



## ELECTRONIC CONSULTATION

### **What is E-Consultation?**

Technology is having a major impact on the consultation arena. Using technology to consult is often referred to as Electronic or E-Consultation.


Some only see this in a narrow sense - as simply being the publication of information about the consultation they are carrying out on the Internet.

However, it is much more than this. It is about using a wide variety of electronically based tools to carry out consultation. This includes the Internet (online polls, webcasting, online response forms), SMS Text Messaging, WAP, Audio and Video (e.g. video comment booth) and Voting Key Pads.

It is about undertaking interactive consultation between the public and the council in conjunction with other methods of consultation to ensure that we reach as many people as possible – especially those people considered “Hard to reach”. It is also about letting the consultees have more control over consultation and engagement which will increase their involvement in the local democratic process.

### **Why use it?**


- E-consultation can give you rapid responses.
- E-consultation utilises software that transfers data directly into databases, saving time and more because there is no need to manually input data.
- E-consultation enables us to explore some of the issues arising from consultation in more depth through tools such as bulletin boards, online discussion groups and chat rooms.
- Encourages participants into thinking their contribution does make a difference and is taken seriously by the Council
- E-consultation, particularly via the internet can be cheaper than sending out surveys by post (although e-consultation should be

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- used as part of a range of methodologies to obtain a representative demographic)
- E-consultation can be used to gain feedback on policies, strategies and other consultation-related documents
  - Better consultation with Hard to reach groups, i.e. consultation with young people - a large proportion of whom have personal computers, internet access and mobile phones and do not tend to respond to traditional consultation techniques.
  - It is an effective way of engaging people who are housebound.
  - It is much easier to effectively consult with people who live over a wide geographic area.
  - E-Consultations are easy to conduct in-house as most software packages will do basic analysis at the touch of a button

### What are the disadvantages?

- Respondents may find e-consultation material / equipment confusing or daunting and won't participate as a result.
- A significant proportion of the population do not have direct access to the internet
- It can be more difficult to control the identity of the person carrying out the consultation.
- People with poor literacy skills or with English language difficulties may not respond unless it has been tailored for their needs.
- Respondents are likely to comprise of those who are more confident, articulate, engaged and politically motivated as well as having well developed IT skills. Therefore, the sample is unlikely to be demographically representative of the whole population.

### Things to Remember

- There are two groups of people that have been identified as being most likely to respond to e-consultation. These are **e-amenable progressives\*** and **contendeds\*\***.
  - *\*pro-technology and confident, likely to be male, ABC1, high income earners, under 55 with high access to technology (16% of the adult population, i.e. six million).*
  - *\*\*generally happy with their council and comfortable with technology, likely to be male, single, with high level qualifications and access to technology (30% of adult population, i.e. 11.5 million).*
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- The above is taken From “Local Government IT in Use” (pp2, Spring 1005), *Research carried out via E-citizen National Project. Check out [www.e-citizen.gov.uk](http://www.e-citizen.gov.uk)*
- E-consultation is not intended as a straight replacement for more traditional forms of consultation. The methodologies outlined in this paper should be carried out in conjunction with other forms of consultation unless targeting a specific group where traditional methods are not usually successful.
- E-consultation must have clear objectives and ensure that explanations & instructions are written clearly in plain English and that understanding is checked.
- If using the internet, include hyperlinks from and to websites frequented by the groups and / or people who are within the scope of the consultation.
- Make sure to publicise your e-consultation activity in leaflets, posters and articles.
- Ensure your e-consultation initiative is accessible to all including people who are visually impaired or whose primary language is not English. See the following websites for more details:
- Ensure your e-consultation initiative complies with Charnwood Borough Council Policy.
- Ensure any changes to email address, mobile numbers of other contact details are amended when changed.

## **E-Consultation Techniques**

- E-consultation, includes a wide variety of methods of consultation (some of which are identified above), which all provide technological alternatives to the more traditional techniques. Although a lot of these methods utilise the Internet, e-consultation also includes methodologies that use mobile phone technology and other multimedia equipment. Below is a list of the different types of e-consultation:

### **A) Online Surveys**

Questionnaires can be put on the Internet as a document that can be downloaded and then completed. However, this suffers from two main drawbacks:

- This approach presupposes a good deal of IT knowledge on the part of the respondent. He or she needs to know how to download the survey, open and complete it in the relevant software, save it, then attach it to an email and send it.
- The survey information still needs to be manually inputted to a database to produce results

- The alternative is to use an online form. This is simpler to complete and allows you to guide the respondent through the process of completing the surveys with useful prompts or help. Once the respondent is happy with his or her answers to the survey, a submit button could then be clicked which sends the information directly to the database holding the survey results and respondent's details without the need for responses to be manually processed and inputted.
- You can also give respondents individual Id's and passwords that they will need to allow them to complete the form. This is a good way of filtering out respondents who submit multiple responses to the same survey. It also enables a respondent to fill out his or her contact details once and not need to repeat the process when completing further surveys in the future.
- Once completed, it is good practice for an automated response to appear thanking the participant in e-consultation for their response, giving instant feedback.

### Marketing Online Surveys

- Marketing an Online consultation is essential. Simply publishing a consultation survey online and relying on passing traffic visiting the internet site being public spirited enough to complete it is unlikely to elicit many responses. Visitors to the website may have come to the site for entirely different reasons, such as to request a service, to make an enquiry and be unwilling to be distracted from that purpose. Any form of e-consultation will need a marketing plan to provide it with adequate publicity and promotion to generate a sufficient response.

### Benefits of Online Surveys

- Officers are able to take snapshots of consultation responses
- Officers are able potentially to cross-reference consultation results with external factors such as events in the news impacting upon public opinion
- Many young people use the internet and this might be a potential way to reach them

### Costs of Online Surveys

- Costs of developing an online survey facility
- Increased demands upon the internet web server

### **B) Online Polls**

- Online polls are usually quick and easy questions which ease people into expressing their opinions. They enjoy higher response rates than online surveys in that they are quicker and easier to complete but provide only some indication of public mood and opinion.

### **C) Question & Answers Page**

- Question and answer pages are webpages which display questions submitted to an Officer by email and a published response. They have the advantage of being comparatively simple to produce and require little in the way of complicated technology to bring them to life. They are often referred to as FAQ's (Frequently Asked Questions).

### **D) Live Chats**

- Live chats occur through Chat Rooms. A Chat Room is an area of a website that enables members of the public to participate in a form of online conversation faster than email, which takes place in real time. Members of the public might be able to pose questions to Council officers, perhaps in the form of a question and answer session. Chat rooms require individuals to log on with a username and password usually received once they have completed a form and agreed to the terms and conditions of the chat room.
- Chat rooms offer a fast line of communication between officers and multiple members of the public and the opportunity for question and answer sessions.
- However, they can only accommodate a limited number of people at any one time and can be difficult to moderate. Even where the chat room technology offers the potential to filter out certain keywords, there is still a very real possibility that individuals will be able to make comments that offend other users of the chat room.
- Live chat events rely on adequate advance publicity to ensure a large enough audience at a specific time. The timing of live chat events is important, as it will affect both the size and type of audience. Some public authorities publish transcripts of live chat events on their website.

### **E) Messaging**

- Messaging includes both Instant Messaging and Net Meetings. Instant messaging works in much the same way as a chat room. An individual is required to download software to enable instant messaging on his or her personal computer. With Instant Messaging software downloaded, an officer can communicate with others in a group whenever they are online in real time.
- Instant Message applications can be used in conjunction with Web Cam and Microphone software to host online net meetings where the participants cannot be together in the same place.
- There are some problems with this medium though:
  - Not everyone however is adept at installing the software necessary to run this application.
  - Given that Instant Messaging usually offers the facility to send and receive files, there are information security, confidentiality and data protection issues here.

- Instant Messaging applications are not always compatible with existing software on an individual's PC and sometimes the two may conflict.
- Finally, skilled hackers can use Instant Messages as a Trojan horse with which to gain access to PCs and upload information or download viruses.

## **F) Bulletin Boards & Online Forums**

- Bulletin boards enable individuals using the Internet to post comments about a given issue or consultation and to read and respond to the comments of others.
- Online forums are slightly more sophisticated versions of bulletin boards, enabling members of a forum to post responses to many different threads of discussion and voice opinions on multiple issues.

### **Advantages**

- Bulletin boards and discussion thread fora can be superior to online chat events since messages can be stored or archived and responded to after readers have had time to contemplate them
- This form of online deliberation removes the constraint of time that often render synchronous discussions less measured and detailed
- These features could be used in conjunction with other forms of e-consultation to elicit more detailed responses, discussion and debate surrounding certain issues arising out of consultation.

### **Disadvantages**

- There are risks people will post offensive material unconnected with the topic under discussion
- There is a need for an officer to act as a moderator removing inappropriate material
- Given the ease with which the individual may post comments and opinions, however, inevitably there are dangers of the individual publishing defamatory or explicit comments. Given these risks, there is a need for bulletin boards to be moderated by a member of staff, possibly with the use of automated validation (e.g. Through JavaScript) to prevent messages containing certain keywords from being posted.
- A moderator needs to be present not just to provide rules and regulation but to keep debate moving in a constructive direction. He or she can do this in the following ways:

- Set out clear and transparent rules for participants, e.g. maximum length of messages; maximum frequency of messages; attitudes to offensive language and defamation;
- Regulate the discussion, both by implementing agreed rules and adhering to ethical principles, such as data privacy, political neutrality and non-coercion;
- Moderate discussion messages, ensuring that any participant with a point to make receives a fair hearing and that the discussion is conducted on a fair and friendly basis;
- Help discussion participants to reach conclusions (not necessarily shared ones) rather than incessantly rehashing old arguments;
- Summarise the deliberation so that key points of evidence and main conclusions are set out in a balanced and accessible form;
- Seek to ensure that there is feedback to the participants, so that they do not feel that they have contributed to the policy process without any response from the policy-makers.

Bulletin boards and discussion thread forums can be produced either via commercial software or by web developers writing Perl scripts in-house. Another alternative is to utilise one of the websites who provide forum service for free in exchange for advertising banners appearing at the top of the forum page.

### **G) SMS Text Messaging**

- SMS texts are brief messages, which can be sent and received by mobile phone. It is also possible to send emails and view web pages using a mobile phone. Web pages, which are special written in WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) which can be accessible from mobile phones.

### **H) Multi Media Events**

- Multimedia events can include events such as a press conference or meeting aired over the Internet (a “webcast”).
- Webcasts usually necessitate the purchase of appropriate software to display the visual images broadcast over the web, and hardware in terms of camera equipment to capture the images, microphones and a sufficiently robust server to handle the webcast without becoming sluggish and unresponsive. Webcasts are dependent obviously on the modem and processing speed of the computer used to view and listen to them.

### **I) Electronic Voting Handsets**

- Electronic Voting Handsets are similar to TV remote controls, whose signals (uses Infra-red) are fed into a laptop computer connected to a video projector and portable printer.
- It can combine presentation software, which displays the questions and results, with Question Wizard software, which provides the interactive element. You can also have e-notes messaging which allows participants to send comments as well as votes.


- Questions can be programmed before each meeting, or added during the session so that any extra issues that crop up during discussion can be included. The questions are shown on a large screen and the participants can answer by voting with their handsets. The system immediately collates the results and shows them on the screen in colour charts or graphs.
- Usually a question session begins with a few questions on age, gender and ethnicity to allow people to get used to the handsets. Then the main survey questions are asked, and the participants see the results unfolding before them. This often leads to energetic discussions, and to further questions as people ask for more votes on the developing themes. The agenda for discussion at a meeting can be influenced to reflect the issues that are shown to be of most concern.

### Advantages

- The equipment is fully portable and can be installed in about 30 minutes in a variety of venues such as pubs, village halls and schools. It's easy to use - participants can get comfortable with it straight away.
- The system allows quantitative data to be collected quickly and accurately and, combined with qualitative information from discussions and focus groups, it can give a comprehensive picture of public views and priorities from various parts of the community, informing and directing decision-making at all levels.
- The electronic voting system has the advantage of giving a fun, lively and active element to meetings and discussions. It also gives an instant and accurate measure of the full range of views of people attending. In environments where discussions are sometimes dominated by particularly vocal individuals, the anonymity provided by the handsets can help to give a clearer picture of the full range of opinions and viewpoints.
- The ability to get instant results from the system also provides opportunities for people to get more involved in the issues being discussed. In the course of a question session, participants can put forward extra questions, and discussions can develop according to the answers. This helps to transfer control of the agenda to the public and allows them to go away with instant information about results and outcomes.
- The results of a series of meetings can also be aggregated to reveal the overall views of all those attending. Comparisons can be made with the answers to the same question at previous years' forums, helping to identify trends.

### **E-consultation – The National Picture**

- The UK Government has set a national target for full electronic service delivery by 2005. It requires a commitment to providing access, whether by telephone, Internet or other electronic methods, to all authority services that can be delivered electronically. Having said that, the focus is primarily on electronic delivery of and access to services and the facilitation of e-transactions.

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- Given the comparatively recent nature of the ICT revolution, no specific guidance on the use of e-consultation is available. The HM Government Online consultation paper titled “In service of democracy” states that “participation is at the core of democratic government. Within this, the two areas for Government action [are] e-participation and e-voting”.
  - The thrust of this e-democracy initiative however is primarily aimed though at encouraging more people to vote by utilising the ICT revolution to broaden the mechanisms through which individuals can participate in the electoral process. Certainly, e-consultation is a valuable form of e-participation in local government but again there is no specific guidance on e-consultation best practice.

