to take more than 30 minutes, participants should be clearly told.

5.21 Transparency continues beyond the end of the process: **evaluations should be shown to participants.**

Conclusion

Electronic consultation and participation processes are in their infancy: there is still much to learn.

We hope that Dialogue by Design's commitment to publishing what we learn will benefit others, and also encourage more use of the Internet for this purpose.