



Final Report

E-consultation: evaluating appropriate technologies and processes for citizens' participation in public policy

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www.e-consultation.org

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Social and political context of consultation.....	9	5.4 Central government’s approach to public consultation	69
1.1 Introduction	9	5.5 The main purposes of public consultation	71
1.2 The move towards governance	9	5.6 Challenges in initiating public consultation .	73
1.3 E-government and the missing dimension of citizen’s participation	10	5.7 The benefits of engaging in public consultation	75
1.4 Social Partnership as Governance: Republic of Ireland	13	5.8 Overall views on the impact of, and approaches to, public consultation	76
1.5 Multi-level governance in Northern Ireland .	14	5.9 Conclusion	77
1.6 E-government at local level	15	Chapter 6. Northern Ireland central government and consultation.....	78
1.7 Participation and democracy	17	6.1 Introduction	78
Chapter 2. E-consultation technologies.....	20	6.2 Recent and current uses of public consultation techniques	78
2.1 Starting to match technologies to consultations	20	6.3 Key forms of public consultation	78
2.2 E-consultation technology classification	21	6.4 Central Government approaches to Public Consultation	81
2.3 Defining the problem	22	6.5 The Main Purposes of Public Consultation .	82
2.4 Exploring the problem	26	6.6 Challenges in initiating public consultation .	84
2.5 Choosing and developing solutions	31	6.7 The Benefits of engaging in Public Consultation	86
2.6 Managing the consultation process	35	6.8 Overall Views on the Impact of, and Approaches to, Public Consultation	88
Chapter 3. Consultation values and evaluating e-consultation.....	37	6.9 Conclusion	89
3.1 Theoretical perspectives on (e-)consultation	37	6.10 North South Comparisons	89
3.2 Empirical approach to researching (e-)consultation	45	Chapter 7. Consultation and the community and voluntary sector.....	92
Chapter 4. Consultation and local governance	48	7.1 Introduction	92
4.1 Introduction	48	7.2 Recent and current forms of consultation engaged by NGOs	93
4.2 Recent and current uses of public consultation techniques	48	7.3 Experiences of Public Consultation	95
4.3 Key forms of public consultation	50	7.4 Public consultation—‘best practice’, benefits and challenges	95
4.4 Local Authority approaches to public consultation	54	7.5 Participation in the decision-making process	99
4.5 The Main Purposes of Public Consultation .	56	7.6 Perceptions of the consulters	100
4.6 Challenges in Initiating Public Consultation	59	7.7 Findings from focus groups and interviews	100
4.7 The Benefits of Engaging in Public Consultation	62	Chapter 8. Three e-consultation trials.....	105
4.8 Overall Views on the Impact of, and Approaches to, Public Consultation	63	8.1 Waterways Ireland trial	105
4.9 Conclusion	64	8.2 North South Exchange Consortium trial	110
Chapter 5. Consultation and central government, Republic of Ireland.....	66	8.3 The Wheel trial on active citizenship	118
5.1 Introduction	66	Chapter 9. Exploratory tests.....	127
5.2 Recent and current uses of public consultation techniques	66	9.1 Consulting ex-offenders and others: access and usability challenges	127
5.3 Key forms of public consultation	67	9.2 Consulting youth: diversity test	133

9.3 Consulting youth: Ph.D. research with NI Youth Forum	138	10.6 Consultation and central government ..	143
Chapter 10. Summary and conclusions.....	142	10.5 Consultation and the voluntary and community sector	144
10.1 Consultation and e-consultation context ..	142	10.8 Trials	144
10.2 Technologies	142	10.9 Tests	145
10.3 Valuing consultation and evaluating e-consultation	142	Chapter 11. Appendices.....	148
10.4 Consultation and local government	143	11.1 NSEC trial	148
		11.2 PSNI usability tests	149

Table of figures

Figure 2.1.1. E-consultation as mediation/negotiation stages (Morison & Newman 2001).....	20	Figure 4.3.4. Prevalence of the use of Consultation in particular Policy/Issue areas.....	52
Figure 2.3.1. Extract from Local Issues Forum guide	25	Figure 4.3.5. Policies where public consultation is most likely to be initiated.....	53
Figure 2.4.1. An on-line chat room.....	27	Figure 4.4.1. Factors that influence the initiation of public consultation initiatives.....	54
Figure 2.4.2. 16-year old teaching how to moderate an on-line chat.....	27	Figure 4.4.2. Southern authority responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.....	54
Figure 2.4.3. On-line video conferencing using Conference XP.....	28	Figure 4.4.3. Northern authority responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.....	55
Figure 2.4.4. Dublin City discussion forum.....	29	Figure 4.4.4. Where do authorities get assistance from?.....	55
Figure 2.4.5. On-screen map of issues and position in Dito.....	30	Figure 4.4.5. The use of consultation in the promotion of peace and reconciliation.....	56
Figure 2.5.1. Editing a wikiwiki page.....	32	Figure 4.5.1. Reasons for initiating Public Consultation.....	56
Figure 2.5.2. Positions in GRASS.....	32	Figure 4.5.2. Southern Authorities assessment of the Reasons for engaging in public consultation.....	57
Figure 2.5.3. The on-line survey cycle.....	33	Figure 4.5.3. Northern Authorities assessment of the Reasons for engaging in public consultation.....	57
Figure 3.1.1. Theoretical perspectives on public (e-) consultation.....	38	Figure 4.5.4. Local authority assessments of when in the policy-making cycle public consultation should be employed, N & S.....	58
Figure 3.1.2. Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (extended).....	41	Figure 4.5.5. Table of local authority assessments of when in the policy-making cycle public consultation should be employed.....	58
Figure 3.1.3. News images of hatred.....	42	Figure 4.5.6. The provision of feedback/review mechanisms.....	58
Figure 3.1.4. Peace rally in Belfast (Feb. 1996).....	42	Figure 4.6.1. Southern Authorities identification of problematic factors in relation to the initiation of consultation processes.....	59
Figure 3.1.5. Contrasting systems views of e-consultation.....	44	Figure 4.6.2. Northern Authorities identification of problematic factors in relation to the initiation of consultation processes.....	60
Figure 3.2.1. Armagh e-consultation workshop programme.....	46	Figure 4.6.3. The Challenge of 'Consultation Fatigue'	60
Figure 4.2.1. Use of traditional techniques by Northern authorities for 2000-2003.....	48	Figure 4.6.4. Authority responses to the question 'Have consultation initiatives had negative effects on the work of your authority?', S & N.....	61
Figure 4.2.2. Use of traditional techniques by Southern authorities for 2000-2003.....	49	Figure 4.6.5. When not to consult the public?.....	61
Figure 4.2.3. Use of electronic techniques by Northern authorities for 2000-2003.....	49		
Figure 4.2.4. Use of electronic techniques by Southern authorities for 2000-2003.....	49		
Figure 4.3.1. Prevalence/diversity of consultation techniques initiated by local authorities N & S.....	50		
Figure 4.3.2. Number of authorities that have used certain techniques, N& S.....	51		
Figure 4.3.3. Target Groups in the North and South ..	52		

Figure 4.6.6. Authorities' failure to engage particular groups in consultation processes.....	62	Figure 6.4.3. Where do departments get assistance in running consultations?.....	82
Figure 4.7.1. Perceived benefits from public consultation.....	62	Figure 6.5.1. Table of the main purposes of engaging in public consultation.....	82
Figure 5.2.1. Use of traditional techniques by Irish government departments/ 2000-2003.....	66	Figure 6.5.2. Chart of the main purposes of engaging in public consultation.....	83
Figure 5.2.2. Use of electronic techniques by Irish government departments/agencies for 2000-2003... ..	66	Figure 6.5.3. At which stage in the policy-making process do you consult?.....	83
Figure 5.3.1. The use of traditional consultation techniques.....	67	Figure 6.5.4. When is consultation to be used?.....	84
Figure 5.3.2. Uses of electronic consultation techniques.....	68	Figure 6.6.1. Table of challenges in initiating public consultation.....	85
Figure 5.3.3. Target groups.....	68	Figure 6.6.2: Chart of challenges in initiating public consultation.....	85
Figure 5.3.4. Policy/Issues.....	69	Figure 6.6.3. The challenge of 'consultation fatigue'.	85
Figure 5.4.1. Table of responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.....	70	Figure 6.7.1. Table of perceived benefits for central government in entering into consultation.....	87
Figure 5.4.2. Graph of responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.....	70	Figure 6.7.2. Chart of the perceived benefits for central government in entering into consultation processes.....	87
Figure 5.4.3. Where does the Irish government get assistance in running consultation initiatives?.....	71	Figure 7.1.1. Organisation's staff/ICT capacity.....	92
Figure 5.5.1. Table of central government assessments of the purposes of engaging in public consultation... ..	71	Figure 7.1.2. Organisation's use of communication techniques.....	93
Figure 5.5.2. Graph of central government assessments of the purposes of engaging in public consultation.....	71	Figure 7.2.1. Consultation techniques that your organisation has encountered.....	94
Figure 5.5.3. Stages when consultation used.....	72	Figure 7.2.2. Consultation Techniques that Your Organisation has encountered.....	94
Figure 5.5.4. When is consultation to be used?.....	72	Figure 7.2.3. The three techniques that best enabled your organisation to represent their views.....	94
Figure 5.5.5. The provision of feedback/review mechanisms.....	73	Figure 7.4.1. Rating aspects of the most successful consultation.....	96
Figure 5.6.1. What is problematic when consulting?73		Figure 7.4.2. Requirements for more effective consultation.....	96
Figure 5.6.2. Irish government departments/agencies identification of problematic factors in relation to the initiation of consultation processes.....	74	Figure 7.4.3: The benefits of engaging in consultation.	97
Figure 5.6.3. The challenge of 'Consultation Fatigue'.	74	Figure 7.4.4. Chart of difficulties encountered in consultation.....	98
Figure 5.7.1. Table of perceived benefits for central government in entering into consultation processes. 75		Figure 7.4.5. Table of difficulties encountered in consultation.....	98
Figure 5.7.2. Chart of perceived benefits for central government in entering into consultation processes. 75		Figure 7.5.1. At what stage in the decision-making process have you been involved in?.....	99
Figure 6.2.1. Use of traditional techniques by Northern Ireland government departments for 2000-2003.....	78	Figure 8.1.1. Waterways Ireland e-consultation web site.....	107
Figure 6.3.1. The use of traditional consultation techniques.....	79	Figure 8.1.2. A sample of the Waterways Ireland consultation text people had to read.....	108
Figure 6.3.2. Uses of electronic consultation techniques.....	79	Figure 8.1.3. Waterways Ireland submission page. 108	
Figure 6.3.3. Policy/Issues.....	80	Figure 8.1.4. Waterways Ireland discussion forum, posts to internal screening topic.....	108
Figure 6.4.1. Table of responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.....	81	Figure 8.1.5. Some of the Waterways Ireland discussion forum questions, that failed to provoke a response.....	109
Figure 6.4.2. Chart of responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.....	81		

Figure 8.2.1. Overview of the e-consultation design process.....	112	Figure 8.3.4. Responses to "What should the role of the State be in 'active citizenship'?".....	125
Figure 8.2.2. The NSEC web page with e-consultation link.....	113	Figure 9.1.1. CommunityWalk map of current and new probation locations in Northern Ireland.....	129
Figure 8.2.3. The NSEC e-consultation page,.....	114	Figure 9.1.2. Close-up of old Shankill Road location with a comment.....	129
Figure 8.2.4. PRS responses at the NSEC launch meeting.....	116	Figure 9.1.3. Directions from an old location to a new one.....	130
Figure 8.3.1. How to share your views on The Wheel e-consultation website.....	120	Figure 9.2.1. Invitation to participate in diversity exhibition.....	136
Figure 8.3.2. Consultation themes on active citizenship.....	121	Figure 11.1.1. PRS voting trial results at the NSEC launch.....	148
Figure 8.3.3. Responses to "Who is an 'active citizen'?".....	124		

Introduction

This report sets out to explore the reality of consultation as a form of citizen participation in policy development in Ireland, North and South. It investigates processes of consultation, the only form of participation that is a legal requirement of policy making, with a view to assessing their value as supporting tools of citizen centric governance. In addition a key objective of the research was to support the development of citizen driven government by identifying how Information Communication Technologies could support, develop or deepen the participation of citizens in policy development through that same consultation requirement. In particular, it was hoped to identify e-consultation processes and technologies that are most appropriate to the needs of diverse local communities and to find the best ways to apply these to support citizen driven democracy.

The research team is both interdisciplinary and action orientated. The authors come from diverse academic backgrounds such as sociology, political science, information management, community development and even marketing! However, they at least share in common a commitment to democratic experimentalism (Unger,), which involves working with what we have on offer to enrich democratic institutional possibilities by finding and building the zone where there is overlap between the conditions of practical progress and the requirements of individual development, where whatever is proposed responds to the felt needs and aspirations of ordinary citizens.

Since a core idea behind our research was to put ICT to use in supporting citizen centric governance, it behoved us to mark our research approach by as much use of technologies as possible, and with as much citizen involvement in the development of our research as possible. These two seemingly straightforward methodological requirements were adhered to at all times, but obviously did not make the research process any easier.

On our first objective, maximising use of technologies—we e-surveyed the key parties to consultation, that is, all local authorities and all government departments North and South, and the entire set of voluntary and community organisations registered North and South of the border. Here we quickly came into direct confrontation with our first problem. While e-Government is supposed to be well established, what in reality this means is that there are appropriate e-mail lists and addresses available. However, when you actually try to work with these or through these, there is a zero response rate. Without the use of traditional methods such as hard copy questionnaires and follow-up phone-calls there would be very little research data emanating from this research.

Thus we had to mix our use of technologies with some traditional methods and with some imaginative methods of research. The findings in this report are based on

- survey responses from all 12 NI central/regional government departments,
- 25 RoI central government departments,
- 42 out of 60 local authorities, north and south and
- 81 organisations from the community and voluntary sectors.
- focus group data, from a range of people from the above categories throughout the research process.
- 3 consultation trials run with key with two North/South bodies—Waterways Ireland and the North South Educational Consortium—and The Wheel, the Republic of Ireland’s umbrella organisation for the voluntary and community sector.
- 2 consultation tests carried out, one with Probation Board Northern Ireland and one run by the E-Consultation Research Project on youth and diversity.

In keeping with our second objective, to incorporate as much citizen involvement as possible in our research design and outcomes, the numbers contacted through the above processes were extraordinary. E-consultation has, throughout the remit of this project, been used to contact thousands of citizens. However, it is not always possible to measure in numbers. Contact was made with all of the community and voluntary sector through the e-surveying and e-consulting, but depth of contact was achieved with focus groups participants, the anonymous participants in e-consultation trials, the story-tellers about active citizenship (wheel.e-consultation.org), the schoolchildren who told stories and made drawings on diversity (diversity.e-consultation.org), and even voters at the NSEC launch event.

The work it will take to develop citizen-centric governance and advance citizen participation is phenomenal. However, the work it will take to develop the depth of citizen participation in consultation processes is less, and has been a key focus of this research. The research reported in this document is merely a small part of that work. Chapter One examines the social and political context of consultation processes and the shift to a discourse of citizens' participation in governance. Chapter Two and Three, given that consultation processes are the key mode of governance operationalised to extend participation, examines how and why consultation processes themselves are constituted, and how we are to measure and evaluate their significance. Particular focus is on E-consultation technologies.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 report on Northern and Southern local and central government's use, forms and approaches to consultation and e-consultation. They describe the challenges faced in initiating and carrying out public consultations. Government, at local and national level, assess the shortcomings and benefits of engaging in consultation, and the general impact of public consultation. These three chapters contain a report and summary of their assessment and view of those processes. Chapter Seven turns to the voluntary and community sector both sides of the border and reports on their experience of being consulted and of consulting with their membership. Their perspective on the consultations they have been involved in, which needless to say differs considerably from the central and local government perspective, is reported. The particular challenges that this sector faces in consultation processes are outlined. Overall the pitfalls and potentials of consultation and e-consultation for this sector are addressed in this chapter. Chapters Eight and Nine report on trials and tests designed by the team to ascertain the e-consultation technologies and processes that are most appropriate to the needs of diverse local communities and to determine the best ways to apply these technologies and processes, focussing on identified needs. Chapter 10 presents a summary. Appendices follow this, which contains additional information on technologies, and on the trials and tests carried out.

Much of the work of the project team has been about both critiquing and supporting the use of ICT for deepening and broadening the participation of citizens in policy making. With reference to the second of these actions—supporting the use of ICT with reference to citizens' needs—we have produced an on-line guide to help people embarking on consultation processes, either as consulters or consultees. This has been designed from the basis of the knowledge accumulated in the above research process and thus we are engaging in 'knowledge transfer', but the non-patented, democratic sort. The guide is available free and on-line at <http://www.e-consultation.org/guide/>

Chapter 1. Social and political context of consultation

1.1 Introduction

The changes that are having the most impact on our social, economic and political lives are those that characterise us as networked information society. Governments, aware of the shift to computerised global networks as the leading organisational form of capitalist development (see Castells, 1996 and Sassen, 1998) find themselves operating in a 'digitally renewed economy' (Hobsbawm, 2003). With governments in general fostering the information society in the age of a global network powered economy, with a view to keeping their economies competitive, the benefits to themselves of increasing their use of ICT has not been missed. E-Government, as an objective, is being driven at multi-scalar levels of government, from the global to the local. E-Government involves using the power of new Information and Communication Technologies¹ (ICT) to assist in improving the accessibility, quality and cost-effectiveness of public services. That access has been improved has been directly contested by research on e-inclusion, which has disclosed the 'digital divide'. Whether ICT can improve the quality of access to government is also increasingly topical and under research at the moment. The notion that ICT could, even if they do not as yet, provide tools and frameworks for increasing access and improving the quality of access to government is, however, increasingly accepted. That ICT could provide tools that better integrate the citizen into the governing networks through aiding improved consultation and participation of citizens in government is likewise, increasingly the subject of research.

However, improving the cost-effectiveness of public services has been the key feature of the first phase of the development of e-Government in Europe. Aware that the new ICT could significantly reduce costs in the provision of public services, the early priority in e-Government has been the creation of the infrastructure for the delivery of on-line services, which we can characterise as the development of transactional government. More recently there has emerged a newer emphasis on using the technologies to implement a more fundamental review and modernisation of the entire process of governing and the relationship governments have with their citizens. For a period that approximates to the 1990's, e-government has operated at the level of enquiries, recommendations and problems of take-up of electronic government. Work on this phase centred on making Government information available on the World Wide Web, the digitalisation of government services to televisions or telephones, the running of elections on-line, and the development of the infrastructure to do these tasks securely. E-government, with its emphasis on transactional services and its only concern for democracy revolving around e-voting, has been largely about developing the efficiency of government in the late 1990's. However, a second phase is emerging in the 2000's, where the simultaneous development of efficiency and democracy was recognised as key to the success of the e-Government agenda. This coincides with a shift in emphasis from e-Government (transactional government on line) to e-governance, where questions of the quality of democracy and citizen's participation are seen as necessary constituents of the developing e-agenda.

1.2 The move towards governance

Since the early 1990's most Western democracies have moved from a traditional government model to one based on the concept of 'governance'. This is a term derived from the Latin 'cybern' meaning 'steering' and, not coincidentally, the same root as the contemporary 'cybernetics'. Given the real and perceived loss of control of the economy by the nation state due to the rise of economic internationalism (globalisation in short) it is now seen as more appropriate to see the state as 'steering' the economy. The new governance theories stress

¹ New Information and communication technologies (ICT) are tools such as computers, screen based terminals, databases, software applications and the networks connecting them.

'steering' over control and focus more on processes and outcomes rather than on formal institutional arrangements (see Pierre and Peters, 2000). Given the complexity of contemporary information/network/global society, governance is seen to provide a more adequate response than traditional government approaches focused in existing institutions. The governance approach would see itself as more flexible, innovative, more in tune with a market society. It would, in keeping with the ethos of a cybernetic-information society, stress the effectiveness of networks and non-bureaucratic modes of regeneration.

An interesting development of governance theory is the concept of multi-level governance, which is particularly illuminating for our study of e-governance. It reflects the growing complexity of the government function, that is more geographically diverse now (occurring at multiple levels) but also more differentiated horizontally insofar as it is now more often provided by multiple agencies. This is particularly the case in relation to so-called 'wicked issues' such as the environment or urban crime that are not amenable to traditional departmental-based government solutions. Multilevel governance then 'stresses the complexity of policy-making implementation and accountability relationships between a variety of state and societal actors at the level of supranational activity (EU), central government, devolved administration, local authorities and quasi-government' (Carmichael, 2003: 6)

From the point of view of a theory of democracy the most important issue to emerge from these debates is the nature and quality of social involvement. While there is a top-down conception of governance (conceived of as a more market-friendly version of government in the era of globalisation) it also takes a more participatory or bottom-up variant. From this conception, governance is seen to emerge from social interactions rather than be imposed from above. Society is seen to have the capacity to act autonomously and organise itself in pursuit of social interests that may conflict with those of government or the market. Government cannot simply impose its authority on a well-organised networked and informed society. Thus the move in recent years, in pursuit of a modernising governance agenda in many countries to create various forms of 'social partnership', particularly in the management of public sector activities.

In conclusion, the concept of governance allows us to grasp the transformation of democracy and participation in the era of the globalised network society. The political process today in Ireland, as elsewhere, involves much broader networks of governance than in the earlier Westminster model of government. While the loss of control by the state of the economy—the loss of sovereignty argument—is often exaggerated, the capacity of governments to manage their economy and society is threatened by globalisation. On the one hand there is this threat from above, or outside, but there is also a groping challenge from 'below' as social groups and communities organise on behalf of their own interests. So there is now a diversity of moves towards a more 'modern' form of governance, some from a market perspective, others from a social empowerment agenda. The results, as in all social and political processes, are mixed and complex.

1.3 E-government and the missing dimension of citizen's participation

As the implementation of e-Government progressed the development of transactional government on-line was prioritised in the 1990's. As research exposed the growing digital divide, belatedly questions of democracy entered the debate. Increasing access and tackling the digital divide (given the evidence that lack of access to technology in an e-government context could in fact de-democratise) became a growing concern. An associated democratic question, namely increasing the quality of access and increasing citizen's participation, likewise found its way onto the e-agenda in the early 2000's.

The plan to 'establish Europe as the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' promoted since the Lisbon Summit of 2000 was written into the *eEurope 2002* Action Plan. By the time *E-Europe 2005: An Information Society for All* was published, the

inclusion of the concept of ‘participation for all’ was added to the competitive agenda. Its objectives are:

to provide a favourable environment for private investment and for the creation of new jobs, to boost productivity, to modernise public services, and to give everyone the opportunity to participate in the global information society’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2002: 2).

Critical to its ability to deliver this is ‘its aim to stimulate secure services, applications and content based on a widely available broadband infrastructure’. (Commission of the European Communities, 2002: 2). Technology, in terms of the infrastructure of the broadband, was seen as the key problem in delivering the Action Plan and establishing competitive advantage for Europe. In line with the competitiveness drive, the private sector is directly invited to work towards e-Europe objectives with the support of the Commission and Member States. The promise of success, in terms of ‘a significant impact on growth and productivity, employment and social cohesion’, is once again offered as underpinning the Information Society (CEC, 2002:22).

The Cap Gemini Ernst and Young benchmark surveys of Europe’s on-line public services completed for the European Commission DG Information Society describe progress in establishing Europe’s on-line public services. By 2003, while all countries have progressed at different paces, they report that in almost every country public service businesses score significantly higher than those for citizens and that the gap between the two is growing. They advocate the use of a more proactive citizen focused approach. The fourth survey, released in January 2004, shows the difference between the targets of businesses and citizens steady, but remaining at a 20% difference in on-line sophistication and a 30% difference on full availability on line.

In the Republic of Ireland Information Society (IS) policy was co-ordinated from the Ministry of State for Information Society, located at the very centre of Government in the Department of the Taoiseach, and it reflects this trend where competitiveness is emphasised first and foremost and citizen’s participation comes belatedly onto the scene. The first Government Action Plan was written in January 1999 and the second in 2002. Wider Information Society engagement was the goal and to achieve it eGovernment was seen as central. The Plan for eGovernment focused on the objective of having all key public services that were capable of electronic delivery available on line by 2005 as per European targets. The focus was on improving internal efficiency and back-office administration as well as stimulating wider engagement with ICT ‘in the business community and the public in general’.² The citizen is interpellated as the ‘customer’ or consumer and the business community are specifically named in the discourse rather than other communities of interest. The model developed to deliver the on-line public services was the ‘Public Services Broker (PSB) developed by the Reach Agency. Their approach which would ‘In other words [...] amount to a virtual corporation delivering quality services on the basis of client needs and achieving overall efficiency gains across the public sector’. In the ‘Foreword’ to the 2002 Action Plan on Information Society the Taoiseach made direct reference to ‘the *business*’ of Government, clearly envisioning the transactional dimension as exclusively central to the programme of e-government. In this Plan ICT are seen as important for reshaping government services around user needs first and in providing competitive advantage second (Government Action Plan, 2002:15). Brief mention is made of making possible new connections between Government and the citizen, but the emphasis is on better service delivery.

The development of on-line transactional government in the Republic of Ireland was advanced relatively quickly and competitively. In the 2001 EU Benchmarking Exercise Ireland performed stronger than all member states (Government Action Plan, 2001:2) and in the UN and ASPA Benchmarking study it fell within the ‘high e-Government capacity’ category and scored 2.16 in the global benchmarking ranking. (Benchmarking E-Government: A Global Perspective, 2002). However, the focus on business and commercial applications was notably stronger than that on

²<http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/viewitem.asp?id=212&lang=ENG>

citizen's participation. That is, it was clear that the balance between efficiency and democracy was dangerously skewed towards efficiency and competitiveness as opposed to democracy.

The 2003 Cap Gemini survey on transactional government, i.e. public services on line, showed the Republic of Ireland and Sweden as having the highest level of on-line sophistication, with the Republic of Ireland progressing beyond the level of two-way interaction, and sophistication on-line having increased to 50%. Yet this survey again exposed that greatest progress had been made by on-line services for businesses rather than for other communities of interest in all countries.

'To conclude, Cap Gemini Ernst & Young believes that further growth beyond the stage of interactivity requires a clear political vision and committed leadership to eGovernment as an integral part of national governmental change programme; and a greater emphasis on the citizen. This is required to achieve not just the target of availability, but to deliver the more important aspiration of a transition to a citizen-focused governmental approach' (2003,:2)

In response to this type of critique, the Irish Information Society Commission's 2003 report on eGovernment brought the citizen and the question of democracy into the discourse in ways that were not previously present (Information Society Commission, 2003:5). The prioritising of citizen's participation advances

Considerably in this report which argues that E-Government has the:

'capability to ensure greater engagement with citizens, higher productivity in terms of reduced costs, more efficient administrative procedures, delivery of higher quality services and provision of better policy outcomes' (Information Society Commission, 2003:5).

Service delivery slipped down the scale and 'the centrality of the citizen' became 'the key concept in the provision of e-government' (Information Society Commission, 2003). The report congratulates the government on demonstrating leadership in developing the PSB model and in its performance in the EU benchmarking of available on-line public services, but the strong critique offered is that the citizen-centric model was yet to be engaged and that the potential of e-government was 'more than an automation of government services' (Information Society Commission, 2003:1).

In Northern Ireland efforts to introduce e-government have not followed the same pattern. The general programme for modernisation, outlined in the White Paper *Modernising Government* (1999) and in *Reforming our Public Services: Principles in Practices* (2002) put particular emphasis on government in the Information Age and in addition to this the governance style, which marked constitutional renewal in Northern Ireland, emphasised partnership and placed consultation high on the agenda (Morrison, 2001). The Central Information Technology Unit (Northern Ireland) established in 1997 and now part of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, has lead responsibility for promoting, monitoring and reporting on Electronic Government in Northern Ireland. Their vision is:

"to ensure that the public service in Northern Ireland is among the world leaders in effective exploitation of new and emerging Information and Communication Technologies for the delivery of services to the public"

The Information Age Initiative, through its action plan *Leapfrog to the Information Age* (2000), articulated a strategy to develop a knowledge-based economy in NI and called for joined up e-government. Four principles guide its development: choice, convenience, simplicity and inclusiveness. The Northern Ireland Executive underlined its commitment to electronic service delivery in the Programme for Government agreed in March 2001. In July 2001, the Executive Committee endorsed targets for electronic service delivery. Departments were to have by the end of 2002, 25% of all key services delivered electronically. In line with the European driven UK targets all key services should be on line by 2005. The Executive further articulated its aims in the *Corporate Strategic Framework* with its vision for a 'modernised efficient government, alive to the latest development in e-business and meeting the needs of citizens and businesses in Northern Ireland' (www.nics.gov.uk).

In the Cap Gemini Ernst and Young surveys of Europe's on-line public services, in the section reporting results by country the UK scores highly, but not as high as the Republic of Ireland. In October 2003 the UK came 8th in measurements of on-line sophistication and sixth in measurements of being fully available on line. The Republic of Ireland in the same year came third in the first measure and fifth in the second. These figures measure development of transactional e-government at the level of country and so do not present figures on the province of Northern Ireland, which may or may not reflect the overall trend in the UK.

Worth emphasising however is that in the UK there is also a strong agenda of consultation in the Modernisation of Government programme, where a range of governance mechanisms stress measuring performance outputs in client communities and emphasise partnership structure characterised by dialogue and communication. In Northern Ireland there is a particular culture of consultation built into law, such as Section 75 of the Northern Irish Act where consultation is required.

Once we turn our attention from the transactional to the democratic dimension of e-government a set of entirely new questions emerge and we have no measurements so readily available to guide paths to progress. How to avail of and implement ICT to best facilitate better governance is probably the key democratic question faced by e-Government today. If the infrastructure of broadband is successfully put in place how are citizens, communities, as well as businesses, to be networked into government? We ask this in a new technological context of living in an information society where citizens can be linked into the network of governance as consumers of services, as electronic voters, or as agents of policy making and/or as participants in governance structures, where some may be de-linked through lack of access, and where all can be held under surveillance.

The possibilities of participation may have altered significantly in networked society and the e-Government agenda is currently grappling with the inherent potential and shortcomings that the shift to electronic government has/will have on democracy in general, but more specifically on questions, levels and quality of participation. The advances in the ICT sector when applied to the question of government can radically alter the modalities of democracy—they can enhance the types of democratic structure in place, or they can de-democratise through lowering the quality of participation in decision-making. For example, popularity polls on personalities and policies, where citizens directly control politics at the touch of the button, could be developed. Likewise, the low participation rates in elections could be enhanced through the availability of ICT. As the e-inclusion debate has indicated, whole sectors may be excluded through the shift to electronic forms of government because of the digital divide. On the more positive side, personal computers and the Internet are reasonably widely available to ever-wider sections of the public in the richer countries and could be made available to all. These could possibly facilitate information dissemination and of course transactional government. Computer networks are good at storing, manipulating and quickly transmitting data so they could support improved processes of participation. Because of this they could, in fact, invigorate democracy. How could e-governance tools be used to support and develop more holistic working in government, better policy-making and stronger accountability for decision-making? How can ICT be used to support the democratic process and where can ICT better enhance the quantity and quality of participation in governance? These are just some of the questions that arise if we turn our attention to renewing democracy through the use of ICT in the Information Age. However, these debates are only now emerging as real and they arise only in the context of established modes of governance in the various jurisdictions of Europe. It is to these we now turn, that is, to the political and social contexts of governance in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland.

1.4 Social Partnership as Governance: Republic of Ireland

From the late 1980's onwards governance in the Republic has been based on a 'social partnership' model. Employers, trade unions and farmers' organisations would get together and

agree three-yearly social and economic programmes. Since 1996 this tripartite consultative process was broadened out to include the so-called Community and Voluntary Pillar. That meant the agenda was broadened out from traditional corporatist terms (profits, wages, etc.) to include wider issues such as social equality, poverty and redistribution. The social partnership model in Ireland has been consolidated in the years since and has in fact become somewhat of an international paradigm. It is essential to carefully assess the social partnership model in terms of its democratic credentials, its contribution to consultation and its role in generating a new governance model for contemporary Irish society.

The construction of the national social partnership model in Ireland was based squarely on the requirements of national competitiveness and macro-economic stability following a period of economic decline and instability. Undoubtedly the history of the subsequent economic boom—colloquially known as the Celtic Tiger—has helped to retrospectively validate the effectiveness of the social partnership model in economic terms. As integration with the world economy proceeded apace Ireland's competitive position was secured on the basis of social and political consensus. While social protection and welfare spending is low it may have been even lower still without the social partnership arrangements. Organised labour, through the trade unions, was brought into mainstream politics and at least some of the community/voluntary sector obtained representation. The setting of a minimum wage has helped those on lower incomes and probably goes beyond the usual corporatist incorporation of labour. Whatever its merits or demerits, the social partnership model does seem to have become the 'only game in town' in the Republic of Ireland.

For its critics, however, the social partnership model promises much more than it delivers. While its promoters stress the element of consultation, its detractors focus on 'co-option'. That is to say, trade unions and community groups are only consulted nominally and their once independent voices in society are now co-opted in toothless 'talking shops'. Even 'consensus' on socio-economic priorities, essential for national competitiveness, can be presented in a negative light as a stifling of oppositional alternatives. Not only has the model created an unhealthy (for democracy) emphasis on consensualism but it has actually generated increased levels of social inequality according to its critics. In terms of the 'quality' of participation and the building of democratic institutions there are also questions raised about the 'representativeness' and accountability of those involved in the social partnerships, particularly in regards to the community/voluntary pillar. While not necessarily offering a viable political alternative the critics of the partnership model do offer cogent criticism of their functioning.

A more rounded understanding and evaluation of social partnerships would need to examine the rather complex picture emerging at local level as well as the more longstanding national level arrangements. Local social partnerships have flourished as a means to enhance local governance and combat social exclusion. The principal vehicle has been the County/City Development Board promoting the local development process and involving local civil society organisations. At least potentially, these more devolved consultation mechanisms can be more responsive to ordinary citizens than national level partnerships. However, the evidence is still that the key economic actors—employers and trade unions—play the dominant role with civil society organisations playing a more 'supportive' role or advocating for specific interest groups in society. Overall, the issue of democracy in Irish society cannot be fully resolved by social partnerships, which are driven ultimately by the imperatives of national competitiveness and not the need to build social democracy.

1.5 Multi-level governance in Northern Ireland

In the North of Ireland the social partnership model does not take the same form as in the Republic due to the very distinct institutional history of that jurisdiction. Northern Ireland, under the Local Government Act, (NI) of 1972 has district councils in charge of regulatory services, leisure services and more minor functional areas such as environmental services. Key areas such as housing, education and social services are beyond the remit of this severely

curtailed form of local government. Current moves towards the streamlining of local government in NI has led to accusations that its 'closeness to the people' will suffer and that the 'democratic deficit' will become larger. Essentially though, the main point is that local government in NI is quite fragmented with a proliferation of quangos, joint boards, joint committees and contractual arrangements with other providers. This mixed modality has led to it being characterised, rather accurately, as multi-level governance, worth exploring in some detail.

The Belfast Agreement created a more flexible and hybrid political space than had existed previously. So, governance in NI is situated in a cross cutting terrain framed by the EU, the UK and new cross-border arrangements with the Republic. Multiple levels of government have thus emerged prompted initially by the European paradigm shift in the nature of participation and representation. On top of that there is the legacy of a thirty-year war and entrenched inter-communal rivalry and conflict. While the broader political picture remains unclear as to whether a durable settlement is possible, in terms of consultation and participation, the future seems clear enough. We are likely to see an increased participation by elected local politicians in local authorities, joint boards, and in the public-private partnerships (PPPs). Citizens will increasingly be consulted through traditional or electronic means, since New Labour's Modernising Government agenda places emphasis on consultation and participation as a key driver and imperative.

Partnership activity is evident in NI at a number of spatial levels. Most parts of the public sector are now exhorted to work through partnerships, although nothing like the Republic's macro-level partnership arrangements exists. However, in terms of urban regeneration there are area-based partnerships covering several neighbourhoods and there are local level Partnerships for Peace and Reconciliation. The EU influence is considered to be crucial in stimulating the development of partnership arrangements at all local levels of NI society and across the border with the rest of the island. However, a counter-vailing tendency comes from the New Public Management ethos that is driving public bodies into vertical silos as they adopt the mechanisms of targets and indicators that prioritises internal management rather than horizontal networking with other bodies. So there are serious obstacles to the actual realisation of joined up government and its capacity to target resources towards excluded or historically disadvantaged communities.

The current review of public administration in NI, following on from the Belfast Agreement and a commitment to more inclusive governance, raises a number of crucial political issues. Arguably, the achievement of equality and human rights should be an integral element in the delivery of public services. An economic rationale of 'efficiency' is unlikely to generate the equality of opportunity and equality of outcome necessary for a democratic settlement on the ground. Critics have also taken up the lack of clear and direct lines of accountability from the point of decision-making to that of delivery in terms of who is responsible. While the voluntary and community sector is supposed to be involved in the new model of local governance there is no clear understanding of how it might be involved in the delivery of public services. Clearly there is still some way to go to achieve 'joined up government' aspired to although the current reforms and debates are raising the relevant issues.

1.6 E-government at local level

1.6.1 Northern Ireland

In July 1998 the UK government set out its plans to transform local government in its White paper *Modern Local Government—in Touch with the People*. Its vision was to establish a new dynamic partnership that would provide 'integrated, efficient and effective services, which are accessible, citizen focused, seamless and transparent'. Local government in Northern Ireland was significantly different from its counterparts in the rest of the UK and from that in the Republic of Ireland in that it was characterised by division and struggle over the national

question. However, in the Local Government Act of 2000, there was a strong emphasis on articulating and developing a vision for the community to be reached through extensive dialogue and consultation. ALANI (Association for Local Authorities for Northern Ireland), which had existed for seventeen years without full Council representation, and without the support of some of the main parties, was replaced in 2001. In 2001, NILGA (Northern Ireland Local Government Association) was established and by contrast had all Council and all party support. Mechanisms and arrangements for dialogue between the two tiers of government, local and central, are dissimilar to those pertaining elsewhere in that they are considerably less developed. However, the modernisation agenda impacts the Local Government sector equally and the ongoing Review of Public Administration is the context in which they are now attempting to develop.

While £350 million had been allocated to Local Government on-line funding, in Northern Ireland Local Government is considered to be 'lagging behind' by 2004 in terms of e-Government strategy, development and funding.³ According to Heather Moorhead, Chief Executive of NILGA in June of 2004 only five of the twenty-six councils allowed citizens to perform full transactions on line. In addition to this she stated that:

“Overall, these results (NILGA Survey of NI Council Websites) suggest that councils are each placing a different priority upon eGovernment and are each at a different stage in eGovernment adoption. The truth is that most Councils are developing their eGovernment strategies in isolation.” (Agreeing an eGovernment Vision and Strategy for Local Government in Northern Ireland)

Lack of funding and co-ordination are perceived to have been the key problem and through the summer of 2004 local government in Northern Ireland sought to address the development of e-enabled Councils by developing an *eGovernment Vision*. This agreed document focuses on 'service provision' where citizens are provided:

“access to key services when, where and how they want and in a manner that maximises the efficiency, effectiveness and equality of service provision”. (www.nilga.org).

Throughout the document the citizen is interpellated as the 'customer', but there is a vision strand on 'Empowering the whole community to get involved' in line with the modernising programmes emphasis on participation and consultation. The Vision document states that the councils must:

- Assist in making government information easier to access
- Promote the provision of affordable internet and e-mail to all citizens
- Ensure eGovernment developments are in line with the Councils equality schemes
- Use e-technologies to facilitate public consultation and debate
- Market on-line services and promote the uptake of services
- Ensure customers trust and feel secure using the new technology.

While these aims, at this point, are aspirational only, the vision document itself indicates that in the Northern Ireland context, the modernising government's impact on local councils is that they will in the future emphasise e-enabled service provision, with an openness towards, rather than a strong emphasis on, customer participation through increasing use of ICT.

1.6.2 Republic of Ireland

Local government here was characterised until very recently in terms of the standard model of representative democracy, where citizen's interests are present only through their elected representatives. The Local Government Renewal document of 2001 advocated the development of a more participatory form of democracy. This reflected the broader EC shift from government to governance, and the inclusion of the voluntary sector in the partnership approach advocated at central government level in the ROI. The renewal would more or less be achieved by bringing together, under County Development Boards (CDB's), the systems of Local

³e-Government Consultation, www.nilga.org/pol_wor_government_consult.php

Government and Local Development. These two systems had operated as parallel distinct structures hitherto, but were now to be integrated. Local development initiatives, often worked through participative models of democracy, focused strongly on social inclusion and involved local actors actively engaging in collective policy formation on local development as a response to local needs. This provided an alternative model of local governance and a very active citizenship engagement combined with community empowerment. The model of citizenship in place in the Local Government system was quite simply that of 'client' or 'customer' of public services. Marrying the two systems into the work of City/County Development Boards represented a move to modernise, rationalise and revitalise Local Government. The e-Government agenda of a one-stop-shop for transactional service delivery would only be possible if this merger took place. It remains to be seen how each County/City integrates both systems. Is progressing e-government by improving service delivery to 'customers' the only outcome, or are other objectives of e-governance being pursued at CDB level? Overall it would seem that embracing citizens as 'partners' in policy development may well be progressing very unevenly.

Consultation processes represent one of the key changes of practice since Local Government Renewal and the analysis of the number and quality of these consultations is central to our understanding the nature of the shift that has taken place at local level. Is it significant enough to indicate an actual shift from government to governance? Does the quantity and quality indicate that the merger has foreclosed the strength of local development? An overwhelming emphasis on service delivery and customer satisfactions as the major achievements of the consultation process might indicate that this was the case. The targets of the consultation processes would also be indicators, in that seeking the input of the whole population would be more about representative democracy. How are communities being defined -as communities in the traditional sense or as communities of interest? The stage in policy making that the consultations occurred would also indicate what model was dominant, that is, if occurring at an early stage this would reflect a development model. Levels of transparency and accountability built into the consultation processes would reflect a meaningful shift to governance. Innovative and multiple techniques of consultation would indicate the pursuit of inclusive and democratic mindedness on the part of the particular CDB.

The 2000 report by SOCTIM and IDEA, *Local e-Government Now: A World Wide View* characterised e-government in The Republic of Ireland as falling into the category of an 'e-knowledge' model, as opposed to an 'e-services' or 'e-governance' model, with an emphasis on community based economic and social regeneration. This reflects the strength of the local development model at the time, but this was prior to the renewal of local government. Is this still the case or is there now a significant amount of e-governance in place in addition to transactional service delivery?

1.7 Participation and democracy

Across Europe traditional democratic politics are questioned due to a perceived lack of participation and an increasing disillusionment with traditional democratic institutions and procedures. This disenchantment is particularly noticeable amongst young people where regularly only half of those eligible to vote actually do so. Western nations have been described by leading commentators (Habermas, 1985 and Archibugi & Held 1995) as undergoing what is variously described as a 'legitimation crisis', a 'credibility crisis' or a 'crisis of democracy'. A Gallup International Millennium Survey of 1999 reported in their survey of citizen's perceptions of government in 60 countries, only 12.5% described their government's as just, 10.3%, 40.3% saw them as corrupt, and only 9.9% saw them as efficient. In 2002 a further poll showed 47% as having little or no trust in their governments with only 43% of citizens in North America saw their country being governed by the 'will of the people' and only 33% in the European Union. (Gallup International Millennium Survey, 2002). It is generally recognised among critical commentators that representative political democracy was set up in different times, under

different conditions and is proving inadequate as a mechanism of political representation in contemporary globalised and informationalised society. Most worrying for governments, however, is the low turnout at elections and in the European Commission in particular the issue of low turnout at referenda has been particularly problematic. This debate forms the backdrop to the current impetus for increased participation. Given the increase in political apathy, as evidenced in diminishing voter turnout, information technologies are recently seen as having the potential to renew political participation. Governments, in the late 1990's, when developing policy documents on the Information Society, tended to underscore the potential of ICT to enhance public participation in governance and improve government's accessibility and responsiveness to citizens. So in the United States and across Europe, developments at Information Society level were seen as opportune in the struggle against political apathy in regards to the traditional representative democratic structures and as crucial in shifting the perception of government as 'top-down' and irrelevant to the citizens.

The shift in e-Government policy from being technology-driven towards being citizen-driven takes place in a context of a shift to governance, that is, to including civil society, citizens, and the private sector in the networks of government as a credible way forward. An OECD handbook, *Citizens as Partners, OECD Handbook on Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making* (2001) cultivates the need to see citizens as partners in policy-making. In a European Commission initiative, advanced in *European Governance: A White Paper* (2001), the role of ICT in engaging with the issue of a democratic deficit in relation to governments and EU institutions is addressed. Here a new framework for co-operation on information is announced and it recognises that 'information and communication technologies have an important role' to play in the evolution of a partnership model of policy-making. It's own institutions are linked into a 'interactive platform for information, feedback and debate, linking parallel networks across the Union' (www.europa.eu.int). In general, the European Union has more recently engaged in enthusiastic postings on their EUROPA website of a great deal of information material, showing its operations, processes and decisions and inviting consultation on a large number of initiatives.

So at government level 'participation' is the key political buzz-word of the day, which marks that transition from government to governance. Of course, e-Government has to take participation issues on board in its evolution, not just because the ICT offer new possibilities, but also because the 'legitimacy crisis' more commonly represented though the term 'democratic deficit' has to be tackled. Where 'consensus politics' are the order of the day, participation is a necessary element. But of course, the next questions of who participates, the level of participation possible, and the type of participation possible, is of vital importance, and from an e-Government perspective how ICT can facilitate this participation become the key question.

Participation describes many forms of involvement in government and at this point in the debate the word is overused to the extent that it can in fact hide both a multitude of 'good' governance practices and a multitude of 'bad' practices at the same time. Seen now as a democratic prerequisite, its all-embracing discursive quality has led intellectuals to more recently declare that in many ways 'participation' is the 'new tyranny' (Cooke and Kothari, eds, 2002). What this may lead us to is the question of whether the use of participation has been about the integration of people into structures that in reality they have very little control over.

'Participation' as a powerful enhancer of democratic government is certainly very much on the increase, but it behoves us to question the nature and quality of the participation unfolding in any particular policy formulation. This can be done at the level of the form of participation taking place, that is, is it nominal, instrumental, representative or transformative? What is its objective? Is it for display purposes only? Is it a means to achieving cost effectiveness or local facilities? Is it aiming to give people a voice in determining policies that affect them, or is it both a means and an end to a continuing dynamic empowering people, communities and groups to participate in governance? The definitions of participation vary considerably and one can

see a shift in definitions of participation taking place at the multilateral level of governance. Early on, that is in the late- 1970's, the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) defined the power of participation in transformative terms, where it involved increasing control by the excluded over resources and institutions. Increasing participation of the excluded in the institutions of power is a potentially radical agenda, but this has been since replaced since the turn of the century by definitions which describe participation as citizens 'playing a role in the exchange on policy making', where citizens are 'partners' but government holds responsibility and final decision-making powers (OECD, 2001). The term 'participation' with its 'feel good' appeal is a term widely and imprecisely used in Ireland, North and South, for a wide range of citizen involvements in consensual governance. While participation is seen as a catch-all descriptor for arrangements made for citizen, business and non-governmental organisation involvement in the formulation of public policy, 'consultation' is seen as the central component of the processes put in place to achieve consensus in public affairs between the government and those outside government. Within this context we now turn to consultation processes themselves, to examine how and why they are constituted, and how we are to measure and evaluate their significance.

Chapter 2. E-consultation technologies

In this chapter we introduce a range of technologies that can be used to support processes common to many public consultations. Since there are hundreds of different programs that support group collaboration (groupware) or computer mediated communication (CMC), the problem is not inventing the technology, but matching alternative technologies to the needs of people involved in public consultation. To do that we need to understand:

1. Actors goals and needs in consultation.
2. Consultation processes in enough detail to identify stages and activities that might be supported by ICT.
3. Which ICT applications can support these specific consultation processes and activities.
4. How to modify the software and/or the process to best facilitate the people taking part in the consultation activity.

2.1 Starting to match technologies to consultations

How can people organizing a consultation choose appropriate technologies? One way, is to consider the stages of a policy-making cycle: agenda setting, analysis, formulation, implementation and monitoring (Macintosh 2004). However, this takes only the perspective of the consultation organiser, not the consultees. It defines the problem as one of information management in public administration. Another approach is to conceive of consultation as a process analogous to mediation and negotiation, through which different groups come to an accommodation of what should be done (Morison & Newman 2001) as shown in Figure 2.1.1.

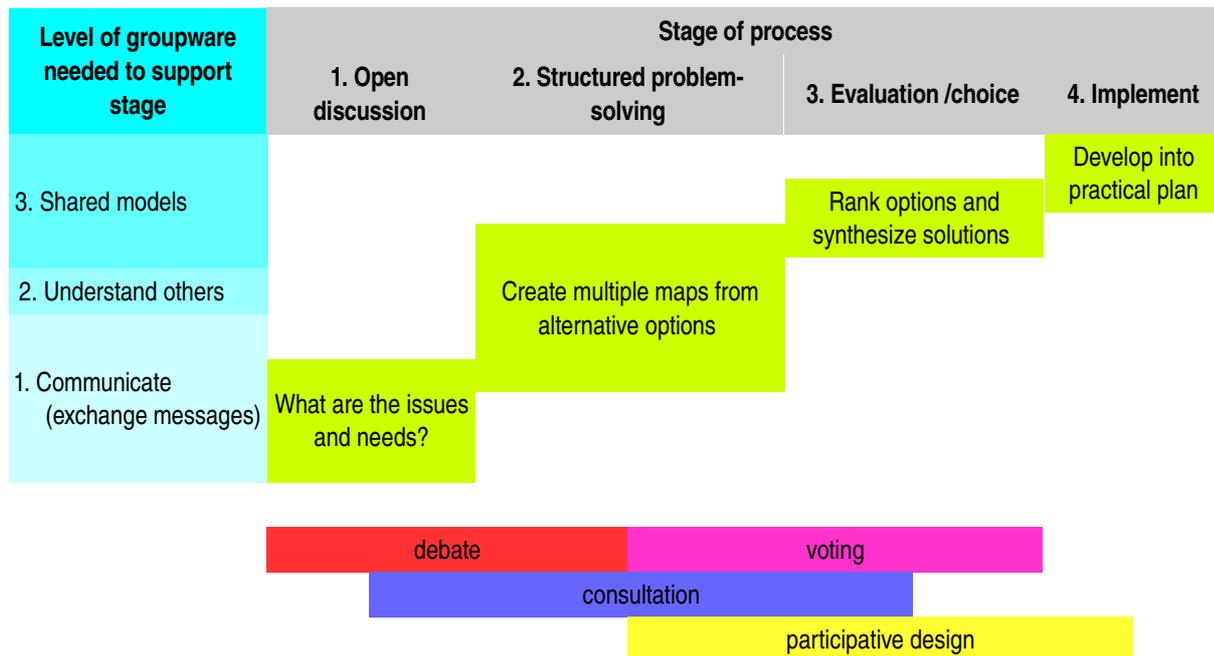


Figure 2.1.1. E-consultation as mediation/negotiation stages (Morison & Newman 2001)

This approach considers what the participants are doing at different stages of a consultation. They specifically set out to identify needs, explore the problem, find alternative solutions, and then choose the best of these developed solutions. This is an ideal form of consultation for use where there is conflict. However, this model applies only to a subset of the consultations that take place. For example, routine annual service satisfaction surveys and consultations, run by a local authority, would not follow this pattern. In other cases, not every stage of the decision-making process would involve citizens. In some Dutch consultations, the point is to identify citizens' issues and needs before deciding on the areas in which to take policy initiatives. In

formal referenda, citizens only come in to confirm or reject a policy defined by legislators. The high degree of variation in the field of practice and the tendency for consulting bodies to develop methods on an ad-hoc basis to meet the needs of a specific consultation exercise, has ultimately led to a lack of continuity and the development of systems that are less transferable to more than one consultation.

In fact, this model describes only one pattern of consultation. It fits well with consultations where the consulting body is the mediator or arbitrator between competing interests, such as in town and country planning. It does not correspond with consultation processes carried out regularly with local authorities, or the ones which merely seek confirmation and minor modifications to a plan that has already been made. There are many patterns of consultation processes that remain to be mapped and classified in ontologies.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify communication processes that occur in some if not all patterns of consultation. They may occur in a different order, or between different participants, but communication between consultees and consulters is always needed. In our first report we identified 5 distinct communication tasks (one way information transfer, dialogue support, explore problems and plan solutions, measure needs and preferences, author documents) and one other task (co-ordinate and manage the consultation process). We prepared a table listing relevant technologies for each task.

We then set about refining this classification, by improving our understanding of the applicability of ICTs to different processes and tasks. We did this by demonstrating several of these technologies to people involved in consultations, either as consultation organisers, or as frequent participants in consultations. This first occurred during our e-consultation workshop in Armagh in April 2005.⁴ Then we ran 7 technology demonstrations in Letterkenny and Belfast in May and June 2005.⁵

The participants got a chance to try out technologies for themselves, and see how others had used them in public consultation, before discussing how they would use them in their consultations. From these discussions we were able to improve our understanding of the first three points in the list mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

In our e-consultation trials (Chapter TRIAL) we then applied our developing understanding of technology matching to the design of specific e-consultation activities, and addressed the fourth point: customising the software and consultation processes to try to improve the consultation.

Coming out of the demonstrations, trials and tests, we now have an improved classification of e-consultation technologies, which will be presented in the rest of this chapter.

2.2 E-consultation technology classification

Each consultation is different. There are many patterns of consultation. An annual survey of the needs of people in a local authority area is different from a consultation on how to dispose of nuclear waste. However, it is possible to identify tasks that are carried out in many consultations, tasks that combined together can form any given consultation process.

We classified e-consultation technologies according to the type of communication process they support. We used that classification in our technology demonstrations in Letterkenny and Belfast in 2005. Here follows an expanded classification. They are organised according to typical stages of a problem-solving process⁶ (as found in some types of consultation).

⁴<http://wiki.e-consultation.org/workshop2005>

⁵<http://wiki.e-consultation.org/TechDemo>

⁶As in Garrison's Theory of Critical Thinking (Garrison 1992). Newman used these stages to (a) evaluate critical thinking (Newman *et al.* 1997) and (b) produce a mediation model of consultation (Morison & Newman 2001; <http://www.qub.ac.uk/mgt/papers/prefer/latrobe.html>).

In other types of consultation, these communication activities may be ordered differently. You can design a consultation process that is task specific, to meet the specific needs of the consultation topic, the consulting organisation and the participants.⁷

1. Defining the problem
Exactly what is the problem or issue to be discussed in a consultation? Can all the participants and the organisers come to a mutual agreement on what is involved? If not, they will be talking at cross-purposes, and no one will be satisfied with the outcome.
2. Exploring the problem
Given an agreed problem definition, participants can then start to explore the problem. They need the ability to see to heart of problem based on deep understanding of situation. As a group they can explore new ideas, develop new solutions, understand issues, disentangle ideas and so on.
3. Choosing and developing solutions
Once participants have explored the problem, potential solutions, and their intended and unintended consequences, they need to choose, develop and write up the best solutions.
4. Managing the consultation process
This is not a communication activity, but every consultation has to be managed, and some IT can help.

2.3 Defining the problem

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At the first stage of a consultation, there are two sorts of useful communication activities:

1. Telling the public what the consultation is about, so setting limits to its scope, and
2. Identifying issues of concern to participants, to help better characterise the situation.

2.3.1 Telling the public

Often it is necessary to give the participants some information about an issue, or a proposed policy, before starting a consultation (as in a downloadable discussion document, or a web site). This is a form of one-way communications. It is hardly participative, but it is needed to set the scene.

The worst way of doing this on-line is to make consultation documents available to download as PDF files, which consultees can then print out, read all 50 or 200 pages, and, if they understand the language used, then sit down and write a long submission. You will find many such examples of bad practice listed on the Northern Ireland Departments Consultation Register.⁸

An improvement is to design a web site so that citizens can search for subjects that interest them. Bristol City Council has such a site, in its Consultation Finder.⁹ They can search for consultations by area of interest or ward, and get back a list of brief summaries of each consultation. Clicking on a link takes them to further details of the consultation, links to documents to read, and often some action they can take to respond at once, such a complete a survey, or even join a focus group. This approach take account of the different way people read

⁷Both for a particular consultation and the management of ongoing relationships between consulting organisations and those consulted.

⁸<http://www.consultationni.gov.uk/>

⁹<http://www.bristol-city.gov.uk/ccm/content/Council-Democracy/Consultations/consultation-finder.en>

on the WWW. Eye tracking experiments show we search for key headings and where to go next, rather than reading through documents from start to finish. This has, as we found out in one of our trials (see), implications for how to write copy for on-line consultations.

On at least one occasion the City of Amsterdam developed an on-line game that citizens could play, introducing them to the consultation subject, before they reached the consultation subject. You can see similar educational efforts, introducing people to the work of councillors, at <http://www.demgames.org/>

2.3.2 Identifying issues, collecting stories

What issues concern participants? What problems should the consulting body be looking at? What can we learn from participants experiences? These are questions often asked at some stage during a consultation (often, but not always, at the beginning). There are many technologies that can help collect these stories and issues. Here we highlight four:

1. E-mail addresses and forms for complaints and compliments
2. E-petitions
3. Issues forums
4. Story-telling blogs.

2.3.2.1 Citizen feedback addresses and forms

Many local councils provide ways for citizens to contact them on-line. Often this starts as a means of collecting and recording complaints. For example Belfast City Council has a complaints form on the WWW, as well as an e-mail address for complaints.¹⁰

Newtownabbey Borough Council goes further. It has a form for both complaints and compliments. Their Customer Relations Officer makes sure that both complaints and compliments get forwarded to the council staff directly involved. This was, for many of them, a refreshing change, as previously they had received many complaints, but only a few compliments. Few people take the effort to write a paper letter of thanks to their council.

If the volume of electronic contact increases greatly, there are technologies that can help. Belfast City Council uses public sector Customer Relationship Management software to keep track of all contacts and their progress. The City of Bologna, in Italy, scans its incoming e-mail using artificial intelligence software to direct it to the right council department, based on the frequencies of words used (words like park, dustbin, school).

However, these techniques work best in support of day-to-day monitoring of services. They are not often used to raise new issues of concern. If you want people to tell you what their new concerns are, you need to encourage them.

2.3.2.2 E-petitions

Rather than each individual writing to complain, groups of people can put together a petition and deliver it to a legislative body (a council, regional assembly or parliament) or a government agency to show their strength of feeling on an issue.

E-petitions have been used in the UK Local E-democracy Project, in Kingston-upon-Thames and in Bristol¹¹, the Scottish Parliament¹² (using software developed at the International Teledemocracy Centre¹³ in Edinburgh) and many other places.

¹⁰<http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/complaints/>

¹¹<http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk/pilots/epetition.htm>

¹²<http://epetitions.scottish.parliament.uk/>

¹³<http://itc.napier.ac.uk/>

Petitions, whether electronic or on paper, measure the strength of feeling on an issue, but nothing of the subtlety of views or experiences on that issue, as any issue has to be reduced to a simple statement that people must agree or disagree with. So they do not help define an issue (they are predefined), or allow one to discover possible compromises. Finding consensus can be done through advanced voting techniques (discussed later). Exploring an issue can be done through on-line discussion in issues forums or by collecting stories.

2.3.2.3 Issues forums

In the Netherlands, many public authorities have started consulting earlier, asking people what they want before drawing up policy, rather than presenting complete plans to be accepted or rejected (Enthoven 2001).

E-consultation can be used for intelligence gathering: finding out the views of people on what issues concern them, at an early stage. The traditional approach is to wait until enough people have got annoyed they have organised a campaign, demonstrations, perhaps even civil disobedience (from blocking bulldozers to the old Irish standbys of bombs and bullets), sufficient to get reported in the local media. Why not try to get an early warning of issues before they turn into serious problems? One approach tried in Minnesota and the UK is the on-line issues forum.

The idea behind the forums is to empower citizens by giving them a public platform to share their experiences, points of view and questions, as well as helping local authorities provide better leadership and services by connecting with a broader base of diverse citizens. Local volunteers facilitate and co-ordinate the forums based on rules that encourage substantive discussion and ensure that political doesn't descend into personal. Volunteer facilitators consult with citizens and officials, but are independent. As they say in their guide:

Simply put, a Local Issues Forum is an online public commons (or town hall meeting), where any citizen, journalist, or elected official can:

- post an idea
- ask a question
- make a public announcement
- connect with one another
- monitor public opinion
- ask for public input
- and where journalists can look for story ideas or identify sources for articles.

The goal of a Local Issues Forum is to give everyone a greater voice in local decisions and encourage more citizen participation in local public policy making. It also provides a forum for decision-makers to receive immediate feedback from the community on issues that must be decided or voted on.

One of the most important features of a Local Issues Forum is that it is citizen driven. Anyone can introduce a topic, concern or idea for discussion as long as it relates to an issue that impacts the quality of life in the local community. A Local Issues Forum empowers individual citizens to bring their ideas, suggestions and concerns to the forefront of public attention.

...

How does it work?

A Local Issues Forum is an "email discussion group," - also known as a listserv or list or online forum. If you are active online, you probably have already encountered such lists. When you want to share your thoughts with the Local Issues Forum, you send an email to one address and the "SERVER" forwards your message to everyone else who is a member of the group. When anyone else on the group sends a response to your message, their response is forwarded to every other member of the group. The result is an ongoing community discussion that takes place in your email "in-box." Some software tools, such as GroupServer (a new tool that we use), allow for participants to participate either through email or a web interface.

Keep in mind, that messages to a Local Issues Forum are often forwarded to friends, distributed on other local

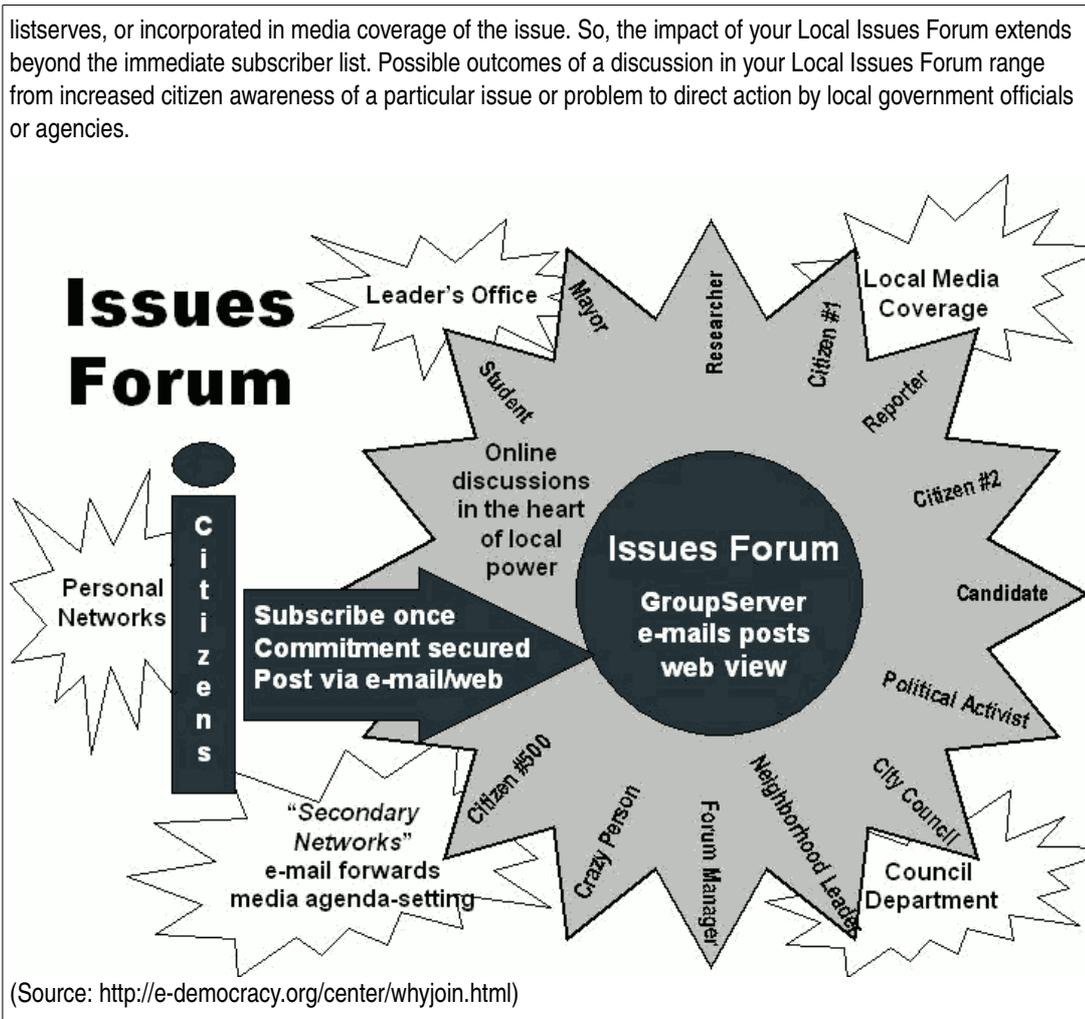


Figure 2.3.1. Extract from *Local Issues Forum guide*

Although a local issues forum may be sponsored by a local authority, it isn't controlled by them, nor do they have to respond to issues discussed there. Councillors, officials or the press may take up issues mentioned in the on-line discussion and raise them elsewhere. The Issues Forum supports communication between many local people, but the action still take place in council committees, service agencies, or political and media campaigns.

Stephen Clift, who started this model in Minnesota, finds that e-mail discussion lists prompt people to read and respond to the discussion more than a web-based discussion forum that people just visit every day or three. Over more than a decade in which such discussions have been run, the list moderators have developed rules that facilitate democratic discussion: some facilitated by human moderators, others enforced by the software (e.g. no more than 2 posts/day, so that no one person can dominate the discussion). In New Zealand these rules are now being built into Groupserver, an open source mail server + WWW discussion forum being developed in New Zealand.¹⁴

2.3.2.4 Story-telling blogs

Arguing about issues in short e-mails does not reveal all the depth of local and personal knowledge and feelings citizens have on an issue. To understand needs and issues requires more than just a few answers to a questionnaire. By getting people to tell stories, a consulter can start to learn from their tacit knowledge, their implicit models built from their life experiences.

How do we get people to tell stories on-line? By getting them to write their stories in weblogs (blogs for short). Many individuals keep on-line diaries of their opinions and (real or fictional)

¹⁴<http://groupserver.org/>

lives, in blogs. But as well as individual blogs, it is possible to use blog software to allow anyone to post a story to a collective blog. We did that for our e-consultation trial with The Wheel, inviting people across Ireland to tell us their stories of active citizenship, by filling in a form on the WWW, sending an e-mail, sending a text message, or leaving a voice mail recording. This will be used to inform The Wheel's submission to the Taoiseach's Task Force on Active Citizenship. See Chapter X for more details.

2.4 Exploring the problem

Given an agreed problem definition, participants can then start to explore the problem. They need the ability to see to heart of problem based on deep understanding of situation. As a group they can explore new ideas, develop new solutions, understand issues, disentangle ideas and so on.

A common complaint about consultation documents is that there is no discussion. For that reason, consultations often include some spaces for conversation or dialogue. E.g. public meetings, focus groups, consultative committees or citizen's juries. There are many electronic communication technologies that support discussions between people who are not necessarily all in the same room, or even present at the same time.

But not all discussions are the same. Different kinds of dialogue can take place, depending on the discussion environment. Newman et al. (1997) studied how students discussed controversial issues on-line and in face-to-face seminars. It turned out that discussion forums helped people link ideas together and justify them. There were fewer distractions than in face-to-face meetings, and the on-line record let people reflect on the issues, and write in a more deliberative style. But to get new ideas, people needed the stimulus of instant responses in real time.

To help select the right kind of discussion technology, we have grouped them into 3 categories:

Purpose	Technology	Examples
To get reactions, feelings, new idea	Real-time, synchronous chat (everyone on-line at the same time for at most a few hours)	chat rooms, IRC, audio and video conferencing.
Deliberation, dialogue, extended conversations	Asynchronous discussions (participants drop in when they can over days or weeks)	E-mail discussion lists, discussion forums.
To map out ideas for solving a problem.	Group support systems and other ideas mapping software (participants take part in a structured process, all typing at the same time)	WebIQ, Zing, Zeno, Dito, Group Systems.

2.4.1 Getting reactions in real-time chats

To get spontaneity, people need to interact in real time, in face-to-face encounters, video or audio conferences, chat rooms and elsewhere.

So if you want considered deliberation, use discussion forums or ideas mapping software. But to get instant engagement, excitement, and spark off new ideas and reveal feelings, use synchronous (same-time) technologies. In other words, use:

Real-time 'chat'

Systems that allow people to converse with others at the same time, reacting immediately to each other, wherever they happen to be. They don't need to be in the same room.

There are many electronic communication technologies that support dialogues between people who are not necessarily all in the same room, or even present at the same time. There is a choice of medium: text, audio or video.

On-line chat

Dozens of people type messages at the same time. Everyone's lines appear on the screen in front of you. It has been used in consultations involving all the schools in East Belfast.

Voice over the Internet (VOIP)

Talk to others over the Internet. You can set up conference calls between 2 to 5 Internet connected computers.

Video conferencing

Seeing, hearing, and questioning speakers at a distance. It is used to hold group meetings or live presentations over the Internet.

2.4.2 On-line chat

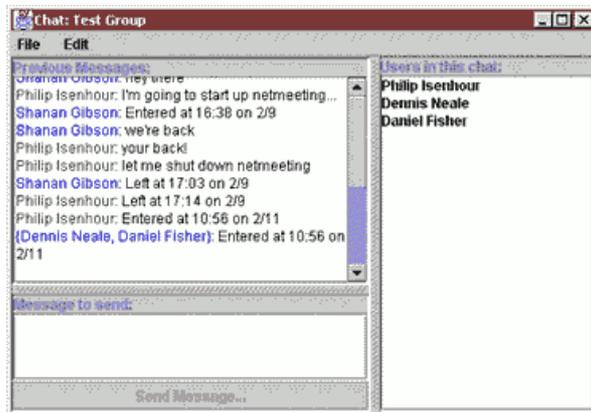


Figure 2.4.1. An on-line chat room.



Figure 2.4.2. 16-year old teaching how to moderate an on-line chat.

Figure 2.4.2 shows a 16-year old teaching civil servants how to run a chat over the Internet. In 2000, The East Belfast Partnership Board asked their youth worker, Matt Milliken, to find out the views of young people in East Belfast on contentious issues, such as human rights and policing. He needed to find a neutral venue (neither catholic nor protestant). The only one he could find at the time was the Internet. He set up chat rooms on a server, and ran them for 3 days. Every class in the computer room of every school in East Belfast went on-line to the chat rooms. The discussions were facilitated by trained 16-year olds, including the one in the picture. So e-consultation really is child's play!

To take part in a chat, you can point your browser at a chat room, log in, and start typing. Each time you hit return, the line appears on the screen, preceded by your nickname. The more people in the chat room, the faster the lines appear, and the quicker the chat goes.

Most web-hosted chat rooms can cope with one or two dozen users before they start to slow down. So dedicated chatters use chat clients that link to chat server networks, like Internet Relay Chat (IRC). You can get 50 active chatters and hundreds of lurkers (people who read but don't type) in an IRC channel.

2.4.3 Voice over the Internet (VOIP) audio calls

Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)

is a method of digitising your voice, sending it over the Internet, and turning it into sound at the other end.

You don't need dedicated telephone lines, just an Internet connection, and a computer with a sound card and a head set (or microphone plus speakers). It costs the same to talk to Melbourne or Maynooth.

We used Skype VOIP between Belfast, Maynooth and Letterkenny to plan our research. We have even used it between Vermont and our workshop in Armagh, to hear Lars Hasselblad Torres talk about the work of AmericaSpeaks¹⁵ and their 21st Century City Meetings. You can set up conference calls to 5 or 6 people at once.

¹⁵<http://www.americaspeaks.org/>

How would you use them in a consultation? There is not enough bandwidth, even in a broadband connection, to support dozens of people sending audio. There are two circumstances where they might help.

1. A telephone conference between key stakeholders, who cannot make it to a face-to-face meeting at the same time.
2. Connecting several local meeting rooms. Each room has a computer, radio microphone and speakers. Members of the public can take turns to hold the microphone, ask questions of experts, or present their views.

The second setting worked in Hilltown, at the foot of the Mourne mountains. People at the Green Party AGM in 2005 used a radio mike to ask questions to a Euro MP sitting in her office in Brussels. Her replies came loud and clear, via MSN Messenger and broadband Internet, over the speakers in the room. As she didn't have to fly, she didn't speed up global warming on that day.

Many VOIP clients can be downloaded. Most of them offer free calls between computers, but charge you for connections to conventional telephones.

2.4.4 Video conferencing

It is possible to compress video recordings and send the files across the Internet. This is the technology behind the online video download sites, like YouTube¹⁶. Small images can be streamed in real time, as they are recorded. There are three communications situations:

1. Video conferenced chats
2. Web casting
3. Video conferenced e-meetings

2.4.4.1 Video conferenced chats

For a video conferenced chat, everyone has a microphone, speakers or earphones and a web cam. They can see small images of everyone else, as shown in the screenshot on the right. They take turns to speak, discussing a topic among a small group.

Consultation applications include:

1. Online focus groups with illiterates.
2. Discussions with key stakeholders who cannot meet in the same place.



Figure 2.4.3. On-line video conferencing using Conference XP.

2.4.4.2 Web casting

One video is streamed to many viewers, such as in Internet broadcasts of parliamentary committees. Questions to the speaker come back through another channel, perhaps by typing them into IRC or a chat room.

Consultation applications include:

1. Letting more people look in on a face-to-face hearing or conference.
2. On-line public meetings, a video presentation followed by answered questions texted back.

¹⁶<http://www.youtube.com/>

There are many programs that will compress video and stream it over the Internet, but you need to pick one that your viewers' computers can play. There are competing containers for video (MPEG, AVI, Quicktime, Real Audio, Windows Media, Macromedia Flash, ...) and competing ways of compressing the audio and video, using different codecs. So start by surveying potential users and finding out what they can view.

If all else fails, you can try the low bandwidth solution of Democaster.¹⁷ It doesn't attempt to stream the video. Instead it streams audio, synchronised with still images taken every 10 or 20 s.

2.4.4.3 Video conferenced e-meetings

The main speaker is broadcast to others, who see the speaker and/or his presentation slides. Questions come back via video, audio or text, all integrated in the same software. Often there are shared whiteboards or documents, so that people can work together.

Consultation applications include:

1. On-line conferences, with sophisticated presentations, as an alternative or supplement to a face-to-face event.
2. Working parties or groups of key stakeholders needing to do synchronous work on solving a problem, not just the asynchronous work on mapping ideas and writing documents (discussed elsewhere).

Sophisticated E-meeting software integrates many functions in one product. It is often expensive. You might pay £5000 to £10000 for your own installation of a video conferencing server. Consequently, many companies host the video conferencing software for you, and let you hire it by the hour.

Commercial video conferencing software suitable for e-meetings includes: Macromedia Breeze, MarraTech, OnlineMeetingRooms, MegaMeeting, and WebEx, among others.

2.4.5 Deliberation and dialogue in discussion systems

For more subtle, and less rushed deliberation, arrange ongoing discussions, rather than quick chats. Any technology that facilitates a relay of responses or conversations can be used.

If you want to get the reactions of different people to each others views on an issue, and get some reflection as well as immediate argument, then on-line deliberation is what you need. Such ongoing discussions allow people to take part in longer debates over several days or weeks, joining in whenever they have time.

If you don't need discussion and reactions, but just the ordinary opinions of people who haven't deliberated on a subject, then use on-line surveys for measuring needs and preferences or collect their stories for identifying issues.

Topic view

Forum name : **Distribution of wealth and quality of life**

Topic name : **Distribution of wealth and quality of life**

Author	Topic
sean healy	Distribution of wealth and quality of life We live in a wealthy society in which many people still do not have the resources that allow them to avail of the material quality of life that some of our people have. Put simply our means of justly distributing income leaves a great deal to be desired. We can address this issue by changing our taxation and social welfare systems in a way that ensures everyone regardless of employment status has a basic income that allows them access a reasonable quality of life. That income could be established against the average disposable income levels available to citizens. Would you be prepared to see changes in the tax and social welfare codes to allow this to happen?
Laura Farrell	Basic income I've read the CORI suggestions for a basic income and I think they

Figure 2.4.4. Dublin City discussion forum.

Ongoing discussion can take place a slow reflective rhythm, in a WWW discussion forum (or bulletin board), such as PHP BB. This is an on-line service that allows registered users to post

¹⁷<http://dowire.org/wiki/Democaster> and <http://www.democaster.org/>

Figure 2.4.5 shows one kind of map. It is an issues-based information system, designed by Reitel to map out wicked problems, like those in town planning. Participants list issues, their alternative positions on each issue, and the advantages and disadvantages of each. The computer map keeps track of all the points made.

Figure 8.2.1 shows a group of people using another group support system, Zing.¹⁹ They each have a keyboard and can type at the same time. Everything they type appears on the screen that everyone can see. Using Zing numbers of keyboards can be plugged in to the same computer, so that people rapidly type in lists of examples and ideas in response to a series of questions. We used it a number of times during our research project. The Centre for Competitiveness²⁰ ran some sessions for us. One was during our Armagh Workshop.

Technologies supporting this task may facilitate brainstorming, a technique groups use to generate ideas on a particular subject. Each person in the team is asked to think creatively and write down as many ideas as possible. The ideas are not discussed or reviewed until after the brainstorming session. From the results of the brainstorming, options are formulated which are then ranked or rated.

We used WebIQ on a number of occasions during this project, including a theory-building workshop during the 2006 European Conference in E-Government in Marburg. Figure 7.2.1 shows the 21 ideas for getting young people more involved with e-consultation that 6 of us brainstormed in less than 15 minutes. We then went on to rate them individually on two criteria (engagement of participants and practicality of implementation). WebIQ lets us explore the rating statistics, including the X-Y plot of the average ratings shown in Figure 7.2.2.

2.5 Choosing and developing solutions

Once participants have explored the problem, potential solutions, and their intended and unintended consequences, they need to develop and write up the better solutions, and choose which solution(s) to implement. Depending on the consultation topic, the writing and developing may come first, before a consensus vote between the developed options; or the preferences affecting the choice can be measured first, then used in developing a satisfactory solution.

There are e-consultation technologies that can help in collaborative writing, and others that can help in measuring preferences.

2.5.1 Collaborative writing to create solutions

Not only do consulting bodies need someone to write a report on the consultation, but also consulted groups often need to put together a document responding to a consultation. In both cases, it helps if a group can be asked to develop their solution and write it up in a report. With computer software running on a server, several people can work on the same document at the same time, writing different parts of it, then editing each other's work.

2.5.1.1 Creating consensus documents on wikiwiki sites

A group of people who have agreed to work together can collaboratively write wikiwiki web pages. A wikiwiki web page (or wiki for short) can be edited by anyone who has been given access to the site. You click on the edit link, and the text appears inside a WWW form editing box (Figure 2.5.1). Change the text, using very simple mark-up, and save it. A new version of the page appears. Once you have edited a couple of pages, you can see why the system has been named after the Hawaiian word for quick, *wikiwiki*.

¹⁹<http://www.anyzing.com/>

²⁰<http://www.cforc.org/>

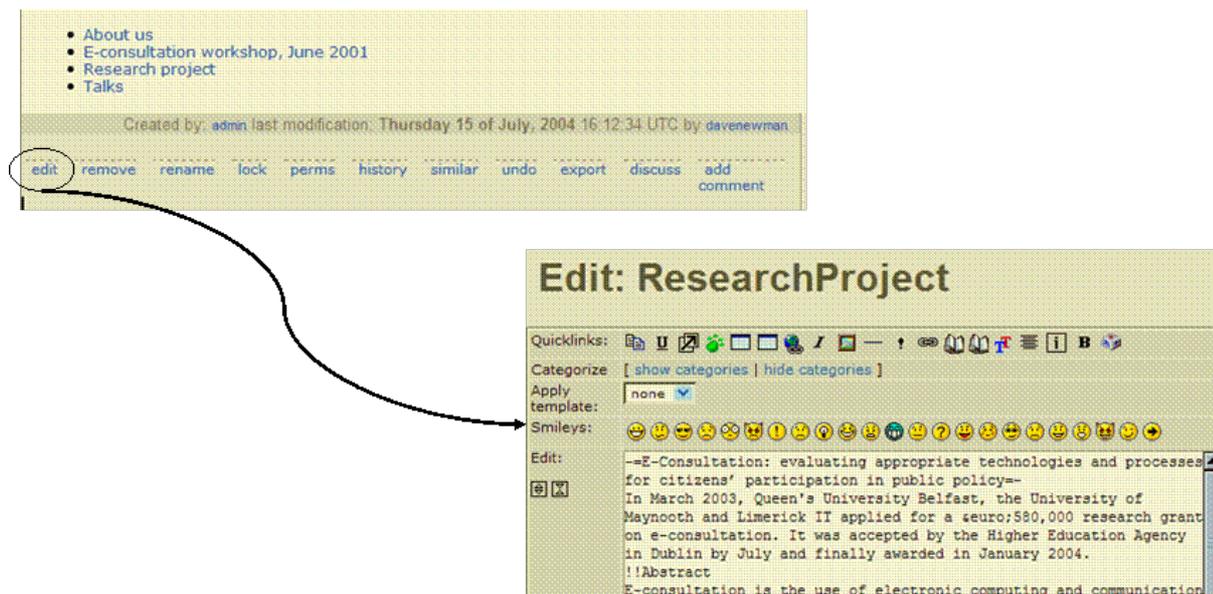


Figure 2.5.1. Editing a wikiwiki page.

In this manner, groups of people can work on the same pages, each developing and correcting each others work (a lot quicker than circulating word processing documents). There is even a wikwiki encyclopaedia, Wikipedia²¹. Wikiwiki software can be set up to run on a web server, and accessed by anyone. The research team is using Mediawiki²² software to create a guide to e-consultation²³, to which others will be invited to contribute.

2.5.1.2 Reporting differences in GRASS

However, if there is strong disagreement between writers, you can get editing wars, when one person keeps deleting another person's edits (Orlowski 2006). In such circumstances, rather than try to get everyone to agree on a single document, it is better to record the different positions.

This is the approach taken in Aldo de Moor's GRASS.²⁴ He used it in his Ph.D. research to get loggers and environmentalists to co-write a report on forestry policy for British Columbia. The software structures the report into a number of issues chosen by the writers. On each issue, stakeholders write their own positions. Others can then indicate whether they agree with that position or not, as shown in Figure 2.5.2.

The result is a report that makes clear the differences, rather than pretending there is some technical optimum or pre-existing political consensus. The job of deciding what to do is then an explicitly political one, informed by the detailed arguments in the report (not just media sound bites).

2.5.2 Measuring needs and preferences

He we group together the quantitative ways a consulter can find out how many citizens have which needs, and what their preferences are between alternative options.

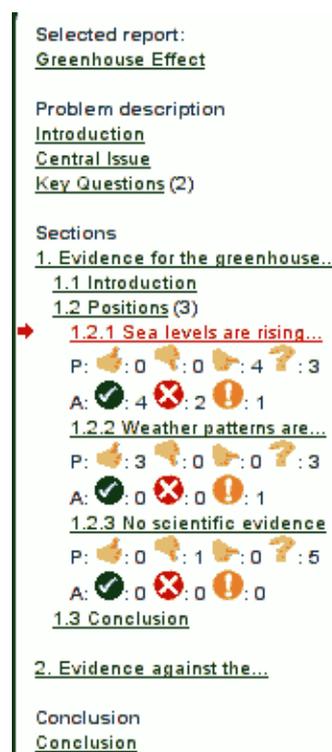


Figure 2.5.2. Positions in GRASS

²¹<http://en.wikipedia.org/>

²²<http://www.mediawiki.org/>

²³<http://www.e-consultation.org/guide/>

²⁴<http://www.wagenvoort.net/grass/>

Some consultations set out to find what particular groups of people need. Others try to find out what preferences people have between different options. In either case, apart from discussion systems, we often use surveys and votes to quantify the needs or preferences.

Computers can help send out surveys, collect the results, and analyse them. They can also be used to run a quick vote in a meeting, or by subtle analysis of preferences, find underlying consensus between opponents.

2.5.2.1 On-line surveys

Consider the screen shots from an on-line survey shown in Figure 3.1.1. They are taken from PHP Surveyor, but similar facilities are found in many packages that run surveys on the WWW. Take each image in turn.

1. The survey designer edits the survey, picking question types from a list and typing in the options. All the choices are stored in a database.
2. The respondents fill out the survey in their web browser. When they submit the survey, it is stored in the database.
3. The survey administrator can check how many people have responded, and send e-mail reminders to those who haven't.
4. The survey analyst can view summary statistics of the survey results, or export the data to allow detailed analysis in spreadsheets or statistical analysis packages.

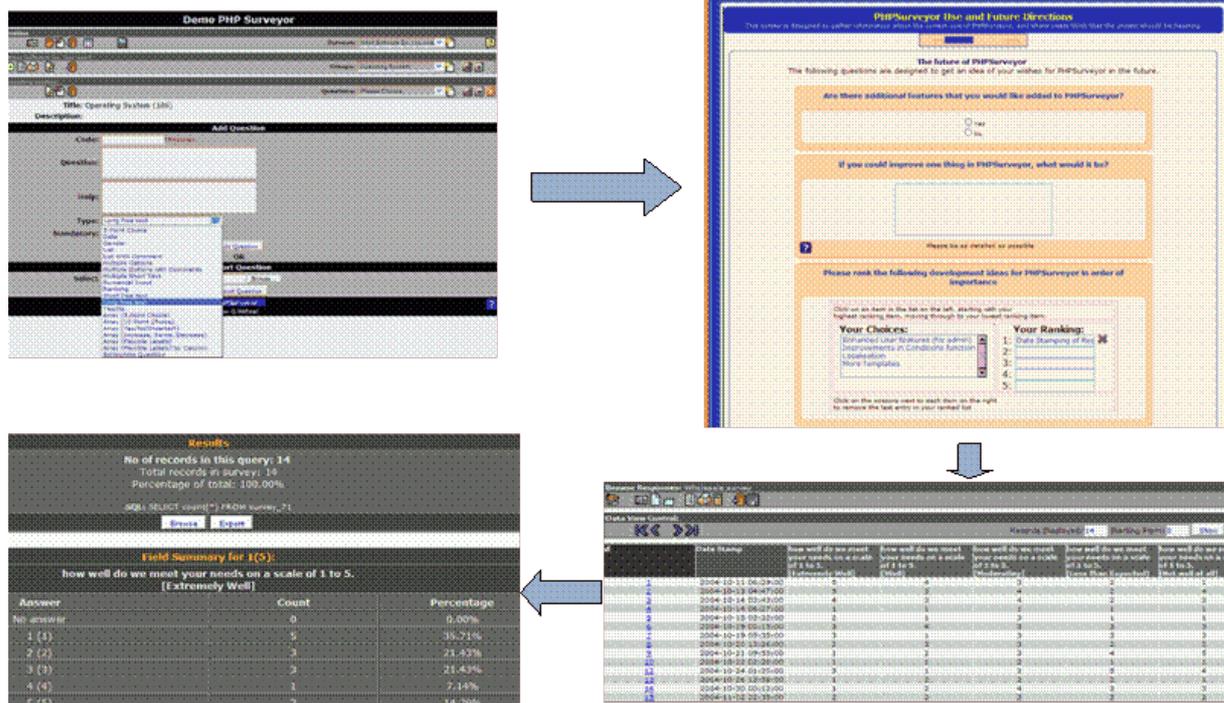


Figure 2.5.3. The on-line survey cycle.

At each stage, the on-line process can save time, for both the consultants and the consultees. A good on-line survey tool will make it easy for respondents to pick options with just one click, and will hide from them any irrelevant questions.²⁵ If you have a list of e-mail addresses for your survey sample, you can enter them into the system, then click on a button to send out invitation e-mails to every one of them: a lot quicker and cheaper than printing, addressing and paper surveys. Nor is there any need to type in responses, as they are automatically stored in the database.

However, there are two circumstances under which on-line surveys do not save time.

²⁵There's no need for instructions like, 'If you answered NO to Q8, go ahead to Q24 on page 14'. The software conditionally hides or reveals questions.

1. When a large proportion of the survey population do not have access to the WWW or e-mail, they will either have to be surveyed by traditional techniques (e.g. posted paper questionnaires), or their views captured in another way (e.g. in focus groups). The better on-line survey tools, such as PHP Surveyor, can print out a paper questionnaire, and then provide an interface to make it easy for clerical staff to enter the answers from the completed questionnaire.
2. The time savings depend on the software being easy to use. If the interfaces have poor usability, the users will either give up or spend more time fighting the interface. In the first year of our project we used SPSS's on-line survey tools. They were harder to use, for both the survey designers and the respondents, than either free software like PHP Surveyor, or commercial tools like Resposian's Consultation Suite. Good web interface design is different from good design of paper questionnaires.

2.5.2.2 E-polling or e-voting

Here we are not talking about voting for representatives in an election, but choosing between policy options in an opinion poll or multiple-choice referendum (a preferendum). The voters are not choosing the best person, but indicating their preferences between possible options.

Technology can help in two ways:

1. Collecting votes.
2. Analysing the votes.

Electronic vote collection

Rather than filling in papers and waiting for someone to count them, voters can hit keys on an electronic device that transmits their vote to a computer for analysis. This can be done in a meeting room, over radio or infra-red, using a personal response system (PRS). A number of universities use PRS in lectures, so that students can give quick reactions to questions, and the lecturer knows which misconceptions to address.

We have used PRS in the same manner when giving a presentation to the HEA conference in Dundalk in 2005. We also used it in the launch meeting of our NSEC e-consultation trial, to find out quickly the opinions of the attendees on policy for north-south educational exchanges (see Chapter TRIALS). In each case we handed out voting terminals, put the questions on the screen, and gave people 15 or 20 s to press the number on the keypad corresponding to their choice. The results appeared on the screen within 5 s, so the audience got instant feedback on their votes. Such rapid, anonymous, voting could be used to progress issues in public meetings.

An alternative to paying €80 for dedicated voting keypads, is to vote by mobile 'phone. There are several packages that will collect votes sent in SMS messages, analyse and display the results. You can set closed questions with options, so that people text back A, B or C, and then display the votes for each option. Or you can set an open ended question, and display on a screen all the answers you get. We have used the latter technique in workshop presentations, asking the audience to text comments and questions during the talk, so that the speaker can pick out groups of texted questions to answer at once.

Computer analysis of voting

Since computers can manipulate data, and do calculations, at high speed, they can support more subtle analyses of votes than is usually done on opinion polls.

At the time of the French revolution, mathematicians such as Condorcet and de Borda were studying ways to measure opinions, and determine the fairest consensus preference from their votes. They used one of these techniques, the de Borda count, in the elections to the French Academy of Sciences. However, the analysis on paper was so time-consuming they didn't persist with this method, and it was dropped by their new head, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Now necessity is the mother of invention. The necessities of the troubles in Northern Ireland have led to a lot of inventions in democracy and conflict resolution. Peter Emerson has applied the de Borda count to finding consensus in decision-making (Emerson 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002; Newman and Emerson 1997). A deliberation process leads to a set of half a dozen to a dozen options. Voters then indicate their preferences for these options by ranking them all. This forces them to consider not only their first choice²⁶, but what they would settle for if they couldn't get that. The de Borda count simply adds up their preferences. The lowest choice gets one point, the second lowest two points and so on. The consequence is often that an option that everyone puts second or third gets more points than something that half the voters put first, but the other half put last. Mathematically, the preferendum can find consensus.

Such voting calculations are easier on a computer than by hand, so Peter Emerson's de Borda Institute²⁷ has produced a CD-ROM of preferendum voting software that can be used in a meeting to analyse the results by majority vote, alternative vote, the de Borda count and other techniques.

2.6 Managing the consultation process

This is not a communication activity, but every consultation has to be managed, and some IT can help. Among the many possibilities, three stand out.

1. Managing contacts
2. Analysing responses
3. Writing documents

2.6.1 Managing consultation contacts

Any consultation involving a large number of participants needs some way of managing all the contacts with them. First they need to know about the consultation, then brought in, kept informed and engaged during the process, and given feedback at the end.

There is software for customer relationship management (CRM), which keeps in a database all the contacts an organisation has with customers, both the contact details and the history of what was discussed in previous contacts. Unfortunately, much CRM software has been designed to meet the needs of private sector sales campaigns, classifying customers as prospects, and conflating every contact in a company as the same relationship.

Neither applies in public consultation, as NSEC discovered when they wanted to use CRM software to keep track of their separate contacts with administrators, teachers and students in schools (see Chapter TRIAL). So Yan Chen had to customise the free SugarCRM software to meet their needs for consultation. Any CRM used to support public consultation needs either to have been specially designed for public sector use (like the software Belfast City Council has purchased) or customised specifically to meet the requirements of consultation exercises. The customisation is a lot easier if you have access to the source code, as Yan Chen had.

There are also tools for keeping in touch with groups of people. If a consulting body can get people to sign up to an e-mail newsletter, then they can send out weekly or monthly updates to inform them of public meetings, focus groups, surveys and other consultation events, and the particular topics currently under discussion. Such e-mail lists are different to discussion lists. Instead of everyone's messages being forwarded to everyone else, the body sends out the e-mails, the others merely subscribe to receive the regular e-mails (and can unsubscribe when they have had enough). We set up PHP list software for NSEC to use in their consultation.²⁸

²⁶Often predictable in Northern Ireland.

²⁷<http://www.deborda.org/>

²⁸Although it wasn't used then, as at the time they didn't have the staff to write the newsletters.

2.6.2 Analysing consultation responses

Policy makers will not read everything produced in a consultation. They need summaries and analyses of responses. Tools for analysing quantitative data (e.g. from surveys) are well-known. But there is also software that can be used to analyse qualitative data (e.g. from focus groups and discussion forums). Computer aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) is well-known to academic researchers, but less so among consultation practitioners.

Researchers can load transcripts of interviews, focus groups, discussion forums or consultation responses. Then they can associate parts of each transcript (a paragraph or a phase) with keywords, according to their desired coding strategy. Often the CAQDAS software then lets the researchers search for other parts of other transcripts with the same phrases or words. It always can help bring together all the parts of the transcripts coded with the same keys, so that the researcher can study the words used by different people about the same topic.

In analysing a consultation, one might use one set keywords associated with different issues in the consultation, and another set associated with particular stakeholder positions, so producing an issue-based analysis without forcing participants to distinguish between issues, positions, advantages and disadvantages.

2.6.3 Writing reports on the consultation

The same software that helps groups of consultees put together submissions can be used by a group of consultation analysts when preparing their reports. Rather than one person writing a draft in a word processor, then circulating it for edits, the consultation team can collaboratively write their report on password-protected private wikiwiki web pages, as described above. Teams that expect to do a lot of group document editing can invest in specialised group document editing systems, as used by technical authors, or those group support systems which pay particular attention to collaborative writing, like Lotus Notes.

Chapter 3. Consultation values and evaluating e-consultation

If we want to evaluate how well ICTs can make consultations better, we need to agree on what is a ‘better’ consultation. But people do not agree on what makes a consultation better. In our surveys and focus groups, we found contrasting values and expectations of consultation, between civil servants running a consultation (who want citizens views, but do not, usually, want citizens to participate in decision-making) and the community and voluntary groups who respond to consultations.

In trying to find theories to evaluate what makes a consultation ‘better’ we have found similar conflicts between theoretical perspectives. E.g., researchers in public sector management and theorists of deliberative democracy make different assumptions and pay attention to different issues. There exists no theoretical synthesis between their theories, or between them and other relevant disciplines, such as Computer Supported Co-operative Work, Computer Mediated Communications or Information Systems.

Faced with that, how can we hope to evaluate e-consultation in this research project? This chapter explains how. It is in two parts.

The first part explores the different theoretical perspectives that could be applied to e-consultation, shows how they conflict, and describes the theory-building activities we have started, that we hope will eventually lead to a new theoretical synthesis on valuing consultation and e-consultation. Unfortunately, we are not there yet.

The second part describes the resolutely empirical approach we have taken to our research in the absence of theoretical consensus. We set out to develop a deeper understanding of consultation goals, values and processes, participants needs, and the actual and potential role of e-consultation technologies in consultation processes.

3.1 Theoretical perspectives on (e-)consultation

Which theories might one draw on to design, implement or evaluate public consultation processes, or the effects of alternative ICT technologies and techniques on these processes? Consultation and participation are ideas whose time appears to have arrived—yet again! A useful theoretical point of departure is Arnstein’s (1969) classic article where she commented on the ubiquity and fashionableness of the terms at that time but critically questioned the extent to which such ideas were mainly about allowing the powerful to claim that all sides were considered while acting in ways that benefit only the few. Arnstein developed a typology of eight levels of participation representing a ladder from non-participation to complete citizen control (Figure 2.4.3). We have added a zero-level, coercion, to cover extreme forms of manipulation evident in some parts of the world where extreme military or paramilitary groups hold power. Admittedly a simplification, the first stage is simply cosmetic consultation where citizens may hear and be heard, although they lack the resources to ensure that their views will be taken into account. The ladder moves through various degrees of token consultation where the ground rules allow the consulted to advise through partnership and eventually to the possibly impractical utopia of complete citizen control over all issues.

If e-consultation technologies and processes are to enhance the democratic process, however, how can one definitively state that they have done so? Public consultation is both an administrative process used in policy formulation/decision-making and a participative process supporting citizen involvement in the democratic process. It is also clearly a communicative process between citizen-government and/or stakeholder-government. Each of these perspectives has its own literature (see Figure 2.3.1) which tends to view its context from only its own perspective, and generally ignores evidence and values from other possible perspectives. None

of them, on their own, are sufficient in developing an understanding of the complex contexts or the various relational aspects of processes in e-consultation (see Figure 3.1.1²⁹).

Type of Process	Research Approach	Concentration on ...	Values from ...
Democratic	Deliberative democracy. Principles of communicative action and discourse ethics (Habermas).	Quality of ongoing relationships between government and civil society actors in consultation processes; fairness; equality.	Democratic theory.
Participative	Social exclusion; Arnstein's ladder; CSCW.	Who controls, depth of engagement in a particular consultation..	Participants' needs
Administrative	Public administration; new public management; most of the e-government literature.	Efficiency and effectiveness of administering each isolated consultation, to reach a single decision.	Consulters' needs
Decision-making	Normative and descriptive decision-making (in psychology and management disciplines); GDSS	Effects of processes on the quality of decisions made, and the speed of decision-making. Some look at consensus formation.	Mathematical norms; objectives/goals of decision-making teams and/or their organisation.
Communicative	Communication studies; computer mediated communication;	Experiences and interactions in communication activities.	Cognitive or affective models of communication processes.

Figure 3.1.1. Theoretical perspectives on public (e-)consultation.

To illustrate this emerging complexity we contrast the applicability of two of these theoretical approaches on participation and decision-making: consultation as an administrative process and consultation as a democratic process.

3.1.1 Administrative perspective

Consultation applies not only to policy development and its expression in law, but also to the delivery of services, particularly in the new, partly marketised forms that these are presently taking. Services are provided by a range of state and non state agencies in a variety of quasi public, partly private and market-based formats which require citizens to act as consumers in order to exercise a degree of accountability and control by virtue of their status as customers. This change in public sector provision is perhaps best described in terms of the modernisation agenda. Modernisation is a world-wide trend (OECD 2003) which shares several common elements based essentially on developing consumer focus, improving public sector performance and taking advantage of new information and communication technology (Charlton & Andras 2003). It also emphasises ideas of consumer consultation and participation which provide particular opportunities for using new technology (Davies 2005).

The underlying general policy here is one of customer focus which requires increasingly that services are targeted and delivery mechanisms monitored. This involves new levels and types of consultation. At the local government level both improved service delivery and enhanced consultation are central to new approaches to local services (Oliver 2003). For example, ideas about community leadership duties contained in the Local Government Act 2000 (and DLTR 2001) put an emphasis on articulating and developing a vision for the community to be obtained after extensive dialogue and consultation. The Best Value regime also involves commitment to consult all sections of the local community on key best value priorities and on the effectiveness of service delivery. Here consultation occurs not so much on the basis of citizenship and participation in public decision making about what constitutes the good life lived together: rather participation is in consumer terms where delivery is focused and satisfaction monitored in an effort to improve services that are now delivered as commodities within a quasi-market based mechanism where customer status is more significant than citizenship. As one recent statement of how New Labour intend to develop further this general programme in its third term of office expresses it, "it is by embracing customer satisfaction as the key driver for public services – finding out what people actually want from their services and using that information

²⁹In the diagram, ako stands for 'is a kind of', a sub-class relationship.

to drive change programmes – that we can help public services catch up with the best on offer in wider society” (Hutton 2005).

Given this focus on customer satisfaction, public officials are expected to consult. But how does a public sector decision-maker conceive of consultation? Ann Macintosh (in OECD 2003) elicited from the UK Cabinet Office a set of stages in government policy-making:

1. agenda-setting
2. analysis
3. formulation
4. implementation and monitoring.

Each of these activities could be carried out by civil servants without any citizen participation. So why should people in public sector bodies even consult the public? Jones and Gammell (2004) identified four contexts in which public bodies carry out a consultation:

Pre-considered: consultation acts as a potential brake, e.g. We intend to go ahead with this proposal, unless the consultation exercise gives us reason to reconsider.

Programmed: decision may form part of an annual cycle which is formally preceded by consultation as a regular part of a defined process, e.g. Budget confirmation and rate setting by local authorities.

Structured: decision based on a series of options, the choice of which can be influenced by consultation, e.g. Most written consultations form Government ministries

Open ended: Deliberately designed to take account of the outcome of a process of public or stakeholder consultation, e.g. What should we do with this parcel of derelict land?

These are four common consultation scenarios, driven either by legislative necessity, or past custom and practice. These do not exhaust the ways in which public consultation can be incorporated into policy formation and decision-making processes. Interestingly, Jones and Gammell’s four contexts have implications for the kind of knowledge transfer needed: from measuring explicit preferences among a small range of options, through more subtly eliciting stakeholder needs and values, to ongoing dialogue allowing some sharing of tacit knowledge during a creative design process. But the public sector management literature does not go into this.

Given one of these situations, how could the consultation be improved, from the perspective of the decision-maker? Macintosh proposed a set of key objectives that can be applied to any e-engagement activity as a basis for evaluation:

- Reaching a wider audience
- Providing relevant information
- Enabling more in depth consultation
- Analysing contributions
- Providing relevant and appropriate feedback to citizens
- Monitoring and evaluating

Note the emphasis on the needs of a professional decision-maker. Five of the six objectives concentrate on explicit knowledge transfer, of simple information from citizens to the decision-maker. Only in ‘in-depth consultation’ could one imagine that knowledge sharing might occur. Citizens are seen as sources of information, rather than as partners in decision-making.

What this perspective does help us study are the efficiency and efficacy of alternative consultation processes. Technology can be used to improve existing processes, or to enable consultation process re-engineering (analogous to business process re-engineering) once we have a sequential process view of consultation.

However, in modelling the process of a single consultation, this perspective ignores the ongoing relationships between different actors in consultation (e.g. when local government carries out consultations every year). It is possible to design an efficient consultation that so alienates some of the participants that they will never participate in another. The deliberative democracy theorists, and researchers into partnerships, consider on-going relationships, but usually ignore specific process details.

3.1.2 Democratic perspective

Before turning to consultation, we will start by examining different understandings of democracy that relates directly to the perceived need for participation (Morison 2004). While administrators may take for granted that the consultation is to collect evidence for their work in a representative democracy, participants may imagine they are taking part in a deliberative democracy. So there is a conflict between theories as well as a conflict in interests and values.

Democracy can be seen as being either incumbent in traditional, liberal representative institutions, or existing as a more radical, critical concept. This touches upon differences between “constitutional democracy” and “revolutionary” democracy (Wolin 1994), procedural and substantive democracy (Gutmann & Thompson 1996), aggregative as opposed to integrative approaches (Pateman 1989; Dryzek 1990). It relates also to distinctions between representational and direct democracy, top-down and bottom-up democracy, and adversary and unitary democracy (Mansbridge 1980). Emerging from the very large literature on democracy, this distinction in part charts the movement from thin to thicker concepts but it also relates to distinctions over how democracy is experienced and the perspective from which the institutions of democracy are viewed. It reflects, as Blaug (2002) argues, that democracy is “a struggle over power, and as such, it provides an entirely different experience to those who hold power and those who do not”.

In this way, viewed from the centre of institutions of power, democracy appears as a set of structures where interests are represented and participation is channelled through institutionalised channels and by means of voting systems. This is incumbent democracy: it is a justificatory and legitimising idea. Viewed from another perspective, at the periphery of the institutions of government, the powerless see democracy as a response to exclusion. From this perspective democracy becomes a means of challenging the orderly management of decision-making and instead demanding that a whole range of power relationships be democratised as excluded voices are empowered in wider participatory processes.

From the perspective of incumbent democracy the focus is on frameworks for decision making while more radical democracy is concerned with process. Elster (1986) describes the distinction by using the metaphor of the “market” and the “forum”. With liberal, representative or incumbent democracy there is a market for choices and the most popular policy or political party will win the competition for votes. Participation here is primarily instrumental. It is not about producing or shaping preferences but about aggregating them and giving effect to the most popular. In representative systems popular authorisation generally extends through only to the choice by citizens of representatives who will decide on the content of public decisions. In contrast a more deliberative approach, however, is concerned with preference building. The emphasis here is on “voice” and which argument is most persuasive in the forum of ideas and deliberation. It is an integrative as opposed to aggregative approach that sees society as an essentially social construct where preferences are endogenously produced and empowerment comes from participation in collective decision making on the actual substance of public action.

However what is common to both versions of democracy is a belief that greater participation is important and necessary.

Consultation and participation are ideas whose time seems to have come – again. In a classic article, Arnstein (1969) commented on the ubiquity and fashionableness of the terms at that time but wondered about the extent to which such ideas were mainly about allowing the powerful to claim that all sides were considered while acting in ways that benefit only some people. Arnstein developed a typology of eight levels of participation which represent a ladder moving from essentially non-participation to full citizen control. This is shown in Figure 2.4.3. We have added a level 0, coercion, to cover extreme forms of manipulation, as practised in some parts of the world by military and paramilitary forces.

8	Citizen Control	Degree of citizen power
7	Delegated Power	
6	Partnership	
5	Placation	Degree of tokenism
4	Consultation	
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	Non-participation
1	Manipulation	
0	Coercion	

Figure 3.1.2. Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (extended)

At the first stage there is cosmetic consultation where citizens may hear and be heard, although they lack the resources to ensure that their views will be taken into account. The ladder moves through various degrees of token consultation where the ground rules allow the consulted to advise but these rules retain for those who hold power the right to decide. Further up the ladder citizen power begins to develop with partnership at stage 6 encouraging negotiation and trade-offs between the consulted and decision takers. At stages 7 and 8 citizens have obtained full managerial control and participation is complete and real.

Of course this eight rung ladder is a simplification but it does allow us to see that participation and consultation are very varied in their scope and effect. Full citizen control is quite a frightening prospect and it might in many instances be impractical. However when government conjures up the genie of consultation either as an adjunct to stimulate and revive incumbent democracy, or as a way of widening and deepening participation in making policy, or to sharpen the focus of new service delivery mechanisms, it should be mindful of where on the ladder it wishes to place itself and how it wishes to respond to the demands and challenges this makes. Consultation that is worthy of the name does not mean that the policy is determined by the views of those who could be bothered to take part, any more than it means simply that the original policy is followed irrespective of the opinions of those consulted. At the same time it is quite possible that after considerable consultation there is simply no agreement. (Not even the most enthusiastic advocate of deliberative democracy would maintain that agreement is always possible.) However it is important that the process of decision-making is designed to maximise its participatory character and lead to a properly deliberative outcome. At the very least, and in order to give some substance to claims of democracy, it is necessary to develop models which hear all possible voices and give full consideration to views expressed. Agreement may not always be reached but ideas of reciprocity require as a minimum that justifications and explanations are offered for taking decisions that do not accord with the views of those consulted. Beyond this minimum there are a whole range of possible models for describing what properly deliberative decision making might look like (and a variety of strategies, including simply voting, for deciding what to do when agreement does not come). All such processes will share, however, the commitment to fairness and inclusion that characterises a properly democratic approach where the process of decision-making is given priority over the pursuit of any particular outcome from that process.

This deliberative democracy perspective is concerned about the ongoing relationships between citizens, civil society and the state, rather than the efficiency of a single consultation.

3.1.3 Conflict resolution perspective

During business decision-making there is disagreement and conflict. But GDSS designers do not need to consider the extreme disagreement found in public politics. A workplace team set up

to reach a decision is working under the implicit threat that if they don't agree, their boss will impose a decision upon them. Compare that with the effects upon the streets of Belfast, Sarajevo or Fallujah of a failure to reach consensus. There are alternatives to democracy: violence is one. Compare the peace rally in Figure 3.1.5 with the violent protest in Figure 2.4.1.



Figure 3.1.4. Peace rally in Belfast (Feb. 1996)



Figure 3.1.3. News images of hatred.

Therefore, one needs to consider issues of conflict and consensus formation in public consultation. It is possible to conceive of a consultation as a mediation and negotiation process. As in any mediation, at the beginning the participants discuss issues and the needs of each group, while avoiding setting out positions. Once the issue is agreed, they can start to explore the problem and possible solutions, creating a map of possibilities. In workplace teams, this may continue until all are agreed, sharing the same mental model of the situation. In public decision-making, this is unlikely. So there follows a stage of evaluation and choice, in which one uses subtle consensus voting systems, such as the de Borda preferendum, to find where there might be underlying consensus despite disagreement on first ranked choices. This is shown in Figure 2.1.1 in Chapter 2 on p. 20 (Morison and Newman 2001).

It is a good normative model for consultation where conflict might arise. Like the public sector management perspective, the focus is on decision-making, rather than ongoing relationships. However, this perspective looks at the process from the viewpoint of a group of citizens forming consensus, rather than that of the civil service decision-maker.

The other weakness of this model is that it does not cover all types of consultation. It is hard to apply to routine annual service satisfaction consultations, run by local authorities, the common use of consultation to give legitimacy to an already taken decision, or early-stage consultations investigating citizens issues and needs, without a particular decision in mind.

3.1.4 Communicative and participative perspectives: consultation and ICTs

The democratic and administrative perspectives value consultations according to different outcomes of the consultation processes, but do not tell us how to improve these outcomes. Several approaches to improving valued outcomes, such as quality management, business process re-engineering, and knowledge management and organizational learning strategies, require process transformation. In transforming the processes, change agents set out to improve the participation of different actors in the process, paying particular attention to communications between them.

Traditional consultation techniques have been limited by information and communication management in oral and paper-based cultures. One could even argue that their design has been determined by the technological constraints. A consultation document sent out on paper must contain everything the consulters want to tell the consultees. Consequently, it is long and often complicated. Few people have the time and high reading ages required to read and digest these documents, write long replies, and post them back. Nor can the people analysing the replies, producing consultation response summaries, cope with many of them. The other traditional technique, of the public meeting, either has too few people turning up, or can be dominated by a few people in a larger crowd. Neither of these would be optimum contexts for knowledge transfer.

A variation on communicative perspectives is the idea of collaborative cognition, of Pitsis, Kornberger and Clegg 2004; Walsh, 1995). Collaborative cognition includes collaborative learning, collaborative knowledge management, knowledge transfer, collaborative memory and collaborative communication. The purpose is collaborative learning, which can be transformed into the intellectual assets of collaborative knowledge management. Towards this end, collaborators communicate, making sense of each other, in a collaborative memory: but not necessarily coming to agreement on a single shared sense of the information; there can still be cultural diversity in understandings. What links the means to the end is a commitment to knowledge transfer, specially designed processes for sharing knowledge, and clear procedures defining the knowledge to be captured.

3.1.5 Theory-building for (e)-consultation

There is a need for theory-building. Consider the different theoretical approaches that might be applied to e-consultation and other forms of participative e-governance, as laid out in Figure 2.3.1, p. 25. Public administration researchers ask policy makers for their goals, and then set those out as criteria for consultation or e-consultation (Macintosh 2004). This leads them, naturally, to concentrate on the efficiency and effectiveness of a particular consultation. Deliberative democracy theorists start from the needs of citizens, and concentrate on the long-term relationships between citizens and government. They may classify these relationships according to the extent to which citizens are in control of decision-making, as opposed to being manipulated, along Arnstein's ladder (Arnstein 1969). The existing theories are in conflict. They are based on conflicting values, and look at different evidence. Given these conflicts, how can one say that a particular consultation is better than another? Whose criteria should we use? How can people write best practice guidelines, when there isn't a consensus on what is better?

There is a need for both empirical and theoretical work to reconcile such conflicts. Over the past two years we have run five workshops bringing together researchers from different projects and different disciplines to discuss these theoretical issues, as a basis for eventual theory-building. We are far from reaching a synthesis, but there are some observations that have arisen from these discussions, our e-consultation trials and the literature.

People are often talking at cross-purposes. They are looking at different processes, with differing definitions of the boundaries and goals of the system. Within each approach, some of the goals, values, boundaries and systems definitions are taken for granted. We need to make these explicit. For example, in Figure 4.3.2, illustrating the number of people collaborating in consultations in a locality over time, you see a number of consultations, over time, involving different groups of participants. C1, C2, ... C6 are individual consultations, each involving a range of participants, and running for a short time. In each consultation there are problem-solving processes, in which the participants start from a scenario (e.g. a problem, a situation, a plan) and produce outcomes (e.g. reports, decisions, chosen actions). At the same time as a particular problem is being solved, the participants engage in democratic communications, which have a cumulative effect on their relationships, feelings and attitudes (more or less trust, more or less legitimacy, more or less willingness to engage in the future, ...).

An administrator, wanting an efficient consultation, is concerned about the efficiency of the process, and the effectiveness of the outcome, for an individual consultation (the arrow going down at the end of each consultation). This fits with the modernising government agenda: how can we effectively get the views of customers of government services so that they can be improved to increase customer satisfaction and reduce costs?

But those are not the most important values by which consultees or democratic theorists would judge a consultation. Participants are more concerned with their psychological engagement in the collaboration, they must feel it is worthwhile taking part. Over time, as participant engage in several consultations, they develop relationships with others. The cumulative long-term effect of these relationships, can be one of trust, legitimising the consultation processes, or distrust and alienation. Is it the human relationships, engendered by communication experiences that

determine the place on Arnstein's ladder for the democratic outcomes of the consultation processes.

Most literature does not look at both dimensions of this drawing. Public sector management specialists, and normative decision support literature look only at achieving efficient outcomes. Deliberative democracy theorists, psychologists of computer mediated communication, and the descriptive decision support literature focus on the interpersonal relationships and democratic values. Researchers in each discipline, in trying to produce a single model of collaboration, have been forced into ignoring either the short-term or long-term aspects of the experience of collaboration, and then evaluated what they can study in their models against a narrow set of values.

Rather than try to force these approaches into an unnatural union, it helps if we identify the different system boundaries. Around the outside of the whole diagram is the democratic system. This includes all the relationship-building encounters between actors in democratic governance. It continues over time. In it we find the development of trust, and the development of some shared meanings.³⁰ This system or level sets the ultimate criteria against which all the other systems are judged in the long term.

Inside are the individual consultation systems. The boundary is set by the individual consultation process. In addition to democratic goals inherited from the democratic system, there are effectiveness goals for the particular consultation, as a problem-solving activity. We use the term problem-solving, rather than decision making, here because it encompasses a wider range of activities.

	Individual consultation system	Democratic system
Customer (who benefits)	Administrators	Citizens
Actors	All participants	All participants
Transformation	Scenario → problem-solving → outcomes	Participation → engagement → changed relationships
Weltaanschauung	Citizens helping administrators and legislators govern	Civil servants and politicians serving their citizen masters
Owner (makes or breaks)	Consultation organisers	Citizens (directly or mediated)
Environmental factors	related to participation in a particular consultation	related to power and trust

Figure 3.1.5. Contrasting systems views of e-consultation.

The individual consultation systems and the overarching democratic system are not the same, as we see if we apply the CATWOE criteria from Soft Systems Methodology (see Figure 3.1.5). But these are not independent systems:

consultation system —part-of→ democratic system.

Within each consultation, there are sub-systems, corresponding to parts of the overall consultation and outcome-forming process. You could identify them by communication activity (public meeting, responding to a document, discussion forum etc.), or better still by communication goal (measuring needs and preferences, dialogue for mutual understanding, collectively writing a report, ...). In practice, at different stages of a consultation, participants will engage in one or two communication activities in order to achieve a goal.

Each system should be evaluated in two ways. How well it meets its own goals, and how it supports the outer, encompassing systems. So a single consultation should not only be evaluated as a problem-solving exercise (e.g. administrative efficacy), but also in how it helps or hinders longer-term democratic processes.

³⁰cf. Checkland's Process of Organisational Meaning.

In short, one task for researchers is to specify the different systems involved in networked e-governance. This will not resolve all the conflicts in evaluating e-participation, as there are still value conflicts, but it will clarify what we should be studying.

3.2 Empirical approach to researching (e-)consultation

Given that there is no single theoretical approach to evaluating consultation or e-consultation, we took a thoroughly empirical approach in this research project. The research design was, of necessity, interpretivist. What positivist hypotheses could one test when the different literatures disagreed on what makes a good consultation?

We set out to deepen our understanding of consultation in Ireland, and the manners in which the application of ICTs in e-consultation might transform it.

3.2.1 Surveys of consulters

At the beginning, we needed to understand the current state of consultation across the island of Ireland. We designed a questionnaire, based on one used repeatedly in England, for consultation organisers in every local authority and central government body on the island.

The questions were designed to elicit data on:

- recent and current uses of public consultation techniques
- forms of public consultation and techniques used
- strategic approaches to public consultation
- the main purposes of public consultation
- challenges in initiating public consultation
- the benefits of engaging in public consultation
- overall views on the impact and approaches to public consultation

We used the survey results, complemented by interviews with a number of consulters, to help us understand the political and organisational context of consultation, and the attitudes of consulters to public consultation, as well as providing a factual baseline survey of the state of consultation and e-consultation across the island. The results are reported in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

3.2.2 Surveys and focus groups of NGOs and other consultees

To investigate the experiences of consultees and their attitudes to consultation, we ran focus groups with people from the community and voluntary sector in Donegal and Northern Ireland. This was complemented by a survey of people in the same sector across the island.

We had initially hoped to investigate differences in attitudes between divided communities affected by conflict. In fact we found similarities between all respondents, but differences between consultees and consulters. We gain a detailed, subtle, understanding of their needs, experiences and attitudes to consultation and different consultation processes, but very little on e-consultation, as they had not experienced any e-consultations. The results are reported in chapter 7.

3.2.3 Technology demonstrations and focus groups

We had found, from all our surveys and focus groups, little use of ICTs in consultation in Ireland. The little discussion on e-consultation that took place during the focus groups was trivial, as the participants had no personal experience of e-consultation technologies. It is hard to get people to discuss technologies they have never seen.

So we arranged to demonstrate a range of electronic communications technologies in hands-on sessions, to be followed by small group discussions of whether and how the participants might use some of these technologies in their consultations (as either consulters or consultees).

The first occasion was during a workshop we ran in Armagh, in April 2005.

**A Practical workshop on using e-consultation, 28 April 2005
At Queen's University Armagh Campus 39, Abbey Street, Armagh
Program**

10:15	Welcome & Coffee		
10:45	Introduction, Lecture Room		
10:45	• the promise	Achievements around the world, and why we started to look at e-consultation	by John Morison
10:55	• the reality	Consultation across Ireland, findings from questionnaires and focus groups.	by Michael Murray
11:15	• the possibilities	Summary of e-consultation technologies, matching them to consultation tasks.	by David Newman
E-consultation technologies and experiences			
	<i>Computer suite</i>	<i>Lecture room</i>	<i>Seminar room</i>
11:30	<i>Online dialogue.</i> Discussion forums, e-mail lists, and online chat.	<i>Tax credit e-consultation in NI</i> by Patricia Donald, Advice NI	Lunch sitting 1
12:00	<i>Measuring needs and opinions.</i> Online surveys.	<i>E-consultation in the UK local e-democracy programme.</i> by Stephen Robinson, Bristol City Council.	Lunch sitting 2
12:30	<i>Online writing.</i> Blogs, wikiwiki webs and group report writing.	<i>E-consultation among young scots.</i> by Ella Smith, International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University, Edinburgh.	Lunch sitting 3
Designing an e-consultation			
13:00	Group A (using Web IQ)	Group B (using Zing)	
13:45	Conclusions, Lecture Room		
14:15	<i>Large scale e-consultation in America.</i> by Lars Hasselblad Torres, America Speaks, by video-conferencing.		
<p>After the formal end of the workshop, feel free to stay on to try out technologies, or to talk about your own consultations.</p> <p>E-consultation technologies and experiences</p> <p>Three sessions in the computer suite, giving hands-on experience on selected technologies, will run in parallel with three talks about experiences on e-consultation. Participants can switch between technical and experience sessions, or choose to take out one time slot for lunch.</p> <p>Designing e-consultation</p> <p>The final session takes participants through an agenda meeting on designing an e-consultation. This will make use of e-meeting tools: Web IQ in the computer suite and Zing in the lecture room. So it is simultaneously a session learning an e-consultation technology, but being used by participants to reflect on e-consultation. The consultation topic can be chosen by participants who wish to run consultation later in the year. By focusing on particular cases, we can encourage participants to come up with concrete suggestions that will benefit both consulters and consultees.</p> <p>Concluding plenary</p> <p>Everyone comes back together to compare their experiences and identify:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Possibilities for small-scale e-consultation experiments. 2. Possibilities for e-consultation trials. 3. What we, as researchers, can do to help practitioners make e-consultation practical. 			

Figure 3.2.1. Armagh e-consultation workshop programme.

We used group support systems to get people to work through exercises picking out important issues in designing e-consultations using some of the technologies they had either tried or heard about during the day, and asked those leaving to fill in forms saying whether they were interested in taking part in e-consultation trials or small-scale tests.

At the workshop we found a great interest in e-consultation (70 came). Some of them were quite enthusiastic. So we designed a half-day technology demonstration to expose small groups of people to a range of promising e-consultation technologies.³¹ We set up these technologies on our server in QUB and then designed a programme to explain how we classified the technologies, show them how each technology has been used in consultation, and give them a quick taste of each technology, before asking them to discuss how they would use those technologies.

There were 3 sessions in Lettekenny, held on 14, 15 and 21 June 2005. 11 out of 13 participants were from the community and voluntary sector. Then we moved to Belfast and ran 4 sessions, on 23 and 24 June, and 1 and 7 July. 15 out of 19 participants came from the public sector.

In the sessions we learned that people with little computing or Internet experience could quickly learn to use the technologies. They could see uses for them in engaging particular groups, but identified a number of organisational constraints that might prevent some of them quickly introducing e-consultation.

This suggested to us that we would need to investigate organisational constraints on technology in organisation-hosted e-consultations as well as other issues in the next phase of the research.

3.2.4 E-consultation trials

This had always been a major part of our research design, an action research component. By helping organisations run an e-consultation, as part of a real public consultation exercise, it was possible to study the organisational factors that affected the design and implementation of e-consultation. This would go a long way to finding out how to make e-consultation routine, no longer experimental.

It now allowed us also to explore in more depth the differences in values and expectations between consulters and consultees, and between different roles in the consulting organisations.

On the technical side, it allowed us to study the processes by which a consultation team can select appropriate e-consultation technologies, and the extent to which the technologies can be customised to meet their needs, as well as the participant reactions to the technologies.

The 3 trials are reported in chapter 8.

3.2.5 E-consultation tests

On reflecting on the findings from our trials, we realised that there were some issues that needed to be explored further. It was possible to explore some of these issues in some small-scale tests, carried out just before the research project ended. In particular we looked at:

1. Whether it is possible to use e-consultation with people like ex-offenders who have difficulties reading and writing.
2. A possible optimum approach integrating e-consultation processes in a way the consultation trial partners did not try.
3. Action research exploring how ICTs might help young people engage in public consultation outside school.

These are reported in Chapter 9.

³¹See <http://wiki.e-consultation.org/TechDemo>

Chapter 4. Consultation and local governance

4.1 Introduction

The following sections provide an in-depth look of the findings from the surveys of local authorities both North and South, and the Irish government. It offer's an analysis of public consultation techniques used by local authorities between 2000 and 2003, with particular emphasis on the period from January to December 2003. The findings are divided into the following sections:

- Recent and Current uses of Public Consultation Techniques
- Key forms of Public Consultation
- Local Authority approaches to public consultation
- The Main Purposes of Public Consultation
- Challenges in initiating Public Consultation
- The Benefits of engaging in Public Consultation
- Overall views on the impact and approaches to Public Consultation

In addition, each section will offer a comparative analysis of authorities, both North and South.

4.1.1 Response rates

In all, 15 local authorities in Northern Ireland responded (out of 26) and 27 for the Republic of Ireland. The Republic of Ireland figure includes 17 county or city authorities (out of 34 such authorities). From these figures, 34 authorities provided comprehensive data that these findings are based on. Other authorities, while not completing a questionnaire, did submit in-depth information on the public consultation processes that they have engaged in. This data is included here where relevant. A wide range of local authorities took part in the survey. While the primary focus of the survey in the Republic was County and City Councils, a number of Borough and Town councils, Regional assemblies, as well as Regional Authorities were also included. In Northern Ireland, respondents included City, Borough and District Councils.

4.2 Recent and current uses of public consultation techniques

While this survey is concerned with current practices in public consultation, a specific focus is given to the use of electronic techniques currently being employed by local authorities. In total, the survey identified the use of twenty-one different forms of public consultation. For the purposes of analysis, practices are differentiated between 'traditional' forms such as public meetings, consultation documents and focus groups, and electronic techniques such as on-line surveys or on-line conferences.

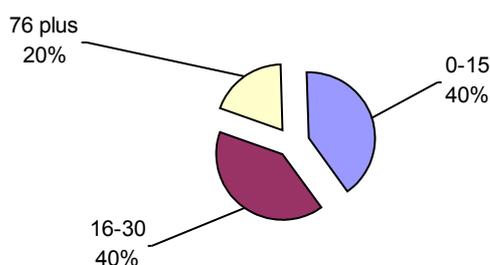


Figure 4.2.1. Use of traditional techniques by Northern authorities for 2000-2003.

Figure 4.2.1 gives the percentage of authorities in the North that have engaged in a specified range of traditional consultation initiatives. The highest range indicates those authorities that have engaged in at least 76 public consultations between 2000 and 2003, with the lowest range indicating between 0 and 15 initiatives being carried out in the same period.

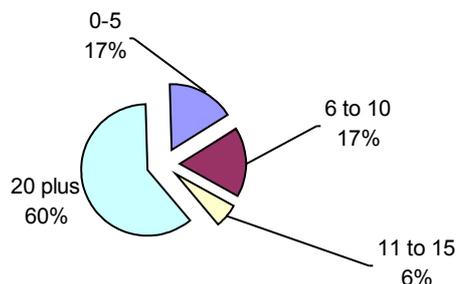


Figure 4.2.2. Use of traditional techniques by Southern authorities for 2000-2003.

Figure 4.2.2 gives the corresponding percentages for Southern authorities for the same time-period, again focusing on the use of traditional consultation methods. Recent and current practice would suggest that local authorities on both sides of the border are currently more likely to engage in traditional consultation practices. When compared, the use of traditional forms of consultation is far more prevalent than electronic techniques—both North and South.

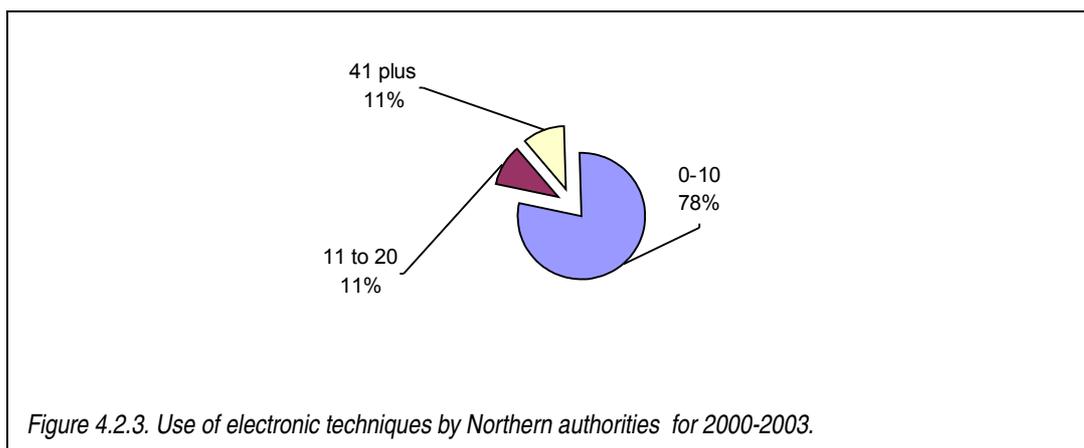


Figure 4.2.3. Use of electronic techniques by Northern authorities for 2000-2003.

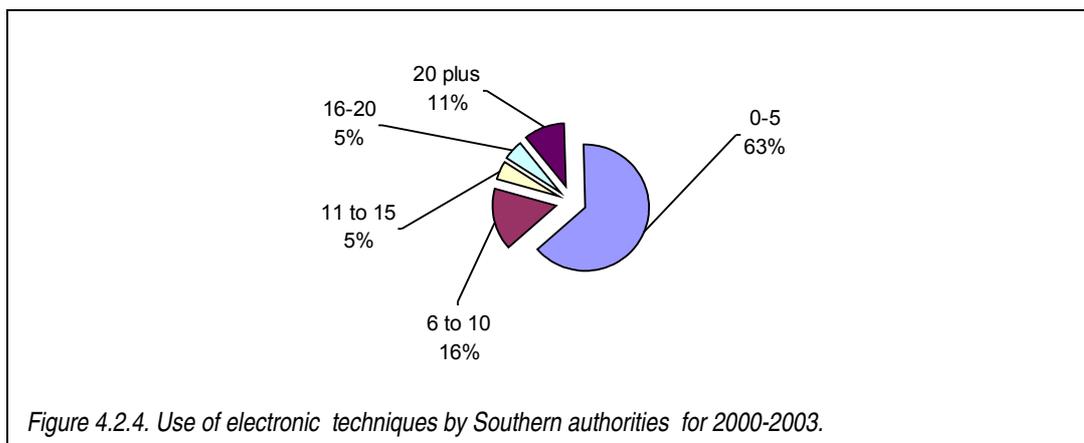


Figure 4.2.4. Use of electronic techniques by Southern authorities for 2000-2003.

The survey results show that while the frequency of the use of traditional practices rests mainly in the mid to high range (between 0 and 30 initiatives employing these techniques in the North and 20 plus in the South), the use of electronic forms is found predominantly in the lower end of the scale (the 0-10 range in the North and 0-5 range in the South).

4.3 Key forms of public consultation

The survey listed twenty-six different forms of public consultation and asked local authorities to indicate if any of these techniques are used. In addition, local authorities were asked to identify a possible 'target group' for each initiative (ranging from the whole population to specific sectors such as the private sector or the community and voluntary sector). Lastly, authorities were asked to name the policy or issue where specific techniques had been employed. The first 18 techniques fall under the category of traditional methods while those listed from 'Documentary/ policy comment websites' onwards indicate electronic techniques.

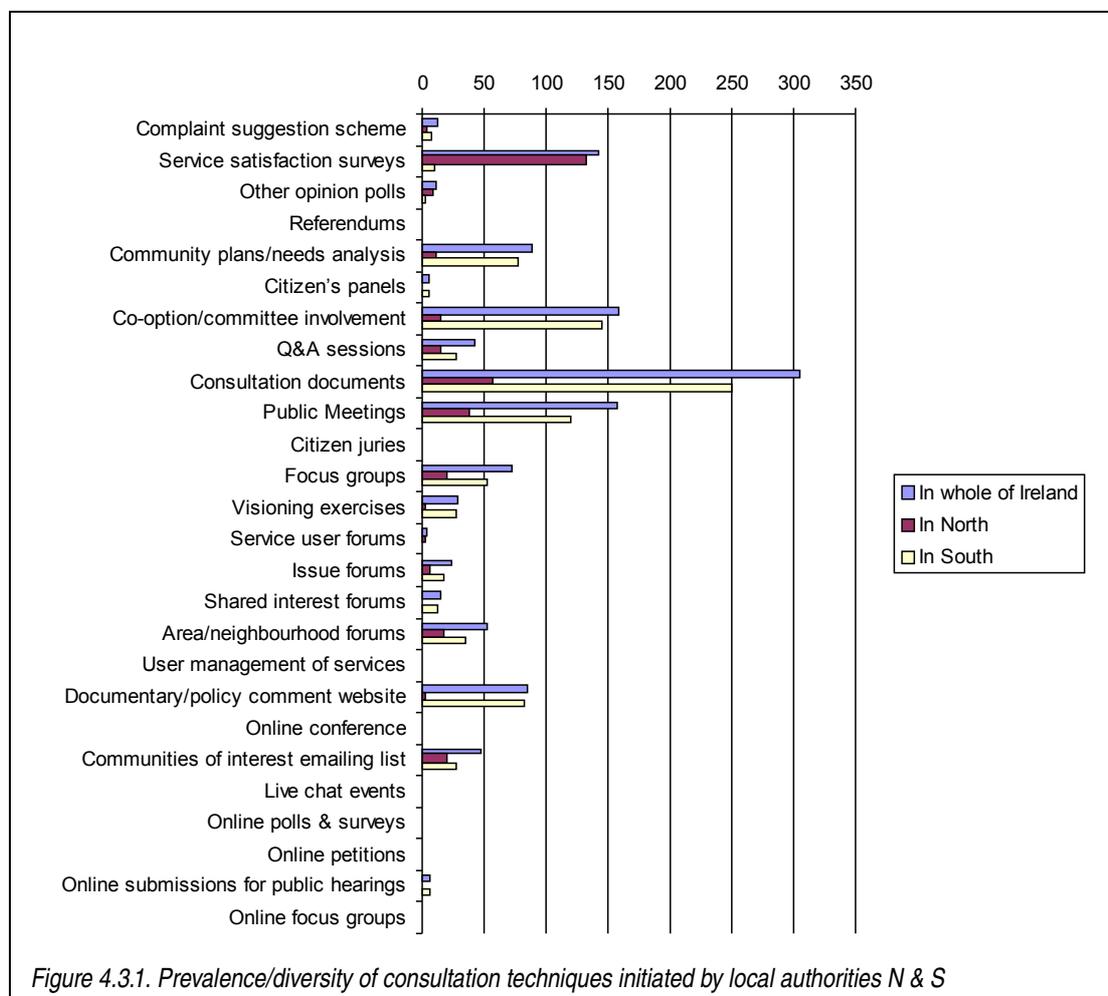
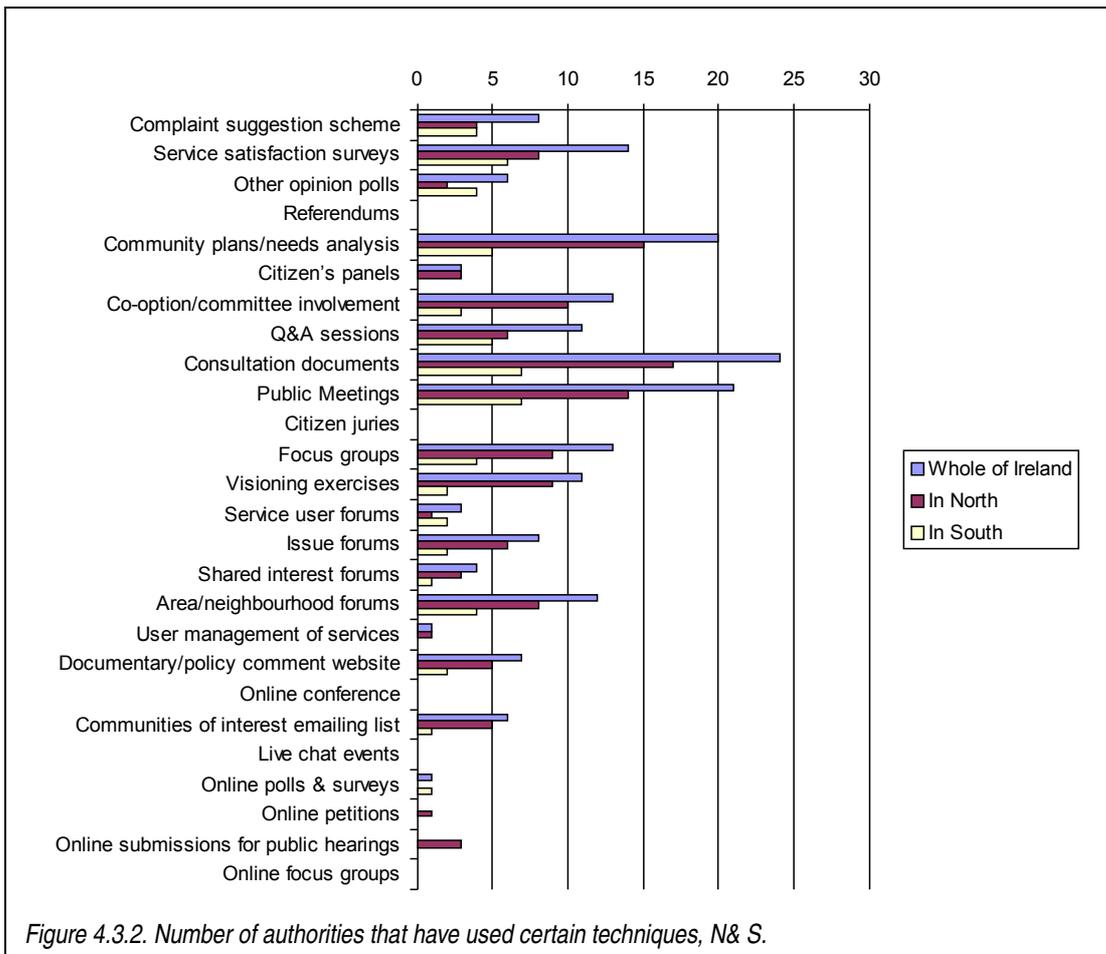


Figure 4.3.1. Prevalence/diversity of consultation techniques initiated by local authorities N & S

Figure 4.3.1 indicates that Service satisfaction surveys, Co-option/committee involvement, Consultation documents and Public meetings were the most commonly utilised forms of consultation, with Consultation documents being by far, the most popular form. This particular process of public consultation was employed in a total of 305 initiatives between 2000 and 2003, and was by a total of 24 local authorities, both North and South. Chart 4.5 also shows a great diversity in the use of different techniques by authorities, with only one (Referendums) not being employed at all. The use of electronic modes of consultation is far less utilised both North and South. While it could be argued that chart 1.5 indicates a certain diversity in the use of electronic consultation in that of the eight forms offered in the survey, five have been used by authorities, the reality is that the majority of initiatives employed in electronic form are concentrated around two specific techniques—'Documentary/policy comments websites' (85 initiatives) and 'Communities of interest e-mailing lists' (48 initiatives).



The total number of authorities that have employed particular consultation techniques can be seen in Figure 4.3.2. It is clear that the most used technique for both North and South is the use of consultation documents, with 24 authorities engaging in this practice. Public meetings are also a commonly used method, with 21 authorities using them. With respect to the use of electronic techniques, Documentary/policy comment websites are the most popular, with 7 authorities using this. One respondent from Northern Ireland pointed to the innovative approach by one NGO in e-consultation:

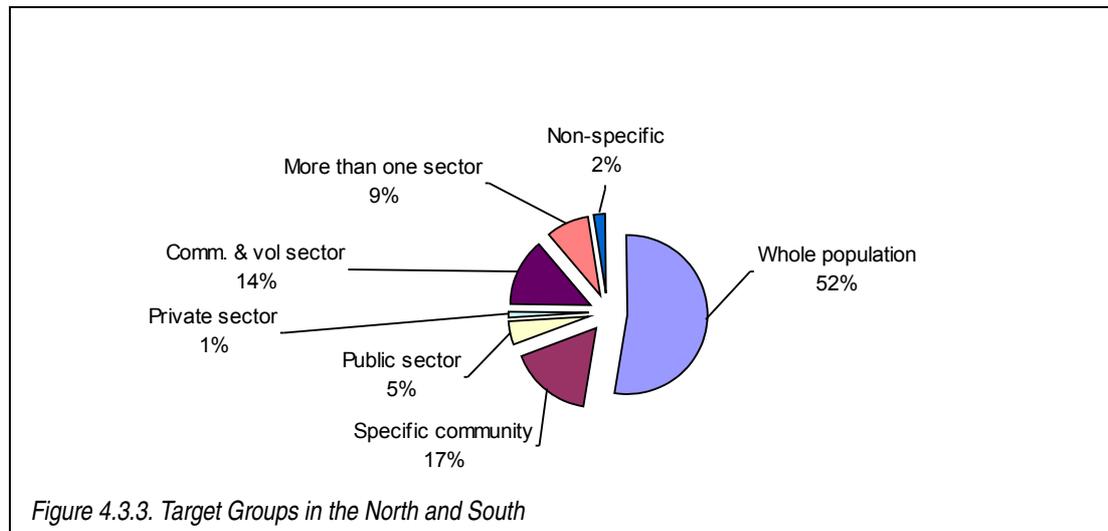
They have had a couple of consultations I've looked at and... one of them is on tax credits. It was a special forum and they invited members of the public to put up their anecdotes about how the system isn't working and it was it was flooded with people who had problems with their tax credits and their stories. And then they got chatting amongst themselves and you see following through the threads of the conversation how they were talking to each other on this forum...

North/South Comparison

Both the use of consultation documents and public meetings are the top two consultation techniques in the North and in the South in terms of their use by the largest number of individual authorities. 17 different authorities in the North use consultation documents along with 7 in the South, while 14 authorities in the North have initiated public meetings, compared to 7 in the South. Despite a greater number of Northern authorities using consultation documents, Southern authorities have actually run more consultation document initiatives—250 compared to 55 in the North. Likewise, Southern authorities have held 120 public meeting initiatives compared to 38 that were held in the North. The situation is similar in relation to electronic techniques. The most used electronic method by individual authorities, both in the North and in the South is 'Documentary/policy comment websites', with 5 Northern authorities using this compared to 2 in the South. However, Southern authorities have launched 82 separate initiatives using this technique, compared to 3 in the North.

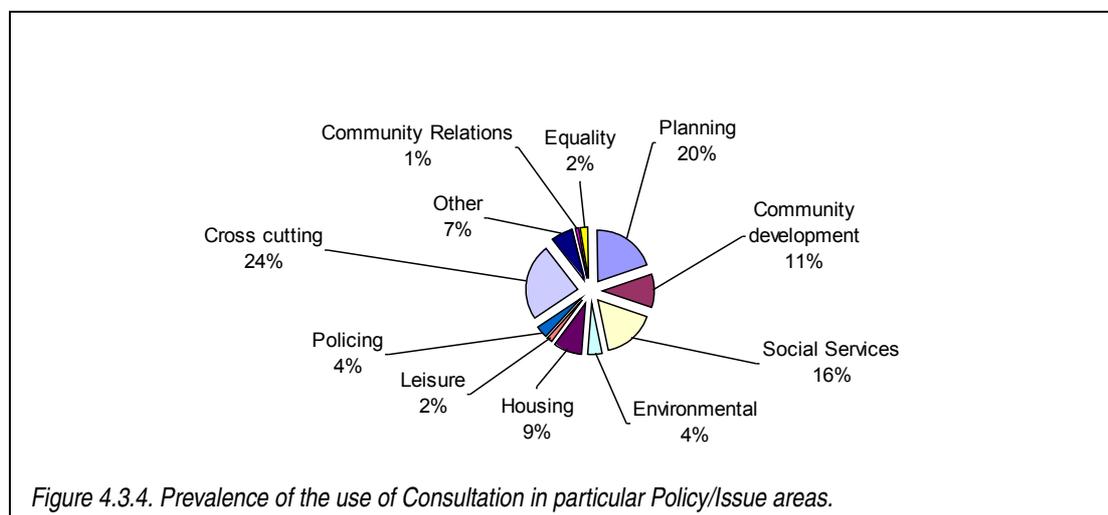
4.3.2 Target groups

Chart 4.7 shows those groups and sectors that are targeted by both Northern and Southern authorities, using traditional and electronic techniques.



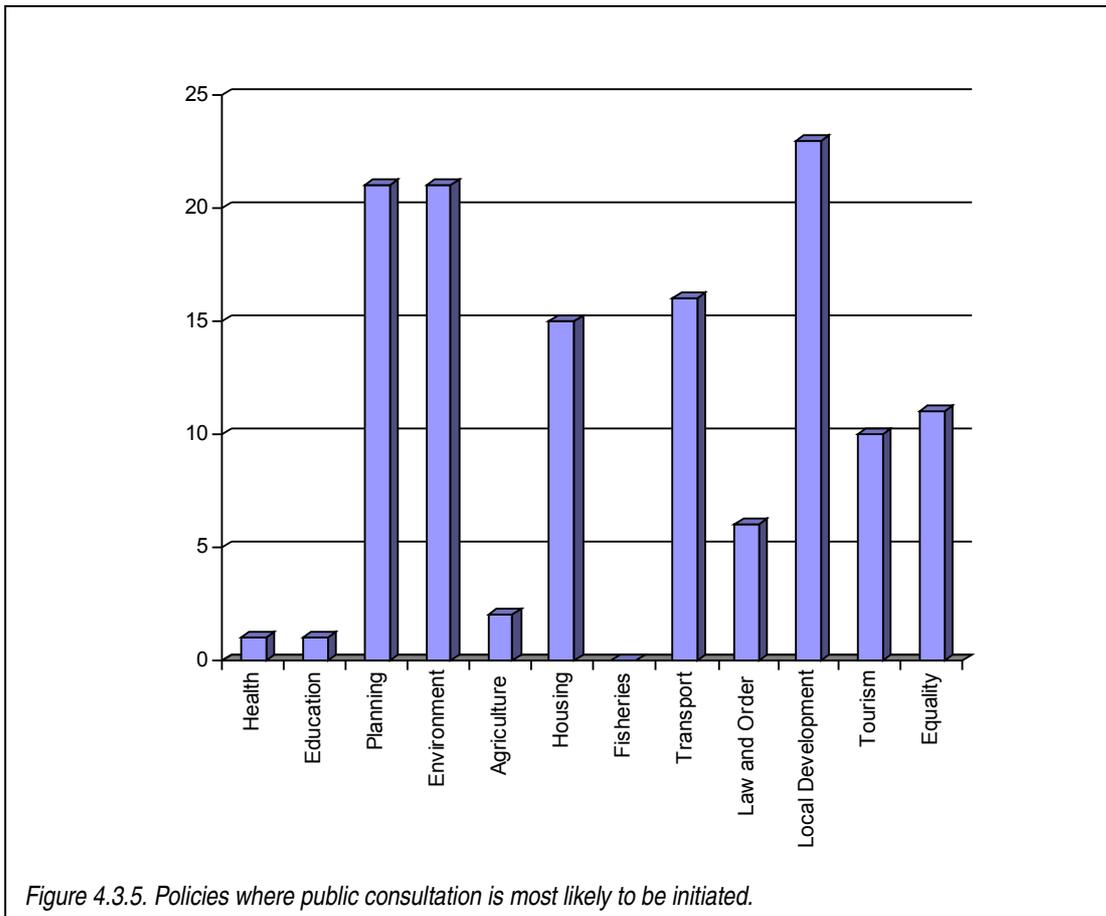
It is clear that the majority of public consultation processes initiated by Northern and Southern local authorities are aimed at ‘whole populations’, rather than specific sectors. However, there are exceptions to this, particularly in relation to ‘Community plans/ needs analysis’ and ‘Area/neighbourhood forums’, which by their nature are targeted towards specific communities. The same would also apply to the use of ‘Communities of interest e-mailing lists’. Overall, however, the use of electronic techniques re-emphasizes a preference by local authorities in targeting the whole population with documentary/policy comment websites and on-line submissions for public hearings being the most used forms.

4.3.3 Policies/Issues



With the exception of those initiatives that are employed in more than one policy/issue area (‘cross cutting’), public consultation processes at local authority level would seem to be most commonly used in relation to the provision and delivery of social services (for instance, with the use of ‘service satisfaction surveys’), community development (‘community plans/needs analysis’) and planning (with the use of ‘consultation documents’ or ‘public meetings’). Planning is the policy that has attracted the most use of electronic consultation techniques with five different methods being employed in relation to this issue.

Local authorities were also asked to name policies or issues that they *perceived* to be most conducive to public consultation. Respondents were asked to pick 5 policy areas where they would be most likely to initiate consultation.



There is a high degree of commonality between the policy areas where consultation is thought to be employed and where it is actually being used. This is particularly true in relation to planning (indicated by 21 authorities). However, other issues such as local development—with the highest rating as a perceived issue, identified by 23 authorities—and the environment, are thought to be far more likely areas for consultation than they actually are.

North/South Comparison

In terms of traditional forms of consultation, local authorities, both North and South, use a wide variety of consultation methods to engage with the public on policy issues. The Northern authorities made substantially more use of Service satisfaction surveys than their Southern counterparts (132 initiatives compared to 10 in the South). However, the Northern authorities also widely use Consultation documents and Public meetings when consulting with the public (55 initiatives and 38 initiatives respectively). For their part, the Southern authorities have made far more use of Community/needs analysis (78 initiatives compared to 11 in the North) and Co-optation/committee involvement (144 compared to 15 in the North). While it has already been mentioned that the Northern authorities make use of both consultation documents and public meetings, the use of these techniques in the South is far more common with 250 consultation documents in the South and 120 public meetings. With respect to electronic forms of consultation, it would seem that the Southern authorities are currently making far more use than the Northern authorities. With the exception of Communities of interest mailing lists, the Northern authorities have only run a total of four other electronically driven consultation initiatives. In contrast, their Southern colleagues have made use of Documentary/policy comment websites, with its employment in 82 initiatives, as well as Community of interest e-mailing lists in 28 initiatives.

4.4 Local Authority approaches to public consultation

	Essential	Very important	Important	Not important
Individual elected members	46.4	25.0	25.0	3.6
Ruling party/group policy	14.3	17.9	35.7	32.1
Corporate strategy/standards	46.4	35.7	7.1	10.7
Departmental projects	28.6	50.0	10.7	10.7
Public/community demand	39.3	46.4	10.7	3.6
Local government networks	17.9	25.0	35.7	21.4
Central government	25.0	46.4	17.9	10.7
Equality Legislation	42.9	25.0	21.4	10.7
Other legal requirements	39.3	28.6	21.4	10.7

Figure 4.4.1. Factors that influence the initiation of public consultation initiatives.

Local authority respondents were asked to indicate the importance of nine listed factors in stimulating public consultation initiatives, rating them as ‘essential’ to ‘not important’. It is clear from Figure 4.4.1 that authorities see factors both internal and external to their own organisation as important when consulting with the public, with the internal factors identified as slightly more important. In terms of internal factors, 46.4% of respondents saw corporate strategy/standards as ‘essential’. Likewise, the key factor that was seen as ‘very important’ was departmental projects. External forces do play a significant role too in stimulating initiatives however, with factors such as public/community demand (seen as essential by 39.3% and very important by 46.4% of respondents), central government (viewed as very important by 46.4% of respondents) and other legal requirements (seen as essential by 39.3% of respondents). The introduction of equality legislation was also identified as essential (42.9 percent). Lastly, just over 46% of respondents viewed individual elected representatives as an essential factor in stimulating processes. While both internal and external forces seem to be driving the initiation of consultation processes, networking between different authorities seems to be relatively unimportant, as is the input from ruling parties or groups.

North/South Comparison

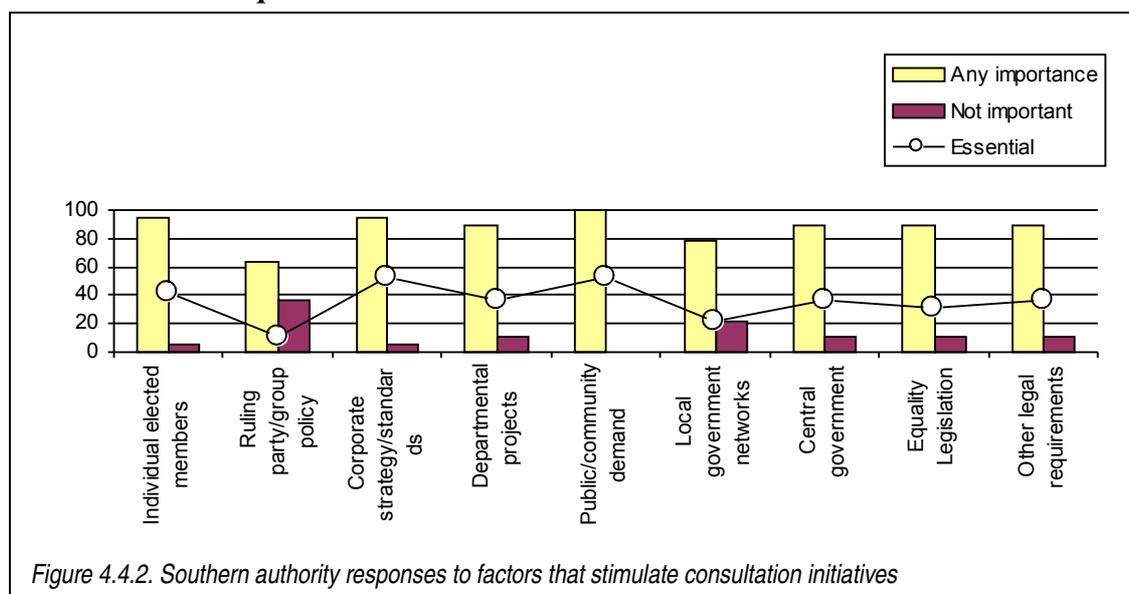


Figure 4.4.2. Southern authority responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives

The data presented in Figure 4.4.2 and Figure 4.4.3 summarise responses as either ‘important’ or ‘not important’, as well as indicating how ‘essential’ each factor is perceived. They show that a number of subtle differences exist between Northern and Southern authorities in terms of identifying drivers for public consultation. Clearly the key difference is the importance of equality legislation in the North compared to the South. 66.7% of Northern authorities indicate

that equality legislation is an essential factor in stimulating consultation, compared to 36.8% in the South. Another difference is the degree of importance placed on corporate strategy/standards—seen by 52.6% of respondents in the South as ‘essential’, compared to just over 33% in the North. Lastly, public/community demand is viewed as ‘essential’ by 52.6% in the South compared to 11.1% in the North (though the percentages of those who see this as ‘very important’ are a lot closer between North and South—44.4% in the North and 47.4% in the South).

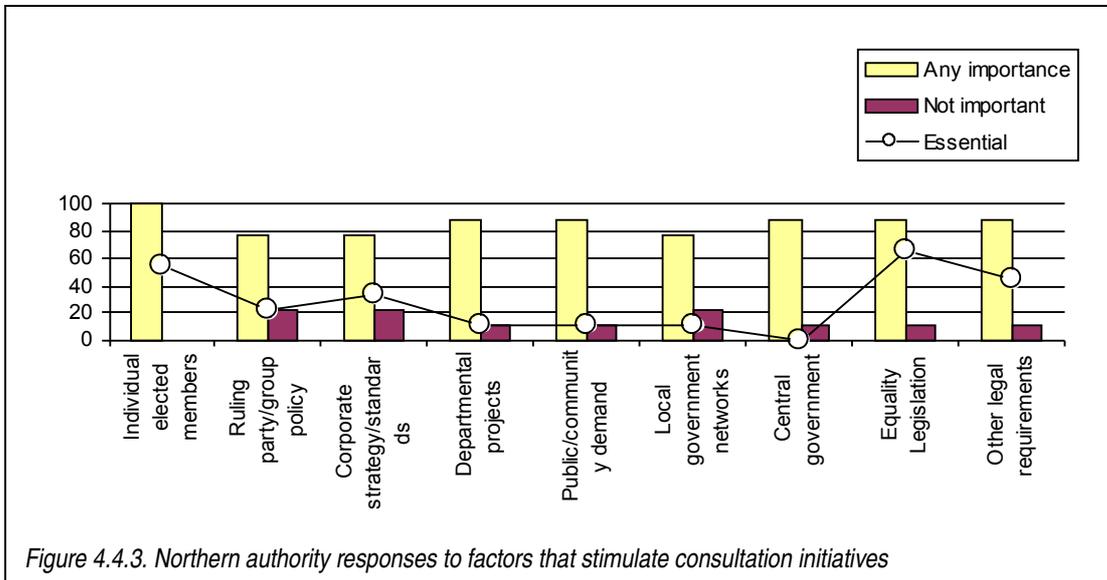


Figure 4.4.3. Northern authority responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives

4.4.1 From where is assistance sought?

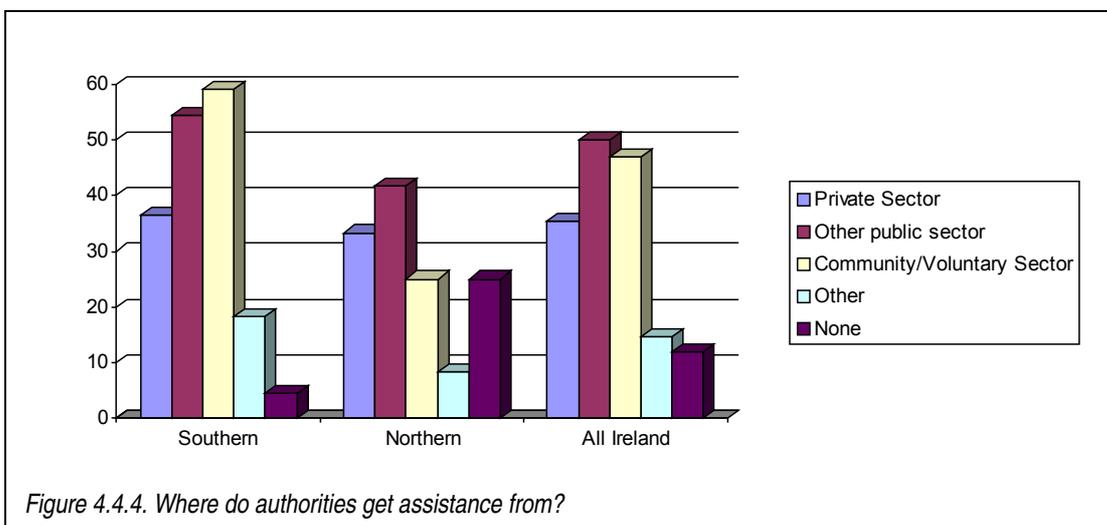


Figure 4.4.4. Where do authorities get assistance from?

On this issue, respondents were given the option of choosing more than one category. The majority of authorities receive assistance from other public sector agencies when it comes to running consultation initiatives (60.7 percent). Assistance from the Community and Voluntary sector is a close second, being identified by just over 57% of authorities. The role of the private sector, while it is the third choice with almost 43% choosing it, is still a significant source of assistance for local authorities in running consultation processes.

North/South Comparison

Figure 4.4.4 compares Northern and Southern authorities on this issue. The key difference is the involvement of the community and voluntary sector in providing assistance for consultation. While 25% of Northern authorities acknowledge input from the community and voluntary sector, this figure rises to almost 60% in the South. There is also a significant difference

between North and South with respect to those authorities that receive no assistance at all, with 25% of Northern authorities indicating this compared to 4.5% of their Southern counterparts.

4.4.2 Peace and Reconciliation as a Driver?

		Southern authorities	Northern authorities	Total
Are there consultative initiatives that have been used to promote peace and reconciliation?	Yes	2 11.8%	8 88.9%	10 38.5%
	No	15 88.2%	1 11%	16 61.5%
Total		17 100%	9 100%	26 100%

Figure 4.4.5. The use of consultation in the promotion of peace and reconciliation.

Figure 4.4.5 clearly shows that the promotion of peace and reconciliation through the use of consultation processes is far more relevant in Northern Ireland than it would appear to be in the South, with just under 90% of Northern authorities identifying this compared to 11.8% in the South. Having said that, a small number of Southern respondents did indicate involvement in cross-border initiatives such as the 'Downpatrick linkage group' with Listowel and the 'Sligo Connections project'.

4.5 The Main Purposes of Public Consultation

Authorities were asked to rank seven possible purposes for engaging in public consultation processes from 'essential' to 'not important'. Clearly the single most important purpose is to meet statutory requirements, which is seen by 60.7% of respondents as 'essential'.

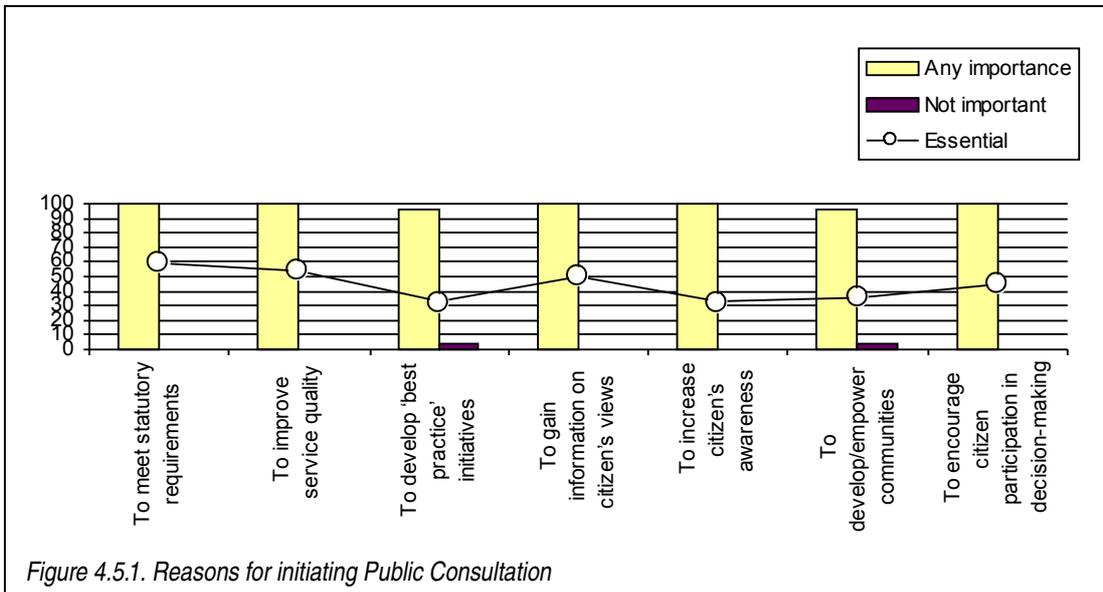


Figure 4.5.1. Reasons for initiating Public Consultation

This is followed by the need to improve service quality. The importance of pursuing improvements in terms of service provision is reflected in the fact that 50% of respondents viewed this as very important. One significant feature here is the perceived benefits or role for citizens in participating in public consultation. Most authorities view public consultation as a way of gaining citizen's views or supplying information to them rather than directly empowering them. However, a sizeable amount of respondents cite encouraging citizen participation in decision-making as a main reason for engaging in public consultation with 46.4 of those questioned seeing it as 'essential' and almost 40% claiming that it is 'very important'.

North/South Comparison

The need to meet statutory requirements and to improve service quality rate highly both South and North.

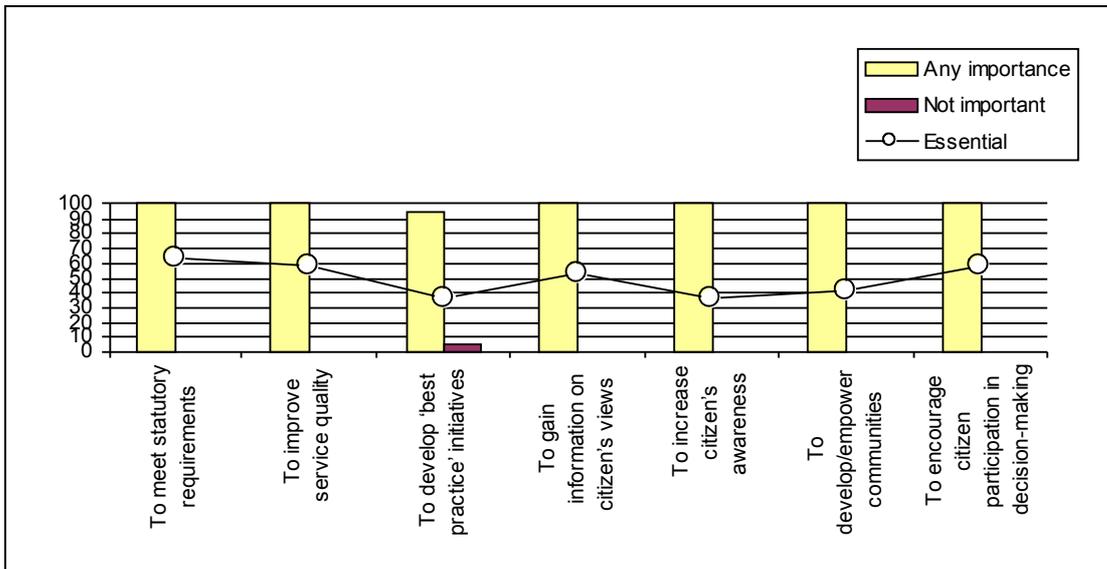


Figure 4.5.2. Southern Authorities assessment of the Reasons for engaging in public consultation

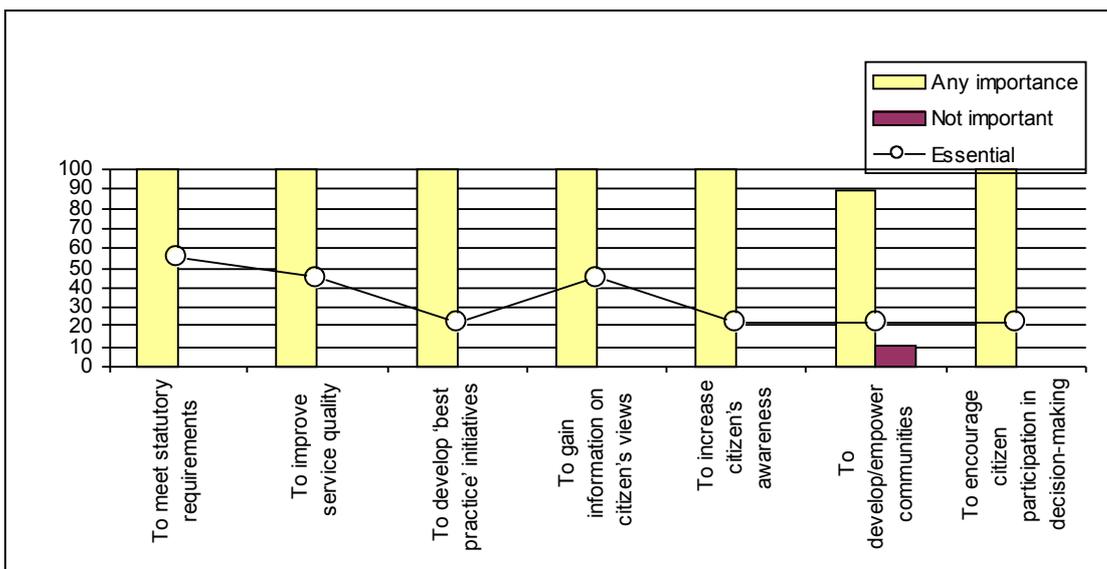


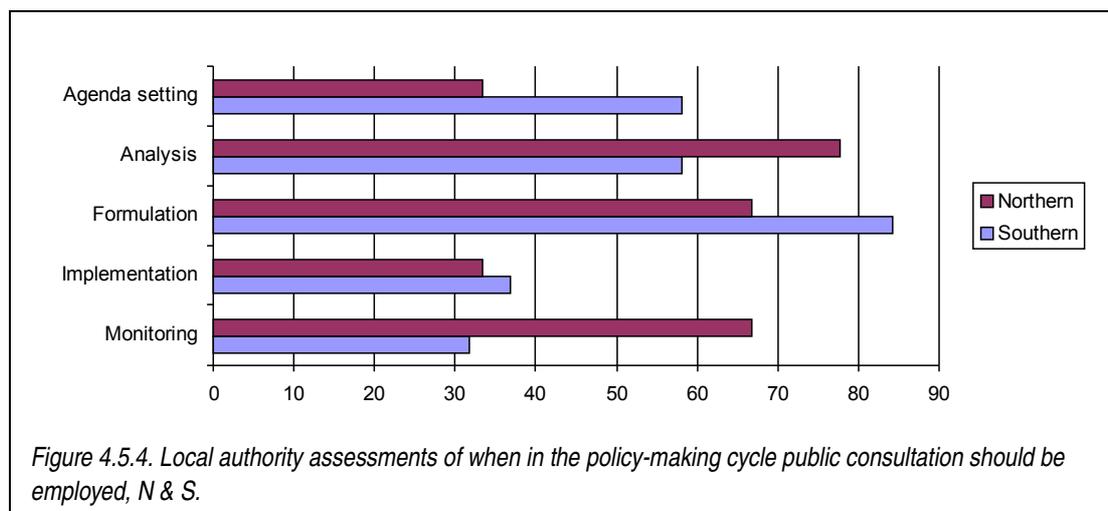
Figure 4.5.3. Northern Authorities assessment of the Reasons for engaging in public consultation

The only significant difference, however, is the emphasis placed on the perceived role or benefits for citizens in consultation. It is evident that in the South more focus is placed on attempting to encourage citizen participation or empowerment. Having said that, factors such as gaining citizens views is still rated as 'essential' by 52.6% of respondents and increasing citizen's awareness is viewed as 'very important' by 63.2 percent. In contrast, the Northern authorities surveyed rated increasing citizen's awareness, empowering communities and encouraging participation in decision-making as less important factors. Gaining citizen's views on issues, however, was rated as essential by 44.4% of respondents.

4.5.2 When is consultation to be used?

The five stages in the policy-making cycle are indications of the degree of public participation in decision-making that local authorities believe is appropriate. The higher respondent rates for the first three stages, particularly the 'formulation' stage, suggests that most local authorities are happy to include public views at this phase of policy-making. The relatively high ratings for the

first three stages may be seen as a contradiction of the above findings with respect to the perceived role of the citizen in decision-making. However, both the 'analysis' and 'formulation' stages can involve a high degree of simply gaining the views of citizens on a particular issue.



North/South Comparison

	Southern		Northern	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Agenda setting	11	57.9	3	33.3
Analysis	11	57.9	7	77.8
Formulation	16	84.2	6	66.7
Implementation	7	36.8	3	33.3
Monitoring	6	31.6	6	66.7

Figure 4.5.5. Table of local authority assessments of when in the policy-making cycle public consultation should be employed.

The 'formulation' and 'analysis' stages are key phase in policy-making where public consultation is introduced in the North and in the South. However, there is also a difference in emphasis between Northern and Southern authorities with respect to the other phases of policy formation. While the Southern authorities place greater emphasis on the importance of consultation at the 'agenda setting' phase, in the North the monitoring stage is seen as more vital. The issue of feedback and monitoring mechanisms is discussed in greater detail below.

4.5.3 The Use of Feedback/ Review Mechanisms

The employment of review and feedback mechanisms can enable greater levels of participation by citizens in consultation processes, as well as facilitating possible the review of particular techniques in order to establish 'best practice' models. When asked whether their authority provided such mechanisms, over 58% said that they had such structures in place.

		Southern	Northern	Total
Does your authority provide feedback / mechanisms in order to ensure that citizens feel they are involved in decision-making?	Yes	11 58%	6 60%	17 59%
	No	8 42%	4 40%	12 41%
Total		19 100%	10 100%	29 100%

Figure 4.5.6. The provision of feedback/review mechanisms

Authorities offered a wide variety of examples where feedback mechanisms have been employed. These included processes that the community level such as 'housing-estate management committees', 'housing forums', 'local area development plans' or 'community

plans’. Regional strategies or county development board strategies were also mentioned. Other policies and issues included equality issues relating to council policy and service delivery in general, including ‘policies on funding social inclusion, sports development and leisure facilities’. One respondent included the use of ‘non-statutory monitoring groups’. These involve ‘Council officials, councilors, and local community groups’ and are seen as ‘very fruitful in terms of ongoing consultation, information provision and dealing with problems arising in a structured rather than reactive way’.

The breakdown in figures between Northern and Southern authorities on this issue are almost identical with almost 58% of Southern authorities and 60% of Northern authorities saying that they do provide such mechanisms to citizens.

4.6 Challenges in Initiating Public Consultation

Authorities were asked to identify how problematic a number of selected factors were when engaging in consultation initiatives, rating each factor from ‘extremely’ problematic to ‘not problematic at all’. One of the most significant points to emerge here is that none of the factors were seen as either ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ problematic. Only a lack of public interest was viewed as problematic in comparison to the other factors—though less than half of respondents thought that this was the case (48.1 percent). What is also significant is that factors such as lack of support from elected representatives, lack of support from the respondent’s own authority and lack of facilitating legislation were all heavily identified as ‘not being problematic at all’.

North/South Comparison

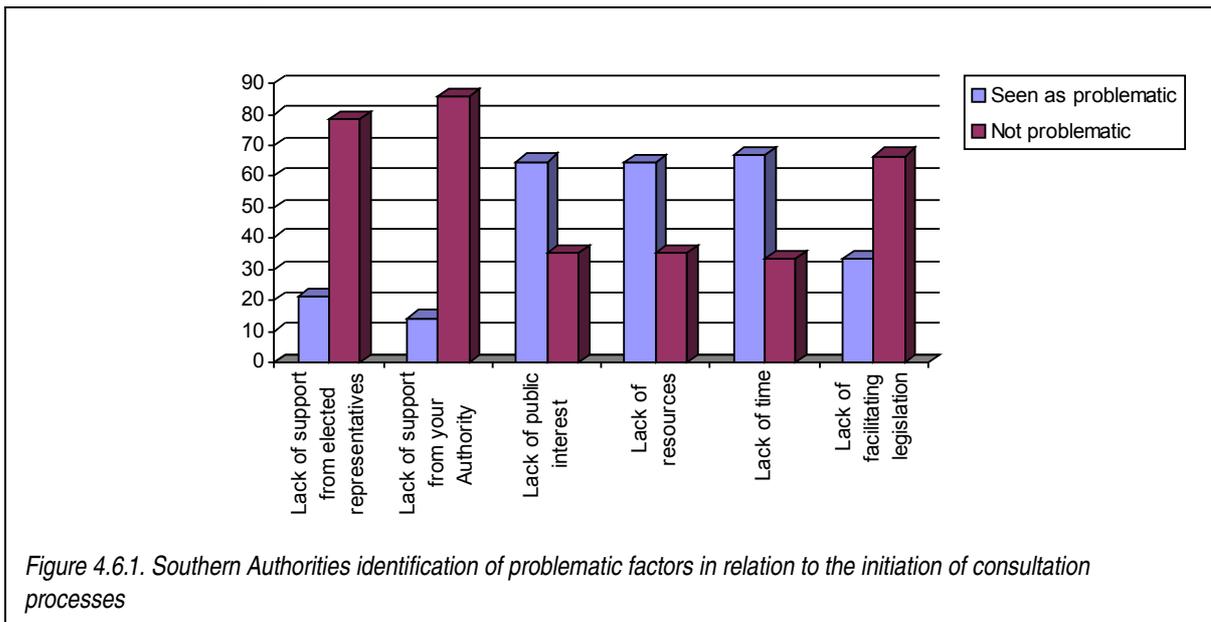
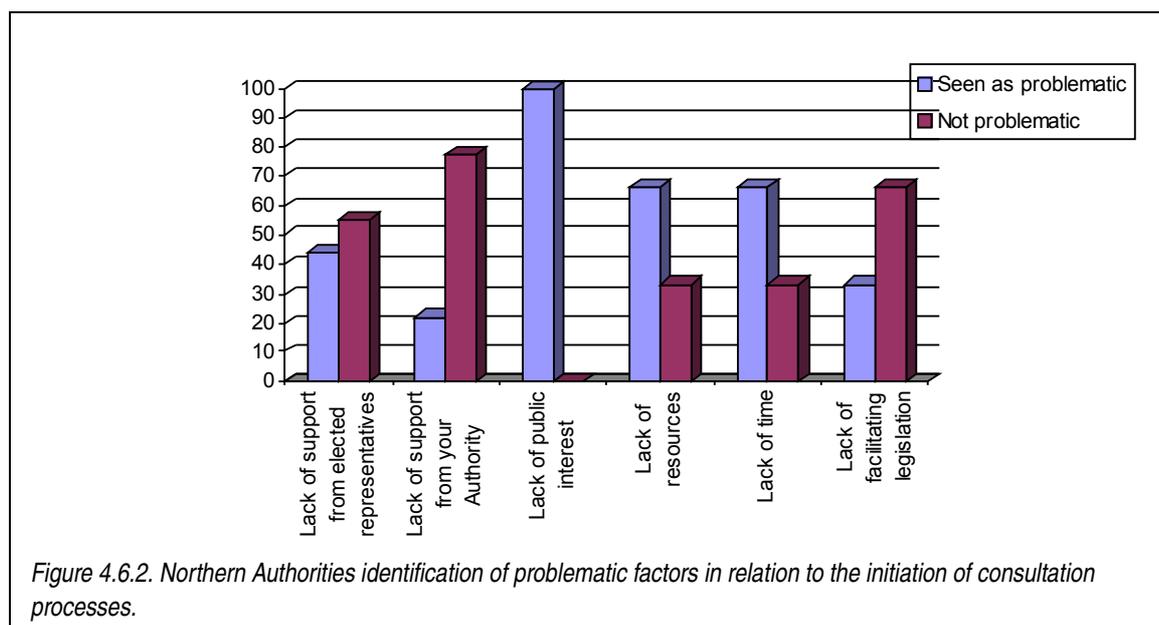


Figure 4.6.1 and Figure 4.6.2 present data by merging responses that indicated that certain factors were problematic (either ‘extremely problematic’, ‘very’ problematic’ or ‘problematic’) or not problematic at all. Comparative figures between Northern and Southern authorities largely reflect the above findings in that a lack of public interest is seen as problematic, though the Northern authorities give this factor a slightly higher rating in terms of it being ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ problematic. One other difference is that the Northern authorities mention lack of resources as being more problematic than the Southern authorities, but again, this factor is not strongly identified as being ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ problematic. Another factor that was mentioned by a number of respondents was ‘difficulties associated with resourcing effective consultation’. One respondent offers the example of conducting surveys with the public:

It has been common to have poor response rates, which reduces the statistical significance of results and prevents the generalisation of the survey to the population making them unrepresentative and unreliable and of limited use in decision-making. It has been found that it can often be difficult to obtain the views

of minority groups and that using commercial research companies is extremely costly. In some cases due to a lack of skills and resources, there can be a failure to make the optimum use of raw data with only basic descriptive data produced....



4.6.1 The Challenge of ‘Consultation Fatigue’

The sheer volume of consultation initiatives can sometimes weigh heavily on participants. Authorities were asked to comment on a number of factors related to consultation fatigue.

	Extremely difficult	Very difficult	Difficult	Not difficult at all
The public are asked to engaged in too many consultation processes	25.0	14.3	28.6	32.1
Current consultation techniques are too time-consuming	0.0	28.6	42.9	28.6
A public perception that consultation does not influence policy	25.0	21.4	39.3	14.3
The public are repeatedly asked the same questions	14.3	17.9	35.7	32.1

Figure 4.6.3. The Challenge of ‘Consultation Fatigue’

While responding authorities do see these factors as problematic, they do not necessarily view them as detrimental to the concept of public consultation. While there are acknowledged difficulties with consultation fatigue, none of the selected factors have been identified as either ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ difficult. 25% of respondents see the issue of the public being asked to engage in too many consultations as ‘extremely’ difficult, however it is significant that just over 32% view this as not difficult at all. Having said that, one respondent was clear that ‘Problems associated with consultation fatigue, from the perspective of the consultee, also need to be addressed...’

It would seem that the most readily identified problematic factor is a public perception that consultation does not influence policy—but again, it is worth reiterating that this was not significantly identified as either ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ difficult.

South/North Comparison

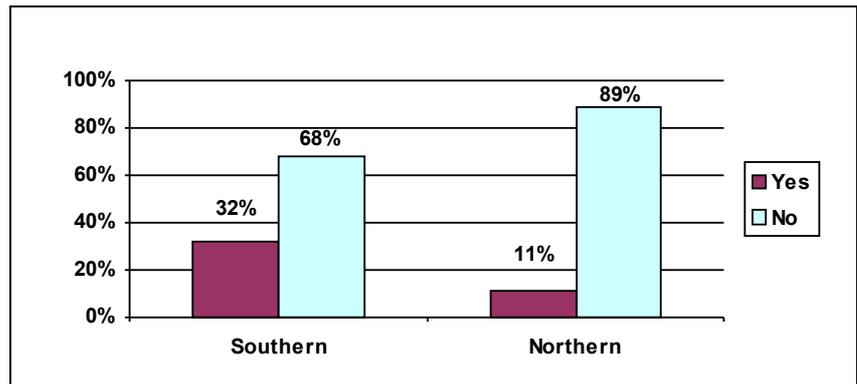
Again, no single issue is identified by either jurisdiction as significant in terms of being extremely or very problematic. There also seems to be a consensus that lack of public interest can be problematic, with 47% of Southern authorities and over 55% of Northern authorities identifying this.

4.6.2 Negative effects on the work of authorities?

Authorities were specifically asked whether they felt that engaging in public consultation had actually had a negative effect on the workings of the authority. 75% of respondents answered ‘no’ to this question. However, those that did say ‘yes’ were asked to provide examples where consultation has a negative effect. One authority claimed that public consultation ‘often results in quite high expectations being raised among [the] public’. Another commented that processes ‘slows down procedure’, or as another put it, consultation can mean a ‘...longer lead in time in policy development’. One respondent specifically pointed to planning procedures—‘The number of repetitive submissions on planning applications have often led to increased demands on human resources...’

North/South Comparison

Out of the 25% of all authorities who indicated a negative effect, the majority were Southern authorities. Almost 32% of authorities from the South thought that consultation did in fact have a negative effect while only 11.1% of Northern authorities concurred.



4.6.3 When NOT to involve the public?

Certainly a contentious issue is choosing NOT to involve the public in particular policy decisions. Almost 18% of authorities identified certain situations where they would not include the public in a consultation process. Some respondents thought that the public should not be consulted on issues relating to ‘in-house working mechanisms’ or ‘issues relating to staff’, while another respondent thought that the public should be excluded ‘at conceptual stages’ of policy.

		Southern	Northern	Total
Are there any circumstances in which you would choose not to consult the public?	Yes	3 15.8%	2 22.2%	5 17.9%
	No	16 84.2%	7 77.8%	23 82.1%
Total		19 100%	9 100%	28 100%

Figure 4.6.5. When not to consult the public?

North/South Comparison

Slightly more Northern authorities than Southern ones thought that there are occasions when the public should not be consulted. Just over 22% of the Northern authorities indicated this in comparison with almost 16% of their Southern colleagues.

4.6.4 A failure to involve particular social or community groups?

In total, just over 21% of all authorities surveyed acknowledge difficulties in involving particular groups in consultation processes. While some respondents offered examples of groups such as 'sexual orientation groups' or 'Traveller men' as examples of excluded groups, one respondent felt that at least part of the problem lay in that 'these groups are not generally organised or networked...'. Yet another respondent felt that 'most public bodies fail to involve people at the fringes of society'.

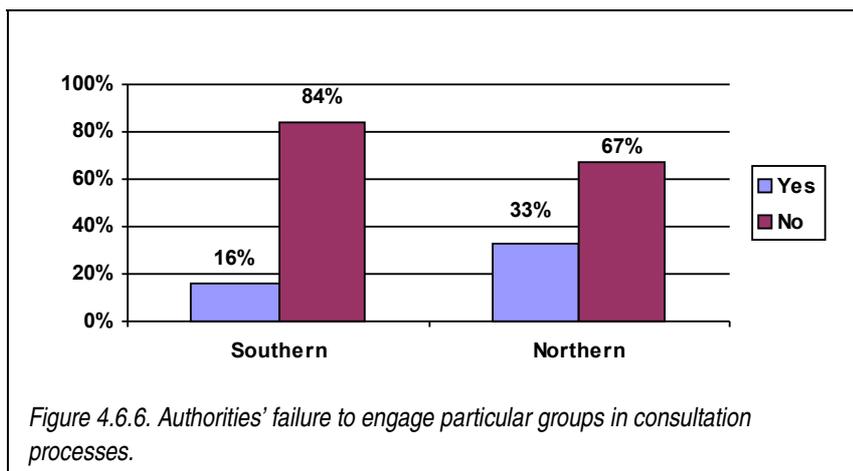


Figure 4.6.6. Authorities' failure to engage particular groups in consultation processes.

North/South Comparison

A third of all Northern authorities view this as a problem compared to just under 16% of Southern authorities.

4.7 The Benefits of Engaging in Public Consultation

It has already been noted that the most identifiable purposes of public consultation are a need to meet statutory requirements, as a way of improving service quality, to gain information on citizen's views and to encourage citizen's participation in decision-making. It will come as no surprise, therefore, that the top three benefits from public consultation that are identified by authorities are better policy-making (selected by 82.1% of authorities), improvement in services (64.3 percent) and greater citizen awareness (53.6 percent).

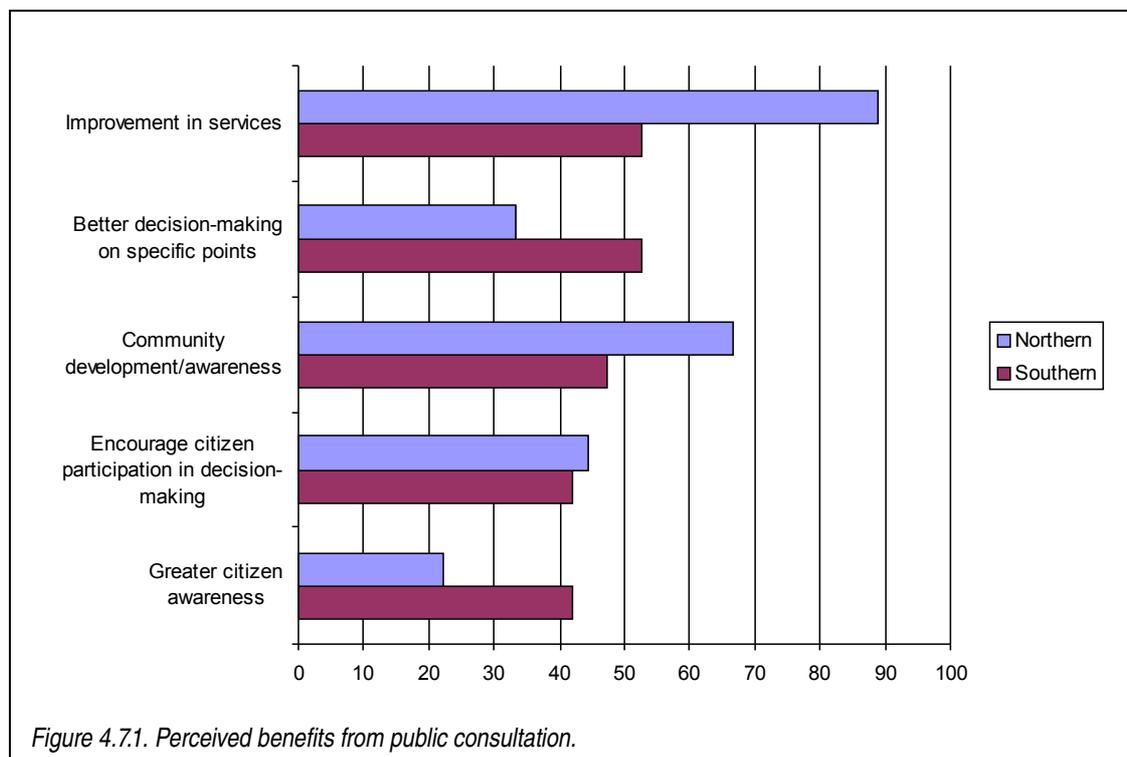


Figure 4.7.1. Perceived benefits from public consultation.

It is worth noting that encouraging citizen participation in decision-making was selected by 42.9% of authorities and this was perceived to be an ‘essential’ purpose of public consultation by 46.4% of authorities (see section 4.5 above).

North/South Comparison

There is a difference in emphasis on the top three benefits selected by Northern and Southern authorities respectively. While both chose better policymaking and improvement in services, Southern authorities identified better decision-making on specific points, and the Northern authorities indicated community development/awareness as a key benefit.

4.8 Overall Views on the Impact of, and Approaches to, Public Consultation

4.8.1 The Impact of Consultation

All authorities were asked to briefly outline what they felt was the impact of consultation on decision-making. With the exception of one Northern authority representative who deemed such practices as ‘adequate’, and another who saw it as ‘satisfactory’, all other comments were overwhelmingly positive. One respondent thought that consultation had a ‘positive impact on service delivery, relationship with community and range of new initiatives’, while another thought that:

Consultation has enriched the process of decision-making and has led to services meeting the needs of citizens more effectively. It has also built a sense of ownership of policies, plans and strategies among citizens...

Another stated that:

Where used effectively consultation enables the Council to ensure that the policies and strategies developed have the support of the people we serve. In this way it also contributes to continuous service improvement and ensures that we are accurately providing what it is that people tell us they want.

Some respondents were keen to highlight the benefits that consultation brought to policy implementation. One respondent thought that it led ‘to a better formulated policy and hence easier implementation’. Another commented that consultation resulted in a ‘more inclusive approach to decision-making and policy formulation’. Still another thought that ‘decisions made following consultation are more widely accepted’. A key factor would seem to be gaining public views on issues ‘...wider input often provides useful local knowledge previously unknown to the Authority’. Finally, some thought that the positive role of consultation needed to be given more recognition—‘Overall consultation plays a role in decision making but in my view is not given the level of importance or influence it actually merits’. Another respondent commented—

While Public Consultation is considered a relatively new concept in Ireland and is perceived by many as mandatory for macro projects only, it is essential to highlight that the [name of county council] use the process extensively (although not mandatory).

4.8.2 Participative Democracy

Lastly, authorities were given an opportunity to add any issues or comments that had not already been covered in the survey with particular reference to overall approaches to consultation. One respondent addressed the issue of ‘participative democracy’ and consultation, particularly in relation to local communities:

When facilitated by consultation processes that reflect good practice and local circumstances it plays a vital role in local authority decision-making. In this context consultation with the public is a vital element in ensuring that the local authority addresses locally-articulated needs.

This respondent went on to say:

The whole concept of participative democracy has been embraced by [name of county council] this means starting the consultation process with a blank page and facilitating communities (both geographical and

sectoral) in being able to play a full and active part in decision-making in relation to issues that affect their lives and communities.

Essentially, this respondent thought that 'new and more inclusive consultation processes give local people and communities both a stake and a say in local decision making'.

4.9 Conclusion

Public consultation is used extensively by local authorities, both north and south of the border. Its impact is viewed overwhelmingly as positive in the context of improving service delivery, gaining knowledge of citizen's views on policy matters, as well as encouraging citizen participation in decision-making processes. Currently, there exists a clear preference for more traditional consultation techniques, particularly with the wide-spread use of consultation documents, public meetings, service satisfaction surveys and co-option/committee involvement. Electronic methods are employed too, albeit to a much lesser extent, with the use of documentary/policy websites being the most popular technique. The majority of consultation initiatives would appear to be targeted towards the whole population rather than a specific sector or group. The key policy or issue concerns service quality and delivery overall, with planning issues attracting considerable use of electronic techniques. Both internal and external factors play important roles in stimulating public consultation. There is significant evidence to suggest that a degree of 'ownership' exists over the processes that are initiated by local authorities. This is borne out by the importance given to 'drivers' such as corporate strategy/standards, departmental projects and by the extensive assistance local authorities receive from other public sector agencies in running consultations. However, external factors also play a key role, with the need to satisfy public demand and various statutory requirements seen as vitally important drivers too.

The need to satisfy statutory requirements is also viewed as one of the main purposes of public consultation. Improving service quality is also seen as a key purpose, as well as being one of the main benefits of engaging in public consultations. Better policymaking is also identified as an important benefit to be derived from entering into public consultation. This has been linked to the importance of gaining knowledge of citizens' views on issues in order to shape policy outcomes. Having said that, the perceived role of the citizen in consultation—and therefore in decision-making—would seem to be secondary in importance to other perceived purposes/benefits. The role of citizens in this context would seem to be defined as 'participation' rather than 'empowerment' and this preference may account for gaining knowledge of citizens' views as a form of participation in decision-making.

Initiating public consultations would not appear to be significantly problematic for local authorities, though some features of consultation fatigue are acknowledged by some respondents as being valid—particularly issues such as 'current consultation techniques are too time-consuming' and a 'public perception that consultation does not influence policy'. Overall, however, respondents strongly rejected the idea that public consultations can have a negative effect on the workings of their authority.

North/South Comparison

While subtle differences exist between Northern and Southern authorities in relation to public consultation, these differences could not be described as significant. For instance, the most popular techniques used by authorities North and South of the border are the same—consultation documents and public meetings. However, Northern authorities make more use of service satisfaction surveys, while Southern authorities run more initiatives involving community/needs analysis and co-option/committee involvement. Overall, based on the evidence presented in these findings, Southern authorities have launched significantly more initiatives than their Northern counterparts—using traditional and electronic techniques. One key difference emerges however, in relation to perceived 'drivers' of consultation processes. The Northern authorities place far more importance on the influence of equality legislation and

the same is also true of peace and reconciliation, where 90% of Northern authorities cite this as an important driver, compared to 11% of Southern authorities. The situation is similar in relation to perceived purposes and benefits of public consultation. Overall, the two main purposes for both Northern and Southern authorities are the need to satisfy statutory requirements and the need to improve service quality. The two key benefits are better policy-making and improvement in services, with more Southern authorities identify with better policy-making and more Northern authorities see improvement in services as the main benefit.

Both jurisdictions see the role of the citizen as secondary in terms of purposes and benefits. However, Southern authorities view empowering communities as slightly more important than Northern authorities, where gaining information on citizens' views is seen as more important. But again, it should be stated that both jurisdictions see citizen participation as important. One way in which this importance is reflected is in the provision of feedback/review mechanisms. The percentages of those authorities that have such structures in place are both significant and almost identical on both sides of the border with 58% of Southern authorities and 60% of Northern authorities making these initiatives available to the public. The final difference of any significance is in relation to an acknowledgement by those authorities that have failed to involve particular social groups. A third of Northern authorities did view this as a problem compared to 16% of Southern authorities.

Chapter 5. Consultation and central government, Republic of Ireland

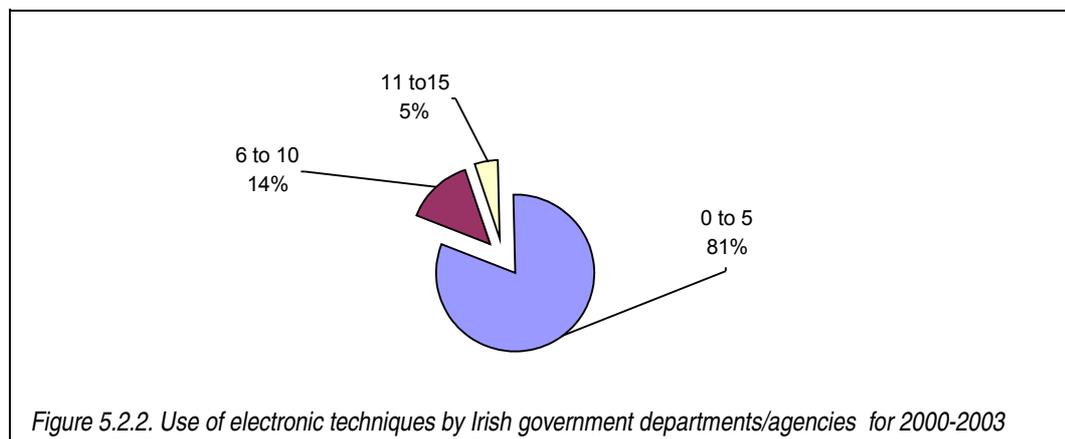
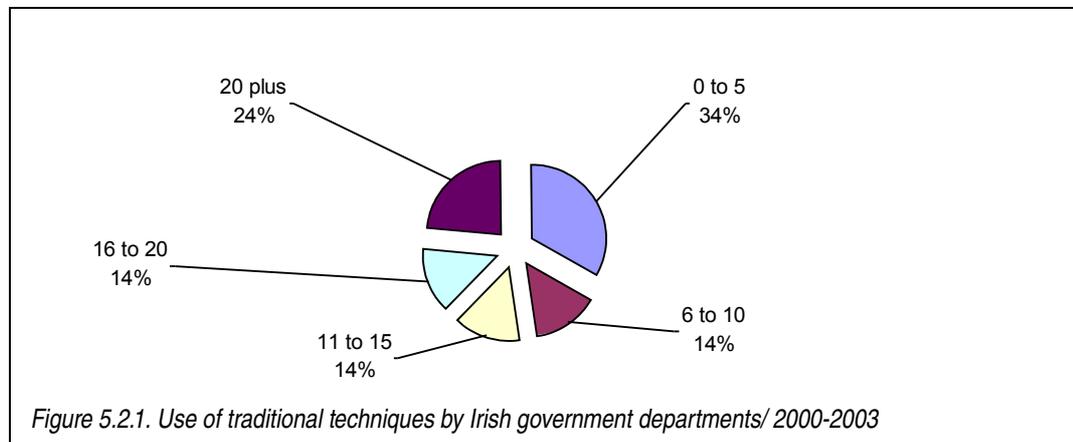
5.1 Introduction

This section examines how public consultation is currently being practiced by the Irish government through its departments, agencies and state-sponsored bodies. Each Department and state organisation was asked to submit information on public consultations between the periods 2000—2003, with particular reference to 2003. Findings are presented in the following sections—

- Recent and Current uses of Public Consultation Techniques
- Key forms of Public Consultation
- Central Government approaches to public consultation
- The Main Purposes of Public Consultation
- Challenges in initiating Public Consultation
- The Benefits of engaging in Public Consultation
- Overall views on the impact and approaches to Public Consultation

In all, 25 government Departments and bodies submitted completed questionnaires. These included central government Departments, health boards, as well as a number of agencies that are engaged in a wide variety of policy areas. The diversity in the various government bodies that responded to the survey allows for a comprehensive presentation of current public consultation practice.

5.2 Recent and current uses of public consultation techniques



For the purposes of analysis, consultation techniques are divided between traditional and electronic forms. In the period between 2000 and 2003 it is clear that the Irish government made far more use of traditional consultation techniques than electronic forms. While the majority of government bodies engaged in zero to 20 consultation processes involving traditional techniques, 5 bodies initiated 20 plus ‘traditional’ consultations.

In comparison, only one government body used electronic media in over 10 consultations (the ‘11-15’ category), while the majority—17 government bodies—ran between 0 and 5 electronically-based consultations with the public.

5.3 Key forms of public consultation

Government bodies were given a list of 26 different consultation techniques and were asked to indicate how many times (if any) they had employed each technique, the target group that the initiative was aimed at, and finally, the policy or issue that the consultation process was concerned with.

5.3.1 Prevalence/diversity of techniques employed

Figure 5.3.1 and Figure 5.3.2 show the number of times a particular technique was used, as well as the number of different government bodies that employed that technique.

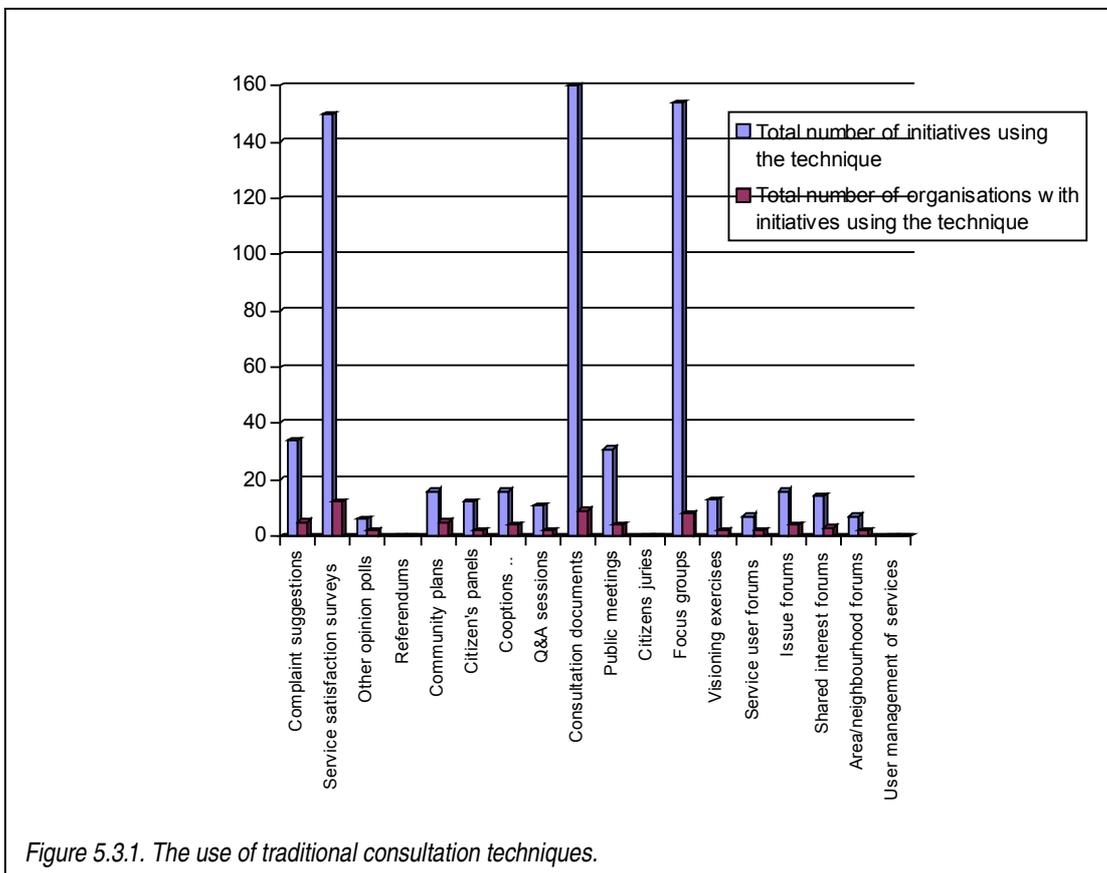


Figure 5.3.1. The use of traditional consultation techniques.

With respect to traditional forms of consultation, three techniques are by far the most widely used—Service satisfaction surveys, Consultation documents and Focus groups. These three forms alone were used in 464 separate initiatives. In addition, these techniques were used by the largest number of individual government bodies and organisations—12 separate government bodies used Services satisfaction surveys, 9 used Consultation documents and 8 employed Focus groups. There exists a rich diversity in the traditional techniques in use. Only two of the forms listed were not used at all by any government body—Referendums and User management of services. The most widely used electronic technique is the Documentary/policy comment website. This was employed in 14 different consultation initiatives, with 5 different government

bodies making use of this particular form. While the number of initiatives using electronic media is significantly smaller than those employing traditional techniques, some diversity is still observable. Out of the 8 electronic techniques listed, only two were not used at all—Live chat events and on-line petitions.

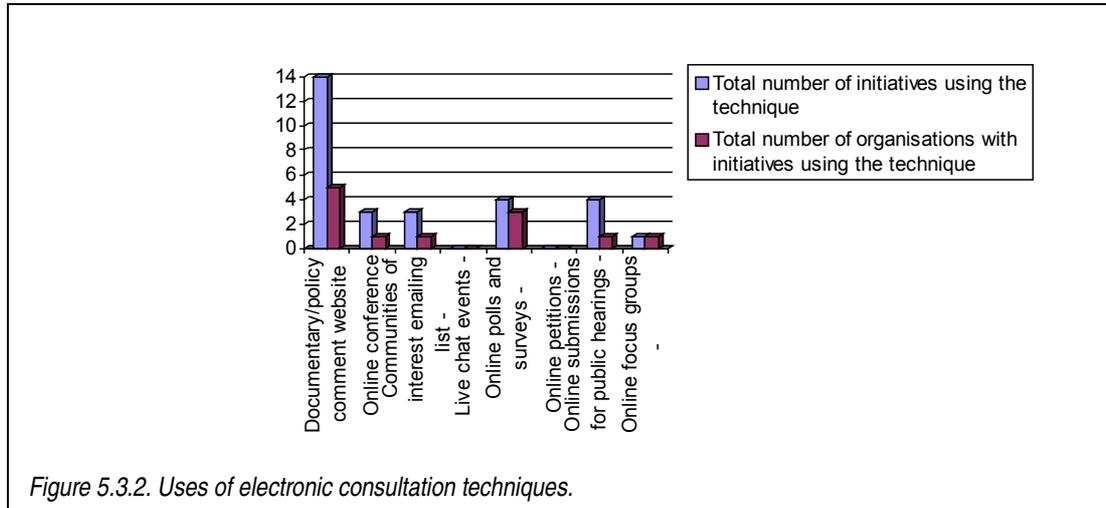


Figure 5.3.2. Uses of electronic consultation techniques.

5.3.2 Target groups

Respondents were asked to select a specific target group from the following—whole population, specific community, public sector, private sector, community /voluntary sector, service users (members of the public that specifically use the services offered by a Department/agency), initiatives that involved more than one sector and non-specified groups. Figure 5.3.3 shows the specific groups or sectors that have been involved in consultation initiatives.

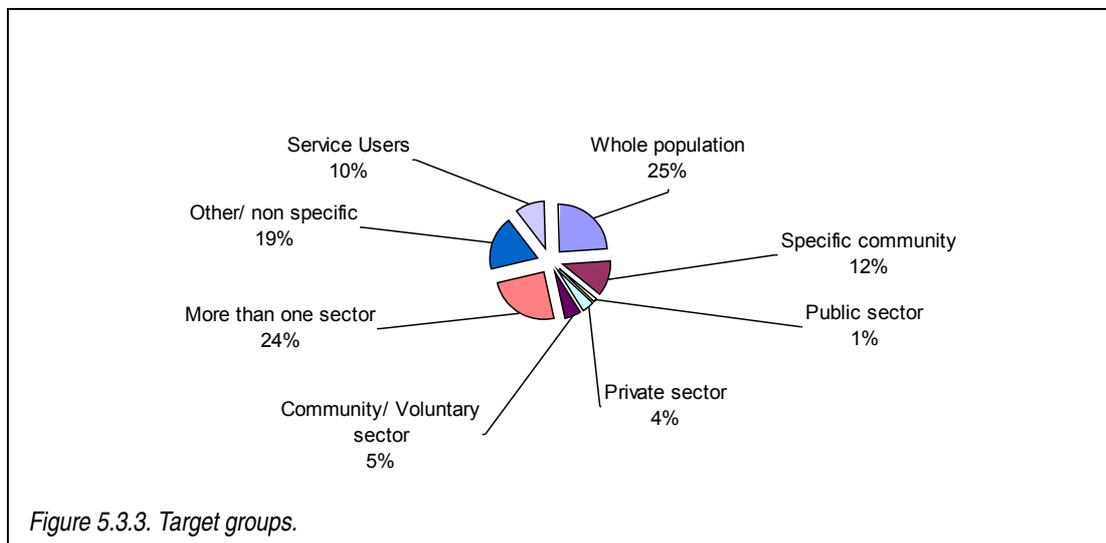
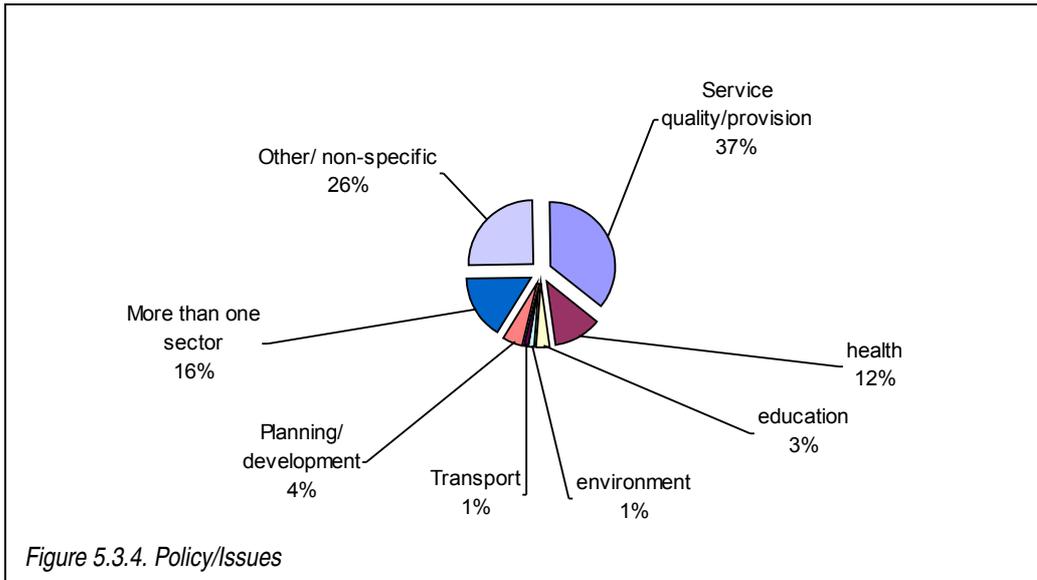


Figure 5.3.3. Target groups.

Most of the Departments and government bodies included in the survey —19 in total—targeted more than one of the listed sectors—particularly with the use of consultation documents. 14 Departments and bodies targeted the whole population. Interestingly, of the 5 Departments that used service satisfaction surveys, none limited their target groups to merely service users — instead they targeted the whole population. Of those that gave responses to this particular question, the most popularly used electronic technique—documentary/policy comment websites—is targeted predominately at the whole population, with only one government body specifically focusing on service users.

5.3.3 Policy/issues addressed



It is clear from the evidence presented in Figure 5.3.4 that most of the government Departments and bodies surveyed employ consultation processes do so in relation to service quality/provision. This particular sector accounts for the majority of both traditional and electronic techniques. Health policy is another significant area, with 12% of public consultations initiated in relation to health issues.

5.3.4 Innovative forms of public consultation

Respondents were given the opportunity to offer examples of other consultation techniques that had not already been listed in the survey. One respondent offered the use of ‘specialist workshops’ that ‘have been used to clarify important health and social service policy agendas such as risk management and patient safety’. Another drew attention to the use of:

Touchscreen technology using PC, touchscreen monitor, customers are invited to answer questions at the point where service is received—these surveys are carried out by staff in local offices in our 10 Regions...

Other innovative forms included the use of ‘Ad hoc bilateral/trilateral meetings with particular stakeholders’, ‘advisory committees’, as well as ‘calls for written submissions’ from lone parents, prisoners, ex-offenders, school leavers and low-income tenants.

5.4 Central government’s approach to public consultation

5.4.1 Factors that influence the initiation of public consultation processes

Both internal and external factors are key to stimulating public consultation at the central government level. Respondents were given the opportunity to rate a number of selected factors from ‘essential’ to ‘not important’. Internal factors, such as corporate strategy/standards (viewed as essential by 47.6% of respondents) and Ministerial projects (essential to 33.3 percent), does suggest a certain degree of internal ownership over consultation initiatives. This argument could be further supported by the fact that 52.4% of respondents thought that ruling party/group policy was not important—the highest single rating of any factor. However, There is also evidence to suggest that external factors do indeed play a significant role in driving consultation initiatives. For instance, other ‘statutory requirements’ are essential according to 47.6% of those surveyed. Similarly, EU legislation is seen as essential by 33.3% of respondents, while 47.6% selected public demand as a very important factor—but only seen as essential by under 15 percent.

It is also clear from the responses to this question that the social partners (employers, trade unions, farmers and community/voluntary sector) are not perceived as being important

stimulators of consultation processes. Lastly, it is interesting that exactly the same amount of respondents thought that Ministerial projects were not important in stimulating consultation as those that thought that this factor was essential.

%	Essential	Very important	Important	Not important
Ruling party/group policy	19	9.5	19	52.4
Corporate strategy/standards	47.6	28.6	14.3	9.5
Ministerial projects	33.3	14.3	19	33.3
Public demand	14.3	47.6	19	19
Local government networks	9.5	14.3	33.3	42.9
Equality legislation	19	14.3	19	47.6
EU legislation	33.3	9.5	28.6	28.6
Other statutory requirements	47.6	4.8	28.6	19
Employers sector	14.3	28.6	14.3	42.9
Trade union sector	14.3	19	19	47.6
Farming sector	4.8	19	14.3	61.9
Community/voluntary sector	19	33.3	9.5	38.1

Figure 5.4.1. Table of responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.

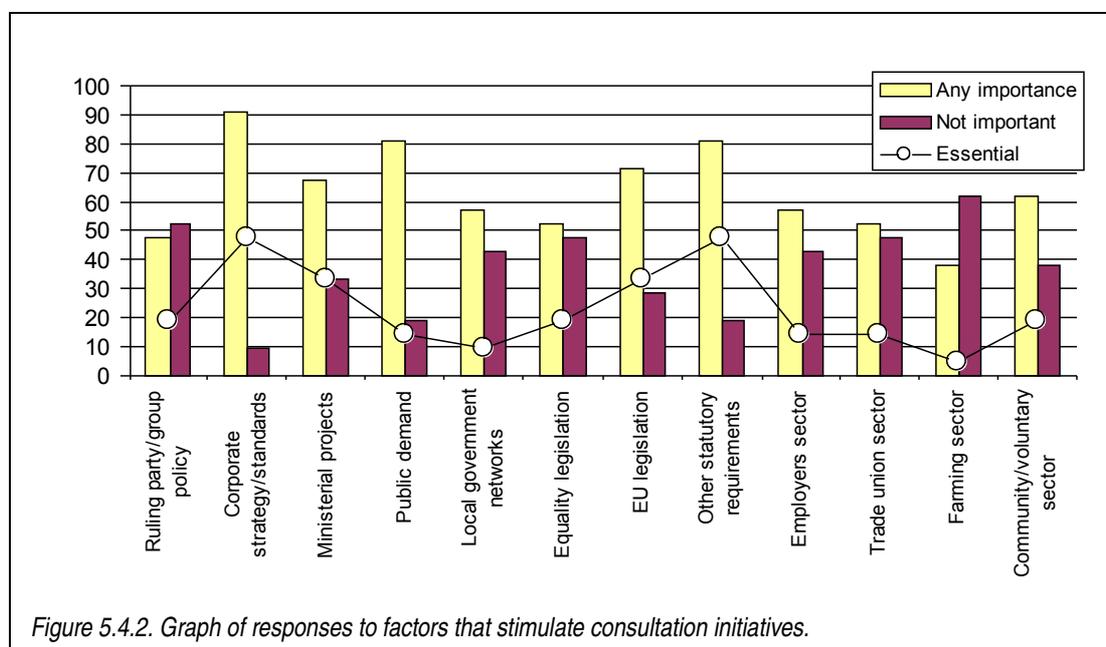


Figure 5.4.2. Graph of responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.

Respondents were given the chance to add other factors that they found important in the initiation of consultation processes. One respondent commented that there existed a 'need to develop services for specific groups in population...Need for evaluation of services (particularly in light of changing technology, evidenced based treatments etc).' Another highlighted the role of research and experts in initiating the need for consultations on specific issues, while yet another mentioned the 'Regional partnership process'. Consultation was also identified by a respondent as a way of introducing 'best practice' in relation to 'the reduction of road crashes and fire outbreaks'.

5.4.2 From where is assistance sought?

Figure 5.4.3 indicates that almost 62% of respondents receive assistance in running consultation initiatives from other public sector bodies. This factor could well tie in sense of internal ownership of consultation processes mentioned above. In terms of external factors, both the private sector and the community/voluntary sector are notable sources of assistance. However, while 43% of Departments/agencies get assistance from the private sector, only 19% use this source exclusively.

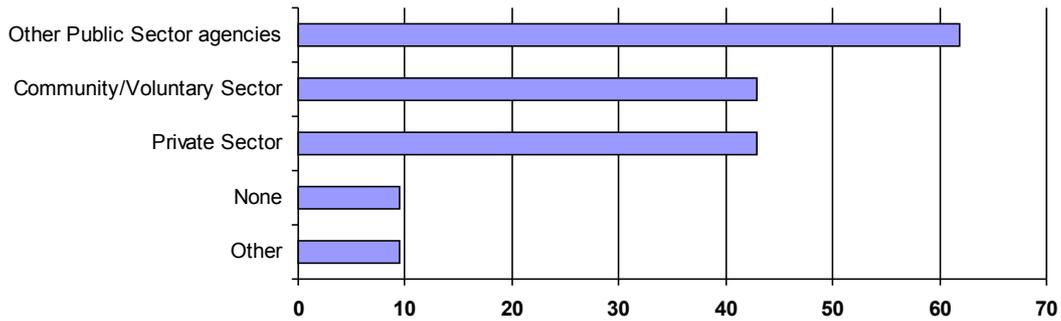


Figure 5.4.3. Where does the Irish government get assistance in running consultation initiatives?

5.4.3 Peace and reconciliation as a driver?

Only 19% of respondents indicated that they could identify consultation initiatives that had been used to promote peace and reconciliation. One respondent pointed to the Donegal gaeltacht where ‘we have worked closely with the International Fund for Ireland on projects to develop tourism and cross border co-operation.’ Another offered the specific instance where:

The research community in Northern Ireland was invited to contribute to the consultation process that led to the publication of Making Knowledge Work for Health and a number of significant contributions were received...

5.5 The main purposes of public consultation

	Essential	Very important	Important	Not important
To meet statutory requirements	47.9	9.5	23.8	19.0
To meet equality legislation requirements	28.6	9.5	23.8	38.1
To meet EU legal requirements	28.6	19	19	33.3
To improve service quality	47.6	42.9	9.5	0
To develop ‘best practice’ initiatives	33.3	52.4	9.5	4.8
To increase citizen’s awareness	19	47.6	19	14.3
To gain information on citizen’s views	38.1	33.3	23.8	4.8
To develop/empower communities	28.6	23.8	23.8	23.8
To encourage citizen participation in decision-making	28.6	23.8	23.8	23.8

Figure 5.5.1. Table of central government assessments of the purposes of engaging in public consultation.

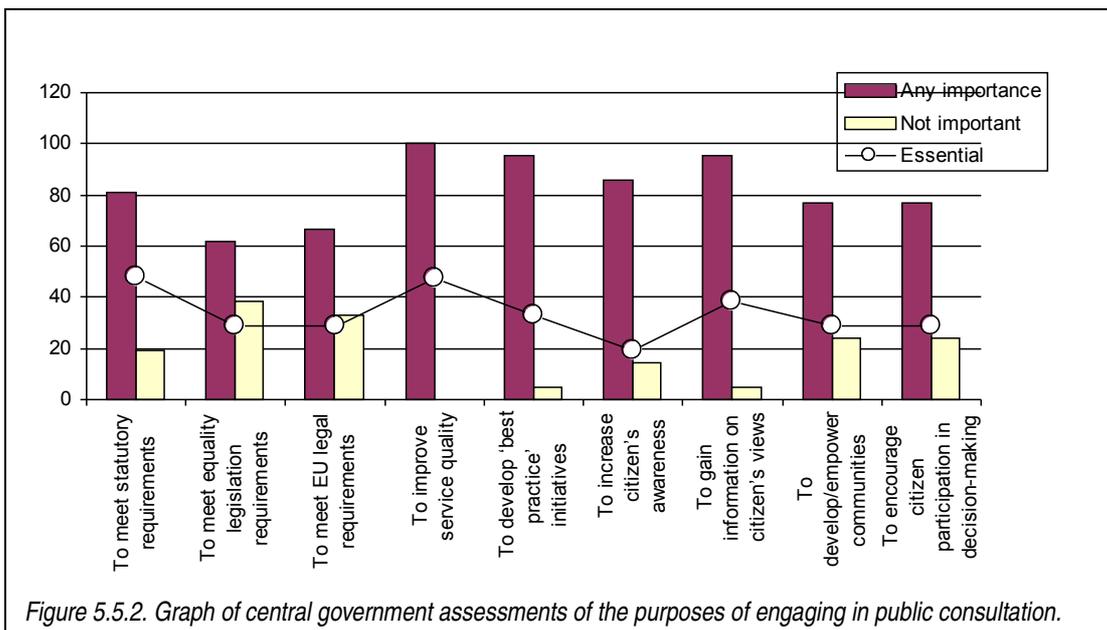


Figure 5.5.2. Graph of central government assessments of the purposes of engaging in public consultation.

The highest rated 'essential' factor identified by government bodies in assessing the purpose of initiating public consultation is to meet statutory requirements, with 47.6% of respondents choosing this option. This also reflects the fact that over 47% saw this as essential in stimulating consultation processes (see above). The need to improve service quality is seen by 47.6% of respondents as essential and by almost 43% as 'very important'—again reflecting the above findings on factors that stimulate consultation. Another significant finding is that the need to develop 'best practice' initiatives (possibly linked to service quality) is identified by almost 53% as very important.

Critically, the perceived role of citizens in consultation is seen as secondary to other factors. While gaining information on citizen's views rates relatively highly at just over 38% seeing it as essential and over 33% deeming it very important, other possible factors such as empowering communities or encouraging citizen participation would seem to be less relevant.

5.5.1 When is consultation to be used?

Government Departments and bodies were given the opportunity to rate five specific stages in the policy-making process in terms of where they were most likely to initiate consultation with the public. Figure 5.5.3 shows the results:

	Extremely	Very	Likely	Only slightly	Not likely at all
Agenda setting	14.3	28.6	19	14.3	23.8
Analysis	4.8	42.9	23.8	9.5	19
Formulation	14.3	33.3	23.8	9.5	19
Implementation	19	23.8	14.3	9.5	33.3
Monitoring	9.5	38.1	28.6	4.8	19

Figure 5.5.3. Stages when consultation used.

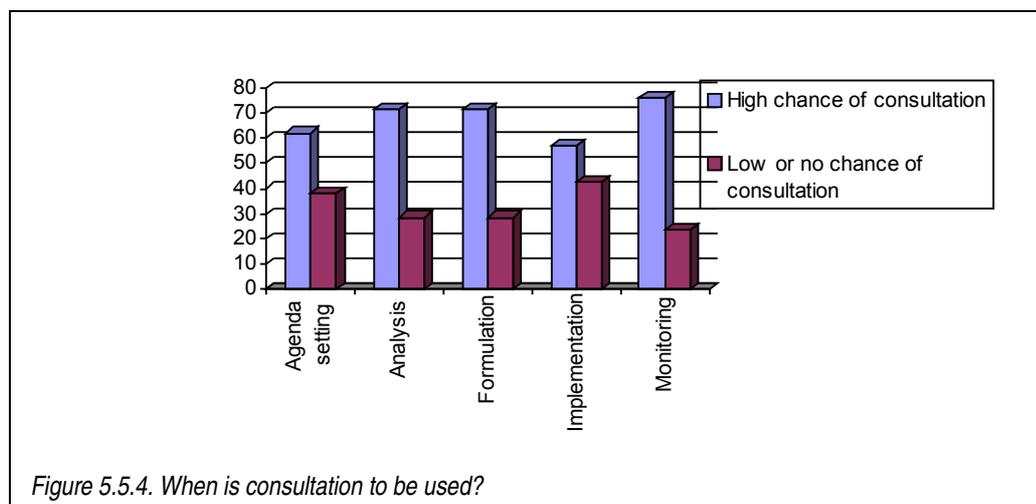


Figure 5.5.4. When is consultation to be used?

While no stage was significantly identified as 'extremely likely', the analysis stage is seen by almost 43% as 'very likely', while the other significant stage rated as 'very likely' is monitoring on just over 38 percent. The formulation stage is also indicated as being significant, where formal consultation is initiated and the implementation plan is designed. The preference for the analysis stage may well be reflecting the importance of gaining information on citizen's views that has been expressed in other questions as this particular policy stage is concerned with '... gathering evidence and knowledge from a range of sources including citizens...'. .

The preference for the formulation stage may also be indicative of the importance of gaining citizens' views, however it is important to state that this does not necessarily signify full participation by citizens in decision-making. The relatively high rating for the monitoring stage again may reflect other survey findings in that monitoring can include service satisfaction surveys and other techniques that deal with service delivery and provision.

5.5.2 The use of feedback/ review mechanisms

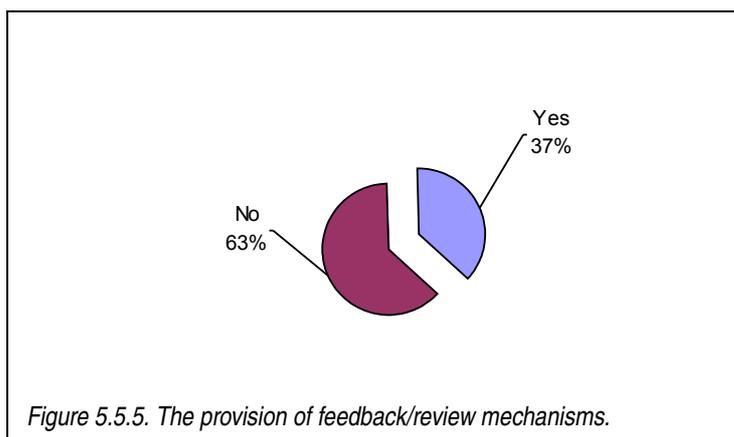


Figure 5.5.5. The provision of feedback/review mechanisms.

Issues surrounding the employment of review mechanisms have already been alluded to earlier in relation to the ‘monitoring’ stage of the policy-making process (see Chart 5.11 above). The use of review mechanisms assumes a strengthening of citizen’s participation in decision-making, as recommendations here may well feed back into the ‘agenda setting’ phase of policy. Departments and agencies were asked whether they provide such mechanisms

in order for citizens to evaluate the consultation processes that they had been involved in. Out of the total of respondents that answered this particular question, just over 57% indicated that they did not offer any such mechanisms.

Again, this might reflect the perceived importance of the role of the citizen in decision-making that has been already outlined above. Of the feedback mechanisms currently in use, a number involves the use of electronic techniques. For example, a number of respondents commented that reports are made available on websites, where interested parties are then able to submit their views. One respondent offered ‘risk management and safe systems development’ as a means of review/feedback. Yet another gave the examples ‘customer comment cards’ and ‘complaint procedures’ as a way of informing ‘customer service policy’. Lastly, a respondent stated that the views of ‘relevant interest groups’ were actively sought in relation to ‘draft policies’.

5.6 Challenges in initiating public consultation

Respondents were asked to evaluate how problematic a selected list of factors were in implementing consultation initiatives.

	Extremely	Very	Problematic	Only slightly	Not problematic at all
Lack of support from elected representatives	4.8	4.8	0	14.3	76.2
Lack of support from your organisation	0	4.8	0	14.3	81.1
Lack of public interest	9.5	0	4.8	28.6	57.1
Lack of resources	14.3	19	19	14.3	33.3
Lack of time	4.8	14.3	42.9	9.5	28.6
Lack of facilitating legislation	0	4.8	4.8	14.3	76.2

Figure 5.6.1. What is problematic when consulting?

Figure 5.6.1 gives the ratings by respondents from ‘extremely problematic’ through to ‘not problematic at all’. Clearly a key finding here is that no factors are identified in any significant way as being either ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ problematic. In fact, the only factor that is seen as problematic in any substantial way is a lack of time with 42.9% of respondents indicating this.

When asked to offer other problematic factors not already listed, one respondent thought that more could be done to reach out to more marginalised groups. This respondent said that there was a:

Need for advocacy on behalf of clients who may not be able to represent themselves e.g. mental health services, lower literacy levels. Reaching marginalised groups e.g. homeless Representatives of groups e.g. voluntary sector or interest groups...

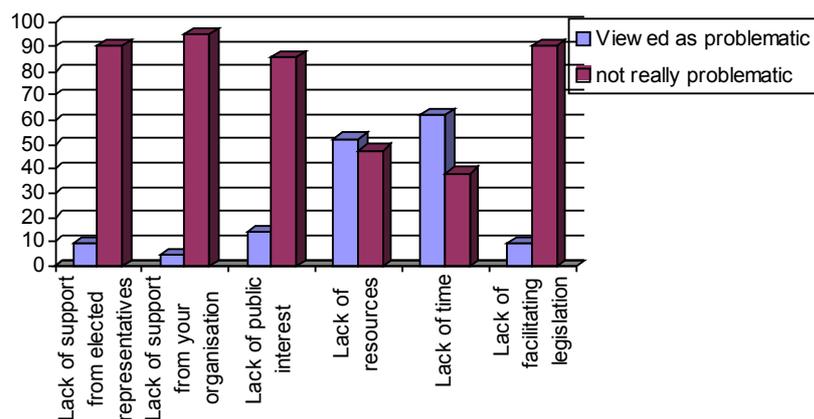


Figure 5.6.2. Irish government departments/agencies identification of problematic factors in relation to the initiation of consultation processes.

5.6.1 The challenge of ‘consultation fatigue’

As with the identification of potential problem areas in the implementation of consultation, the issue of consultation fatigue is not identified by government departments and bodies as being a problem at all. Figure 5.6.3 illustrates this.

	Extremely difficult	Very difficult	Difficult	Not difficult at all
The public are asked to engaged in too many consultation processes	5.9	5.9	29.4	58.8
Current consultation techniques are too time-consuming	5.9	0	47.1	47.1
A public perception that consultation does not influence policy	11.8	5.9	41.2	41.2
The public are repeatedly asked the same questions	5.9	17.6	5.9	70.6

Figure 5.6.3. The challenge of ‘Consultation Fatigue’.

It is clear here that the ‘not difficult at all’ category is heavily favoured by respondents when asked about factors that contribute to consultation fatigue. One explanation why this might be the case was offered by one respondent—

Our consultation was not with ‘the public’ but with people with an interest in the outcome of what we do. That may explain why we have got a good response to our invitations to comment/participate.

5.6.2 Negative effects on the work of government departments and bodies?

Respondents were asked whether they felt that public consultation has a negative effect on their particular Department, branch, division or agency. A total of 89% replied ‘no’ to this. When asked to give examples where consultation does have a negative effect, respondents raised the issue of public perceptions/expectations of the role of government. One pointed to ‘... difficulties that public have with other organizations that you have no role...’, while another gave an example, ‘It is perceived that we have a role in traffic law enforcement, which is the reserved function of the Gardai’.

5.6.3 When NOT to involve the public

There are certain issues or situations where it may be felt that it would inadvisable to involve public input through the use of consultation. When asked whether there were particular circumstances where there would be a preference of not to involve the public, 42% answered ‘yes’ while 58% said ‘no’.

Clearly one of the key areas where public consultation is perceived by some to be inappropriate is in relation to internal matters. One respondent highlighted ‘Issues that are internal to the organisation. However, we do consult staff about the way the organisations run, as in the staff survey’. Another commented:

‘Issues where we would not be in a position to respond or act upon feedback received e.g. internal service delivery problems which would need to be addressed within the organisation first before consulting with customers...’

Others pointed to the issue of the implementation of EU Directives as an area that may not necessarily require public consultation—‘where policy must be implemented irrespective of views e.g. EU Directives, however, notwithstanding this, most EU directive implementation is subject to consultation’.

5.6.4 A failure to involve particular social or community groups

In total, only 10% of respondents acknowledged a failure to engage particular social or community groups.

5.7 The benefits of engaging in public consultation

	score	%
Better policy-making	14	66.7
Better decision-making on specific points	12	57.1
Improvement in services	15	71.4
Greater citizen awareness	7	33.3
Community development/awareness	3	14.3
Encourage citizen participation in decision-making	5	23.8

Figure 5.7.1. Table of perceived benefits for central government in entering into consultation processes.

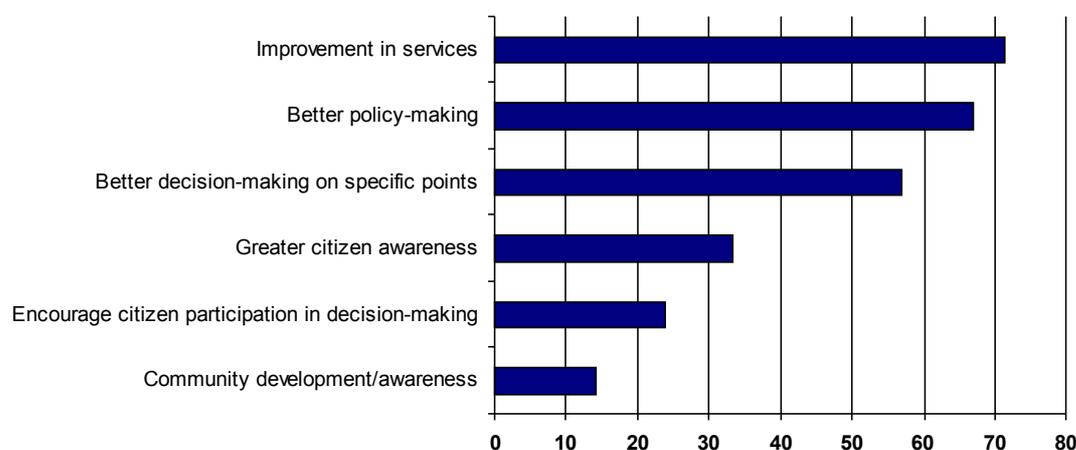


Figure 5.7.2. Chart of perceived benefits for central government in entering into consultation processes.

It was noted above that central government Departments and agencies identified improving service quality as a key purpose of public consultation (see section 2.5 above). Not surprisingly, almost 72% of respondents identified improvement in services as one of the main benefits to be gained from consultation processes. Better policy making was also cited by many respondents as a benefit to be gained from consultation. Again, following on from earlier findings, the perceived role or position of citizens in consultation was seen by many respondents to be of secondary importance in terms of perceived benefits. Citizen awareness, community development/awareness and citizen participation all rated significantly lower than other factors.

5.7.1 The successful use of consultation initiatives

Respondents were asked to name what they perceived to be the more successful use of consultation and to remark why they thought these initiatives had been so successful. Some respondents were keen to mention the use of consultation in relation to service users. One offered the use of service satisfaction survey because it enabled an improvement of services 'in line with feedback'. Another felt that 'User surveys are a good method of getting real feedback from users—rather than just general opinions'. A key point, however, with user surveys is that 'a good method of getting real feedback from users—rather than just general opinions'. Other traditional techniques that were identified as very successful included 'consultative conferences' because 'they provide the best means for different stakeholders to evaluate and adjust their positions when exposed to each other's views'. The use of regular meetings with 'representative bodies' is seen as a key way of establishing a 'basis of trust'. In addition, one respondent mentioned the use of opinion polls—'used before and after major TV advertising campaigns to evaluate pre and post changes in responses and awareness levels'. It is also clear that the use of submissions from the public (gaining information on public views) is seen as important—'information received from wide range of stakeholders used to produce report. Also allows for follow-up meetings and visits to community initiatives'. Some electronic techniques were also highlighted as successful. Among these were 'Asking for submissions from the public via our website'. Another electronic technique mentioned was the use of 'touchscreen surveys' because they are seen as '...efficient, cost effective and customer friendly...'

5.8 Overall views on the impact of, and approaches to, public consultation

5.8.1 The impact of consultation

Respondents were invited to express what they thought the impact of employing public consultation processes has on their organisation's decision-making. All thought that consultation had a beneficial effect. For instance, one stated that 'Consultation is a central part of our work. It provides key material for all our reports and underpins many of the recommendations we make to Government'. Another thought that it:

*Greatly contributes to the policy making process. Helps to tailor services to meet client/patient needs
Highlights problems and can assist in prioritisation and enable creative solutions Generates awareness of choices government has to make.*

Critically, consultation is seen as a way of improving decision-making. One respondent commented—'Consultation is a central part of our work. It provides key material for all our reports and underpins many of the recommendations we make to Government', while another saw it as an 'essential part of decision-making in a public organisation'. One of the reasons why consultation is seen as an integral part of the decision-making process was offered by one respondent—'having consultation changes the agenda and highlights gaps in services...'. Finally, consultation was seen by a number of respondents as a way of improving 'external relationships'. One respondent felt that it 'improves 'buy-in' from stakeholders for implementation of final recommendations'.

5.8.2 Other features of authorities' overall approaches to public consultation

Finally, central government Departments and bodies were given the opportunity to offer other features of their overall approach to public consultation that had not already been addressed in the questionnaire. One respondent took this opportunity to comment on the use of electronic techniques for consultation:

While use of electronic collected data is very efficient, you still need to have face to face meetings with individuals and the public as some of the public especially the elderly are not comfortable with the new technology.

Another respondent mentioned the fact that decentralization of government Departments and a large ‘local office network’ means that ‘staff consult with individual customers on a daily basis’. This respondent also alluded to another important element of public consultation—

The media (local and national press) would also be used on a regular basis as a means of communicating information such as extension of a closing date for applying to a scheme or to invite submissions on a particular issue.

5.9 Conclusion

The overall view expressed by the government Departments and bodies that took part in this survey was that public consultation has positive impact on policy and decision-making. It is seen as a critical means of improving the quality of services and is perceived as a way of including the views of the public in policy formulation. Consultation would seem to be used extensively, however three specific traditional techniques are predominately employed—Service satisfaction surveys, consultation documents and focus groups. It comes as no surprise therefore, that the issue that consultation is used in relation to is service quality. The need to improve services is seen both as a central purpose from initiating public consultation, as well as one of its perceived benefits. The use of electronic techniques would appear to be at an embryonic stage of development as it presently lags far behind the use of more traditional techniques. The manner in which consultation is initiated would indicate strong sense of internal ownership of the processes. One way that this is reflected is in the fact that government bodies currently get most assistance in running public consultations from other public sector bodies. However, external ‘drivers’ also play a crucial role, with the need to satisfy statutory requirements and EU legislation key factors. Significantly, peace and reconciliation is not viewed as key driver of public consultation.

One of the key findings in this section is the perception of the role of the citizen in public consultation. Factors such as empowering communities or encouraging citizen participation in decision-making are viewed as secondary in importance. While there exists a strong body of opinion that public consultation should happen at the ‘analysis’ and ‘formulation’ stage of the policy-making cycle (before implementation) and at the ‘monitoring’ phase (after implementation), the extent of citizen participation seems to be less clearly defined. For instance, while a sizeable majority of respondents thought that consultation should be happening at the monitoring level—an indication of participation in the decision-making process—the reality is that the majority of respondents (57 percent) acknowledged that they do not have feedback/review structures in place currently. Lastly, no significantly negative views on the concept of public consultation were expressed, either in terms of impact on the public or on the workings of government Departments and organisations.

Chapter 6. Northern Ireland central government and consultation

6.1 Introduction

This section looks at the practice of public consultation by the Northern Ireland government Departments. Again, each Department was asked to submit information on public consultations between the periods 2000–2003, with particular reference to 2003. Findings are presented in the following sections:

- Recent and Current uses of Public Consultation Techniques
- Key forms of Public Consultation
- Central Government approaches to public consultation
- The Main Purposes of Public Consultation
- Challenges in initiating Public Consultation
- The Benefits of engaging in Public Consultation
- Overall views on the impact and approaches to Public Consultation
- Comparison between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland

All 12 Northern Ireland Departments completed survey submissions for this project.

6.2 Recent and current uses of public consultation techniques

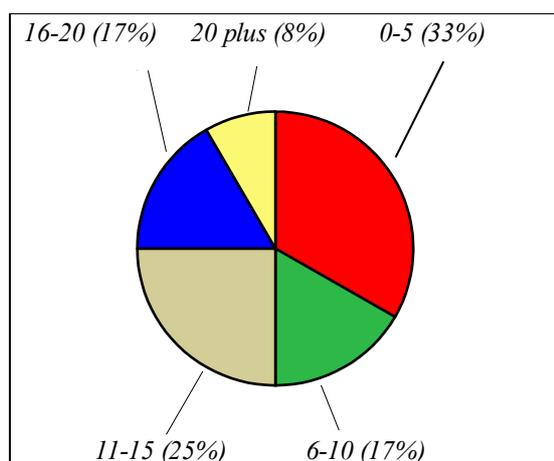


Figure 6.2.1. Use of traditional techniques by Northern Ireland government departments for 2000-2003.

Again, for analytical purposes, consultation techniques are divided between traditional and electronic forms. In the period 2000-2003, the Northern Ireland Government employed traditional techniques far more extensively than electronic consultation methods. 50% of government Departments initiated a maximum of 10 traditional consultations in this time. At the other end, Figure 6.2.1 shows that only 8% of responding Departments initiated '20 plus' consultations.

The use of e-consultation by Northern Ireland central government lagged far behind the deployment of traditional methods. For the period 2000-2003, 50% of Departments did not make use of any e-consultations, while the other 50% introduced 1 to 5 consultations.

6.3 Key forms of public consultation

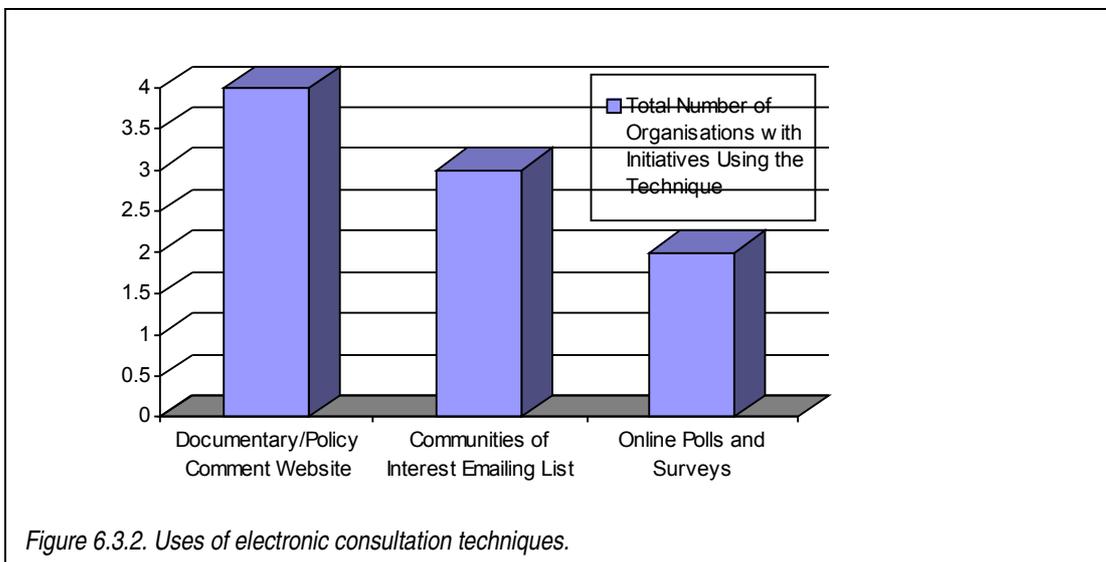
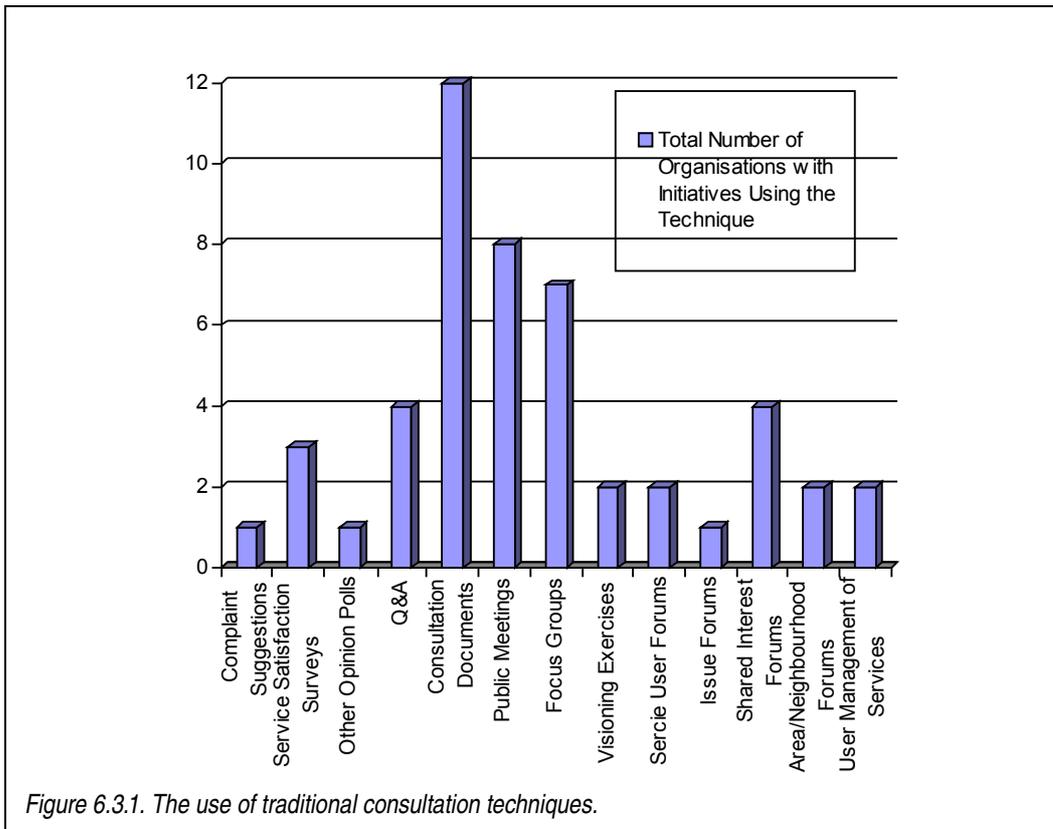
Respondents were asked to indicate the forms of consultation that they had used in the period 2000-2003. The primary purpose here was to ascertain the diversity and prevalence of techniques employed.

6.3.1 Prevalence/diversity of techniques employed

Figure 6.3.1 indicates the number of Northern Ireland government departments who have utilised particular traditional consultation techniques.

By far, the three most popularly used traditional consultation techniques used by Northern Ireland government departments are 'consultation documents', 'public meetings' and 'focus groups'. All 12 departments made use of consultation documents, 8 employed public meetings, while 7 ran focus groups. Overall, 13 different techniques have been used, indicating a diversity

of strategies employed in order to consult with the public. In turn, 5 of the techniques listed by the researchers were not utilised—referendums, community plans, citizens panels, co-option/committee involvement and visioning exercises.



While it is possible to see diversity in the use of traditional techniques, the same cannot be said of electronic techniques. Out of a possible list of 8 different electronic techniques, only three were used in the period 2000-2003. 4 departments used ‘documentary/policy comment websites’, 3 employed ‘communities of interest e-mailing lists’, while 2 departments made use of ‘on-line polls and surveys’. 5 other techniques listed in the survey were not used at all—on-line conferences, live chat events, on-line petitions, on-line submissions and on-line focus groups. Interestingly, one respondent claimed that their Department did not have the software to engage in e-consultation.

6.3.2 Target groups

Respondents were asked to select a specific target group from the following—whole population, specific community, public sector, private sector, community /voluntary sector, service users (members of the public that specifically use the services offered by a Department/agency), initiatives that involved more than one sector and non-specified groups.

The majority of consultations initiated are aimed at specific communities (43.5 percent), with 19.1% geared towards more than one sector and 16.5% used to engage with the whole population. Of specific sectors indicated, it is the community and voluntary sector that is most commonly engaged in consultations with the Northern Ireland government.

6.3.3 Policies/issues addressed

When asked to indicate what were the policy areas that Departments used public consultations for, the single biggest policy or issue is service quality/provision (14 percent)

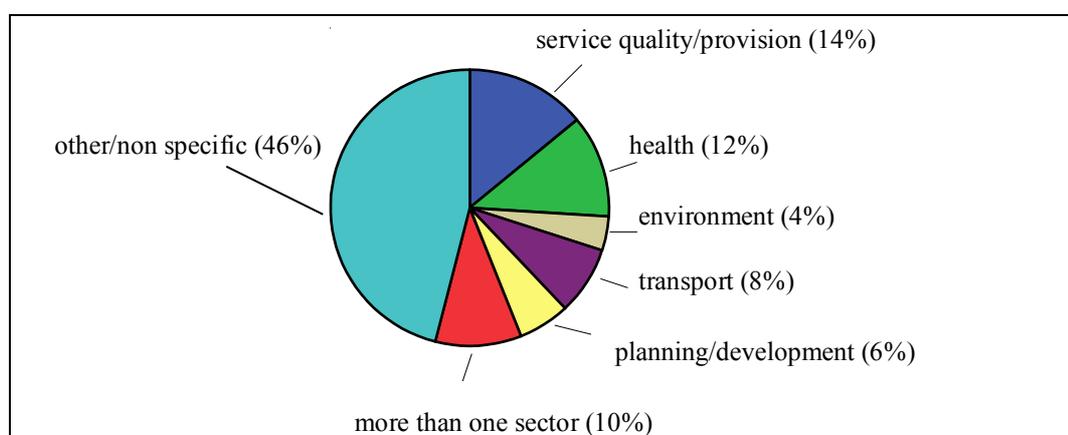


Figure 6.3.3. Policy/Issues

Interestingly, the majority of consultations involved non-specific issues. While some of these particular issues would seem to have a basis in equality concerns—gender, race and sexuality, other responses are less specific, for instance, one Department stated that they applied consultations to ‘various laws’. In contrast, ‘more than one sector’ (10 percent) indicates when more than one policy is specified.

6.3.4 Innovative forms of public consultation

Respondents were given the opportunity to tell researchers of any techniques that they have used, but were not listed in the survey. One respondent mentioned ‘stakeholder meetings’ with trade unions and employers. Another offered the following:

In addition to hard copy consultation, Environmental Policy Group (EPG) is increasingly committed to early and frequent engagement with key stakeholders on emerging environmental policies and legislation, throughout the policy development process. This engagement can take a variety of forms –attendance at district council meetings, and information sessions with key interest groups are some examples. In addition, in late 2004, EPG convened a series of public meetings relating to proposals for new National Parks legislation. EPG is also committed to reducing hard copy consultation wherever possible. For some consultation exercises, they have issued a summary letter to consultees—this highlights the fact that consultation is underway, summarising the key elements and directing them towards the full electronic document stored on EPG’s web-site.

Another gave the following instance—‘Culturally specific consultation with Irish Travellers in relation to proposal to introduce legislation to control unauthorised encampments.’ Yet another respondent listed the following initiatives—

Correspondence to target groups. Bi-laterals when necessary. Working groups comprising of relevant policy representatives. Officials attending an event. Formal consultation with PSNI staff associations on the preparation of draft Regs introducing amendments to police terms & conditions of service. Letters directly to organisations who may have a view e.g. police, legal system, health workers in stat sector.

Placed on CJSNI and NIO website and asked for comments in writing.

6.4 Central Government approaches to Public Consultation

6.4.1 Factors Influencing Initiation of Public Consultations

Northern Ireland government departments were asked to evaluate a number of factors that were identified by the researchers as important stimulants for the initiation of public consultation. These factors were ranked as follows:

%	Essential	Very Important	Important	Not Important	Missing
Ruling Party/ Group Policy	8.3	41.7	25	0	25
Corporate Strategy/Standards	33.3	50	16.7	0	0
Ministerial Projects	33.3	41.7	25	0	0
Public Demand	16.7	50	16.7	8.3	8.3
Local Government Networks	8.3	0	50	25	16.7
Equality Legislation	66.7	16.7	16.7	0	0
EU Legislation	50	25	16.7	8.3	0
Other Statutory Requirements	50	25	16.7	8.3	0
Employers Sector	0	16.7	50	25	8.3
Trade Union Sector	0	16.7	33.3	33.3	16.7
Farming Sector	16.7	0	25	50	8.3
Community/Voluntary Sector	8.3	25	25	33.3	8.3

Figure 6.4.1. Table of responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.

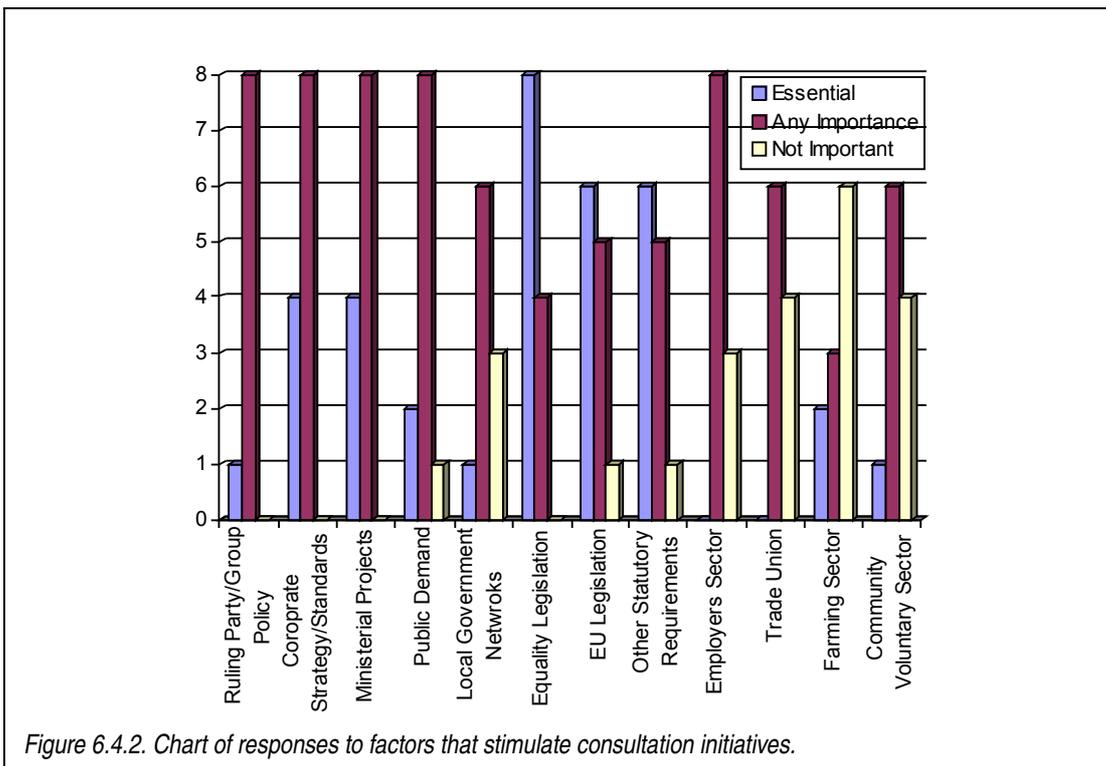


Figure 6.4.2. Chart of responses to factors that stimulate consultation initiatives.

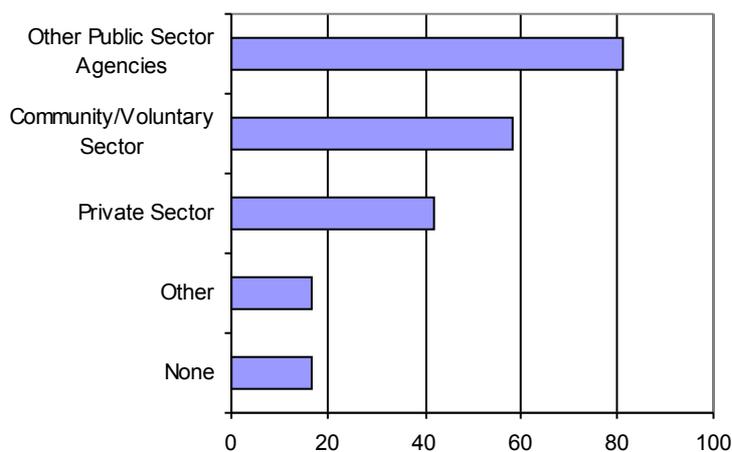
On the basis of responses, it can be seen that various forms of legislative or statutory requirements habitually stimulate consultation. The chief factor here is equality legislation, with 66.7% of respondents citing this as an ‘essential’ element in initiating consultation. Satisfying EU legislation and ‘other statutory requirements’ were also identified as significantly ‘essential’. Other notable factors included ‘public demand’, with 50% seeing this as ‘very important’; ‘ruling party/group policy’, with 41.7 seeing this also as ‘very important’; ‘local government networks’ (50% viewed this as ‘important’; and ‘employers sector’ (again, 50% see this as ‘important’). Interestingly, other listed sectors such as trade unions, farmers and the

community/voluntary sector were perceived as being less important in this respect. While external factors are of fundamental importance, internal considerations also play a role. The importance of ruling party/ group policy has already been mentioned above. In addition, 33.3% saw 'Ministerial projects' as 'essential', while 41.7% saw this as 'very important'.

When asked to comment on any other important 'drivers' of public consultation, one respondent commented:

The key drivers for consultation for NI Departments relate to statutory obligations arising out of Section 75 and the requirement to consult on draft legislation. It is also seen as part of good policy-making generally.

6.4.2 Where does central government get assistance in running consultation initiatives?



By far, the most critical source of assistance in running consultations is 'other public sector agencies', with 80% citing this as significant. Again, as with the most vital factors in the stimulation consultation, the importance of other public sector Agencies suggests a large degree of internal ownership of consultation processes. Important external factors are the community/voluntary sector (with just under 60% identifying this) and the private sector (40

Figure 6.4.3. Where do departments get assistance in running consultations? (percent).

6.4.3 Peace and Reconciliation as a Driver?

A small minority of respondents identified consultation processes that were specifically designed to promote peace and reconciliation.

Chart 6.7 Are there consultative initiatives that have been used to promote peace and reconciliation?

When asked to mention specific instances, one respondent listed 'Peace II Extension during consultation period, public meetings/Q&A sessions held in border areas.'

6.5 The Main Purposes of Public Consultation

%	Essential	Very Important	Important	Not Important	Missing
To meet statutory requirements	75	8.3	8.3	0	8.3
To meet equality legislation	66.7	16.7	8.3	0	0
To meet EU legal requirements	58.3	25	8.3	0	8.3
To improve service quality	8.3	66.7	16.7	0	8.3
To develop 'best practice' initiatives	8.3	41.7	41.7	0	8.3
To increase citizen's awareness	8.3	33.3	50	0	8.3
To gain information on citizen's views	25	33.3	41.7	0	0
To develop/empower communities	8.3	33.3	33.3	16.7	8.3
To encourage citizen participation in decision making	8.3	58.3	25	0	8.3

Figure 6.5.1. Table of the main purposes of engaging in public consultation

It is clear from the above that the need to satisfy various legislative requirements is seen as the key reason for initiating public consultation. The single most important reason in this respect is the need to meet statutory requirements with 75% of respondents identifying this. Following on from this is the need to meet equality legislation—identified by 66.7 respondents—and the need to meet EU requirements, with 58.3 percent. The need to improve service quality is seen as ‘very important’ by 66.7% of those surveyed. Developing ‘best practice’ initiatives is seen as by ‘very important’ by 41.7% and ‘important’ by 41.7% of respondents respectively.

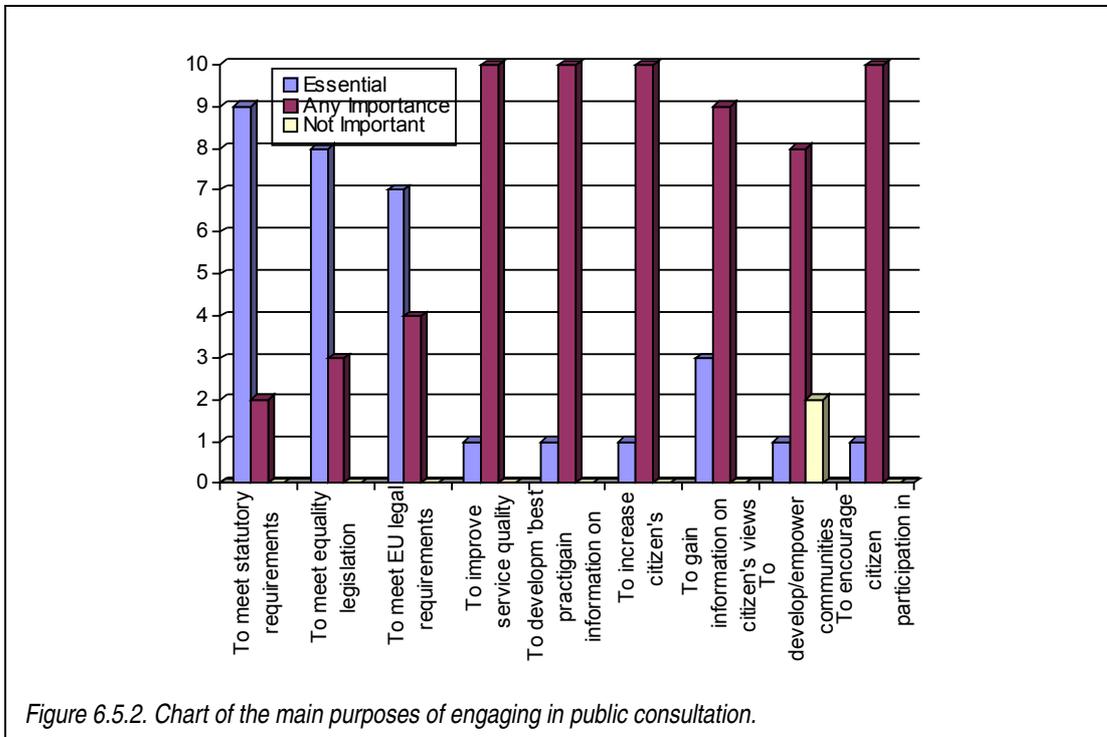


Figure 6.5.2. Chart of the main purposes of engaging in public consultation.

The perceived role of the citizen in consultation is, viewed as significant on the basis of these findings. Crucially, 58.3% of respondents saw that encouraging citizen participation in decision-making as ‘very important’. Likewise, but to a lesser extent, gaining information on citizen’s views is also identified with 41.7 of those surveyed seeing this as ‘important’.

6.5.1 When is Consultation to be used?

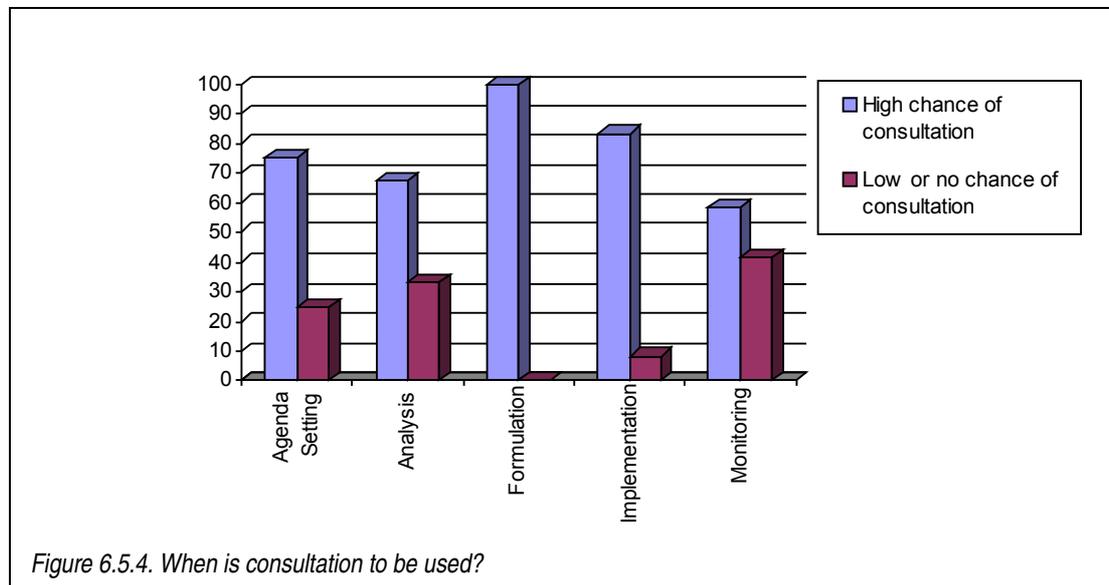
At what stage in the policy-making cycle should consultation be employed is an important issue. Departments were asked to identify where they are most likely to use consultation and Figure 6.5.3 shows the results:

%	Extremely Likely	Very Likely	Likely	Only Slightly Likely	Not Likely At All
Agenda setting	0	25	50	16.7	8.3
Analysis	8.3	33.3	25	25	8.3
Formulation	50	41.7	8.3	0	0
Implementation	33.3	33.3	16.7	0	8.3
Monitoring	0	33.3	25	25	16.7

Figure 6.5.3. At which stage in the policy-making process do you consult?

Overall, the ‘formulation’ stage of the policy-making cycle scores most highly when considering when is consultation most likely to be initiated. 50% identified this as ‘extremely likely’, while 41.7% saw it as ‘very likely’. Next, the implementation stage was seen as ‘extremely likely’ for initiating consultation by 33.3 percent, while the same percentage of respondents identified it as ‘very likely’. Both the ‘analysis’ stage and the ‘monitoring’ stage were identified as ‘very likely’ by 33.3% each, and finally, 50% envisaged it as ‘likely’ to conduct consultation at the ‘agenda setting’ stage. Following on from the identification of

significance of citizen participation in decision-making as a key purpose in initiating consultation, it is not surprising that the 'formulation' stage is seen as the single most significant time to conduct these processes. However, it again must be stated clearly that involving the public at these different stages—from agenda setting to monitoring—does not constitute full involvement in final decision-making. The actual extent to which citizen input influences policy decisions cannot be ascertained here.



6.5.2 The Use of Feedback/ Review Mechanisms

The provision of feedback and review mechanisms is an indication of the degree to which citizen's input on policy-making is taken seriously. Northern Ireland government Departments were asked to indicate whether or not they provided such mechanisms in relation to public consultation. Exactly half of the respondents indicated that they do indeed provide such mechanisms, again illustrating the importance given by certain government Departments to citizen's active participation in policy-making. Of course, the opposite could also be argued, that a significant number of government Departments do not have such mechanisms in place, and this itself may be indicative of a lack of importance given to citizen's more direct involvement in public policy. Respondents were asked to identify specific instances of where feedback/monitoring mechanisms have been employed. One mentioned 'feedback used to influence various initiatives such as Food Strategy Implementation and "Supply Chain" training programme'. Another commented:

After analysing and summarising responses, findings have been discussed with various focus groups in relation to Sexual Health, Home Accidents and Tobacco Action Plan and pre-consultations have taken place in 'Fit Estates'.

Other initiatives mentioned were the 'Accessible Transport Strategy Project Reference Group', 'legislation to unauthorised encampments', the 'Neighbourhood Renewal in Derry/Londonderry Implementation Plan' and the 'Racial Equality Strategy via Racial Equality Forum'.

6.6 Challenges in initiating public consultation

Initiating, managing and disseminating a public consultation process may be fraught with difficulties. The survey concentrated on a number of areas where specific challenges could arise for government consulters. Firstly, respondents were asked to evaluate a number of factors in terms of how problematic they might be, if at all problematic.

Interestingly, no factor was identified as 'extremely problematic', while two factors—'lack of public interest' and 'lack of time'—could not be seen to be significant in the 'very problematic' category. Of all the factors listed, 'lack of public interest' is an issue that could be described in

any way as being problematic, but again, not in any significant manner (see Figure 6.6.2). Lack of resources and time are identified as ‘problematic’ by 50% of respondents respectively. Again, these factors could not be described as significantly challenging for respondents.

% Lack of...	Extremely Problematic	Very Problematic	Problematic	Only Slightly Problematic	Not Problematic at all
Support from elected reps	0	0	16.7	33.3	41.7
Support from your org.	0	0	8.3	8.3	83.3
Public Interest	0	8.3	33.3	50	8.3
Resources	0	0	50	41.7	8.3
Time	0	8.3	50	25	8.3
Facilitating legislation	0	0	8.3	16.7	75

Figure 6.6.1. Table of challenges in initiating public consultation

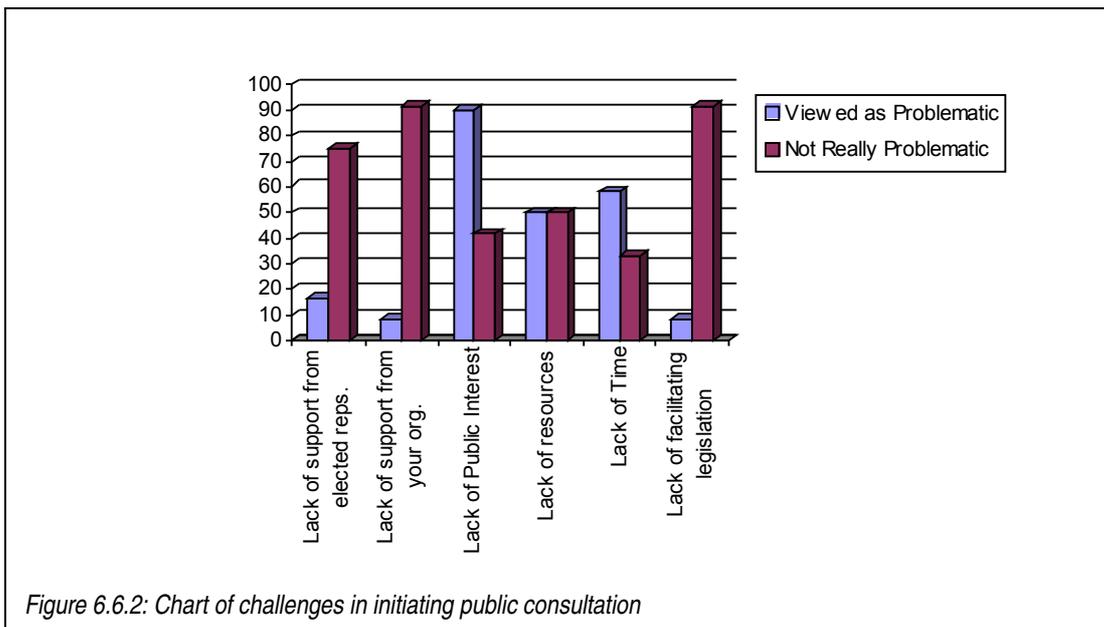


Figure 6.6.2: Chart of challenges in initiating public consultation

When asked to mention any other problematic factors encountered, one respondent replied:

Consultation documents tend to contain a large amount of reading material which seems to put a lot of people off responding. Preparation of Regulatory impact assessments are time consuming and somewhat unnecessary for subordinate legislation where there is no option but to implement EU obligations.

Low response rates were recognised as an issue, while another respondent commented that ‘dealing with large volumes of written consultation responses can be time consuming and difficult to manage/analyse.’ Large volumes of written responses were also difficult in that it was difficult to ‘condense responses’.

6.6.1 The challenge of ‘consultation fatigue’

%	Very difficult	Difficult	Only slightly difficult	Not difficult at all
The public are asked to engage in too many consultation processes	0	50	16.7	0
Current consultation techniques are too time-consuming	8.3	66.7	16.7	0
A public perception that consultation does not influence policy	0	83.3	0	8.3
The public are repeatedly asked the same questions	0	16.7	8.3	33.3

Figure 6.6.3. The challenge of ‘consultation fatigue’.

Respondents were asked to evaluate a number of factors that can contribute to ‘consultation fatigue’ for consulters and consultees, chiefly because these factors made the overall process more ‘difficult’. No factor was ranked as ‘extremely difficult’ or as significantly ‘very difficult’.

However, three issues—‘the public are asked to engage in too many consultations’ (50 percent), ‘current consultation techniques are too time-consuming’ (66.7 percent), and ‘a public perception that consultation does not influence policy’ (83.3 percent), were all identified as being ‘difficult’ to a significant degree. In commenting on these factors, a number of respondents commented on ‘late responses’ were problematic, but there was also recognition that the sheer volume of consultations was an issue. For instance one comment was that ‘Section 75 consultees may be asked to participate in several consultations at once...’ Another commented that ‘most consultations only receive a small response, possibly down to apathy on part of the consultee, or over-consultation by government’. Echoing many of these sentiments, one respondent commented:

Written response rates can be low and citizens not involved in community structures tend to avoid public meetings. Some members of the public feel that they are being “consulted to death” and consultations for different things frequently happen at one time.

6.6.2 Negative Effects on the work of Government Departments?

Respondents were asked whether they thought that, in an overall assessment, initiating consultation had any negative effects on the work that their own Department carried out. The results show that there are identified problems associated with initiating consultations with the public.

Very significantly, a clear majority, 66.7 percent, thought that this was the case, while 33.3% did not think that consultation had any negative effects on their own Department.

One respondent stated that consultation involved ‘resourcing problems’, it could be ‘time consuming’, and critically, it could result in ‘...little change to proposed policy after consultation.’ A number mentioned that running consultations created an extra workload for consulters.

6.6.3 When NOT to involve the public

This is a contentious issue for both consulters and consultees. Certain policy issues and areas are perceived as not suitable for public consultation processes. Respondents were first asked whether they could perceive of circumstances where they would choose NOT to consult with the public.

While a majority of respondents (58.3 percent) did not envisage circumstances where this issue would arise, 41.7% certainly could. One respondent cited an example of ‘minor legislative amendments with little impact for the public’ as an instance where the public would not be consulted. Another area not suitable for consultation was in relation to policing.

6.6.4 A failure to involve particular social or community groups?

When asked, not a single respondent could identify a failure to involve or engage with any particular social or community groups. One comment offered in this regard was:

Any group can seek to be included in consultations/ added to the Section 75 consultation list for a Department. All consultations are advertised on Departmental websites and in the media so are open to the public.

6.7 The Benefits of engaging in Public Consultation

It can be seen from Figure 6.7.2 that the most salient benefit to be derived from engaging in consultation is ‘better policy-making’ with 91.7% of respondents identifying this. Closely related to this is the issue of ‘better decision-making on specific points’, with 75% seeing this as an important benefit. ‘Improvement in services’, identified in table 3.2 as a significantly important purpose of initiating consultation, scores relatively low here with only 25% identifying this as perceived benefit. Again, ‘encouraging citizen participation in decision-

making’ is identified as a key benefit in using consultation. This ties in with the importance on involving citizens in policy-making as a key purpose of initiating consultation (see Figure 6.7.1 above).

	score	%
Better policy-making	11	91.7
Better decision-making on specific points	9	75
Improvement in services	3	25
Greater citizen awareness	3	25
Community development/awareness	2	16.7
Encourage citizen participation in decision-making	8	66.7

Figure 6.7.1. Table of perceived benefits for central government in entering into consultation.

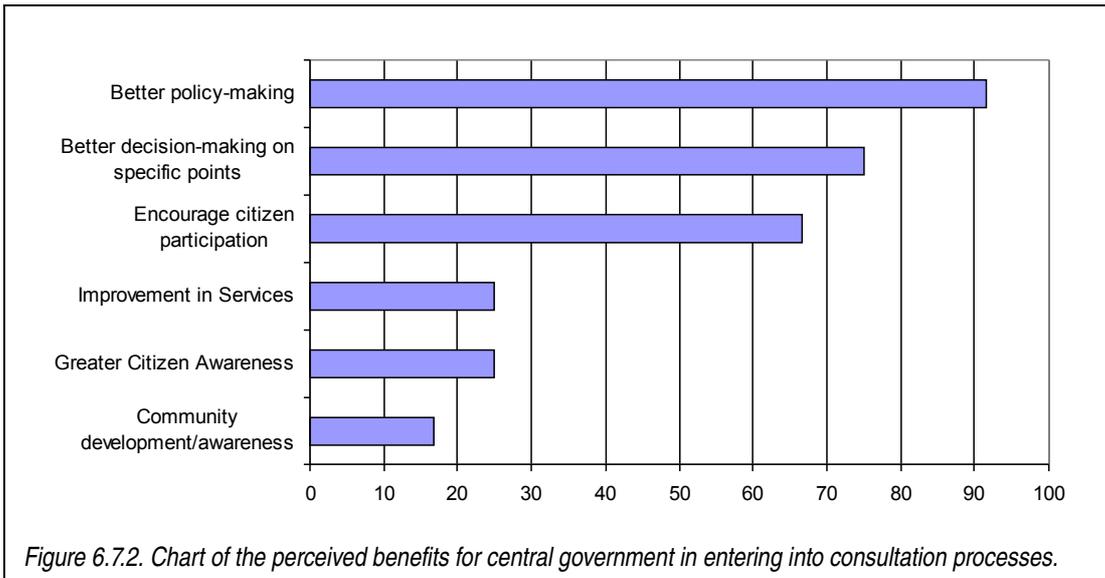


Figure 6.7.2. Chart of the perceived benefits for central government in entering into consultation processes.

In commenting on other benefits, one respondent thought that ‘...ensuring that equality of opportunity is considered in decision making and mitigations offered where potential negative impacts have been identified...’ was an important factor. Another stated that consultation ‘... identifies potential negative impacts that Departments can’t be aware of on their own.’

6.7.1 The Successful use of Consultation Initiatives

Respondents were asked to name what they perceived to be the more successful use of consultation and to remark why they thought these initiatives had been so successful. Overwhelmingly, these comments referred to traditional techniques, though one respondent pointed to a ‘...consultation placed on NIO website which seemed to increase accessibility.’ A number of comments were made in relation to a preference for some type of face-to-face technique over written submissions, such as public meetings. These techniques ‘...allowed those affected to get involved and contribute to the development of policy...’ However, large-scale public meeting were also seen as problematic by one respondent because of lack of attendance at them. One respondent identified ‘round table discussion/focus group events’ because these techniques ‘are viewed positively by the consultees rather than written consultations that have poor response rates.’ Another respondent concurred with this view, pointing out that ‘written consultations can have low response rates and many consultees don’t respond to specific issues to which Departments want views.’ One specific instance mentioned was:

One face-to-face meeting for DPE was held at the request of a disability interest group. This was most helpful in clarifying intentions and was mutually beneficial.

Another respondent outlined the following approach as particularly successful:

Public consultation document produced by consultants providing a route map of how Department would

progress. Interested parties given the opportunity to comment...

Some business areas found Workshops to be the most successful type of consultation —more participants & leaders are better able to direct participants to respond to specific issues. Consultations were on technical legal proposals requiring consideration of technical papers. Another was a UK wide Green Paper issued simultaneously across the UK.

One other example offered was:

In developing the Racial Equality strategy, the most successful consultation initiative used during the consultation process involved meetings between the department and the various minority ethnic groups. These meetings proved invaluable and greatly contributed to the shape of the final strategy document. By speaking face to face with the people that the strategy would impact upon, provided a view, if you like, from the frontline. It also enabled minority ethnic representatives to consult within their own communities.

6.8 Overall Views on the Impact of, and Approaches to, Public Consultation

6.8.1 The Impact of Consultation

Respondents were invited to express what they thought the impact of employing public consultation processes has on their organisation's decision-making. One response was that consultation '...broadens awareness of strategic issues.' Another view expressed was that, while consultation could not always be applied to the policy arena,

scope does often exist to alter the way a policy is implemented in NI and for this reason consultation initiatives can, and often do have a considerable impact on decision making.

This resulted in '...more informed decisions made by Government...' where '...full account is taken of all views received and where possible they are reflected in decision making process.' Yet another response on this issue was that—

Consultation initiatives provided a useful means of reaching different sections of the community through the medium that suited their needs, thus maximising participation and ensuring any decisions were considered with the full knowledge of public opinion on the subject.

However, another view expressed, while acknowledging some of the benefits of consultation, stated that overall impact could be 'fairly minimal'. Following on from this, one respondent, while stating that consultation was 'essential to the rigorous challenge and testing of assumptions', added that

Limited, consultation tends to only result in minor changes. At the end of the day Ministers have duties to fulfil and are responsible for delivering certain things. Consultation exercises cannot, and should not shift that responsibility.

Another stated quite clearly that:

Being part of the consultation process does not mean you're part of the decision making process because at the end of the day everybody in consultation will express a slightly different opinion and somebody at the end of the day has to make a decision and that person is the minister.

Lastly, one respondent concluded that consultation processes can have wider implications, 'Consultation exercises also include consideration of other impact assessments (e.g. regulatory, environmental, rural proofing etc).'

6.8.2 Other features of governments' overall approaches to public consultation

Finally, central government departments were given the opportunity to offer other features of their overall approach to public consultation that had not already been addressed in the questionnaire. Unsurprisingly, the impact of Section 75 was identified as a key factor in shaping consultation by Northern government Departments. One respondent commented—

Consultation, both formal and informal, is an obligation that is placed on us as a result, inter alia, of Section 75 and comes into play as part of the screening of policies (informal) and the Equality Impact

Assessment process (formal).

Critically, another commented that Section 75 was now ‘an accepted part of the policy development process’. It is now seen as a critical element in policy-shaping. One respondent stated:

What Section 75 in northern Ireland is particularly adapt at doing is reminding the public sector of the weight of voices that they need to get in... to actually say not just how does this work for the people, but how does this work for all the people here?

Summarising government’s approach to consultation, one respondent made the following comment:

There is a need to consult people and it is seen as a very important part of the consultation process. Consultation should be a permanent dialogue of multi-lateral conversation with our many key stakeholders. It is not just a legal obligation, but an essential element of good policy making and of achieving buy in. It is within this context that specific consultation initiatives must take place.

In assessing any future role for e-consultation, respondents were clear that its use should be viewed as an extra option and not as a replacement for more traditional techniques. One respondent commented that ‘e-consultation can ever replace face- to-face meetings...’ Another offered the following:

Within the Dept we need to capture views from some of the most marginalised people who may not have access to the supporting technology and who may not even be able to read or write. Equally, a number of people from a minority ethnic background do not have English as a first language and it can therefore be difficult, at times, to communicate with them both verbally and in written form, let alone electronically. In addition we are aware of some religious groups (certain Brethren) who do not use e-technology to communicate. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we continue to consult certain parts of our client base, in any future consultations, by way of a paper based exercise. We recognise the importance of e-government and would see e-consultation as supplementing the consultation process. However, we do not envisage that e-consultation would be able to replace regular consultation but perhaps would supplement it.

6.9 Conclusion

Overall, the concept of public consultation is seen as a valuable tool in the governing of Northern Ireland. While the main drivers of initiating consultation would appear to be based on various legislative and statutory requirements, as well as a way of targeting and improving service provision, encouraging citizen participation in decision-making also scores highly based on the results presented here. Nevertheless, ‘participation’ remains an elusive term in term of degrees of involvement. It was made clear by a number of respondents that participation in decision-making does not mean *making* decisions. That role is reserved for Ministers. In terms of what techniques have been employed, it is clear that Departments make use of an extensive variety of consultations. Consultation documents —which some respondents indicated as problematic, public meetings and focus groups are the most popularly employed techniques. E-techniques remain largely the exception rather than the rule and there was a view expressed that such techniques such never be envisaged as a replacement for more traditional methods. The advent of Section 75 has had a significant impact on consultation in Northern Ireland. At the same time, peace and reconciliation accounts as a key driver for just under 17% of consultations. Lastly, while the overall perception of consultation is positive, there are some issues that are identified as negative. For instance, the multitude of consultations undertaken has increased workloads and there is a recognition by government officials that consultation fatigue is a genuine issue for those that are consulted.

6.10 North South Comparisons

In general, the recent use of public consultation in both jurisdictions paints a similar picture. Both governments view consultation as an important and valuable means of gaining views and opinions on policy matters. While some problems are identified in the running of public consultation, overall the view is very much a positive one. E technology is employed by both

governments, but currently, its use is limited. Lastly, public consultation is not overtly seen as a way of promoting peace and reconciliation.

6.10.1 Key forms of public consultation

'Consultation documents' is the most prevalent means of conducting consultation in both jurisdictions. The other key forms of consultation used by the Republic of Ireland government are 'service satisfaction surveys' and 'focus groups', while 'public meetings' and 'focus groups' account for the other key techniques used by the Northern Ireland government. There is some evidence to suggest that e-consultation is used more often in the South than in the North, and that more diversity in e-techniques has been deployed in this respect. Currently, the Northern Ireland government has made use of 3 e-techniques compared to 6 in the Republic. Critically, respondents from both jurisdictions were keen to state that e-consultation should and could never replace the more face-to-face or traditional consultation techniques. Therefore, e-consultation is viewed both as an embryonic development and as an addition (rather than a replacement) to current consultation practice.

6.10.2 Factors that influence the initiation of public consultation

While both internal and external factors play a role in both jurisdictions, it is primarily the need to satisfy statutory or legal requirements that is central to initiating consultations by both governments. Within this, the key difference is that equality legislation plays a far greater role as a driver of consultation in the North than it does in the South. Ministerial projects and corporate strategy are important factors for both governments, again suggesting a degree of internal ownership. While public demand for consultation is viewed as important by both jurisdictions, one key difference emerges in relation to the role played by the ruling party in initiating consultation. In the North this is seen as a particularly important factor (41.7 respondents seeing it as 'very important') and in contrast it is viewed as 'not important' by 52.4 of respondents from the South.

Lastly, slightly more emphasis is given to the importance of the employers and trade unions sector in the South than the North in driving consultation (where the farmers sector is viewed as more 'essential' in this respect), while neither government views the community and voluntary sector as particularly important. In terms of where the two governments get assistance in running consultations, it is assistance from other public sector agencies that is key in this respect. Critical too is the assistance given by the community and voluntary sector, followed by the private sector. Finally, peace and reconciliation is not viewed as an important factor in initiating consultation by the majority of Northern respondents (83.3 percent). This is slightly higher than in the Republic where 81% of respondents did not see this as a significant factor.

6.10.3 The main purposes of public consultation

The three main purposes of initiating consultation identified by both jurisdictions in order of importance are the same—meeting various statutory or legal requirements, improving service quality and developing 'best' practice. There are differences in the detail here. As mentioned already, meeting equality legislation requirements is a key factor in the Northern Ireland government's calculations for running consultation—66.7% of respondents indicated this as 'essential', as opposed to 28.6% of Southern respondents. Again, the perceived as secondary in importance to these factors by both governments. However, gaining information on citizen's views scores relatively high in the Republic with 38.1% seeing this as essential (compared to 8.3% in the North), and encouraging citizen participation in decision-making is viewed as 'very important' by 58.3% of respondents in the North, compared to 23.8% in the South. Both governments recognise the importance of initiating consultation prior to the implementation stage—though the Northern Ireland government respondents see the implementation stage as slightly more significant than their Southern counterparts. Finally, the use of monitoring/feedback mechanisms does not feature in the majority of consultations that are run

on both sides of the border, with the Northern government initiating more of these mechanisms—50% of consultations have this feature compared to 37% in the Republic.

6.10.4 Challenges to Consultation

None of the factors listed by the researchers were seen as particularly problematic for the two governments. Again, any differences in this respect are subtle—while most of the factors listed for ranking were seen as ‘not problematic at all’ by the Republic of Ireland (with the exception of time ranked as ‘problematic’ by 42.9% respectively), issues of a lack of resources, time and to a lesser extent, lack of public interest, were viewed as ‘problematic’ by the Northern Ireland government. Following on from this, the Republic of Ireland government respondents did not view any of the factors associated with consultation fatigue as particularly problematic. In contrast, issues of consultation being too time-consuming for citizens, a view that the public are asked to engage in too many consultations and a public perception that consultation does not influence policy are all viewed as significantly ‘difficult’ factors by the Northern Ireland government. Interestingly, a majority of Northern Ireland respondents thought that running consultations has a negative effect on the working of their Departments (66.7 percent) compared to 11% in the Republic. Lastly, there are no groups that are excluded from consultation in the North (possibly as a result of Section 75), while 10% of respondents in the Republic thought that they had indeed failed to reach or include certain sectors or groups.

6.10.5 Benefits of Consultation

For Northern Ireland Departments the two key benefits of running consultations are better policy-making and better decision-making on specific points. For the Republic, the two key issues are better policy-making and improvement in services. Encouraging citizen participation in decision-making is an important benefit for the Northern Ireland government (66.7% identified this), compared to 23.8% in the Republic.

Chapter 7. Consultation and the community and voluntary sector

7.1 Introduction

This section examines the findings from surveys, focus groups and interviews that were carried out with representatives from the Community and Voluntary sector in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Again, the findings are concerned with the period between 2000 and 2003. The survey findings are discussed under the following headings

- Organisational details
- Recent/ Current forms of public consultation
- Experiences of public consultation
- Views on what makes a successful/unsuccessful consultation process
- Consultation as a means of participating in the decision-making process
- Perceptions of the consulters
- Focus groups and interviews with key actors

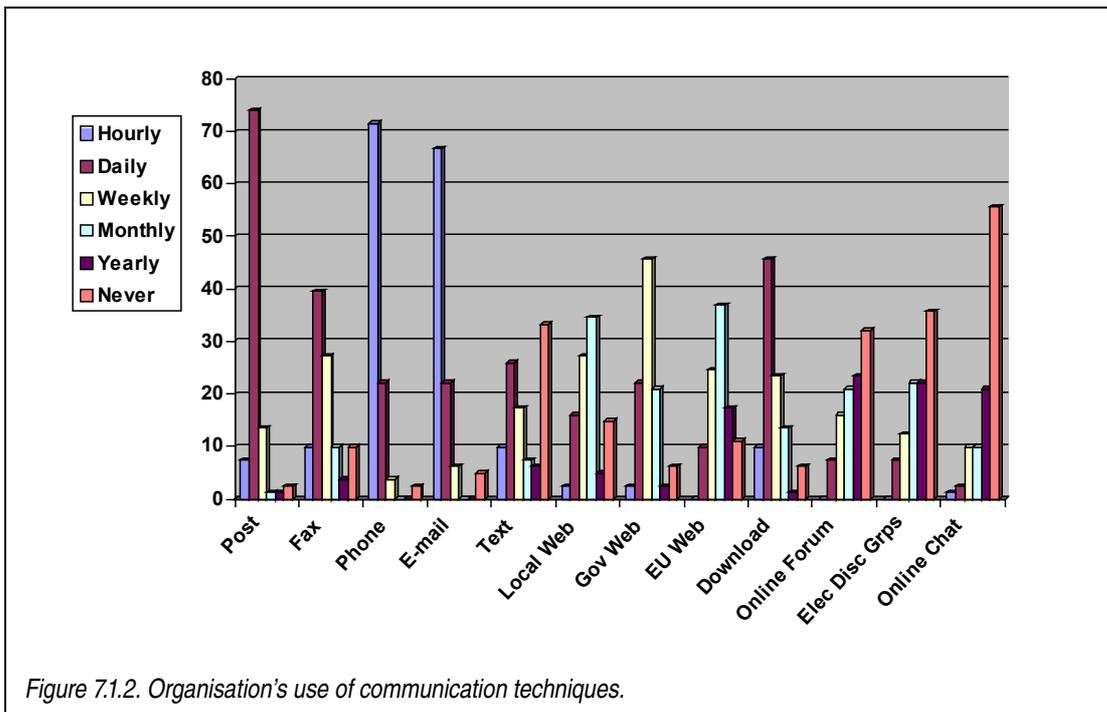
7.1.1 Organisational details

A wide range of groups and organisations from the Community/Voluntary sector were surveyed, both North and South. In order to ascertain the capacity of the organisations to engage in public consultation, groups were asked to indicate staff/volunteer numbers, access to PCs, access to the Internet, and the frequency of communications techniques that would be normally used. On average, the organisations had 20 full time staff and 62 volunteers. Each organisation that completed the survey had an average of 17 PCs, 13 of which had Internet access.

	1.7 How many staff does your organisation have?	1.8 How many volunteers does your organisation have?	1.9 How many PCs does your organisation have?	1.10 How many PCs does your organisation have that are connected to the Internet?
N Valid	78	74	78	78
Missing	3	7	3	3
Mean	20.32	62.16	17.37	13.82

Figure 7.1.1. Organisation's staff/ICT capacity.

Based on the survey results, organisations are employing both electronic and non-electronic communications technologies in their working practices. Broken down into use by hour, day, week, month and year, the following are the most popularly used communication techniques. On an hourly basis, telephones and e-mail (58 and 54 respectively) are the most commonly used means of communication. Daily, post is easily the most used technique with 60, followed by downloading information from websites (37) and then communication by fax with 32. While the figures for use of more traditional communication technologies is high relative to electronic techniques on a hourly/daily basis—with the notable exception of e-mailing, the deployment of e-technology is more evident for figures illustrating weekly, monthly and yearly use. For instance, 22 indicate that they consult their local authority websites on a weekly basis, with 28 consulting on a monthly basis, or that 20 check EU websites weekly and 30 do so monthly. Only at the weekly, monthly and yearly levels do we see any significant usage of e-technologies such as on-line discussion forums, discussion groups or on-line chat systems. Significantly too, 25 say that they *never* use texting, 23 indicate they never use on-line forums, 27 say they have never engaged in electronic discussion groups and lastly, 43 say that they have never used on-line chat systems.



7.2 Recent and current forms of consultation engaged by NGOs

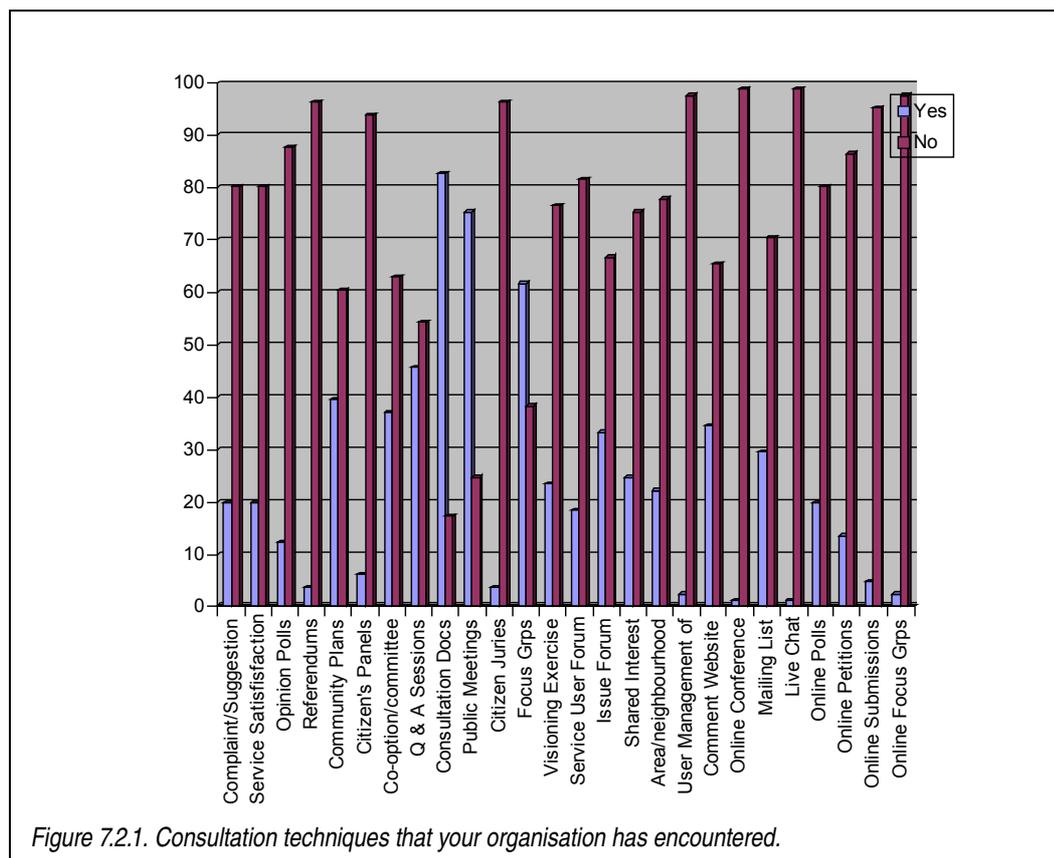
7.2.1 Frequency of involvement

Of all the organisations taking part in this survey, indicated that they had been involved in a public consultation process. The researchers were interested in finding out how many consultations the organisations had engaged in between 2000 and 2003, and specifically, for purposes of analysis, how many consultations had they been involved in for the year 2003. The findings show that almost all of the groups had been involved in public consultation processes (96.2 percent, with only 3.8% saying that they have never been involved).

Respondents were asked to list the different policy areas or issues around which consultations had occurred. Policy areas/issues were incredibly diverse and included 'equality, best value, user surveys, omnibus ratepayer surveys', 'Services to the Unemployed, Community Development, Youth, County Development Board Plans, Review of Local Development Structures', 'Planning, Health, Rural development, New TSN, Housing, Education, Transport, Sustainability, Rights, Community Relations etc', Equality, women, community development, social issues, health, policy development, political issues, funding, strategic plans, transport, urban regeneration, economic development, business issues, domestic violence, peace and conflict issues', 'Poverty and social inclusion, Employment, Structural Funds, Community Development, Voluntary sector, Racism, Migration, Equality, Gender, Family.'

7.2.2 Forms/techniques employed

In order to get an idea of the range of consultation techniques that the organisations have experienced, respondents were asked if they had encountered any of a list of 26 different techniques. By far the three most popular techniques are traditional—'consultation documents' (82.7% have engaged in this), 'public meetings' (with 75.3 percent) and focus groups (61.7 percent). In all, respondents have had experience of all consultations techniques listed by the researchers, illustrating a wide diversity of techniques employed North and South of the border. What is of particular interest here is the depth and breadth of experience of e-techniques. Of the 8 different e-techniques offered, respondents had at least some experience of some of them. Of particular note is the use of 'comment websites' (with 34.6% saying they had encountered this) and 'mailing lists' (29.6 percent).



	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (n)	No (n)
Compliant/suggestion scheme	19.8	80.2	16	65
Service satisfaction survey	19.8	80.2	16	65
Opinion polls	12.3	87.7	10	71
Referendums	3.7	96.3	3	78
Comm Plans	39.5	60.5	32	49
Citizen Panels	6.2	93.8	5	76
Committee	37	63	30	51
Q&A	45.7	54.3	37	44
Documents	82.7	17.3	67	14
Meetings	75.3	24.7	61	20
Juries	3.7	96.3	3	78
Focus Groups	61.7	38.3	50	31
Visioning	23.5	76.5	19	62
Service user Forums	18.5	81.5	15	66
Issue Forums	33.3	66.7	27	54
Shared issue Forums	24.7	75.3	20	61
Area Forums	22.2	77.8	14	67
User management	2.5	97.5	2	79
Website	34.6	65.4	28	53
on-line Conference	1.2	98.8	1	80
Mailing List	29.6	70.4	24	57
Live Chat	1.2	98.8	1	80
on-line polls	19.8	80.2	16	65
on-line petition	13.6	86.4	11	70
on-line submissions	4.9	95.1	4	77
on-line Focus Groups	2.5	97.5	1	80

Figure 7.2.2. Consultation Techniques that Your Organisation has encountered.

Technique	%
Consultation Documents	53.1
Focus Groups	43.2
Public Meetings	38.3
Community Plans/Needs Analysis	17.3
Co-option/Committee Involvement	16
Q & A Sessions	14.8
Document/Policy Comment Website	14.8
Service Satisfaction Survey	11.1
Visioning Exercises	11.1
Service User Forums	11.1
Shared Interest Forums	9.9
Issue Forums	6.2
Communities of Interest Mailing List	6.2
on-line Polls and Surveys	6.2
Area/Neighbourhood Forum	4.9
Complaint Suggestion Scheme	3.7
on-line Petitions	3.7
on-line Submissions for Public Hearings	3.7
Citizen's Panels	2.5
Citizen's Juries	2.5
Live Chat Events	2.5
Referendums	1.2
on-line Focus Groups	1.2
on-line Polls	0
User Management of Services	0
on-line Conference	0

Figure 7.2.3. The three techniques that best enabled your organisation to represent their views.

Respondents were then asked to list any other consultation techniques that they had encountered, along with the relevant policy area. These included: ‘Case studies: future role of the C7V Fora’, ‘Conference with workshops’, ‘personal meetings’, ‘meet politicians’, ‘One to one consultation’, ‘multi-option referendums’, ‘Newsletter distribution’. When asked to choose three of the listed techniques that best enable groups to represent the views of their organisation, respondents indicated the following, from the list of 26 options, were the most favoured: ‘consultation documents’ with 53.1 percent, ‘focus groups’ with 43.2% and public meetings’ with 38.3% indicating that these are the most favoured techniques.

This, of course, correlates exactly with the most encountered techniques as shown in Figure 7.2.1 above. Of interest too, is that e-techniques are far from favoured on the basis of these findings. For instance, the highest placed e-technology is ‘document/policy website’, identified by 14.8 of respondents and lies seventh in order of preference. All other e-techniques are found at the bottom of Figure 7.2.3.

7.3 Experiences of Public Consultation

Respondents were asked a number of questions pertaining to their experiences of public consultation. Firstly, organisations were asked to indicate how they got to be involved in consultations, whether through direct or indirect invitation (an invitation passed on to the group by, for example, another group member). Of the organisations surveyed, 91.1% said that, in the past they became involved through direct invitation, with 8.9% indicating that they had never received a direct invitation.

Direct invitations came from central government departments, local authorities and from other agencies such as NILGA, NICVA, or local groups such as ‘Ballymun citizens jury’. In contrast, the figures for those who had/had not gotten involved through indirect invitation were more equally divided, with 56.3% indicating that they had and 43.7% saying that they had not.

Some of those indirect invitations came about through because ‘periodical notice’ was given to many organisations on up and coming consultations, exchange of information through networks such as the ‘Equality Coalition’ or the ‘Rural Community Network’. Of those organisations that had, either directly or indirectly, been invited to participate in a consultation, 94.9% agreed to do so, with 5.1% deciding not to.

Importantly, respondents were given an opportunity to indicate their motivations in participating in consultation. Many pointed to the objective of influencing policy— ‘To understand (almost more important) as well as to influence policy’, ‘inclusion in having input and attempting to influence policy. Sharing expertise...’ Other motives included—‘Having experienced the impact of poor decisions our members wish to make changes’, ‘Funding issues’, ‘Improvement of conditions and accommodation options for homeless people’, ‘Articulating the rural voice’, ‘Women's equality issues, general equality, civil society input into participative processes’, ‘improving the quality of life for our service users’, ‘Community impact’.

7.3.1 Peace and reconciliation

On the issue of whether groups felt that the consultation processes that they had been involved had promoted peace and reconciliation, there was a direct split, with exactly half the groups indicating that the processes they had been involved had in fact promoted peace and reconciliation, and half indicating the opposite.

7.4 Public consultation—‘best practice’, benefits and challenges

7.4.1 Aspects of the most successful consultations

Groups were asked to rate aspects of what they perceived as the most successful consultation processes they had been involved in. Respondents were asked to rank from ‘poor’ to ‘excellent’

12 different aspect that ranged from 'transparency of process', 'range of NGOs involved' to 'your organisation's impact on policy formation'.

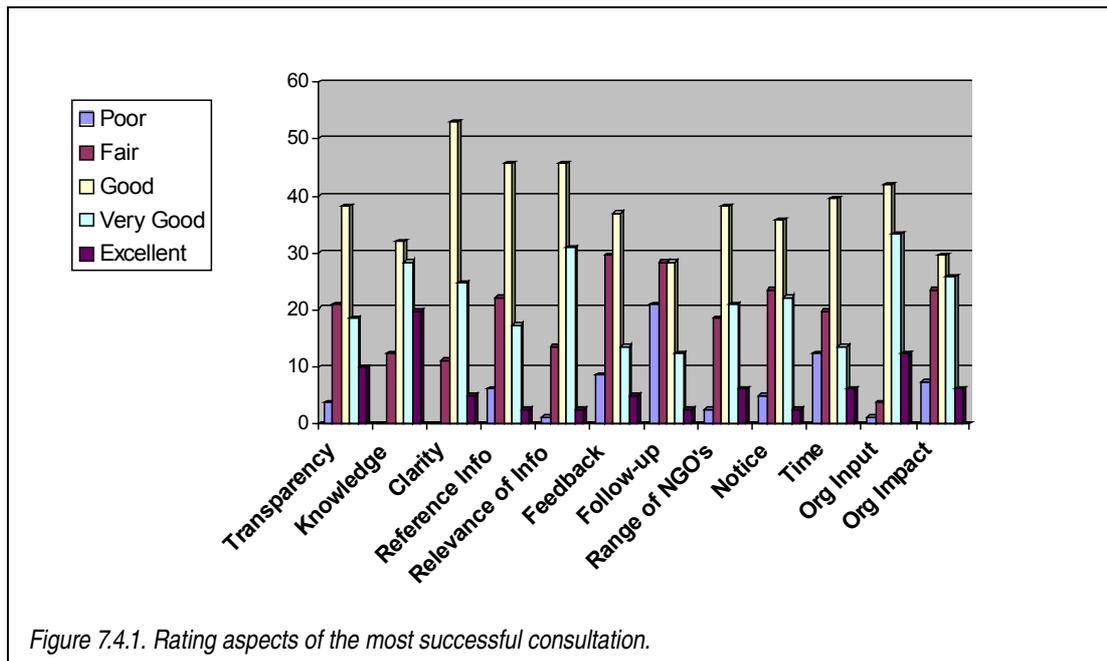


Figure 7.4.1. Rating aspects of the most successful consultation.

The results show that on the most successful consultation—or the ‘best practice’ that they had been involved in, ‘clarity of information given (52 percent)’, ‘amount of reference information given (45 percent)’, ‘relevance of information given’ (45 percent) and ‘range of NGOs involved’(38 percent) were rated significantly as ‘good’. No aspects were rated significantly ‘excellent’ or ‘poor’.

7.4.2 Making the community/voluntary sector more effective in consultation

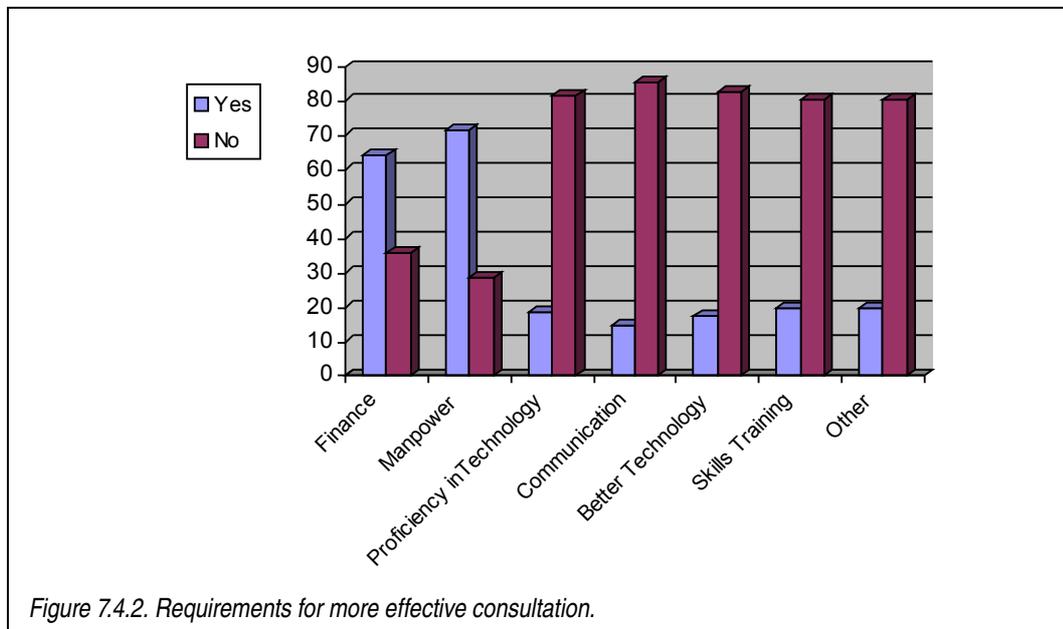


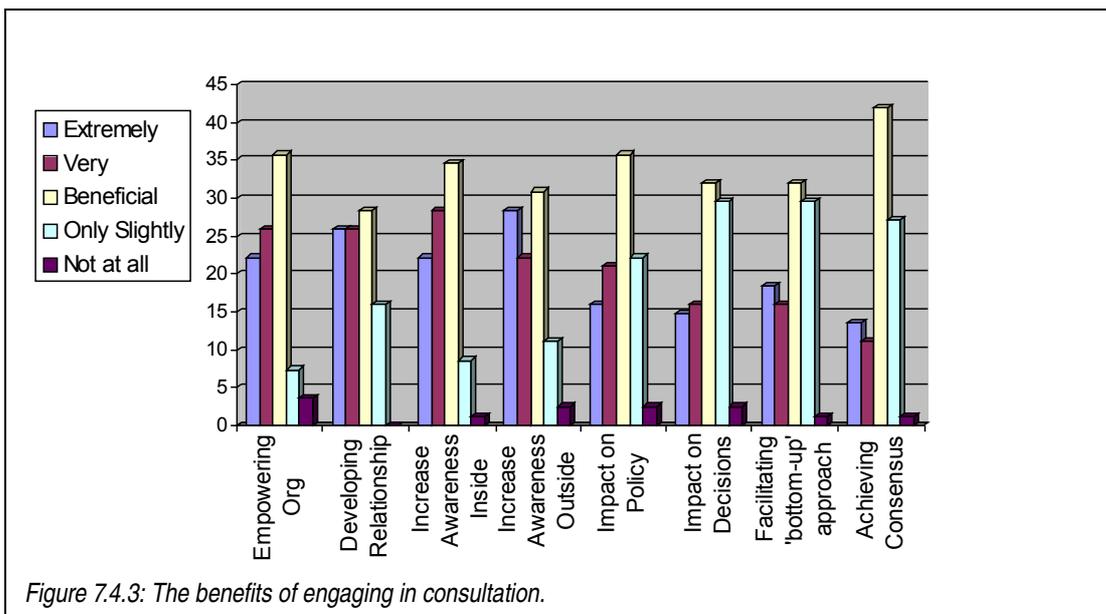
Figure 7.4.2. Requirements for more effective consultation.

Respondents were then asked to identify factors that, in their view, would make their involvement in consultation more effective. While additional finance and manpower were identified by 62% and 70% respectively as requirements, other capacity-building factors such as ‘proficiency in technology (80 percent)’, ‘better communication skills’ (82 percent), ‘better or other technologies’ (80 percent) and ‘skills training’ (79 percent) were all strongly identified as unnecessary factors in more effective consultation engagement.

Respondents were asked to specify other factors required for more effective consultation. These included: ‘provision of a composite consultation register—inbound and outbound through maybe a simple software database product linked into an update system (similar to virus scanner software) which is updated daily with new consultations...’, ‘We need to know that we are not being used and that there is a genuine commitment to take the feedback on board’, ‘Respect for views from some state sectors’, ‘Accessible processes’, ‘More honesty about what can and cannot be influenced by the process’, ‘A better understanding of government departmental processes, constraints and attitudes’, ‘Long-term funding (not just one year at a time) is needed if we are to make a long-term commitment to consultation process’.

7.4.3 Benefits to engaging in consultation

Organisations were asked to identify how beneficial engaging in consultation was by rating a number of options such as ‘empowering your organisation’, developing a two-way relationship with government and local authorities’, or ‘facilitating a ‘bottom-up’ approach to policy decisions’. Respondents were asked to rate these options between ‘extremely beneficial’ and ‘not beneficial at all’. Those options that were significantly identified as important (rated as extremely beneficial, very beneficial or beneficial) included ‘empowering your organisation’, ‘developing a two-way relationship’, ‘increasing awareness inside your organisation’ and ‘increasing awareness outside of your organisation’. ‘Achieving consensus’ was viewed as significantly ‘beneficial’ (with 42% of respondents indicating this), as was ‘impacting on decision-making’.



7.4.4 Challenges faced engaging in consultation

Respondents were asked to identify factors that contributed to difficulties in engaging in public consultation. Choosing from four different factors—‘you are asked to engage in too many consultation processes’, ‘current consultation techniques are too time-consuming’, ‘you are asked the wrong questions’ and ‘entering into consultation does not influence policy’—respondents were asked to rank them from ‘extremely difficult’ to ‘not difficult at all’. The results showed that the issue of policy influence was identified as ‘extremely difficult’ by 28.4% of respondents and ‘difficult’ by 27.2 percent. This is therefore, the single most problematic factor for the community and voluntary sector in engaging with public consultation. The time factor involved in engagement was viewed as ‘very difficult’ by 24.7% and ‘difficult’ by 30.9% of respondents. Critically, all of the factors were viewed by respondents as being difficult, notably the issues of too many consultations and being asked the wrong questions, with 33% seeing these as ‘difficult’, respectively.

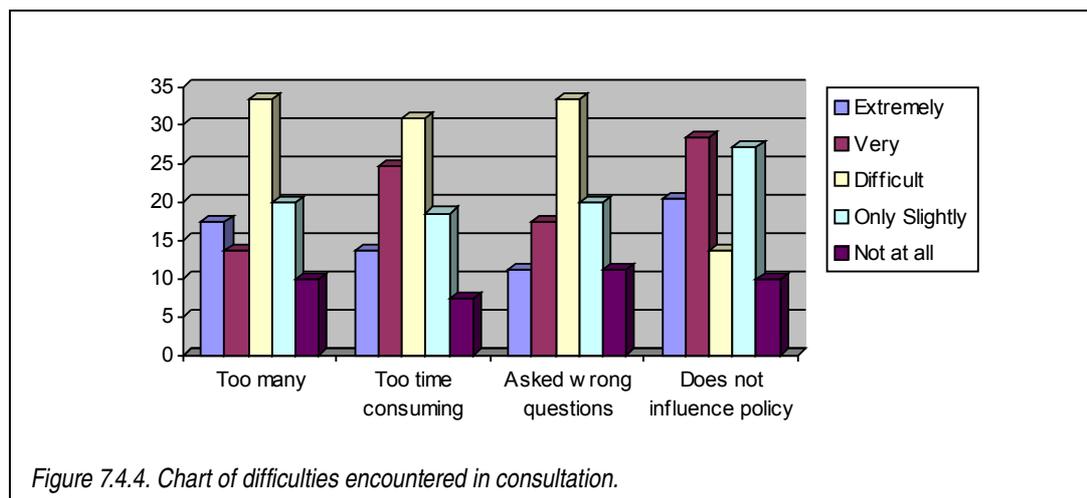


Figure 7.4.4. Chart of difficulties encountered in consultation.

	Extremely	Very	Difficult	Slightly	Not
Too Many	17.3	13.6	33.3	19.8	9.9
Time	13.6	24.7	30.9	18.5	7.4
Wrong Q	11.1	17.3	33.3	19.8	11.1
Influence	28.4	13.6	27.2	9.9	7.4

Figure 7.4.5. Table of difficulties encountered in consultation.

Respondents were asked to contribute comments on this issue. These included:

We have no sense that we make any contribution at all—we will continue to try.

Few organisations have funded policy posts to respond and even those with policy officers do not have the capacity to understand the range of issues involved or deal with the number of consultations...

Monitoring the impact is very difficult.

Most important frustration is the sense of a hollow 'consultation' exercise'.

Women have been consulted with ad nauseam still it makes practically no difference to policy, it feels like government just go through the motions but lack the political will to make any significant changes.

No consultation process is worth anything, unless all concerned are aware of the decision-making process with which it culminates. At the very least, such a conclusion should ask everyone to reveal their preferences.

People are now at the stage of feeling that this is a complete waste of time. Outcomes are predetermined and civil servants defend the policy that they present rather than listening to what people say is required and what will work.

The basic difficulty is that unless NGOs are involved at the stage when policy formation is still plastic and malleable, any influence will be marginal.

7.4.5 A negative effect on organisations?

Respondents were asked whether they thought involvement in consultation culminated in a negative effect on their organisations. Most groups rejected this idea. When asked, 'Has involvement in consultation processes had any negative effects on your organisation?', 38.3% said yes, 54.3% no.

Respondents were then asked to comment on some of the negative effects that they had identified. These comments included—'Drew away staff from other duties to take part in consultations which often proved futile', 'threats and intimidation. Stress and exhaustion', 'Time consuming, but not negative', 'inability to respond due to resource implications; impacts on other areas of work due to the time involved', 'Can become weary from lengthy consultation not translating into action—bad for morale of organisation', 'Sometimes seen as too close to Government', 'Because we presented an alternative viewpoint on behalf of the sector, we as an organisation suffered from a funding point of view', 'Stress, anger, de-motivation, waste of

resources when our efforts are not reflected in any fairness or objectivity by the institution’, ‘a seriously disillusioned sector can identify an organisation as raising expectations and then not to deliver on them. This is a real risk for NGOs’, ‘consulting on behalf of Departments—attached by proxy, despite transparency in our approach to poorly managed consultation processes and outcomes’.

7.5 Participation in the decision-making process

	Yes %	No %
Agenda	53.1	46.9
Analysis	58	42
Formulation	61.7	38.3
Implementation	39.5	60.5
Monitoring	39.5	60.5

Figure 7.5.1. At what stage in the decision-making process have you been involved in?

Clearly, a key concern amongst many organisations is the extent to which engagement in consultation is translated into policy outcomes. Respondents were asked to indicate at what stage in the policy-making process they have been involved through consultation.

For the organisations that responded to this survey, most involvement came at the early to middle stages of the policy-making process: ‘Agenda setting’, ‘Analysis’ and ‘Formulation’.

Respondents were then asked to comment on this—‘There is very little feedback—in fact of the four consultations we have not received any feedback as to how our input was influential. This could have been very useful. We feel we are ‘consulted out’...’, ‘Some Government Departments are better than others and experience in each of these areas has varied’, ‘Key to be involved as early as possible’, ‘Only rarely do outside organisations (mainly government departments and agencies) involve us in agenda setting or monitoring’, ‘Consultation and decision-making works better when relevant interests are involved from the beginning and throughout the process—policy and legislation is then more likely to meet their needs’, ‘The third sector has no impact into agenda setting for decision-making and there is no process of negotiation in relation to policy development’.

7.5.1 Consultation as a two-way process?

Perceptions of public consultation as a process, if not of deliberation but at least as a ‘dialogue’ between the consulter and the consultee, is obviously of importance. When asked whether they thought that consultation could be viewed as a ‘two-way’ process, the majority of respondents believed that this was not the case: 42% yes, 50.6% no.

Some of those that did see it as a two-way process commented:

Some consultations have been a very two-way process, however they would be the exception rather than the rule

Information was shared both ways

We have received feedback on some of our suggestions in the past

Openness of each other's view to make the consensus and resolution

Building relationships and impacting on thinking at a policy level

There's communication between our organisation and the Department and we know the people in question more

People on the ground in Statutory sector were interested in our input

Where we get feedback and we are affirmed in our efforts to make progress on issues

In contrast, those that answered ‘no’ commented:

Regional government tends to have a fixed idea and will only ‘fill in potholes’ identified in policies—no real intention of altering policy,

We do lots of work but our ideas are not considered

It often feels like the consulter has already made decision

Very little feedback afterwards

It's like "tell us what you think and we'll get back to you, maybe?"

The rare occasions when we have discussed our concerns with the statutory agencies with whom we work has been at our instigation

Our views and those of our constituency can be dismissed without explanation

Filling out forms is not an effective two- way method

Government tends to consult ex post facto when its view is already well formed and unlikely to be changed fundamentally...

7.6 Perceptions of the consulters

Lastly, respondents were asked for their perception of what local authorities or central government achieve through initiating public consultation processes. Positive comments included:

Fodder for plans, informed plans. Consultation brings a richness to policy.

Consultation gives the scope for increased partnership both locally and nationally for the local area it is important way of communicating with customers and should be a tool which is applied more in the future

In some small way they get a sense of the dissatisfaction that exists in society. They have the opportunity to explain the constraints they operate under. Occasionally they get an idea, which they can run with and implement.

More respect/ trust and better relationships with society when the consultation is seen as real and meaningful and when it results in positive change. Where tokenistic, Departments are viewed with disdain and distrust.

A semblance of credibility, of transparency and an attempt to redress issues of trust in services by the people they govern.

Negative perceptions of the value for consulters included:

Overall they get very little. They are obliged to do them and see them as wasted time and resources.

Depending on the individuals/departments—in some cases it does inform decision-makers. Unfortunately for a lot involved in the process it is a box ticking exercise.

They have provided a sense of what the real issues are for ordinary people. Unfortunately sometimes government can be upset by frank discussions which actually expresses frustrations at the system not necessarily frustrations with the civil servant...

Fulfil their obligations in law but continue to ignore the views of people on the ground. A rubber stamping exercise sometimes carried out by people who do not know what they are doing and care less. Consultation is not taken seriously...

7.7 Findings from focus groups and interviews

Researchers conducted 6 focus groups with representatives from the Community and Voluntary Sector, both in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Many of the organisations that participated in the focus groups came from the border counties—this particularly true in relation to organisations based in the Irish Republic. In addition, a focus group was conducted in Belfast. Essentially, the purpose of the focus groups was to ask organisations of their perceptions and experiences of public consultation, as well as their views on the potential for e-consultation. Overall, the views expressed in focus groups and interviews reinforced the findings from the survey. Most respondents felt that, at least conceptually, consultation was a useful tool of governance. However, the general consensus was that consultation, as an actual process, remained problematic in a number of respects. Lastly, many respondents identified the potential for e-consultation, viewing it as a complement rather than replacement for existing, more traditional, consultation techniques.

7.7.1 The use of public consultation by government departments and local authorities

Some respondents remarked that some Government Departments and Local Authorities provided more effective consultation processes than others. One respondent remarked:

...I think you can see a difference between those organisations and institutions that have a culture of participation in the past and those that don't. In some organizations, in health and education for example, there is more of a history of engagement...

Another key issue identified was that the propensity for the centralisation of decision-making powers by both governments effectively meant that the outcomes from regionally/locally-based consultations were not reflected in policy outcomes—

... the public consultation processes that are effectively taking place regionally aren't quite ignored by central decision making but you could quite often find that central decision making has done something that is inconsistent with the outcome of all sorts of consultation processes...

7.7.2 The positive aspects of public consultation

Many respondents were able to identify what they considered as positive aspects to public consultation. A number expressed what they thought consultation should be about:

giving people a voice, better decision making, more informed decision making... a sense of participation and control over their own lives and things that are important for them... That's the theory of why we need to do it.

Many aspects of this normative view of consultation were identified as features of actual consultation. For instance, one respondent stated that consultation allowed people to 'participate' and have a 'voice' in public policy. One remarked—

I live in Donegal town and we have just completed consultation process on the local area plan, and I would be a member of the community chamber there and ordinary members and people living in the community felt that they got an opportunity to actually inform local government of what they wanted and what they would like and... that in itself should make for better understanding when decisions are made...

Another respondent stated that public consultation processes gave the public more access to appropriate information, hence allowing them the potential to influence policy. Yet another respondent thought that consultation allowed for a dialogue between policy-makers and their public—'...the whole thing with local government and central government is "we'll tell you what's best for you" now all of a sudden it's [governments'] coming back and its saying "oh well you tell us what's best"'. Another remarked—

It's quite clear that the input and consultation from a number of kinds of organisations in civil society has lead to initiatives around racial equality, sexual orientation. There are working groups, there are fora, there are now policy makers facing people on the outside that wouldn't have happened otherwise... there's less of an acceptance now that policy should be made by an elite policy maker without any reference or need for information from outside...

There are benefits, particularly in terms of public trust, when public consultation is operated satisfactorily. One respondent claimed that, when run properly, consultation makes the political authority in question 'more accessible', resulting in a 'less negative relationship' with the public.

7.7.3 The negative aspects of public consultation

Current consultation practices came in for significant criticism from many respondents. Clearly a key issue was in relation to outcomes from consultation. A common complaint by many who participated in this research was that they entered into consultation in good faith, only for their suggestions and views to be ultimately ignored when policy decisions were eventually taken. One respondent commented— '...you mark all the boxes but you know, it doesn't mean a thing at the end of the day...' Another respondent was far more blunt—

They were just talk shops that's all they were, talk shops and you could sit and you could talk from here

to kingdom come.... nobody on the council gives a damn what your opinion is, not one iota do they care.

Many respondents felt that some of the consultation processes that they had engaged in had largely been cosmetic exercises. They believed that the political authority in question had already made all the policy-making decisions prior to the consultation process was initiated:

It's an area where the decision has actually been made, so you're invited into a room. You're being brought on board but, the actual outcome, the key decision has actually been made. There is a sense of going through the motions and being seen to listen and being seen to take things on board. Actually when it comes to the final decision maker, whether it's to do with charges for personal health care or whether it's to do with water charges or whether it's to do with rating policy..., in many cases that decision has been made before you've been invited in. So it's good that you're on the radar screen, but it has a corrosive effect in that you keep going back and getting asked for your opinion when you feel that the person has already made up their mind. Then it does leave you with a sense of well why should I bother doing it? The energy is just being wasted...

One respondent commented that some of the negatives aspects to current practice should be viewed as the result of inexperience on the part of the political authority in running public consultation. Bad practice resulted—

not because people intentionally set out to do that, but because consultation has been another new exercise to the public authorities as well, and some have learned more and more quickly than others and some continue to repeat the same mistakes.

Far more alarming however, was the view expressed by some respondents that they had been effectively coerced into participating in public consultation:

They pull in the community sector, the voluntary sector and as I say you're working in a.... you're working on a basis of "you owe us"....

7.7.4 Resources/capacity building

The issue of capacity building was identified in the Community/Voluntary sector as an important determinant of how effectively organisations can engage in consultation. One respondent remarked—'...resources are a huge issue with access to anything...' One respondent commented:

Few organisations have funded policy posts to respond [to consultations] and even those with policy officers do not have the capacity to understand the range of issues involved or deal with the number of consultations.

Another respondent listed some of the issues that political authorities should look at in relation to capacity building:

Before we consult we should actually be doing capacity building to get the groups to a stage where they can consult you know... there is... before we look at the actual consultation process we should be look at the abilities of the people that we are actually chatting to, to see can they interact, can they understand what it is that we are doing...

One important issue identified in terms of resources, was a disparity between local, community-based groups and the larger, better-funded NGOs. Put simply, it was felt that these larger organisations were able to have a greater impact on policy outcomes—

It's like NGOs, large NGOs are more expert at lobbying....they have the input into central government and statutory agencies at the... the lobbying capacity and as I said to have the expertise and the training and have the money

7.7.5 Consultation fatigue

Again, consultation fatigue is identified in the survey as a key issue of concern for the Community and Voluntary sector. Many organisations felt that they were obliged to engage in far too many consultation processes. This is particularly true for Northern-based groups, who cite the enormous impact that Section 75 Equality legislation has had on the volume of processes. One respondent stated:

I think there are a couple of things, I think there is the fatigue that we felt very much, is the fatigue because we've been badly consulted about the wrong things...

This respondent went on to remark that some community/voluntary sector representatives were reluctant to use the term ‘consultation fatigue’ in case of repercussions—‘I suppose some of us around this table anyway, would be nervous about the term consultation fatigue, because the risk is that it is then used as “lets not consult you’.

7.7.6 The pitfalls and potential for e-consultation

Most respondents were largely positive on the idea of using ICT as part of consultation. However, some voiced a number of concerns, including issues of access and education in the use of E-technology, ‘...if people haven’t access to it [ICT] and the ability to... or the knowledge to do it then its not going to work...’ Some felt that the ‘Digital Divide’ is already an important issue, particularly in terms of IT literacy:

There’s a huge culture of people who are IT literate to be patronising to people who are not IT literate and I think that people are made to feel as if you don’t know what that is... well... then you’re not very bright.

Overall however, those who participated in the focus groups and interviews were enthusiastic in terms of the potential for E-technology to improve public consultation and suggested a number of ways that the technology could be best employed. For instance, organisations in one focus group agreed that more innovative interface media than PCs needed to be developed. They suggested that the use of mobile phones, other handsets or interactive television must be seriously considered. Exploration of these particular issues arose partially in relation to fears that E-consultation mean the end of face-to-face interaction between citizens and authorities. As one respondent pointed out—‘ I think that the electronic thing will never work unless there is a kind of reasonable amount of interaction socially’. One NGO representative suggested that techniques such as video conferencing or ‘web-casts’ could overcome this problem because with these techniques, ‘... there is sort of human interaction, and I always think that’s positive...’ Paradoxically, another representative pointed to the advantages remaining anonymous through the use of ICT—

If someone can kind of have an assumed identity on it and still raise their points within reason obviously, it’s a very positive way because you know you have a public meeting...say in a church hall or something, people aren’t going to stand up against the local landowner who is looking to, you know develop say sky rise tenements...’

One representative from an NGO umbrella organisation emphasised the potential of e-technology in consulting regularly with a large amount of groups:

We’re moving towards the targeting of information so we can pick those organizations out that have a particular query and give them information around any funding related to that... we’ve been trying to move down that road of targeting better information to the people who opt in for it so you can register your preferences on the site. We’re not quite there yet but the principal is that you’ll get a bulletin based on what your preferences are, what you’ve selected rather than us deciding what you want.

Some of those involved in the focus groups estimate that E-consultation will not be feasible in the near future. Also, while many are interested in the concept, it became clear that they did want E-consultation to *complement* rather than *replace* more traditional consultation techniques. One representative commented:

One thing I would just say about the e-consultation ... I wouldn’t see that as the “be all and end all” of everything to be honest with you. I would think that it would be just one additional mechanism in relation to a range of options that you could use.

Another commented—‘There was a natural consultation process that existed through local politics and I don’t know that e-consultation could ever replace that.’

One of the best advantages identified for the use of E-technology is accessibility, both in terms of the consultation processes themselves and access to relevant information necessary for engaging effectively in those processes. This is a particularly important issue for rural communities—both in terms of the accessibility of relevant information and being able to participate in the consultation itself. The advent of E-consultation could, in the opinion of some

respondents, enable citizens to access discussion documents and other relevant information. Rurally based groups remarked that E-consultation would allow more geographically isolated members of the community to participate in consultation processes. In the future, one representative envisaged a situation where access to ICT will be more decentralised—

I suppose it shouldn't be limited to the likes of computer centres and stuff like that there should a podium sitting in Tesco with a screen on it which basically says the council is going to do this what do you think?

Lastly, some respondents saw E-technology as a way of addressing one of the key problems associated with current consultation—consultation fatigue. Instead of consulting everybody on everything, one respondent felt that E-technology would allow for a 'localisation of issues'—

I suppose trying to find the best fit for the individual rather than calling a public meeting which is very intimidating. You break it down into smaller groups, you e-mail out the questionnaire, you provide it on-line or whatever, but, you actually give a range of options so the person does the consulting in the most convenient time for them, that they are not going three nights a week to a public meeting.

7.7.7 Conclusion

An overview and identification of consultation practices on the island as a whole is a necessary component of its social development. It allows for the development of common initiatives on a cross border basis. The development of appropriate technologies to facilitate these processes for citizen participation could foster social stability and a healthy civil society and would provide a context where the benefits of the peace process can be maximised for all. Having investigated the strengths and weaknesses of consultation processes, the perspective held within the multi-layers of governance to consultation, it was evident that consultation was widely practised as part of governance structures. The community and voluntary sector were not fully enamoured of the consultation processes as they had been carried out to date. Resource issues, degree of participation, and lack of feedback were key issues. However, this did not seem to interfere with their enthusiasm for participation or for further developing modes of participation. Overall, it was felt that new technologies could support and improve consultation processes in the future.

Chapter 8. Three e-consultation trials

Following on from our research on consultation processes engaged by central government local government, and Non-governmental organisations, and having developed support and advice materials (see e-consultation on-line guide) from that research, our next step was to proceed to work with organisations in order to trial the use of ‘best practice’ e-consultation along side traditional consultation processes. The project team began to assist and evaluate trials on e-consultation in collaboration with consulting bodies. These trials were designed to put e-consultation technologies into practice through design research, while exploring the institutional drivers and constraints to e-consultation. At the same time, the trials were more broadly used to explore the use of e-consultation in building e-democracy in particular and democracy in general.

A key aspect of the democratic shift we were trying to support was the countering of marginalisation of citizens, thus ensuring more progressive social policy initiatives. However, in addition to this we wished to specifically address citizen involvement in cross border initiatives, to the benefit of local and regional development. In the light of the cross border aspect of this particular research initiative the team undertook to work with three organisations: Waterways Ireland, North South Exchange Consortium, and The Wheel. All were about to run consultation processes, two had a cross border North South remit (Waterways Ireland and North South Exchange Consortium) and a third which, although located simply in the Southern constituency is an umbrella organisation for the Community and Voluntary sector, would be addressing the development of active citizenry specifically (The Wheel). These organisations had initially come in contact with us through our conference presentations and workshops in the first year of the research programme, and were interested in working with us to explore e-consultation.

8.1 Waterways Ireland trial

The first trial was run with Waterways Ireland. Basically, two very basic problems emerged to counteract the effectiveness of the consultation: (a) insufficient resource allocation and a consultation on a (b) complicated legal issue presented on an overly complicated web page. In short, more was learned about what not to do than what to do from this trial.

8.1.1 Context

Waterways Ireland was established in 1999 as one of six North/South Implementation Bodies established under the British Irish Agreement. Its responsibilities include ‘the management, maintenance, development and restoration of inland navigable waterways principally for recreational purposes’³², both north and south of the border. In 2005, as part of their ‘Equality Quality Assessment (EQA), Waterways Ireland wished to establish a process of policy-making and screening in order to evaluate and ensure equality in all its policy operations:

*As a new organisation, developing new policies, Waterways Ireland's approach has been to seek to mainstream consideration of equality in policy development. To do this we are implementing an Internal Screening Process to identify and where possible remove any adverse equality impacts from new policies whilst these are being developed.*³³

In conjunction with the E-Consultation Research Project, Waterways Ireland decided to embark on an e-consultation process as part of their first Section 75 consultation on this issue. One of the key reasons for adopting this approach was a hope that such a strategy would be more inclusive in terms of engaging the general public, as well as its usual clients. Previously, Waterways Ireland conducted more traditional consultations, primarily through focus groups and public meetings. This e-consultation would be run in tandem with a traditional, ‘consultation document’ process and ‘face-to-face’ meetings.

Waterways Ireland identified ten different groups for promoting equality:

³² See www.waterwaysireland.org

³³ See <http://waterways.e-consultation.org/consultation.php>

1. People of different gender.
2. People of different ages.
3. People of different religious belief.
4. People of different race, colour, nationality and ethnic origin.
5. People of different marital status.
6. People of different sexual orientation.
7. People with and without disabilities.
8. People with and without dependants.
9. People of different political opinion.
10. People who are members of the travelling community and people who are not.³⁴

The stated aims of the e-consultation were to gain views on:

- The Internal Screening Process developed and implemented by Waterways Ireland to ensure new policies are equality proofed as they are developed.
- Policies developed and internally screened to date.
- The policies Waterways Ireland proposes to subject to an Equality Impact Assessment in the future.
- Timetable for proposed Equality Impact Assessments.³⁵

8.1.2 Process and Planning

It was decided by Waterways Ireland that the consultation would concentrate on:

- The Internal Screening Process
- Policies for the Equality Impact Assessment

The consultation organisers wanted to include e-consultation elements in an overall consultation process run along traditional lines, in which respondents could send in written submissions or request a meeting with the consulters. The organisers were experienced in running consultations, it was the electronic communications component that was new to them.

After a number of meetings between the research group and Waterways Ireland, it was decided that the team would design a web site where potential respondents could browse the consultation documents, then join a discussion forum where they could leave comments on the issues that interested them.

There then followed a short process of negotiation in relation to the design of the site. The research team took the Waterways Ireland consultation document, converted it to HTML and put it on-line. Our developers set up a discussion forum, and showed the consultation organisers how to enter the first questions to start off the discussion. Every part of the site was reviewed by Waterways Ireland and amended in accordance with their suggestions. The result, for better or worse, was a site that mirrored their off-line consultation.

8.1.3 Expectations for e-consultation

Apart from the wish to open up the consultation to the general public, Waterways Ireland wanted to utilise e-technology in this instance for another key reason. The consultation itself involved disseminating complex and legalistic documentation. It was hoped that using e-technology would in some way simplify this for participants. It was made clear to the research team that Waterways Ireland viewed this consultation as a 'trial run' for another, major consultation that was going to be undertaken by the organisation in the near future. For their part, the researchers went to pains to stress the importance of employing adequate resources in

³⁴ See <http://waterways.e-consultation.org/consultation.php>

³⁵ Ibid

running a consultation, particularly with respect to publicising the consultation and recruiting participants, and in managing the process. Waterways Ireland indicated that they would run advertisements in local newspapers and some specialist publications, as well as approach some clients by phone in order to encourage them to participate.

8.1.4 The e-consultation

We set up a site for the e-consultation on our own servers, at <http://waterways.e-consultation.org/>, as the Waterways Ireland web site was not set up at that time to run discussion forums. They publicised this URL in the e-mails they sent out inviting organisations to respond to the consultation, but did not highlight the e-consultation on their own home page.



Figure 8.1.1. Waterways Ireland e-consultation web site.

The consultation document was put on-line, not as one long linear PDF to download and print, but in HTML, broken up into a number of pages, with the hope that readers might browse to particular issues that concern them, and then respond on those issues. It was, however, written in the same language as the paper consultation document (see Figure 8.1.2). That ensured that everyone was responding to the same text. However, it took no account of the differences in the ways people read linear paper documents and browse on-line web pages.

INTERNAL SCREENING PROCESS

As a new organisation, developing new policies, Waterways Ireland's approach has been to seek to mainstream consideration of equality in policy development. To do this we are implementing an Internal Screening Process to identify and where possible remove any adverse equality impacts from new policies whilst these are being developed.

Waterways Ireland's internal screening process has two steps:

1. An initial screening is completed by the Equality Unit in the Strategy and Policy Section, who are responsible for the management and delivery of equality and policy development in Waterways Ireland. A screening report is completed and returned with the policy to the policy writer(s) with comments if required to mitigate or remove any adverse impact identified. A flowchart of the Waterways Ireland Screening Process and the pro-forma screening report are attached at Appendices 1

and 2.

Figure 8.1.2. A sample of the Waterways Ireland consultation text people had to read.

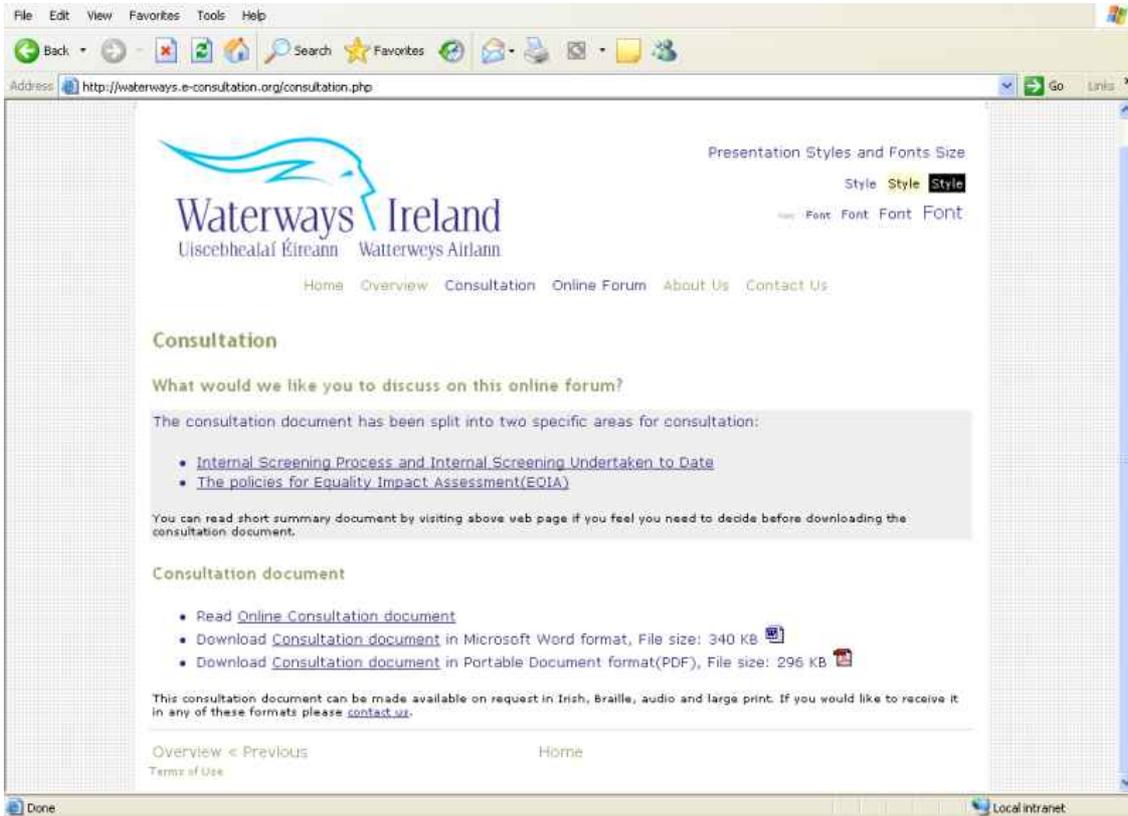


Figure 8.1.3. Waterways Ireland submission page.

Topics	Replies	Author	Views	Last Post
 Sticky: <u>The Internal screening process</u>	0	admin	136	Fri Nov 11, 2005 11:30 am admin →
 Sticky: <u>Internal Screening Undertaken to Date</u>	0	admin	106	Fri Nov 11, 2005 11:30 am admin →
 <u>Internal Screening Process</u>	0	Rick Fawcett	118	Tue Dec 20, 2005 12:58 pm Rick Fawcett →
 <u>Feedback on Internal Screening Process</u>	1	admin	193	Wed Nov 30, 2005 10:44 am Roisin →
 <u>Feedback on our decision not to take forward EQIA</u>	0	admin	113	Fri Nov 11, 2005 11:28 am admin →

Figure 8.1.4. Waterways Ireland discussion forum, posts to internal screening topic.

Readers were invited to read the consultation document, then submit their views in an on-line forum. 12 people went as far as to register on the discussion forum (6 internal, 6 from outside Waterways Ireland), but no-one from outside went on to submit a comment to the discussion forum. But Waterways Ireland had half a dozen responses to their consultation, all of which were paper submissions. It seems that quite a few people viewed the discussion forum, as shown in Figure 8.1.4, but hardly any was willing to write their views. The starting questions for each thread, as shown in Figure 8.1.5, were hardly designed to generate emotional engagement.

Waterways Ireland is seeking your feedback on: The Internal Screening Process developed to ensure new policies are equality proofed as they are developed.
Waterways Ireland is seeking your feedback on Our decision not to take forward EQIAs on these policies.
Waterways Ireland is seeking your feedback on Are there policies in Table B which we have screened as not requiring an EQIA, which you believe should be subjected to EQIA?
Waterways Ireland is seeking your feedback on Do you agree with our proposed timetable for carrying out EQIAs?

Figure 8.1.5. Some of the Waterways Ireland discussion forum questions, that failed to provoke a response.

8.1.5 Outcomes

8.1.5.1 Usability

Because of the low participation in the discussion forum, we ran some usability tests. Staff at Waterways Ireland who had not been involved in the consultation, but who obviously had some interest and understanding of the subject (like the target participants), were asked to think aloud while carrying out tasks of finding information on the site, finding the discussion forum, and posting a message to the discussion forum.

Main concerns were centred on the design of the site. It was felt that the instructions were not clear enough. People registered but then had difficulty locating the space to enter their comments. Secondly, the four options offered were seen as confusing to people. Third, it was felt that the language used was too technical and assumed prior technical knowledge—again people felt this was off-putting. Lastly, it was felt that the registration page asked too many questions, and people were not sure of the relevance of these questions in the context of the overall consultation. The content itself was seen as difficult, ‘dry’ and hard to understand. Overall, the potential for e-consultation was recognised by people—if it could be made more concise and easier to use.

8.1.5.2 Other issues

The issue of resources—particularly in relation to publicising consultations—became a major issue with the lack of success of this trial. While Waterways Ireland were keen to utilise e-technology in what was a rather complex consultation, it soon became clear that much more publicity would have been necessary in order to increase the number of respondents. Approximately 150 members were e-mailed about the e-consultation. Adverts were placed in one evening newspaper—the Telegraph, and two local papers. These advertisements were run for one day. The information was also circulated to umbrella organisations such as NICVA. There were no follow up e-mails or phone calls.

In a subsequent interview, a representative from Waterways Ireland acknowledged that resource allocation was a problem in relation to the consultation. Because the e-consultation on equality impact was seen very much as a ‘trial run’ for the more substantial consultation on ‘by-laws’, fewer resources were allocated. The researchers outlined the amount of resources, particularly in relation to human resources, that would be necessary to deploy. This included using ‘waves’ of publicity through various media over a period of weeks, with follow-up phoning and mailing. Waterways simply did not have these resources available for the e-consultation.

Secondly, the nature of the consultation itself, based on a technical and complex issue, was never going to inspire universal interest or appeal. The language used in the consultation document did not lend itself to different levels of ability, given its legalistic nature. Writing for the web is different to writing long documents. Usability studies show people scan for key words, rather than reading from top to bottom. It may be necessary to use copywriters to rewrite documents for web sites, and even more so for discussion forums.

In conclusion, the low uptake in this e-consultation resulted from loss of potential participants at 4 stages.

1. Few people knew about the consultation (not enough publicity) or the e-consultation site.
2. Those who found their way to the site were put off by the language used. This is a common problem with consultation documents, but it is exacerbated by the way people read web sites.
3. Those who managed to read some of the document then had difficulties finding the discussion forum and registering for it.
4. Those who registered for the discussion forum were then presented with the same dry questions asked in the consultation document (Figure 8.1.5). They were too bland to stimulate argument. Discussion forums, like focus groups, need questions to prompt a response, perhaps even projective ones. It also helps if the forums are seeded with comments from a few people who have promised to take part and get things going. People are scared of being the first person to say something.

It was perfectly rational to run the e-consultation along traditional lines. This suited the nature of the Section 75 equality consultation, and the experience of the consultation organisers. We concurred with this design. What we found out from this trial was that:

- a) putting traditional processes on-line, without modification, does not work, and
- b) just because something is on-line doesn't mean people will come. It is not a better mousetrap. You still need publicity.

8.2 North South Exchange Consortium trial

8.2.1 Context

The advent of political changes has seen had many positive impacts on the level of interaction between the north of Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. One of these is the increasing level of exchange and cooperation between education agencies. Over the last decades, thousands of schools and youth groups have participated in exchanges and cooperative activities between the north and south of Ireland. This has increased steadily from initial small exchanges to become a highly complex web of cross-border activity with substantial financial support and diverse programme criteria and objectives.

Given this complexity, the Departments of Education north and south recognized that a cohesive and transparent structure was needed to manage and facilitate this tremendous exchange activity where in the last five years approximately 3,000 school and youth groups were supported, involving in excess of 55,000 participants in cross-border exchange and cooperative activities. The majority of organisations (64%) are drawn from the formal sector and 36% from the non-formal sector.

Given the high levels of activity in this area, the North South Exchange Consortium was given the task by the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) and the Department of Education and Science (Ireland) to act as an independent and impartial monitoring and evaluation group. NSEC therefore work in the context of a programme framework, which is currently being developed to:

- identify good practice

- identify the best use of resources and the added value of present cross-border programmes in the fields of formal and non-formal educational exchange and co-operation, with a view to advising the Departments on a more effective and efficient use of resources
- identify gaps in provision
- analyse the resources required and to invite and assess proposals for current and future providers to address those gaps
- to examine existing provision

A key element of the NSEC work plan is to develop and maintain lines of communication with various stakeholders involved in North-South Exchange programmes. More specifically they aim:

1. To manage the development and implementation of the North South School and Youth Exchange and Co-operation Programme Framework in partnership with the Department of Education and Science (Ireland) and the Department of Education (Northern Ireland).
2. To establish and maintain collaborative working relationships with the range of formal and non-formal education and youth work agencies North and South.
3. To ensure that the North South Exchange Consortium has an effective and active media and public affairs capability and where appropriate articulate the Consortium's position to the range of interested parties, including statutory, voluntary and private sector bodies.
4. To support and advise the Programme Management Committee and the Consortium through the development and provision of briefing papers, reports and presentations in respect of policy, strategy and operations.
5. To identify opportunities to respond to the needs of the educational and youth sectors in developing an intercultural and North/South dimension to their work.

NSEC, therefore, was very interested in developing additional channels of communication through e-technologies. This would both increase their capacity to run consultation initiatives and secondly, to facilitate consultations with large groups of their stakeholders such as school children.

8.2.2 Process and planning

A key research objective of the NSEC trial was to develop an e-consultation framework that could mirror the complexity of the consultation objectives set out by NSEC.

Rather than set out to achieve a single consultation exercise the NSEC remit was to develop an e-consultation framework that was capable of underpinning different levels of engagement with a diverse number of stakeholders. On one hand, there was the policy arena, which concerned such issues as future development of North South exchange programmes, and on the other, there was an ongoing need to evaluate existing exchange programmes in order to provide feedback to programme designers. The stakeholders most likely to be targeted in the trials were identified as programme coordinators, educational managers, schoolteachers and school children. NSEC were interested in consulting with people who had participated in North South exchange programmes and those who had not.

In the series of meetings with NSEC two key points worth noting arose:

1. The need for a clear understanding of the consultation aims. While the NSEC brief was to consult widely, it was difficult to ensure that the aims of each individual consultation process was clarified.
2. The need for a clear understanding of the potential of available technologies. The NSEC management team had to attend several public *fora* and technology demonstrations before either party committed to a joint trial.

The agreement to formally work together was only arrived at after a fairly long period of discussion and clarification of the needs of both parties. Then the planning phase began.

The outcome of the planning phase was a list of the e-consultation objectives agreed by both NSEC and the research team. It was agreed that the trial should focus on the following 5 objectives:

1. To obtain stakeholders' views on the Single Programme Framework (SPF) and to ask stakeholders if they believe its proscribed themes and criteria were correct.
2. Consultation in order to evaluate exchange programmes and to devise ways of optimising the benefits gained from these activities not only for the actual participants but also for the schools that were involved.
3. Consultation to gather input from stakeholders (3,000 local groups and 18 management bodies) for policy development.
4. Consultation designed to capture the attitudes and expectation of young people, teachers and youth workers. (This process had already started with the publication of the quality research

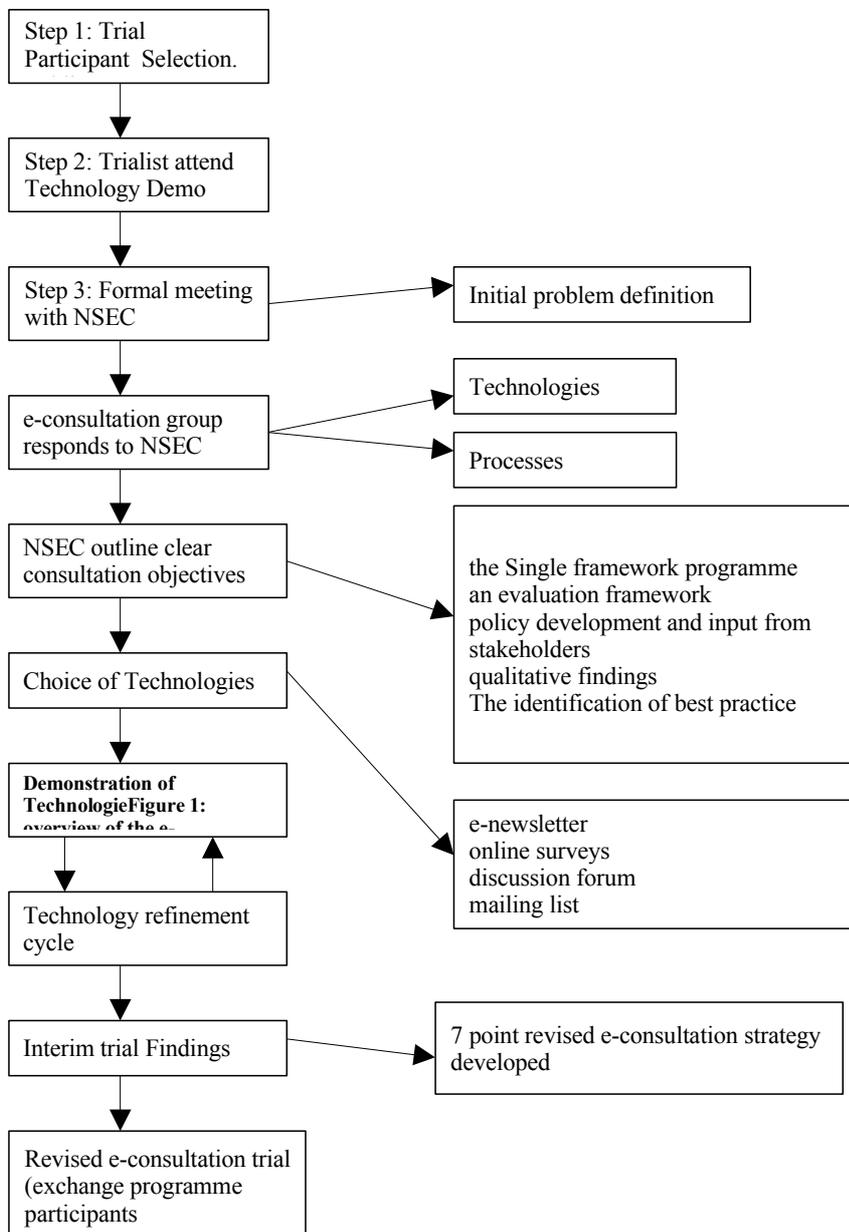


Figure 8.2.1. Overview of the e-consultation design process

study entitled “In their own words” by NSEC and it was hoped to make this type of activity ongoing).

5. Consultation to identify best practice.

8.2.3 E-consultation design

During the series of meeting that constituted the planning phase of the NSEC trial, several possible e-consultation strategies were proposed that could be used to suit NSEC consultation needs, such as on-line surveys and the incorporation of forums into a website. The considered opinion of the both NSEC and the e-consultation research team was that conventional consultation techniques and e-consultation elements should be applied to the process. From NSEC’s point of view it allowed all channels of communication to be exploited and from the research team’s perspective it afforded an opportunity to compare various methods, and to see how well technology fitted in with, and helped on, a public consultation. An overview of the e-consultation design process is set out in Figure 8.2.1.

8.2.3.1 E-consultation for the NSEC launch event

NSEC planned a meeting to launch their consultation in November 2005. At the launch they would present the research reports they had commissioned on N-S educational exchange to an audience of educationalists from a range of stakeholders across Ireland (often at senior policy levels). Their web site, with all the research reports, would be revealed at the same time (Figure 8.2.2)



Figure 8.2.2. The NSEC web page with e-consultation link.

So the first stages of the e-consultation were to be launched at the same time, namely:

1. A short e-voting session during the presentations, to get instant responses from the audience.
2. The possibility to sign up to an e-newsletter, so that NSEC could e-mail people with news about educational exchange and also opportunities to participate in the consultation.
3. A short on-line questionnaire.

We designed a consultation web site for NSEC, including mailing list subscription software (PHP list), and questionnaire run on PHP Surveyor, and pages introducing the consultation and all the conventional and electronic ways in which people might participate (Figure 8.2.3).

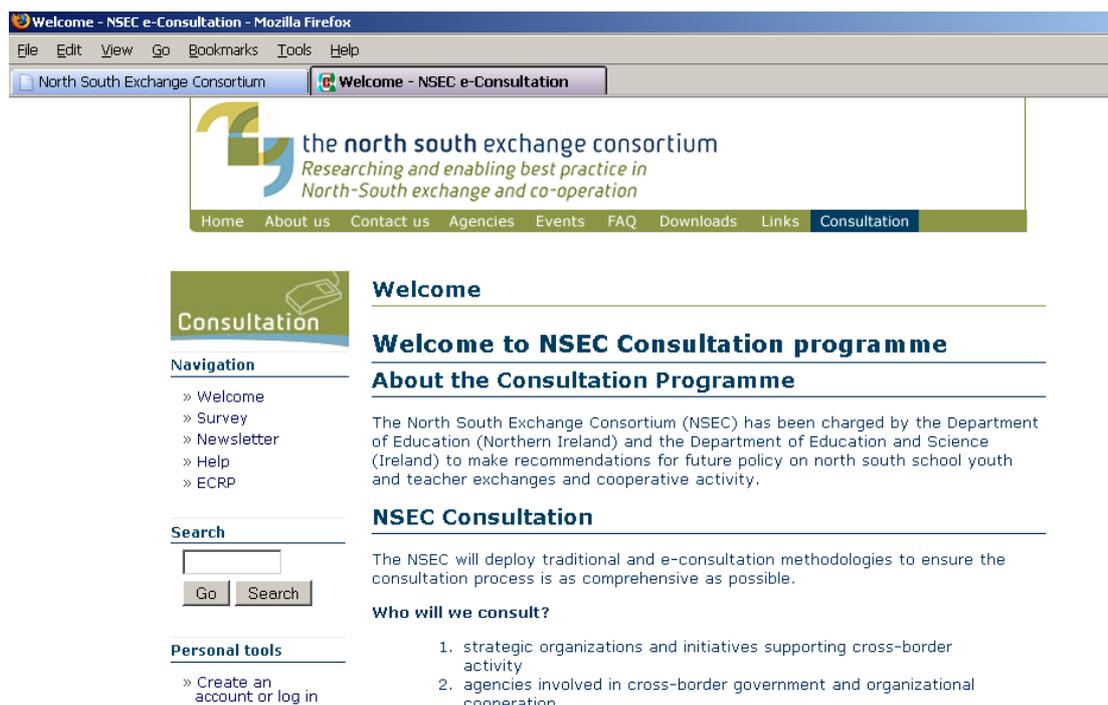


Figure 8.2.3. The NSEC e-consultation page,

We also designed a set of questions for the launch meeting.

8.2.3.2 Post-launch e-consultation design

The activities at the launch only engaged the 60 to 70 people who attended. These were important stakeholders, often senior people in organizations involved in funding or managing educational exchanges. But they were not the only group that NSEC wanted to involve in their consultations. So in several meetings following the launch, we discussed and demonstrated technologies that might be used to facilitate consultations with different groups of participants.

One crucial element of the process, which was emphasised constantly throughout the early stages given the problems experienced with the Waterways Ireland trial, was the need for publicity and promotion. It is essential in any consultation, regardless whether conventional or electronic, that there is a clear strategy to ensure that potential consultees are aware of the proposed consultation. NSEC needed to engage more than the senior staff who had attended the launch.

One important group to consult were the organizations that currently managed and/or funded existing educational exchanges. Any new policy would impact on them. If NSEC were to eventually administer funding for cross-border exchanges, it is these key stakeholders they would have to work with. So NSEC was planning to run long meetings with them to discuss the issues in some depth.

The research team suggested using group support systems, such as WebIQ or Zing in half of these meetings. In principle such idea mapping tools should speed up brainstorming and ranking activities, as participants could type at the same time. The consultations should achieve the same benefits from GSS tools as do management teams in private companies. We arranged for the Centre for Competitiveness to demonstrate Zing to NSEC staff in a meeting in Belfast.

However, although they agreed in principle to do this, NSEC were not able to organise any GSS meetings before our research project ended, as their staff were fully stretched organising and running non-electronic meetings. So no Zing agenda was designed.

A second key group to consult are young people, including (but not limited to) those who had participated in cross-border exchanges. Michele Smyth showed NSEC staff the work she had been doing for her Ph.D. research with groups of young people at the NI Youth Forum (see

Chapter 9). NSEC staff explored with the NIYF the possibility of subcontracting part of the consultation with young people to them. The ideas discussed centred on an initial face-to-face workshop in which a small group of young people could discuss the issues and determine the questions they would want to ask about cross-border exchanges, followed by an on-line discussion forum in which many more young people could participate. After some discussion NSEC decided not to fund this work (at least in the short term), apparently because of resource limitations in NSEC.

What they did manage to start, just before our research project finished, was design on-line questionnaires targeted at particular groups of participants, including young people and teachers. We helped them design the questionnaires, and loaded into the system some of the lists of e-mail addresses they had finally obtained.

Finally, our technical research assistants also customised the SugarCRM Customer Relationship Management software for NSEC, so that they could keep track of their potential huge number of contacts with pupils, staff, youth workers and others in 9000 organisations. Because Yan Chen used free (open source) software, he could customise it so that it was no longer a tool for selling into companies, but one to record contacts with many individuals in each organisation: something that many commercial CRM packages lack.

8.2.4 Participant experiences.

Although referred to as the NSEC trial, from the outset both the NSEC management and the e-consultation researchers were aware of the complexity of the consultation domain and that the work programme and subsequent relationship between NSEC and the e-consultation would last longer than the duration of the HEA project. NSEC were newly formed and in the process of recruiting staff and as an embryonic North/South body had to take cognisance of the changing political situation. Thus at the e-consultation design phase a multi-stranded plan was adopted.

This however meant that for each target group involved there was a corresponding level of research required to understand the participants experience with the technology and the optimal way in which to access these groups. A simple but telling exemplar of this issue was demonstrated in the fact that of the 300 e-mails to a mailing list provided by a state agency, over 25% were returned due to incorrect addresses. Furthermore internet security protocols employed in the modern school environment meant that very often there was no way of adequately ensuring that e-mails were being received by the intended recipients, or that they could access the consultation web sites. Many Irish schools have their Internet connections provided through an agreement administered by Fortinet. They use filtering software to block access to some classifications of web site. It is staff in the USA who classify these sites, and they had not classified either nsec.info or e-consultation.org, so pupils in those Irish schools could not see our sites. Eventually HEANET arranged to whitelist the sites, overriding the opinions of the US staff who know little about Irish web sites.

Overall eleven types of participant were identified for the purposes of the trials and assessment criteria drafted to elicit feedback from each group. The types of participant were:

1. Funding Agencies
2. Individuals—Managers
3. Individuals—Teachers
4. Individuals—Volunteers
5. Individuals—Young people
6. Individuals—Youth workers
7. Post-primary level schools
8. Primary level schools
9. Statutory Organisations
10. Voluntary Organisations
11. Youth Groups

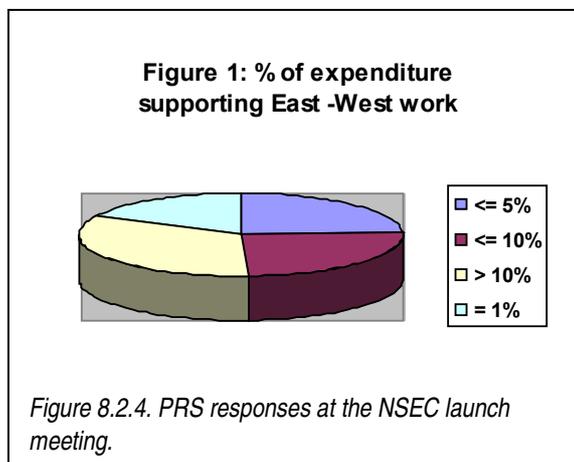
Now in fact very few people signed up to the newsletter or took part in the initial survey. Only at the end of our research project did NSEC start to send out surveys to more people, and start to get some responses. Our most enthusiastic response came from the attendees at the launch event, who all managed successfully to vote on half a dozen questions.

Turning from the consultees to the consultants, they claimed to be particularly satisfied with the research team's work, and are planning to transfer to their own site the web site and software we have designed for them. They like the e-consultation tools, but only now have the resources to actually use them in their ongoing consultation. The software may be free, but not the time and attention of the NSEC staff.

8.2.5 Consultation data generated

We worked with NSEC at the beginning of their consultation design. They are only in July 2006 starting to ramp up their consultation activities. Consequently we have very little data from the time before the research project ended. For us, this trial has been about learning how to design e-consultations, not the participant responses.

The early consultation data generated was mostly from the hand-held voting during the launch meeting. In 10 minutes the audience answered 6 questions (see 11.1 in the Appendices). Key outcome of the survey indicated that there was widespread awareness amongst the respondents of North-South Educational exchanges with over 80% being aware of 5 or more programmes. More specifically the results of the survey showed:



- 71% wished to see a widening of the funding area to include non-border areas. This would widen the scope and range of the programmes to have a stronger all-Ireland focus.
- On the issues of east-west work the respondents were more equally divided as shown in Figure 8.2.4.
- The ages of the participants was an important issue as it referenced the age cohorts that the respondents felt the programme participants should come from. Respondents felt that by default this had a very significant bearing on the type of programme delivered and the expected outcomes. Over 80% of the respondents felt that the age groups involved should be between 10 and 19 years.
- The matter of social exclusion was dealt with at various levels, and the majority of respondents (40%), felt that the funding mechanisms should be restructured to allow for up to 50% of monies to be targeting at socially excluded groups. This high response rate does not however take account of the fact that most programmes have some element of targeting socially excluded groups built into them.

The actual data generated by the e-consultation on-line survey launched at the same time was low, however further analysis of web traffic indicated that there was increased activity on the web page—people were using the site to download reports and files, but not completing the survey.

8.2.6 Key learning outcomes from the process

Trialling e-consultation with NSEC has been carried on over a year now and is ongoing. The e-consultation component will be able to effectively support the extremely broad remit of consultation required from NSEC. As an experimental process it has had some key learning outcomes. As with all new technologies there is a tendency for an overly optimistic assessment of what can be delivered. The progress of the trials was affected by: resource issues; political considerations; calendar considerations; and the complexity of the task of broad consultation with multiple constituents. However, as the team worked their way through these issues, the following were clear learning outcomes in all of these areas:

1. *Resource issues are always primarily present.* An e-consultation exercise is a major undertaking (like any serious consultation) and will place significant pressure on the internal resources of the sponsoring organisation.³⁶
2. *Political considerations must be taken into account:* With the political processes frozen, activity from NSEC might have been seen to be inappropriately creating a new north-south body with no NI Assembly to report to. NSEC could not publicise and promote consultation in the media for fear of possible political reactions. It was agreed NSEC would target specific groups, e.g. teachers, youth works and young people, etc. who would be followed up by the e-consultation research team.
3. *There are very real calendar considerations.* As will all of the consultations carried out there are times when consultees will not be there or not be interested. Consultations with schools in particular need to take into account the academic school year, where there are few specific windows of opportunities to conduct consultations of any nature. Understanding the precise nature of the calendar most affecting specific consultees is crucial.
4. *The complexity of the consultation environment must be fully understood:* the domain of NSEC is comprised of a diverse range of specific populations. There were at least 5 layers of activity that need to be considered and as the research team moved through the layers of complexity, it became increasingly obvious that to engage with some of these consultees would require specialist strategies.
5. *Each group of consultees needs to be clearly identified and separate assessments made of—* (a) their requirements in terms of consultation instruments and resources required; and (b) the resource implication for each of these populations and the consultation team. These are crucial element of any successful e-consultation.
6. *E-consultation can play a role in developing an integrated communications strategy to manage the totality of the NSEC requirements .* E-consultation offers NSEC the potential to develop a highly specialized and adaptive communications e-consultation strategy, which then needs to be integrated into the overall communications strategy of the organisation.

8.2.7 Future work programme

The trial initiated as part of the research project was always intended to have a life-span of longer than the duration of the HEA funded project. NSEC is its infancy and it is the desire of the research team to fully develop the relationship between the two teams where possible. As a result in the latter stages of the e-consultation project a future work programme was agreed as follows:

1. The e-consultation team are to brief the new NSEC team members in July 2006.
2. The web sites will be transferred to the NSEC site in July 2006.
3. The e-consultation exercise involving school children and young people who have participated in exchange programmes is to be initiated in Sept. 2006
4. E-enable focus groups are to be initiated in Jan 2007

8.2.8 Conclusion

The initial trial with the NSEC clearly identified some issues:

1. Key issues were technological, personnel and financial resources. You cannot fully automate a consultation, people still need to manage and run it.
2. As has been identified in other trials, the technology proved easier than anticipated but the process more complex than expected.

³⁶Whilst it was possible for the e-consultation research group to absorb some of the administrative functions, there was still a considerable burden placed on NSEC in terms of recruitment to the trials and focus groups that were not fully anticipated at the outset of the trials.

3. The extensive promotion of the consultation process is essential to ensure participation. Thousands of schoolchildren don't spontaneously visit the NSEC offices in Dundalk. So why expect them to visit nsec.info or nsec.e-consultation.org?
4. Given the complexity of the consultation domain, which in NSEC case involved a significant number of stakeholders who are both interrelated and interdependent, there is a clear need for extensive pre-consultation research. This would ensure that the precise context of that the e-consultation was understood.
5. There are lessons to be learned on technical issues. Due to the increasing levels of nuisance e-mails and spam that people are receiving there is an increasing unwillingness to download attachments or go to websites with which they are unfamiliar.

8.3 The Wheel trial on active citizenship

8.3.1 Context

The Wheel is a non-profit 'support and representative body' for community and voluntary organisations in the Republic of Ireland. Established in 2000, it currently has a membership of over 500 hundred organisations and individuals and provides leadership 'by listening to and responding to the unmet needs of community and voluntary organisations', both locally and nationally. The Wheel's leadership role is 'in accordance with the highest standards of openness, accountability and effectiveness'. Critically, it sees itself as an 'advocate' for organisations: 'We recognise that a vibrant community and voluntary sector is vital to a healthy society and democracy. therefore we act as an advocate for community and voluntary activity in whatever forum we engage in...'.³⁷

In 2005, the Irish government announced its intention to establish a task force in order to recommend measures which could be taken as part of public policy to facilitate and encourage a greater degree of engagement by citizens in all aspects of life and the growth and development of voluntary organisations as part of a strong civic culture (Terms of Reference of the Task Force).

As part of this process, the Wheel decided to conduct a consultation on the issue of active citizenship, with a view to identifying the following:

- Views on who is an active citizen
- What should the States role be in active citizenship
- How can the Wheel facilitate active citizenship
- Reflections on the terms of reference for the Task Force on Active Citizenship

The principle purpose for conducting this consultation was to inform the Wheel of member/non members views on different aspects of active citizenship. These views would then contribute to the Wheel's own submission to the task force.

Previously, the Wheel had engaged in consultations with its membership, utilising traditional consultation techniques such as focus groups or requesting submissions by post. This time, however, the Wheel decided to open up participation in the consultation to the public, as well as its members. This was one reason why e-consultation was considered for the active citizenship consultation, albeit on a small trial basis. Overall, the Wheel hoped to consult representatives from member organisations, volunteers within the organisations, as well as members of the public.

8.3.2 Process and planning

From an initial contact meeting, the Wheel made it clear that it had little resources of its own to expend on the proposed e-consultation.

³⁷ See www.wheel.ie

Following a number of meetings between the research team and the Wheel, a 'Memorandum of Understanding' was drawn up and agreed upon by the Wheel and the research team. This included an agreement on confidentiality, an agreed embargo on the release of information, data protection and costs. In addition, the following was agreed that the E-Consultation Research Project would provide:

- Expertise in identifying appropriate technology for the consultation
- Setting up a consultation website, including discussion forums that can be accessed on-line, by e-mail, mobile phone and 'land-line'
- Technical support during the consultation
- Training to Wheel personnel on running and maintaining an e-consultation

In return, the researchers were given the opportunity to conduct surveys with consultation participants before and after the e-consultation trial. In addition, researchers were able to conduct in-depth interviews with Wheel personnel, again before and after the e-consultation. By doing this, it was possible to discern whether consulters/consultees expectations for e-technology and quality of participation had been met in the course of the trial.

The idea of eliciting experiences or 'stories' from participants was identified as a key way of gaining information. The experiences and views of Irish people about active citizenship would enrich any report The Wheel submitted to the task force, as it could be grounded in people's own understanding of active citizenship, rather than what the task force members or David Putnam thinks active citizenship might be.

The staff at The Wheel did not have time to moderate a discussion forum, so it was decided between the research team and the Wheel to develop a site specifically to collect these stories, but not discuss them. The Wheel would not engage directly with the views posted during the course of the e-consultation, but would use the data gathered to inform a future submission to the Task Force.

The research team were keen to point out that a feedback mechanism must be incorporated into the process so that participants would be informed of overall progress with the Task Force, but also, and critically, that participants would be able to evaluate whether or not their own submissions were seriously considered by the Wheel in its final submission.

Lastly, the research team strongly emphasized the importance of publicising the e-consultation prior to its launch. The problem of 'recruiting' participants to engage in consultation is a central issue with many processes. To this end, the Wheel outlined a strategy including e-mailing lists, postcards, and if necessary phoning members in order to encourage them to participate.

8.3.3 E-consultation design

Given the requirements to collect, but not discuss, stories, the active citizenship site was built as a collective blog. Weblogs (blogs for short) are usually used as public on-line diaries. Individuals add entries to their blog, that others can read, be it the work of a local councillor³⁸, or the sexual adventures of a Washington D.C. intern (Cutler 2005). But if you let anyone post to a blog, they can also be used to collect entries from many people. We used Wordpress³⁹, open source blogging software, to run the site.

To make it easier for anyone to submit a story, Ashish Italiya modified the Wordpress software to accept submissions not just by filling in a form on the WWW, but also by e-mail, SMS text messages from a mobile 'phone, and through voice mail. Two mobile 'phones were connected to USB ports on a PC at Queen's University Belfast (one with a Northern Ireland number, the other with an Irish one). Software on that PC picks up text messages sent to those 'phones, and loads them on to the blog.

³⁸<http://www.readmyday.co.uk/maryreid>

³⁹<http://wordpress.org/>

Or people could telephone a number and leave a message, which the Queen's University voice mail system stored as a .wav file, and e-mailed it to us. This was then automatically converted to an MP3, and uploaded to the blog, so that people could click on a link and listen to the message. So even illiterate people could tell their stories.⁴⁰ You can see the different ways of sharing your views in Figure 8.3.1.



Figure 8.3.1. How to share your views on The Wheel e-consultation website.

The research team spent some time developing draft pages for this site, to try and make it easy for people to get the point of the consultation on active citizenship, and go on to submit their stories. Earlier experience from the Waterways Ireland consultation showed that registration can confuse some participants, so no registration was required. The cost of that is deleting spam every day or two from the site. This was later confirmed by usability tests run on the site in the offices of The Wheel.

The site was structured along the four themes The Wheel wanted to use in their report to the Task Force on Active Citizenship (see Figure 8.3.2):

1. Who is an active citizen?
2. What should the role of the state be in active citizenship?
3. How can The Wheel facilitate active citizenship?
4. Reflect on the terms of reference.

The research team spent a lot of time getting the words and images right for the explanations on the site. There were many iterations of writing, first within the team, between Letterkenny and Belfast, and then making corrections⁴¹ noted by staff at the Wheel. The end result of all that

⁴⁰Once they knew the telephone number, that is.

⁴¹To the spelling, grammar and sense.

work was a site that reads much better than the Waterways Ireland one. You don't need to be an experienced consultation respondent to follow it.

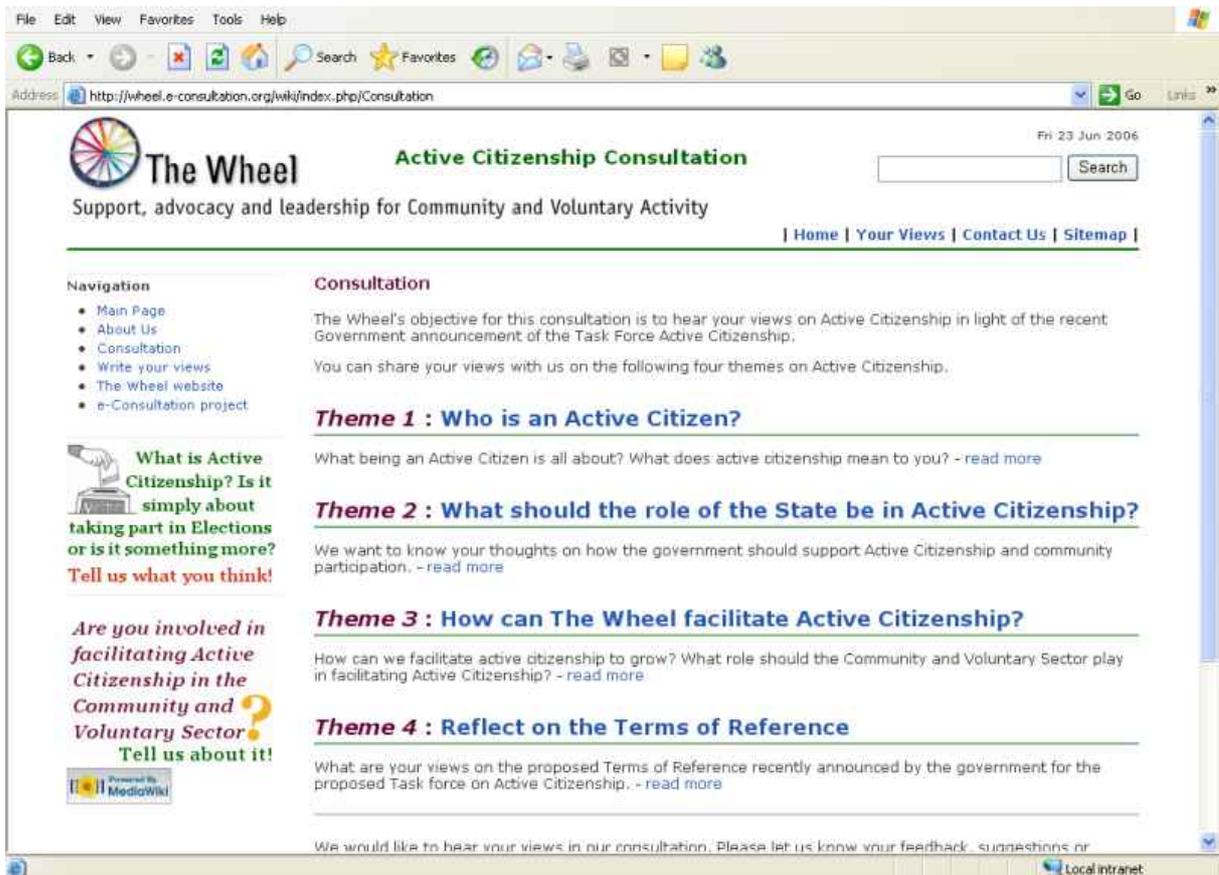


Figure 8.3.2. Consultation themes on active citizenship.

8.3.4 Expectations for E-consultation

8.3.4.1 The consulters

Researchers were keen to identify initial expectations of the consulters for the E-Consultation. It must be reiterated that this was the first e-consultation ever conducted by the Wheel. When asked what the advantages of using e-technology would be, the representative from the Wheel stated:

I think expectations from the point of view from the Wheel is that we would learn and experience another method of reaching out the clients that we would seek to service or facilitate. Our expectation would be that it would improve the opportunity to do that because it is breaking away from traditional methods, which we have had problems with, where you can't get everyone in a room. So by using a virtual medium we would hope that it would increase that participation rate basically.

While getting appropriate numbers of people to participate is seen as a critical problem for many of the consulters that we talked to in the course of this research, this respondent also pointed another key issue for the Community and Voluntary sector, access to technology:

It is recognised that as a sector, there are limitations and challenges in so far as many people operating in the sector do not have access...So us as the Wheel would like to explore this area, we do have reservations about whether or not people will be able to participate. But if we can share the burden of that quest with Maynooth or Queens University then of course, we are willing to embark on it.

8.3.4.2 The Consultees

A number of representatives from the Community and Voluntary sector agreed to take part in a survey in order to gauge expectations for engaging in the e-consultation. These participants were initially contacted by e-mail through the Wheel's membership mailing list. All participants had access to computers and the Internet.

The majority of participants had at least some previous experience of engaging in public consultations. Instances of these experiences include:

'...attendance at meetings representing a community partnership—representatives from Dept of community and family affairs in attendance...'
'Forum compiled a 'Model' of good consultation. This was tested on the Co. Monaghan Heritage Plan'
'We have submitted detailed written response to consultation on Town and Local Development Plans.'

Some participants felt that the experience was largely negative— 'We have never seen any tangible change in plans by our doing so.' Another commented '...Initially felt good and that we were being listened to; however deeper into the process it felt to me as if the local authority was just checking off the public consultation box.' However, another respondent was more positive about his experience—

Very positive. Effective consultation is imperative for PAUL Partnership. As an area-based partnership company it is vital that PAUL's strategies and programmes are validated by consultation with all partners and the community and voluntary sector in particular. It is also a central goal of the Partnership to ensure that the voice of the community is enabled to be heard at wider fora for decision-making in social inclusion, local and community development and local governance.

Respondents were asked to list any other resources that would be necessary in order to make participation in consultation easier. One respondent suggested 'inter agency consultation with state bodies', another pointed to 'excellent and sustainable networking pathways between stakeholders', while another proposed 'more power in decision making as to when, where etc., meeting are held'. In the same vein, another suggested 'more evidence that it [consultation] makes any difference'.. When asked resources would be needed in order to make participation in consultation easier, respondents identified 'higher proficiency in technology' and more 'skills training' as the most important factors. Significantly, the need for more financial and personnel resources were viewed as less important.

Next, respondents were asked to state the type of expectations they had from the e-consultation. Responses included:

'experience an e consultation and how it works as a form of communications'
'A clearer picture of how to use e-mail and internet to promote and advance our project'
'After taking part in this consultation process I would at least expect to receive feed back on the results received and information as to how the results will be used. Mindless consultation and lack of credibility can often be the reason for lack of future participation. If ones view is not given proper consideration or acknowledgement the incentive certainly decreases to participate in future.'
'Hopefully the real volunteers will be listened to and catered for; often the organising or facilitator arranges things which are easier for them, not necessarily easier for us. I would hope that free, easily accessibility for all people in our committee would be addressed. Perhaps allowing local parish halls or other community facilities to have a 'hub' where anyone can access and have their issues or ideas heard. Women, children and those usually not at the table making decision that effect their lives should be especially thought of during the consultation process.'
'That it will make sensible and usable recommendations with regard to the form, and use of electronic surveying, so that real effects can be derived from it'
'PAUL has multiple interests in the potential of e-consultation methodologies: Enhanced capacity for consultation for strategic and operational planning; Ability to enhance the operational capacities of the community and voluntary sector, especially its ability to highlight its particular perspective; Identification of new ways in which bodies such as the Limerick City Social Inclusion Measures Working Group and Limerick City Community & Voluntary Forum can exploit e-technologies and use them to communicate more effectively, raise awareness of social inclusion issues and capture the views, priorities and concerns of a wide audience.'
'that my views will be heard and taken into account.'
'I would like to be able to learn techniques for divining public opinion without having to spend a

lot of money! I am presuming this will entail clever use of new technology, and I am hoping to gain a lot from that.'

'That it will make sensible and usable recommendations with regard to the form, and use of electronic surveying, so that real effects can be derived from it'

Respondents were then asked to articulate expected outcomes from the processes. These included:

'In particular, to identify ways in which PAUL Partnership, Limerick City Community Forum and Limerick City Social Inclusion Measures Working Group can use e-technologies to effectively communicate with and harness the views of the community sector as well as identify ways in which that sector can avail of the potential for consultation, make its voice heard and overcome the risk of digital exclusion'.

'That positive change will happen. That new technologies will enable greater ease of access to peoples opinions and ideas.'

'I would hope to be able to use the resources we currently have to better effect. Also, to be able to identify what we need to more effectively communicate/canvass opinion among our target audiences.'

'Better proficiency with internet and advise on how to use it to our advantage.'

'1) Free easy access to technology to allow all people of the community to have their issues aired. 2) Special attention to be given to those usually absent from the decision making process; i.e. disabled (incl. those with mental health issues), women, children, teenagers and displaced (incl those from the travelling community). 3) To establish a fun element to encourage people to become involved in their community and to come back. 4) Allow local—grass roots projects access to the same resources that recognised organisations / charities enjoy.'

'Proposal and technology for effective e-consultation.'

8.3.5 Consultation Data Generated

The following are examples of the data that was generated in the e-consultation:

Who is an 'active citizen'?

'The work carried out by myself on behalf of the BCCN, will lead to more active participation from children in settings, leading to more active citizens later in life. We begin with the youngest children trying to help practitioners see children as separate individuals with rights and responsibilities. We use listening and learning as a reflective tool for working with children in a variety of settings. We want to help children to feel confident about who they are, how they feel about themselves and how they relate to others.

Listening and learning from children within settings and taking a pro-active approach in seeing that this becomes part of the everyday fabric of practice is a must.

An active citizen is someone who exercise rights as well as responsibilities and is involved in community/local life in general e.g.—vote and use it wisely, neighbour watch schemes, youth work, involvement in local/community politics. Children can also be involved in different peer forums on in clubs or within their our schools or settings. It is a democratic way of being that should be promoted. Many people are on the margins and outskirts of society and need to be brought in the from the cold more successfully.

We must begin with the youngest children giving them a sense of autonomy and choices in relation to everyday life so that they can then grow up to make good choices and better decisions in their lives. When children feel they have choice, they feel more in control of what is happening to them and this affects everything form their self-esteem to their learning.'

'Since I gave up paid work to care for my child, I have never worked harder. This unpaid work that I do includes

- caring for my child
- supporting her school
- looking after her friends after school
- looking after the increased housework due to having children around
- caring for a family member with a disability at weekends

-volunteering in the community with a naionra and a women's organisation.
Yet the value of my husband's take-home pay fell in January because I am not 'working', I am a home carer. The value of the home carer tax credit is €770 per annum, or less than €2.11 per day for all that I do. It has not been increased since it was introduced. Even worse, home carers whose spouses are on lower incomes do not get even that. When I was in paid work, I felt that I contributed and that my contribution was reasonably recognised. Now that I contribute many more hours, albeit not in the workforce, all this has changed. Until we allow all those who are active citizens, contributing to society and the economy on an unpaid basis, to have a decent life, people will increasingly take up paid work to the detriment of the life of our communities.'
'I have a question. What does it mean to be Irish? Does the state recognise(truly recognise) black people as citizens because I think there seems to be some uncertainty. If we can answer this question, it becomes easier for me to give my view of what an active citizen is.'
'Active citizenship can only come about from people's confidence and faith that they will be heard. The Pioneer total abstinence association is involved in promoting abstinence from alcohol and drugs. Our main programme target group is the youth.'
'It is not just about taking part in elections though taking part in elections is a vital part of the role. It is about being interested and informed on matters political, social, social policy and nationhood. It is also about participating, to what ever level one is able, in local and community affairs...'
'Yes I am an active citizen. I work for and represent my community , specifically women on different commitees and public bodies. I do this because I recognise the need to build women's capacity to become more involved within their own communities and at local, regional and national level.'
'Being an active citizen means being involved in your community from the lowest level to the highest level. Building the capacity of your community, organising / taking part / representing / raising awareness of key issues / working towards betterment of community and civil society.'
'I think that anyone who gets involved (especially without any financial gain) is an active citizen. This can be something as simple as picking up litter outside their own homes, in their local amenities, such as playgrounds and sports fields, as well as taking park in their local Tidy Towns clean up days.'
'Active citizenship is, I believe, a fine ideal. There are many wonderful opportunities for people to contribute as volunteers in society but community development can be a vicious nasty place. My experience is that bullying is the norm. If you disagree or try to express a different point of view to 'the consensus' (which is decided by one or two individuals) you will be punished, treated as a trouble maker. The choices you have are conform, engage in endless conflict or vote with your feet. Personally I've chosen to vote with my feet. I've never found anything resembling community in my neighbourhood outside of schools and churches. What I've found is endless struggles for power and control by people with no integrity and no morals. Communities are not in chaos because people are not active citizens—people are not active citizens because communities are in chaos. It's a vicious cycle. There's no point in telling people to be nice. The culture needs to change.'

Figure 8.3.3. Responses to "Who is an 'active citizen'?"

What should the role of the State be in 'active citizenship'?

'I am uncomfortable with a "political agenda" behind the concept of active citizenship...Living in a democracy that is more a representative than a participative one, can one realistically be an active citizen? The concept of active citizenship is used, politically, to reinforce the social norms of society, and promote the needs of those in power, rather than being used to challenge and transform a society, the notion of hegemony comes to mind. "Community Involvement", "Participation", "Empowerment" are all phrases associated with active citizenship, but unless the state is willing to transfer some of its power and trust its members to actually participate in the development of a representative democracy, then the concept of an active citizen becomes a myth. Is active citizenship being introduced because the public are becoming increasingly disenchanted with and disenfranchised from Politics and the state sees it as being a way of re-engaging? If so I would hate to think that, as happened under Thatcher in the UK in the 1980's, we create a society of individualism where active citizenship is something that is encouraged amongst those who agree with the popular discourse and those outside of this are even more marginalised; where active citizenship means personal responsibility, rather than responsibility to
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society.
If the state is really committed to active citizenship, then it must be totally committed to devolution of power. There has been a lot of rhetoric about decentralisation, and how this will bring government closer to the people; however in reality what it means is we will still be operating a centralised government system, with the decentralised offices being the spokes in a wheel, the hub of which is Dublin. It is about the displacement of labour, rather than the devolution of power and a way of involving citizens in the democratic process.
<p>Within the debate on active citizenship, we therefore need to also consider a debate on what democracy actually means to us, how we can more fully participate in this process and how at a very local level our views and concerns can be effectively articulated. I would argue that if we are to promote active citizenship, then we need to take community development very seriously, in particular the process of conscientization. We need to reflect on what it is to be a citizen in the state, what we are told being a citizen means, how it actually is for us in reality and what type of society we would like to actively participate in, within this identifying contradictions and ways of overcoming them. Only then can we take forward a notion of active citizenship, and really empower people to take part in a dialogue with the state on the role of the citizen in transforming society.’</p> <p>[In response to this submission] ‘I agree we need to take community development seriously. Many neighbourhoods are in crisis and words like community and development are bandied about like anyone even knows what they mean. We need more than to reflect, ask questions and use fine words. Activists have been quoting Freire since the 60’s but lots of people just want to get out of those neighbourhood before the stress kills them.’</p>
‘The state should actively support those working towards empowering others to become active citizens. How? By financially resourcing projects and programmes that educate and support those most disadvantaged and without a voice. Much of this has been left to the community and voluntary sector and no doubt good if not great work has been carried out by them it has been delivered on a shoestring. If it were not for those volunteers committed to making society better many projects would have collapsed while waiting on funding coming from government etc. Education and training in this area is paramount if we are to move society forward.’
[From a voice-mail]—‘My opinion on active citizenship and what government can do is to incorporate all the United Nations principals for older persons and specifically talking a bout active citizenship for older persons and if older people an able to be integrated in community they could be active citizens.’

Figure 8.3.4. Responses to "What should the role of the State be in 'active citizenship'?"

8.3.6 Outcomes from the e-consultation trial

8.3.6.1 Technology and usability

After initially setting up the website to be used as part of the consultation, researchers gave Wheel personnel an opportunity to give feedback on the site in terms of its usability. These views were collected in the course of a focus group. While in general, the view was that the potential for e-technology was very positive, there were some problems with the design of the site. A common complaint was that the site needed to be clearer and easier to navigate. Another point raised was that the site needed to state clear instructions and set out expectations, devise limits to the particular consultation, and finally, state what will happen to submissions. The registration process was particularly identified as overtly complicated. On the basis of these recommendations, the researchers significantly modified the site to the satisfaction of the Wheel.

Prior to launching the consultation, a number of participants were invited to take part in a pre-trial usability survey. Bearing in mind that all participants considered themselves to be frequent computer and Internet users, most found the site relevantly easy to navigate. Some participants felt that the site provided the necessary information needed to engage in the consultation in a straight-forward manner, while the majority felt that most people could learn to use the website very quickly. At a more critical level, a number of participants felt that the site was still unnecessarily complex, that the information provided was somewhat opaque and that this would

prevent them from frequently using the website. It must be stated however, that this was the minority view expressed.

Once the site was running, it worked without any major problems. Because it accepts e-mails, the researchers had to delete spam every few days. We had not included a spam filter in the software set up, but the manual deletion was easy. There were no offensive messages posted, only a few commercial advertisements (the spam). In general, we have found that worries about having to inspect sites for offensive comments are exaggerated. More difficult is getting anyone to participate at all.

The technology for collecting voice mail and text messages worked surprisingly well. Our only problem was when there was a power cut at QUB that affected the computer plugged in to the mobile 'phones. It had to be restarted when the power came back on. The voice mail kept on working.

8.3.6.2 Issues of participation

From an early stage in planning and designing the e-consultation, the researchers were at pains to point out to the Wheel that e-technologies were not a 'magic bullet' for boosting quality or levels of participation. It was impressed on the Wheel that in order to engage significant numbers of consultees, resources would to be employed to publicise the consultation. In turn, it was made clear to the researchers that the Wheel was not able to expend any significant resources in this respect, citing that it wished to wait until the Task Force was formally announced by the Taoiseach and use the ensuing press coverage to publicise the Wheel's own consultation on active citizenship. The researchers believe that this had a significant impact on the low quantity of participation in the E-consultation.

However, the quality of participation was high, as can be seen from reading the sample messages above. The site had succeeded in getting a range of views and experiences from people that would have not appeared in formal submissions on consultation documents. And this was at a far lower cost than running public meetings or focus groups across Ireland.

There were also problems of participation among the consulters, as the staff changed at The Wheel. Few of the people who started the e-consultation are still in place, which means that people came in half-way through, perhaps not fully understanding what was going on. This would affect any consultation process, electronic or not, but confirms the importance of having enough resources for a consultation, as noted in the NSEC trial.

8.3.7 Conclusions

1. This is an effective way to collect tacit knowledge from people, by stimulating them to tell their stories to the world, on a collective blog. You can get high quality interesting responses.
2. The multiple routes for submission worked, so bridging the digital divide. If you cannot access the web, use e-mail. If not, send a text. If all else fails, telephone and record a message.
3. It doesn't require as much work for the consulters as do discussion forums or even surveys. But it does require some attention.
4. Publicity is needed to bring people to a site. This can be done through the media (from press releases to a launch by the Taoiseach), or by making people aware of the site when they visit their favourite on-line hangouts (messages in mailing lists or on-line games, or buying Google adwords so that when people search for 'active citizenship' they find the site).
5. Copy-writing for the web takes skill and time. But without it, people will leave the site before even having a chance to submit a story.

Chapter 9. Exploratory tests

The team decided to carry out tests designed to explore issues that emerged during the demonstrations and trials. In the trials we could only study a limited range of processes and technologies, appropriate to the needs of the trial partners. In each trial it was only possible to use one or two technologies, in what was often a fairly conventional consultation process. While these helped us understand the institutional factors that affected the implementation of e-consultation, they did allow us explore the full potential of radically new technologies and processes. In particular we were interested in designing some tests of our own to explore two key issues:

1. Is it possible to design e-consultation technologies and processes that can be used even by those with literacy difficulties who are a challenging group for both e-consultation and traditional consultations?
2. How can a range of technologies be used to get creative input from groups who do not normally respond to consultations, such as schoolchildren?

Since these tests were done at the end of this project's time frame, this chapter can only present a demonstration of their potential. Further research is needed on all of these issues: consultations that cross the digital divide, integrating technologies in innovative consultation processes, and engaging youth in e-consultation.

9.1 Consulting ex-offenders and others: access and usability challenges

E-consultation is often criticized on the grounds that different groups of people do not have equal access to electronic communications technologies. They may not be able to afford Internet access at home, or have the skills or confidence to use Internet facilities in libraries, community centres or cybercafés. As a general criticism, it is a weak one. The most common consultation technique used in Ireland is to write a long document (40, 50 or even 200 pages) in language that only makes sense to professionals, send it out to a few hundred organisations, and expect people there to read and digest it, then write long replies. Such processes discriminate against those with little time, and those who do not have very high reading ages. Few e-consultation techniques will exclude so many people. From the beginning, we have proposed e-consultation techniques as complementary to traditional approaches, rather than replacements. Each technique can reduce participation: but the groups excluded are different. However, no matter what you do to make electronic access simpler, there are still people who will find it difficult to participate. In this section we discuss what can be done to improve accessibility and usability for some of these groups.

9.1.1 Probation Board of Northern Ireland consultation

One of the people who came to our Armagh workshop in April 2005 worked for the Probation Board of Northern Ireland (PBNI). We met with Mary Coffey and Louise Orr on 5 Aug. 2005 to discuss their coming consultations. The PBNI was planning to run a consultation on changes to the locations of probation offices, and reporting centres, across Northern Ireland. Consultants had recommended nine alternative ways of reducing the number of offices they had to maintain. The PBNI would like to gather data on the impact of the changes on:

- Partners groups under NI section 75,
- Political parties, councillors, community groups, and
- Individual offenders

They had had a number of problems with previous consultations:

- There was a low response to calls for public meeting in newspapers.

- No response from some partner groups.
- Little interest in filling out surveys.
- There were no representative groups for offenders⁴².
- It was difficult to engage with individual offenders due to low literacy, numeracy and other learning difficulties.

This last point is a substantial challenge to any consultation process. Many offenders had left school early, and spent many periods in prison. This had left them functionally illiterate. Perhaps they could read a few words on a road or shop sign, and text short messages from mobile 'phones, but not compose paragraphs. Can such people access some electronic communications technologies? Are there ways of using e-consultation technologies with them?

The project team suggested a number of technologies that could be used in their consultations with organisations. As for the ex-offenders, we suggested running some experiments or usability tests to find out which technologies they can use. Now these e-consultation components would, if accepted, only be a small part of an overall consultation. The consultation managers at PBNI spent some time over the autumn on designing and planning the consultation, with the help of the Consultation Institute (represented by Stratagem in Ireland). The Consultation Institute pointed out the disadvantages of consulting on only one out of nine options.⁴³ The consultation dates needed approval from the PBNI corporate managers, their board, and the Northern Ireland Office, so there was a long delay before the consultation process and schedule was approved. In the end, the PBNI ran a conventional consultation, without any e-consultation component, between 10 March and 2 June 2006.⁴⁴ In that consultation they ask for views on the positive and negative of their preferred option only: but the final questions ask for alternative suggestions. Rather than introducing a new technology for consulting with offenders during this major consultation, they agreed to work with us to do a usability test of an e-consultation technology with ex-offenders.

9.1.2 Designing an e-consultation interface for ex-offenders

We considered several technologies that might be usable by people with reading and writing difficulties. These can use voice, mobile text, or graphical interfaces over the Internet. In other trials we had made it possible for people to submit views via text messages or voice mail, so that those without Internet access could at least leave their stories. You can see the results of this on the sites for The Wheel (wheel.e-consultation.org) and the Diversity consultation (diversity.e-consultation.org). What we chose to explore with ex-offenders was the extent to which they might be able to use a high-graphics, low text interface.

Since the PBNI consultation was about the location of probation offices, we chose to use a geographical, map-based interface. Google Maps (maps.google.co.uk) lets people move around a map of their area, search for locations and businesses, and get directions from one place to another. In addition, they publish an Application Programming Interface (API⁴⁵) that lets developers use those maps in their own applications. CommunityWalk (www.communitywalk.com) is an example of such an application. It helps you create your own map overlay on top of Google Maps. You register on the site, create a map, and then can add locations, information, pictures and comments to the map. Figure 9.1.1 shows the map we created for the usability test.⁴⁶ Every current probation reporting location (whether a probation

⁴²NIACRO provides services, rather than representing offenders.

⁴³E.g. the other options could be discovered through a freedom of information request.

⁴⁴Consultation details at <http://www.pbni.org.uk/news.htm?newsid=4527>

⁴⁵<http://www.google.com/apis/maps/>

⁴⁶ Currently viewable at <http://www.communitywalk.com/map/5267> . All comments made during the tests have been removed to maintain their privacy.

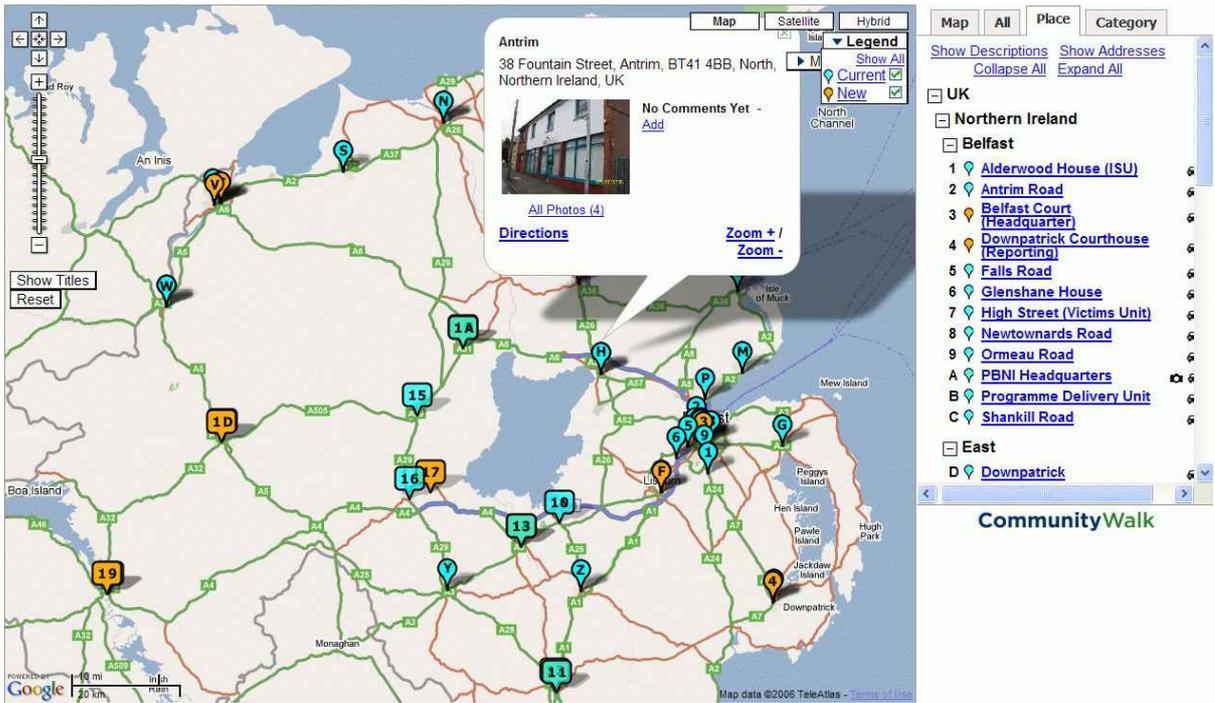


Figure 9.1.1. CommunityWalk map of current and new probation locations in Northern Ireland.

office or a reporting centre open for a few hours a day) is marked on the map (in blue), as well as the proposed new locations (in yellow). When a user clicks on a location, up pops the address, photographs of the office (if available), and any comments made about that place. They can zoom in to see the streets around the office and their homes, before entering a comment (see Figure 9.1.2). They can even get Google Maps to show them the driving route from one location to another place (see Figure 9.1.3).



Figure 9.1.2. Close-up of old Shankill Road location with a comment.

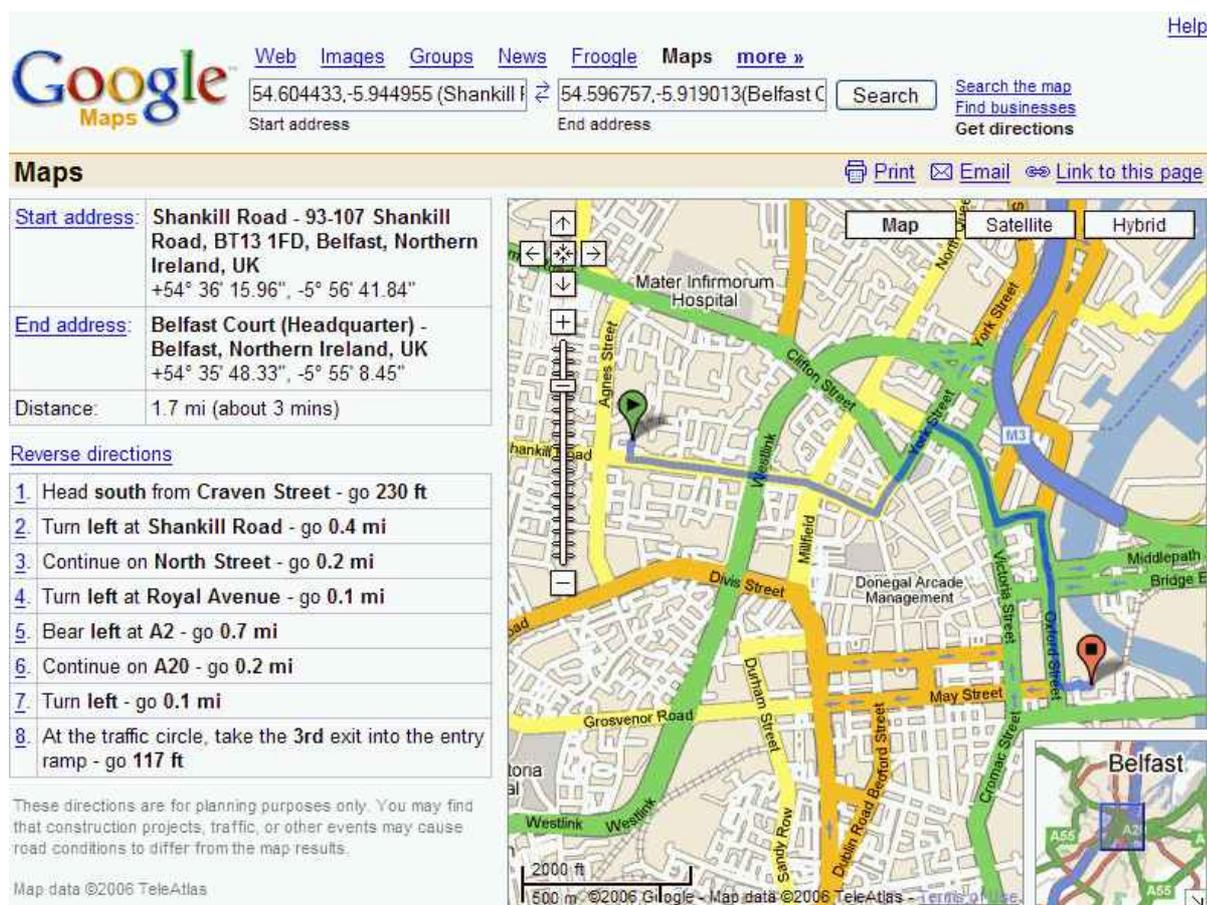


Figure 9.1.3. Directions from an old location to a new one.

9.1.3 Designing a usability test of an e-consultation interface for ex-offenders

We set out to compare the usability of this map-based interface with the conventional paper questionnaire produced by the Probation Board NI.⁴⁷ Details of each stage can be found in Appendix 11.2.

9.1.3.1 Selecting the testers

There is no point getting students to test the interface since what we wanted to know was whether ex-offenders, some with low literacy levels, found the map-based interface more or less usable than current consultation techniques. We needed to recruit ex-offenders to test the system. The Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) runs IT courses for ex-offenders and others. They have a small computer room in which trainees can develop IT skills that may increase their employability. A number of probationers take these courses. So NIACRO arranged for some of their trainees to test the interface when they came in for their regular session on 13 April 2006.

9.1.3.2 Selecting the tasks

We designed a sequence of tasks that started with simple familiarization with the map-based site, then got progressively more involved as the testers gained confidence, until they were entering comments on the consultation topic. In brief they were:

- Explore the PBNI e-consultation website.
- Find your probation office or reporting centre on the map.
- Find the all offices or reporting centres you have been to, and add comments on each place.

⁴⁷ <http://www.pbni.org.uk/annex-a-questionnaire.pdf>

- Find your new office and reporting centre, and comment on how it would affect you.

The control task was to complete as much of the PBNI questionnaire as they could in 15 minutes.

9.1.3.3 Collecting test data

Before the tests started, we asked testers to complete a questionnaire on their familiarity with computers, the Internet and consultations. We set up Camtasia Studio on one PC. This software produced a video of the screen, including the position of the mouse at any time, and what the tester saw. The tester spoke aloud during the test, explaining what s/he was doing, and noting any difficulties in using the interface. This was recorded on the same Camtasia video, using a microphone plugged into the computer. In addition, the comments entered were automatically stored on the server, so at the end of the session we copied the comments and deleted them from the server. After completing the test tasks we asked the testers what they thought of the interface, using the post-test questionnaire. We used a similar questionnaire to collect their assessment of the control task, completing a paper questionnaire. Finally, we invited the testers, in a group, to discuss their experiences in expressing their views through the computer map and the paper questionnaire. We took notes of points raised.

9.1.4 Running the usability test

On 13 April we set up the software on a number of machines at NIACRO. As this was the Thursday before Easter Friday, many trainees did not turn up for the session. We were left with one ex-offender in the morning, and one ex-offender and one non-offender in the afternoon. As they were at different stages of the NIACRO training, their familiarity with computers and the Internet differed.

For each session we ran through the steps listed in the test protocol. In brief these were:

1. Welcome and introduction.
2. Pre-test questionnaire (on skills)
3. Test the map-based computer interface.
4. Post-test questionnaire (on 3)
5. Spend up to 15 min. filling in the conventional paper questionnaire as send out by PBNI.
6. Post-test questionnaire (on 5)
7. Group discussion on usability of 3 and 5.

We had to help them at times. One needed help entering the comments on the map, otherwise there were few difficulties with the map. All needed help in reading the consultation questionnaire (at times it used phrases that were more complicated than the language used in tabloid newspapers), and two had difficulties filling it in (one only ticked the boxes, the other had to get a research assistant to write down the free text answers).

As only three people turned up before Easter, we left copies of the forms and instructions at NIACRO, so that other trainees could be offered the chance to test the software after Easter. But not one trainee did so. A possible explanation is that non-offenders don't know anything about probation offices, and probationers are less willing to help the PBNI (or do not trust that their comments will be anonymous). We are looking at ways of following up this preliminary study by designing geographical tasks that young offenders would perceive as more interesting and less threatening.

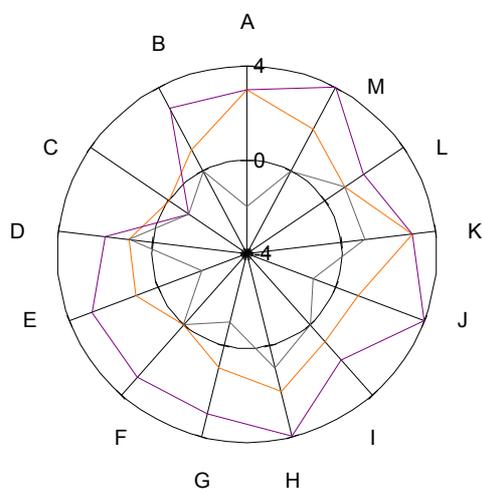
9.1.5 Usability test results

Using this test protocol, it was possible to compare the innovative map-based e-consultation technique with the conventional paper questionnaire used in the Probation Board consultation. The chart shows the difference between the post-test scores given to the web map and the paper consultation questionnaire. The scores were 5 for strongly agree

Testers	S	R	P
Age Range	18-30	31-45	60+
Consultation experience	Yes	No	No
Computer experience	daily	daily	weekly
Internet use	daily	weekly	monthly
on-line consultation experience	No	No	No

down to 1 for strongly disagree. The difference can range from +4 to -4. Where the question was a negative one, the difference was taken away from 0, so that in all cases +4 is better for the web map, and -4 is worse (i.e. the paper questionnaire is better).

Web map - paper questionnaire



- A The information provided is easy to understand.
- B It is easy to find the information I need.
- C The organization of information on the pages is clear.
- D Overall, I am satisfied with it.
- E NOT I need to learn a lot about it before i could effectively use it.
- F The information is effective in helping me complete the tasks.
- G I would imagine that most people would learn to use it very quickly.
- H NOT I found it unnecessarily complex.
- I I think I would like to use it in the future.
- J I thought it was easy to use.
- K NOT I think I would need help to be able to use it.
- L NOT I found it very cumbersome to use.
- M I felt very confident using it.

Now for two of the testers (R and S), the web map was better than the paper questionnaire on all but one criterion. The exception was the organization of information on the page. For those with less Internet experience, the questionnaire was better. But on every other criterion of ease of use, the map-based interface was better. The third tester (P) was over 60, and had had less experience of computers and the Internet. On some criteria he found the paper questionnaire easier (based on his experience of filling in forms in the past). Nevertheless, he was more satisfied overall with the new web map than with the traditional questionnaire.

During the tests, there were frequent complaints about the paper questionnaire. Q5 was particularly hard to grasp. It reads like a university or A-level examination question.⁴⁸ But even when answering the simpler questions, the testers discussed what the questions mean before attempting to answer. In contrast, there were few problems when using the on-line map. They found the probation office locations, recognised local features, and managed to manipulate and move around the map display. Writing in several words as a comment on a particular site was not a problem for two of them: the third got the research assistant to help him. In the discussion afterwards, they expressed their satisfaction with the map interface, and how easy it was to use. Appendix 7 shows some sample comments added to locations on the map. They relate directly to the issues of the consultation, focused on specific sites. By starting from the particular, rather than requiring consultees to give general comments, it is both easier for consultees to express their views, and consulters to understand and analyse them.

9.1.6 Discussion

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, to what extent is it possible through technology to improve accessibility and usability for those with lower literacy levels? We have shown it is possible to design interfaces that reduce the cognitive burden on consultees, compared to traditional questionnaires. This is consistent with a commonly stated principle of human-computer interface design: making the interface consistent with the ways

⁴⁸ The question started: "5. PBNI Equality Scheme has given a commitment that in carrying out its functions it will have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between people who fall under the following groups as stated in s75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. To help us consider potential inequalities please identify the people in the following groups who you believe will be most affected by the proposed changes (for staff and service users):- Religious belief: Positive [] Negative [] ..."

the user thinks about the problem. Instead of forcing people to translate in their head from questions, to their experience, and back into written answers, let them work with a visualisation that mirrors their mental model. If a consultation is about the location of something, then a map is a natural representation of that. Although computer maps have been used in consultations on planning issues for over a decade, few consulting bodies have used them in small consultations, because of the cost of preparing the Geographic Information Systems (GIS). But now that low-cost GIS is easily available, from Google maps to the open source GRASS toolkit, such techniques are becoming more feasible. It only took a couple of days for Ashish Italiya to design a CommunityWalk map for this test, and populate it with data and photographs. Nevertheless, even our map still requires some literacy. Users need to be able to recognise place names (not too difficult) and then type in short comments (rather harder). For a less literate consultee the interface needs to provide information through more photographs (or drawings) and sound (e.g. click on a location and the site plays a recording of the information and what you have to do). To enter information, there would need to be a choice of pictures to click on, or a way of recording voice and storing it. Such approaches turn the interaction with the consultation into something like a short segment of playing a computer game. There have been computer games designed to support e-democracy.⁴⁹ The next challenge is interaction design to engage those most excluded by current consultation techniques (both traditional and electronic), but that would involve an entire research programme in itself.

9.2 Consulting youth: diversity test

9.2.1 Context

A key objective of the e-consultation research group is to develop e-consultation technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones in order to promote the concept of citizens participating in public policy discussions and debates. The belief that using new technologies creatively can help citizens to get involved and this, in turn, helps policy makers keep informed of what the public think about important issues drives the research. Having on-line discussion forums etc. on matters of public concern offers quick and cooperative ways to develop active citizenry and citizens as partners in policy making.

A key focus of the e-consultation research group is on ways to develop reconciliation, mutual understanding and respect between and within communities and traditions. Software can be used to support human mediation, negotiation and decision-making processes. IT can be used to collect issues and needs from many people (e.g. via on-line chats). Other software can be used to map out arguments and possible solutions, as used in Germany by citizens planning circles. Computers allow quite subtle voting, rating and ranking, allowing us to find out possible consensus between people whose first choice solutions remain resolutely opposed. IT can be used to allow people to communicate over social and political distances. The virtual meeting places provide a safe space for talk with strangers. When the East Belfast Partnership Board searched for a neutral venue for discussions between young people about human rights, they found only one: the Internet.

Each of the previous e-consultation experiments and trials run by the team had brought together people from different communities into the same virtual space to deliberate on issues, needs and solutions. However the team decided to trial e-consultation specifically on the issue of diversity. It was envisaged that youth from diverse communities should be given the opportunity to communicate messages on their understanding and encounters with diversity and to read the messages and encounters of others on the same. Could e-technologies help start debate among young people on diversity across borders and across communities? Could the knowledges they produced be, when collected on-line, used as a foundation on which to build debate among policy-makers on diversity?

The team were keen to test:

⁴⁹ <http://www.demgames.org/>

- How quickly can a consultation be run using e-technologies only as a mode of communication?
- What is the effect of a short-time frame on the process?
- How effective can a consultation be run using e-technologies only as a mode of communication?
- How e- friendly is the secondary educational system, that is, are e-technologies a way to communicate instantly and effectively with every secondary child in the North and South jurisdictions?
- Can young people generate creative consultation knowledge using e-technologies?
- Are young people interested in participating in discussions on social issues through e-technologies?
- Can e-technologies access how young people perceive the issue of diversity?
- Can e-technologies help measure how secondary education has dealt with diversity, including issues around conflict resolution, racism and sectarianism?

9.2.2 Process and planning

Following a number of meetings the research team decided that the trial would be developed within the parameters of a six week time-frame and with the use of e-technologies tools only. That is, that a set time, extremely short in comparison to traditional consultations, would be adhered to. In addition, during the trial, no traditional methods would be engaged. This was in order that we expressly assess the validity of using electronic technologies, without the backup of traditional methods, to engender discussion. The target participants were young people between 12-14 years old. However, most importantly, these people were to be targeted through the formal education system's electronic infrastructure and the youth service's electronic infrastructure only. This was in order to test the openness of the electronic infrastructure for future consultation via these formalised e-mail networks.

The team set out to make an electronic call for participation. The objectives in developing the invitation to participate were:

- The language is as direct and simple as possible.
- The language to be cheerful and inviting.
- A form of direct address be used which would be all-inclusive in its remit
- That the poster be colourful and artistically engaging the youthful eye
- That a non-competitive reward be offered to encourage participation.
- That a wide variety of modes of participation were offered, so that everyone regardless of their literacy abilities could choose a mode that suited them, providing it was electronic.

See Figure 9.2.1 for the invitation to participate.

The trial tools consisted of:

- (a) *An on-line survey.*

The diversity objectives of the on-line survey were to measure the perceptions of young people living in the North and South of Ireland on:

- Their education and/or training on diversity;
- Their interest in other cultures
- Their interest in politics
- Their participation in human rights based activities

- Their feelings on encountering diversity
- Their actions in relation to diversity

(b) *An on-line exhibition of true stories of encounters with diversity;*

The diversity objectives of the on-line exhibition were to:

- To gather stories of real encounters with diversity and exhibit them to the general public
- To discover what had been learned by the young person in that situation.
- To offer the young person the opportunity to tell of their experience
- To offer the young person the opportunity to share their experience
- To offer the young person the opportunity to read of others experiences
- To offer the participant the opportunity to reflect and evaluate their experience and understanding of diversity
- To offer the young person the opportunity to creatively account from their everyday life experiences on issues

And time allowing

(c) *An on-line discussion forum.* This would invite participation from teachers and/or policy-makers on the findings of the survey and on the true stories generated.

The team designed the on-line survey using free software called PHP Surveyor. They designed the poster exhibition using Wordpress blog software. The relevant bodies addressing diversity such as Integrating Ireland, Youth Forum, and NCCRI etc. were e-mailed. We asked for feedback on the content and help with the process of disseminating the call through their electronic channels. All agreed to support the process and to e-advertise the invitation. On receipt of comments on the call to participate we then sent out the letters of invitation to participate through the registered e-mail school and youth service addresses. These were sent to the schools and youth centre's registered e-mail addresses and a reminder was sent out one week later to maximise numbers going on-line.

Some problems emerged immediately, that is, within the first two days.

- Firstly, while the relevant government departments North and South had lists of e-mail addresses for all schools, we quickly found that not all of these were live addresses. In the Southern constituency 725 mails were sent and 520 got through to addresses. Wrong addresses and incomplete addresses accounted for 205. This would indicate that almost one third of the Southern school's registered e-mail addresses are not satisfactorily e-workable. In the Northern constituency the set of addresses worked much better.
- Second, it became clear that, of the disappointing number that did arrive at an e-mail destination, not all of the schools used their e-mail addresses as the regular mode of communication. This meant that many of the e-mails may have remained unopened, many may not have gone further than the secretary's desk, and many may not have moved out from the principle's e-mail box to the teachers in any form whatever.
- Third, the trial was been carried out in the run-up to Easter holidays, and the school schedule was most likely filled up with examination work for all years, so participating in such an exercise may not have been possible.
- On the purely technical front, in the Southern constituency teachers could not go on line to fill in surveys because of Fortinet security protocols on school addresses. Fortinet's web filtering software, used by the Department of Education and Science on their free broadband service to schools, was blocking our web page. Fortinet had not classified our web page as an acceptable address and the team had to have the site reclassified. We had to apply to become an accredited website, but when we did so activity began on the website.

Encounters of Diversity from the young people in Ireland and N. Ireland

What is Diversity?

Diversity concerns difference. Diversity has always existed in our society, there have always been people of different ages, abilities, religious beliefs, cultures etc but in recent times our society has become more and more diverse. We want to know about young people's experiences of diversity good and bad.

We would like you to tell us in your own words about an encounter with diversity that you have had and what you learned, if anything, from the experience.

Examples of Diversity

- Cultural/Religious diversity
- Age/Ability/Disability diversity
- What you think of as diversity



About us

We are a team of researchers, funded by the North South Programme for Peace and Reconciliation Fund, who are looking into ways of using new technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones to help citizens participate in public policy discussions and debates.

We believe that using new technologies creatively can help citizens to get involved and this in turn, helps policy makers keep informed of what the public thinks about important issues.

Online Exhibition

We will create an online exhibition of the stories, poems, pictures etc on diversity and we will present the findings from the questionnaire on our website.

We will then ask key policy makers and educators to visit the online exhibition and comment on the experiences that you, the young people, have demonstrated.

It will help to generate debate and inform policy makers and educators on the issue of diversity as young people living in Ireland and Northern Ireland encounter it.



Participate

Email: diversity@e-consultation.org

Email your diversity story, letter, poem, picture, photograph, or piece of artwork.

Online Submission at
<http://diversity.e-consultation.org/participate>

Multi-media Message (MMS)
Send MMS to diversity@e-consultation.org

Take part in survey
<http://diversity.e-consultation.org/onlineurvey.php>

Text/SMS to +353-86-220-7019

Visit at <http://diversity.e-consultation.org/>

Spot prizes for Students!

We value everyone's contribution, however a number of spot prizes will be given out to randomly selected entries to 'reward' you for your 'effort', 'cooperation' and 'participation' and your entry to the exhibition may appear on the exhibition webpage.

Contact us:

Dr. G. Honor Fagan, NUI, Maynooth (01-7086157)

Figure 9.2.1. Invitation to participate in diversity exhibition.

9.2.3 Experience of the consultees

There was a strong sense from the post trial interviews that the young people enjoyed the engagement and in the main had no problem with it. One teacher who took their students through the exercise said 'the students enjoyed it because it was different, a change from the usual computer class where they would just look at Word or spreadsheets'. The same teacher said 'They enjoyed thinking for themselves and feeling that their opinions were valued by an unknown third party'. From the teachers' point of view it was a positive experience because the students:

- a) had practice at completing an on-line survey,
- b) had actively communicated using a computer, and
- c) had been provided with an opportunity to reflect on our changing society.

136

Outside the formality of the classroom how did young people get on with the exercise? One youth worker, interviewed by the team, working informally with a group stated that ‘To be honest they wouldn’t tell you if they enjoyed it or not! They had no difficulty doing it once they were asked’. The particular group she had taken through the consultation fit into the social category of ‘disadvantaged’. The youth worker reported ‘that they were able to work the computers themselves, and they seemed enthusiastic enough! I would have no problems asking other young people to fill in the questionnaire’.

On the other hand, on the technical side, there were some difficulties, some which were overcome and some that weren’t possible to overcome. The following are some examples of reported difficulties:

Some had difficulty if their typing skills weren’t great or if they were not too familiar with computer. They were 1st years, mixed ability, from the very able to the very weak.

They all put in the web address under their own steam, but it was quite long for them and some needed two or three attempts to get it in.

Many had problems with downloading the survey to their screens—at the time the school did not have broadband.

Due to the problems with downloading (or in some instances crashing when most of the way through the exercise) a number of students did not get to complete it in the class time of 35 minutes (down to 30 after allowing for room changes)

Outside the formality of the classroom how did young people get on with the exercise? The only way we had to access this information was to interview youth workers who had sat with people filling it out. One youth worker, interviewed by the team, working informally with a group stated that ‘To be honest they wouldn’t tell you if they enjoyed it or not! They had no difficulty doing it once they were asked’. The particular group she had taken through the consultation fit into the social category of ‘disadvantaged’. The youth worker reported ‘that they were able to work the computers themselves, and they seemed enthusiastic enough! I would have no problems asking other young people to fill in the questionnaire’.

9.2.4 Consultation data generated

There were two types of data generated on diversity in this e-consultation test. The first type was that generated from the survey. In the three weeks this survey was on-line eight-six responses were recorded. Participants were asked where they had learned about diversity, specifically if they had learned about conflict resolution, racism or sectarianism in school. 63% had learned about conflict resolution, and 65% had learned about sectarianism, but only 21% reported learning about racism in school. They were questioned on their interests, and in relation to diversity 79% reported being interested in other cultures. Interestingly, given that it is often assumed that young people are not interested in politics, the survey results show 41% declaring themselves ‘very interested’, or ‘interested’, in politics. What had the young people done in relation to problems of diversity? About 40% had taken part in some human rights based activities developed through schools. 55% had not encountered a refugee in the recent past, but 40% frequently spoke to someone from a different religion. 93% had at some stage spoken up about a person being treated badly, but 18% would not feel confident to speak out if they thought someone was being mistreated. One wonders how these statistics would compare to adults figures? Participants were then questioned on their feelings on encountering diversity. 39% would not feel confident when talking to someone whose English is not good, but 71% would feel confident when talking to someone from a different religion. Overall this survey acted as a litmus test for how young people were being taught about diversity and conflict, and how they felt about diversity, and what actions they had taken or would like to take when difficulties were encountered dealing with difference.

The second type of data, could be considered, not so much as data, but as participative knowledge inputted to a debate on diversity. Since many of these are artistic pieces of work, they are on exhibit on an ‘Encounters of Diversity—True Stories’ web page. Overall they give

a sense of the different meanings diversity holds for young people. How to reach beyond differences was the theme of much of the artwork developed on the site. Can artwork make a contribution to a discussion? Of course it can make an extremely valuable contribution. See the impact of the samples on the site.

Interestingly most of the young people's true stories on encounters with diversity came from their encounters with other cultures while holidaying abroad or visiting the Gaelteacht, or very rural Ireland. So encounters with diversity in the main were interpreted as non-threatening cultural experiences wherein the young person expressed a sense of wonder and happiness with the differences they encountered. One key exception there was an entry from a young person from the Southern constituency who noticed that police forces elsewhere carried guns openly. 'Weapons are designed to kill people and I think Ireland's way of security is a lot better than places such as France or Spain, etc. There are many other ways of protection they can use but I think the chose the wrong way by resorting to violence'.

9.2.5 Outcomes from the Test

9.2.5.1 Technology/Usability

After initially setting up the website to be used as part of the consultation, researchers gave various key organisations working on diversity, youth, and education an opportunity to give feedback on the proposed trial, its content, the site and its usability. These views were collected and appropriate adjustments were made. In general, the view was that the potential for e-technology was very positive and there was considerable excitement about the initiative from all who were contacted. It was only in the first days of running the trial the initial problems with the e-mail addresses and the blocking of the site mentioned earlier became apparent.

9.2.5.2 Issues of Participation

From an early stage in planning and designing the e-consultation, the researchers were at pains to specifically test what level of participation could be achieved by using e-technologies only. It became apparent very quickly that while the infrastructure has been put in place, it is only in place at a superficial level. There is relatively little use made of e-mail addresses and many were no longer active. In addition there was very little activity emerging from those e-mail points of contact and there is much to be done in this particular mode of communication to increase usership. Resources at school level may well be a huge issue. The security protection and the lack of broadband access created technological problems.

On the more positive side the site was easily accessible to young people regardless of their level of disadvantage. It was accessed by people from different national origins, from different class backgrounds, different religious backgrounds and from different racial backgrounds. Worthwhile information was easily and readily generated through the survey, and fascinating, creative and helpful accounts were given on encounters with diversity. The tools used opened access to all youths, and the forms the discussions took generated new ways of directly communicating views and hearing those of others on the subject of diversity. These accounts, both creative and factual, can later form the basis of , or discussion points, for educators and policy makers alike.

9.3 Consulting youth: Ph.D. research with NI Youth Forum

This research programme has sponsored a research student, Michele Smyth, to undertake Ph.D. research in the field of e-consultation. Her chosen topic is 'Exploring Capacity for E-enabled Youth Participation in Public Consultation'.

The research aims to explore the capacity for e-enabling appropriate aspects of youth participation in public consultation within existing structures in Northern Ireland. Various stakeholder perspectives will be interpreted with a view to developing an on-line resource that has the potential to reach a wider catchment of young people than current practice will allow.

Using an action research approach, this study through collaboration with appropriate stakeholders, will explore the appropriateness of e-enabled resources to engage young people in public consultation through a process of development and evaluation. Ultimately, with a view to examining the potential of the resources developed, for providing experiential learning opportunities of citizenship and its related themes within the classroom setting.

9.3.1 Research Rationale

Young people have been socialised away from the 'collective' by a culture of 'individualism'. The prediction for the future is that of a crisis in representative democracy with numbers participating at the polls declining.

As a result, Government are trying to reinvigorate (future) public interest through citizenship education and public bodies are beginning to raise questions as to how young people can be included in participative processes such as consultation and decision making on civic issues.

This move toward including young people in the participative process has been further compounded by recent legislative change such as; The UN Convention on The Rights of the Child (1990) and in Northern Ireland, the equality requirements under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (2000).

At present, there is evidence to suggest that a number of agencies in Northern Ireland, both statutory and voluntary are working independently of each other to address gaps in provision.

Citizenship education in Northern Ireland is at a developmental stage. Research has raised questions as to what are appropriate ways to address the unique requirements of delivering such a programme and the challenges it presents (Faulks 2005).

The delivery of citizenship education in the classroom setting is problematic due to the political nature of its attributed themes. Presenting material in an unbiased fashion, that is not seen as patronising to young people is proving a challenge. Criticisms of current practice also indicate a failing to provide a 'real' experiential learning of citizenship and its related themes. Furthermore, it has been argued that the psychological impact of the culturally embedded authoritarianism of the classroom does not lend itself to the ethos of citizenship;

"No talking....sit down and be quiet....today we're going to learn about democracy" (Delegate at Citizenship Education Conference, QUB, May 2005)

Whilst the classroom setting can provide the benefits of an inclusive and captive audience of young people, it is reasonable to argue that the value laden experience of the pupil / teacher relationship (combined with the potential for controversy in light of the impact of individual personal ideological perspectives) does not lend itself to themes of democracy such as, equality and freedom of speech.

Research is currently being undertaken to at the UNESCO Centre, University of Ulster, Magee to explore options for the appropriate training and delivery of citizenship education as part of the new curriculum (Smith & McCully 2005). One of the questions raised is whether outside agencies should be involved in its delivery.

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) is a key agency in current youth participation activity. For over 25 years the forum has been a central force in developing mechanisms for enabling youth participation across Northern Ireland. Working with the 14 – 25 age group, they currently deliver a number of programmes that characteristically incorporate innovative techniques and a high level of interactivity among the young people involved. These programmes are delivered in various 'real world' settings such as youth clubs.

Through discussions with NIYF, a shared research interest in e-enabled approaches to consultation and their potential capacity to enrich current youth consultation activities has been established and access has been negotiated to conduct a programme of research.

This research aims to explore the capacity of e-enabled consultation mechanisms to meet the perceived needs of all stakeholders. This will be achieved by working closely with a team of practitioners and young people in the development and continuous review of an e-enabled youth participation initiative - towards an on-line model of practice that could potentially be provided by NIYF for schools to use as a citizenship education resource.

In the context of this research, stakeholders include; young people, statutory consulting agencies and intermediaries. Intermediaries include, providers from both the formal and informal education sector.

The intention is to explore which capabilities of ICTs are most applicable to the activities of youth consultation and analyse whether they could create a participation environment that would be embraced and advocated by all stakeholders. This will be achieved through an action research approach.

This research is concerned with three related areas of inquiry; preliminary investigation has indicated deficits in practices of youth participation in terms of the scope of its reach, citizenship education has been criticised in terms of its capacity to instil the associated values of such in the absence of 'experiential' learning. It has emerged that ICTs may have the inherent properties that can facilitate the necessary communications for young people's participation in public consultation.

The aims of this research are multiple and intertwined. Firstly, it is aimed at understanding the behaviour of practitioners and participants in youth participation and the meaning of that behaviour in this specific social context. Whilst at the same time gaining a temporal appreciation of the social phenomena and the interactions concerned, qualitative considerations according to Bryman (2001) This aspect of the research is centred around the ways in which youth participation processes operate, what they mean to practitioners and participants, identification of limitations within the current practice environment and possible opportunities for as well as constraints on, development.

Secondly, it seeks to explore the capacity of appropriated ICTs to provide a platform for the extension of youth participation in public consultation (and possibly other participation activities) through the collaborative design of an online youth participation facility that will serve as an experiential learning tool. It is envisaged that the system will provide access to live consultations including; related information in accessible formats and appropriately structured means of participation. The overarching aim is to develop a model that could be offered by NIYF with support, for use in Citizenship classes, although wider adoption outside the classroom will also be encouraged.

Therefore, the research is concerned not just with an investigation into the social phenomena that is youth participation. It proposes that intervention in the form of e-enabled consultation mechanisms should be explored in order to establish the capacity of these technologies to provide potential solutions to the problems inherent in current practice.

This exploration gives consideration to stakeholders on three levels; the young people participating, the statutory bodies that are required to consult young people and those involved in the delivery of citizenship education. Interpretations of the stakeholder requirements by the researcher will be mediated by NIYF in the first instance and confirmed by the stakeholder group where deemed necessary.

After a period of interpreting the current situation and its social context, change will be introduced, in collaborative agreement with all stakeholders, in the form of an e-enabled youth consultation process. The appropriateness as well as effects of this change will then be observed and reviewed as deemed appropriate.

It is proposed that an action research approach will provide the appropriate strategy to effectively explore the capacity of ICTs to enhance experiences of and opportunities for youth participation in public consultation. This exploration will give due consideration to the specific

context within which consultation activity with young people takes place, the actors involved and the resources available, with a view to developing a model of practice that is practically applicable, sustainable and ethical whilst at the same time accepted and embraced by all stakeholders.

This research is ongoing with final thesis submission expected in September 2007.

Chapter 10. Summary and conclusions

This report is based on data collected in the following research situations.

- All 12 NI central/regional government departments completed surveys.
- 25 RoI central government departments completed surveys.
- 42 out of 60 local authorities, north and south completed surveys.
- 81 respondents from the community and voluntary sectors completed surveys.
- 7 focus groups of consultees.
- 7 technology demonstrations followed by discussions involving consulters and consultees.
- Interviewing, working with, and observing 3 trial partners organising consultation processes.
- E-consultation trials and tests where anonymous participants engaged with the consultation process in such modes as: story-tellers on active citizenship (wheel.e-consultation.org); story-tellers and artists on diversity (diversity.e-consultation.org); and voters and survey respondents on north/south educational exchange programmes.

10.1 Consultation and e-consultation context

The social and political context of e-consultation is the shift from Government to multi-levelled governance, which has been taking place over the past twenty years. In this, the era of global networked powered economy, the benefits of using ICT to facilitate this shift have developed rapidly. Initially ICT were used in a context of e-government, which involved using ICT to assist in improving accessibility, quality and cost-effectiveness of public services, which can be described as the development of transactional government.

More recently the EU has highlighted the quality of democracy and the need to increase citizen's participation. Concurrently this has required a shift in e-Government policy from being technology-driven towards being citizen-driven. The call for participation of citizens in the formulation of public policy has resulted in consultation processes now being a requirement of policy making in Ireland, North and South. Consultation processes are seen as a central component of citizen-driven democracy and engaging ICT to support this development is seen as an urgent requirement.

10.2 Technologies

We have developed, tested and refined a way of classifying electronic communications technologies to meet the needs of public consultation. It identified technologies that can support the different kinds of communication activities in an organisational learning process, in which consulters (the apprentices) learn from consultees (the masters):

1. Defining the problem
2. Exploring the problem
3. Choosing and developing solutions, and
4. Managing the consultation process.

This is detailed in part of an on-line guide to e-consultation we are constructing at <http://www.e-consultation.org/guide> .

10.3 Valuing consultation and evaluating e-consultation

If we want to evaluate how well ICTs can make consultations better, we need to agree on what is a 'better' consultation. But people do not agree on what makes a consultation better. In our

surveys and focus groups, we found contrasting values and expectations of consultation, between civil servants running a consultation (who want citizens views, but do not, usually, want citizens to participate in decision-making) and the community and voluntary groups who respond to consultations.

In trying to find theories to evaluate what makes a consultation 'better' we have found similar conflicts between theoretical perspectives. E.g., researchers in public sector management and theorists of deliberative democracy make different assumptions and pay attention to different issues. There exists no theoretical synthesis between their theories, or between them and other relevant disciplines, such as Computer Supported Co-operative Work, Computer Mediated Communications or Information Systems.

We have run several theory-building workshops to try and find some synthesis between theories, but we are not there yet. In its absence, we have taken an empirical and interpretivist approach to our research, trying to better understand consultation and e-consultation.

10.4 Consultation and local government

Public consultation is used extensively both north and south of the border at local government level. It is viewed by local government as overwhelmingly positive in improving service delivery and gaining knowledge of citizens' views on policy matters. The top three benefits from public consultation were seen to be better policy-making (selected by 82%), improvement in services (selected by 64%) and greater citizen awareness (53.6%). Fewer selected (43%) encouraging citizen participation as a benefit in itself. In addition it was felt that new and more inclusive consultation processes had given local communities a sense of ownership over policies and plans. 89% of authorities in the North and 65% in the South felt consultation in general had no negative effects whatsoever. There is a clear preference for traditional consultation techniques such as public meetings, consultation documents, service satisfaction surveys and co-option/committee involvement.

Subtle differences, as opposed to significant differences, exist north and south of the border in relation to local authorities approach to public consultations. However, one significant difference is that the Northern authorities place far more importance on the influence of equality legislation and on peace and reconciliation, with 90% of N.I authorities citing it as important, compared to 11% of Southern authorities.

10.6 Consultation and central government

The overall view is that public consultation has a positive impact on policy and decision-making. It is seen as an extremely valuable tool in improving the quality of services and is perceived as a way of including the views of the public in policy formulation. Empowering communities or encouraging citizens is seen as of lesser importance, although 67% of respondents from Northern Ireland saw encouraging citizens as an important benefit, compared to 24% in the Republic. There exists a view that consultation should happen at the 'analysis' and 'formulation' stage of the policy making, and at the 'monitoring' stage, which would come after implementation. However, the reality is that 57% of the respondents do not have feedback/review structures in place currently. There is a tendency by government to view consultation as a way of gaining knowledge of citizen's views rather than encouraging active participation in decision-making. This indicates that 'participation' by citizens in public consultation does not necessarily include 'participation' in actual decision-making but rather simply 'participation' in the decision-making process.

Traditional techniques remain largely the norm, with very limited use of e-techniques. There is some evidence to suggest that e-techniques are used more often in the South than in the North, and that a greater diversity of techniques has been deployed. Respondents were keen to state that e-consultation is at an embryonic stage of development and should, and could, never replace the more face-to-face traditional methods of consultation.

There are differences in the views on the main purposes of public consultation between North and South. Meeting equality legislation requirements is a key factor in the Northern Ireland calculations (66% indicated this as 'essential', as opposed to 29% in the Southern government). Gaining information on citizen's views scores relatively highly in the North, with 38% seeing this as essential (compared to 24% in the South), and encouraging citizen participation in decision-making is viewed as very important by 59% of respondents in the Northern central government (compared to 24% in the South). The use of feedback mechanisms featured slightly higher in the Northern jurisdiction, than in the Southern one (57% in the North and 37% in the South). In addition to this, a majority of Northern respondents thought that running consultations had some negative effects on the workings of their Departments (67% compared to 11% in the Republic), particularly on the question of resources needed. Lastly there are no groups that are excluded from consultation processes in the North, while 10% of respondents in the Republic thought that they had indeed failed to reach certain groups in their consultation processes.

10.5 Consultation and the voluntary and community sector

Overall, the community and voluntary sector are unhappy with consultation processes as they have been carried out to date. Resource issues, the degree of participation experienced, and the lack of feedback are key areas of discontent. There is, however, strong enthusiasm for participation more broadly and for further developing modes of participation. It was felt that new technologies could support and improve consultation processes in the future.

Almost all (96%) of the groups who responded to the survey had been involved in public consultation processes. By far the three most used techniques were traditional (83% had experienced the use of consultation documents, 75% public meetings and 62% focus groups). On e-technologies, 35% had encountered comment websites, and 30% had encountered mailing lists, but e-techniques were far from favoured. The highest favoured e-technology, the document/policy website, lay seventh in order of preference of consultation techniques in general.

Fully 91% of those who became involved in consultation processes had become involved through direct invitation. Only 50% indicated that the processes they had been involved in had in fact promoted peace and reconciliation. Best practice is seen to involve 'clarity of information' for most of the groups surveyed.

This sector unsurprisingly identified additional manpower (70%), and additional finance (62%) as requirements for making their involvement in consultation more effective. In terms of difficulties encountered in consultation, this sector felt that the most difficult thing was that they did not influence policy or that their influence was marginal. The key concern is to what extent engagement in consultation translates into policy outcomes and over 50% feel that consultation as they experienced it could not be viewed as a two-way process.

When comparing the focus group data from local government and central government and this sector, there are notable differences in attitudes to and expectations of consultation from this sector. We found some very positive responses. But behind the positive attitudes, is a difference in expectations. Consulters recognize the possible existence of consultation fatigue among the respondents, but do not rate it highly. Whereas our focus group participants from the community and voluntary sector complained strongly of the burden they faced reading long consultation documents, and taking time out from their other activities to respond. Consultees expect, if not involvement in decision-making, at least some impact on decision-making, recognized in feedback to the consultees. Its absence has led to frustration.

10.8 Trials

There are key areas in which it is possible to improve citizens' participation in consultation processes, and in particular key e-technologies that can support and advance citizen's

participation. In most cases the e-consultation will not meet all the requirements of knowledge transfer from every target group of participants, so they will be used to complement traditional methods. Adding technology to a traditional design does not work. You need to co-design the consultation process and the e-consultation technologies.

In each of the trials a lot was learned about the institutional constraints to the design and organisation of consultations, and how that impacts on e-consultation components. It is one of the research teams richest learning experiences during this project. It became clear that it is not a case of picking technologies, but designing a consultation process to make optimum use of technologies to engage participants and collect the right kind of knowledge that the consulters need to learn from the consultees.

Overall the technologies proved easier to apply, use and engage than had been anticipated, but the consultation process was far more complex than expected, in particular with regard to the levels and manner of promotion employed to ensure citizen participation. Areas for improvement included technical issues (design and usability), resources (personnel and financial), publicity, and pre-consultation research.

10.9 Tests

We set about testing some specific issues that had arisen during the trials. Initial tests indicate that it is possible to design e-consultation technologies and processes that can be used by those with literacy difficulties. Using map-based technology we can improve accessibility and usability for those with lower literacy levels.

Tests also indicate that a range of technologies can be used to get creative input from groups who do not normally respond to consultations. Integrating technologies in innovative consultation processes shows promise, and could be combined with other techniques to, for example, take children, teachers and administrators through a full problem-solving cycle.

Action research is under way, as part of a Ph.D., to thoroughly explore the effects of introducing e-consultation technologies on young people engaged in consultation activities.

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Chapter 11. Appendices

11.1 NSEC trial

Voting Results by Question

Session Name: NSEC Launch 30.11.2005 12.53.tpz

Created: 02/12/2005 10:44

1. Do you believe in Santa Claus?

	(percent)	(count)
Yes	64.06%	41
No	35.94%	23
Totals	100%	64

2. How many different youth or school exchange and co-operation programmes do you know about?

	(percent)	(count)
None	2.99%	2
1-4	26.87%	18
5-9	23.88%	16
10-14	20.90%	14
15-19	10.45%	7
20+	14.93%	10
Totals	100%	67

3. ~80% of funding is restricted to Northern Ireland and the six border counties. Should this change?

	(percent)	(count)
More to NI and the borders	9.09%	6
Stay the same	19.70%	13
More to the non-border counties	71.21%	47
Totals	100%	66

4. Currently 1% of all expenditure on exchanges goes to east west work. Do you think this should be increased?

	(percent)	(count)
Yes, to 5%	23.88%	16
Yes, to 10%	25.37%	17
Yes, to more than 10%	32.84%	22
No, stay the same, at 1%	17.91%	12
Totals	100%	67

5. In which age group should funding be concentrated?

	(percent)	(count)
5-9	6.56%	4
10-14	40.98%	25
15-19	39.34%	24
20+	13.11%	8
Totals	100%	61

6. What percentage of available funding should be reserved for socially excluded groups?

	(percent)	(count)
None	4.69%	3
Up to 25%	37.50%	24
Up to 50%	39.06%	25
Up to 75%	17.19%	11
100%	1.56%	1
Totals	100%	64

Figure 11.1.1. PRS voting trial results at the NSEC launch

11.2 PSNI usability tests

11.2.1 The test protocol

At each session we did the following.

1. Welcome the testers and explain what the session is about (using the introduction script in Appendix 2).
 - Get the tester to fill in the form with questions on his/her experience of IT (Appendix 3). S/he must use the same nickname throughout the test.
 - Hand out the help sheet illustrating the map (Appendix 8) and show the map in a web browser. Get the tester to run through the series of tasks listed on the sheet (Appendix 4), from getting used to the interface, to entering his or her comments about the alternative offices.
 - Get the tester to fill in our questionnaire on his/her opinions on consultation via a map. (Appendix 5)
 - Get the tester to spend no more than 15 min. filling in the conventional paper questionnaire as send out by PBNI. S/he doesn't need to finish this questionnaire.
 - Get the tester to fill in our questionnaire on 5.
 - If there are a group of people doing the task at the same time, ask them to say what they thought was good or bad about either approach, the map or the questionnaire, and how they might be improved. (Appendix 6)

11.2.1.1 Support at each stage

Some of the testers will need help with some of the tasks. But as we want to record all the difficulties people have using either interface, we shouldn't intervene too soon.

2. Before each task, remind them that they are testing the software or questionnaire, they are the examiners. Ask them to mention any problems they have, and to ask for help when they get stuck.
 - When they ask for help, ask them what the problem is, explain what they have to do, and make a note of the problem and the help you gave on the back of the questionnaire that they will complete after the task.
 - If they do not ask for help, but appear to have been stuck for 5 min. or more, ask if they have a problem. If yes, do 2.
 - When explaining how to interface with the map, don't grab the keyboard and mouse to show them, unless all else fails. It is better if they continue to try to interact with the map.
 - If you have to complete the PBNI questionnaire for them, writing what they tell you, make a note of that fact on the questionnaire.
 - If they can write the answers to the PBNI questionnaire themselves, just answer questions when they say they are stuck. The answer should explain what the words and sentences mean, rather than discussing what their answers should be. Make a note against the question if you have to explain what it says, or how to fill it in.

11.2.1.2 Collecting the data

3. For each tester, there should be 4 questionnaires completed, all with the same nickname: the initial questionnaire, the one after testing the map interface, the PBNI questionnaire, and our questionnaire after they did that. Keep them together; we will pick them up later.

- There will also be comments on the map. When adding a comment, each tester will use their chosen nickname. Leave the comments until the end of the day, when Ashish or Yan can copy them and then delete the comments from the map, leaving it blank for the next day.

11.2.2 Introductory remarks

At the beginning, Ashish Italiya explained what the session was about. He stressed how the participants were here to test the software, not to be tested themselves. He used this script:

My name is Ashish. I work at Queen's University Belfast on an e-consultation research project. We are looking at ways to use computers and telecommunications to help in public consultation.

The Probation Board of Northern Ireland runs public consultations from time to time. So far they have only used traditional means, such as public meetings and consultation documents. They have asked us to see if there are other ways of carrying out consultations.

Today we want you to help us test some software. You are going to compare leaving comments on a computer-based map with a conventional questionnaire. WE are not testing YOU: YOU will be testing the software. YOU are the examiners, assessing how easy or hard it is to use.

Some of you might have heard of Google Maps. The software we are using today lets you look at places on the map, and leave comments about them. We have set up a map of the locations of the current probation offices and reporting centres. PBNI want to merge some of these offices, to set up fewer, but bigger, centres. Let's see how easy (or hard) it is to use the computer maps to say what you think of this.

Then after you have tried using the software, you will have a go at the conventional questionnaire. At the end, you can tell us which you prefer, the computer map or the questionnaire and why.

Remember, we are not interested in your skills, how good you are with computers. We are interested in finding out what works and what doesn't in the software. If a computer application is hard to use, that is the fault of the programmer, not the user.

11.2.3 Pre-test survey

This is the questionnaire people filled in before doing the test. Those who had difficulties reading writing were helped by a research assistant, who read out the questions and filled in their answers.

Pre-Demonstration Questionnaire	
This is pre demonstration questionnaire before taking part in research.	
* QA_01: Your name	Please write your answer here:
* QA_02: Age Range:	Please choose only one of the following: 18-30 31-45 46-60 60+
* QA_03: Have you any experience of taking part in consultation?	Please choose only one of the following: Yes No
* QA_05: Computer experience	Please choose only one of the following: Very frequent user (every day) Regular user (at least once a week) Infrequent User (less than once a month)
* QA_06: How often do you use the Internet?	

Please choose **only one** of the following:
 Very frequent user (every day)
 Regular user (at least once a week)
 Infrequent User (less than once a month)
 No access to internet

[Skip this question if you answered 'No Access to internet' to question 'QA_06 ']

QA_07: What do you use the Internet for?

Please write your answer here:

*** QA_08: Have you ever take part in on-line consultation before?**

Please choose **only one** of the following:
 Yes
 No

Submit Your Survey.

Thank you for completing this survey. Please fax your completed survey to: +44 28 9097 5156 by 2006-04-30.

11.2.4 Usability tasks

These were the instructions given to people testing the interface.

Please tell us if you need any help when exploring PBNI demonstration website. At any stage you can return to the demonstration website home page by clicking on the "HOME" button in browser.

Task 1: Explore the PBNI e-consultation website.

- a) Go to "Home Page"
- b) Get familiar with map navigation.
- c) Zoom in/out and move around the map. Explore the Belfast city area.
- d) Locate PBNI Head quarter in Belfast city centre (North Street).

Task 2: Find your probation office or reporting centre on the map.

- a) Go to "Home Page"
- b) Close all places on the map by clicking on "-" icon under Northern Ireland in right panel.
- c) Find your office or centre on the map.
- d) Open office/reporting centre place details by clicking on the place marker on the map.
- e) Add your comment on what would you most like/dislike about this place.

Task 3: Find the all offices or reporting centres you have been to, and add comments on each place.

- a) Go to "Home Page"
- b) Close all places on the map by clicking on "-" icon under Northern Ireland in right panel.
- c) Find an office or centre you have attended on the map.
- d) Open office/reporting center place details by clicking on a place marker on the map.
- e) Tell us the advantages and disadvantages of this place by adding your comments.

You may like to tell us about:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| ● Service provided in the centre. | ● Facilities in the office. |
| ● Local transport to the centre. | ● Place in NI. |
| ● Distance from the courts. | ● Community perception of the place. |
| ● Distance you have to travel. | ● Your safety. |
| ● Available car parking. | ● Public safety. |
| ● Accessibility of the building. | ● Crime trends in the area. |

Task 4: Find your new office and reporting centre, and comment on how it would affect you.

- a) Go to "Home Page"
- b) Close all place on the map by clicking on "-" icon under Northern Ireland in right panel.
- c) Find the place of your new PBNI office or reporting centre on the map.
- d) Open office/reporting center place details by clicking on place marker on the map.
- e) Add your comments about the new place, based on what is most important to you.
 - Are you happy with the new location? If not, why not?
 - What could the PBNI do to overcome any difficulties?

11.2.5 Post-test survey

This is the questionnaire people filled in after completing the test. Those who had difficulties reading writing were helped by a research assistant, who read out the questions and filled in their answers.

Post-Demonstration Questionnaire					
Post-Demonstration Questionnaire after the completion of tasks.					
* QA_00: Overall reaction to the website					
Please choose the appropriate response for each item:					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I think I would like to use this website frequently.					
I found the website unnecessarily complex.					
I thought the website was easy to use.					
I think I would need technical support to be able to use this website.					
I found the various functions in this website were well integrated.					
I thought there was too much inconsistency in this website.					
I would imagine that most people would learn to use this website very quickly.					
I found the website very cumbersome to use.					
I felt very confident using the website.					
I need to learn a lot about this website before i could effectively use it.					
It is easy to find the information I need.					
The information provided by the website is easy to understand.					
The information is effective in helping me complete the tasks.					
The organization of information on the website pages is clear.					
Overall, I am satisfied with this website.					
Submit Your Survey.					
Thank you for completing this survey. Please fax your completed survey to: +44 28 9097 5156 by 2006-04-12.					

11.2.6 Final open discussion

After completing the tasks and questionnaires, the participants were invited to discuss their experiences in trying to use a map or a paper questionnaire to comment on a consultation. They were prompted with the following questions:

Now that you have completed all the tasks, please give us your opinions.

How did you feel about your performance on the tasks overall?

What would you say was the best thing about this website?

What would you say the worst thing about this website?

What do you think of visual design of home page? Navigation? colour?

Describe your experience of posting your comment on location. Describe what happened.

What do you think of geographical map for locations in estate review consultation?

Tell me about what happened when [problem]?

11.2.7 Sample comments

Here are some of the comments testers placed on the map.

Alderwood House (ISU)
There is car parking, and bus and shopping. I feel safe to go to office. There is good services offer in office. Some community perception and people might not go over there.—P

Belfast court (Headquarter)
They would be affected by bus strick. They would try to find another way to visit a location—P
It is just convienet to people living in belfast to go to both courts beside center.—P

Ormeau Road
There is no disadvantage to this office, staff are very helpful, safe room to speack to probation office.—P
IT is parking for people, easy for bues and shops.—P

Shankill Road
The marker wasnt near the location. i live on this road and i got a bit confused finding it on the map. The marker should be on the location.—S

Lisburn Office
found the location i needed. needs no improvements.—S

Newtownards
there needs to be more improvement on the map details. if i was really looking for the location i wouldnt get any where because its confusing.—S