

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital Dialogues is an independent review of ways in which central government can use new technologies to promote public engagement and democratic renewal. It has been commissioned by the Ministry of Justice and carried out by the Hansard Society.

This third and final phase has focused, where possible, on multi-platform approaches to online engagement or on sustained approaches to computer mediated deliberation; the intention has been to keep pace with changes to broader internet usage. Previous phases have included 18 case studies and this report adds a further seven, whose intended scope and nature are summarised below:

CASE STUDY	PLATFORMS USED	ENGAGEMENT STYLE	TARGET USERS
Office of Children's Commissioner (OCC)	Social Networking site and Blog	Listening	Members of the public (children)
Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)	Blog with social networking and file sharing channels	Informing/networking	Members of the public (older people)
Office of National Statistics (ONS)	Blog, wiki and forum	Deliberating; developing a community of practice	Members of the public (blog) and stakeholders (wiki and private forum)
Office of the Prime Minister (10 Downing Street)	Debate Mapping technology	Deliberating	Key stakeholders (journalists and academics)
Food Standards Agency (FSA)	Blog	Informing	Members of the public
Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)	Suite of Blogs	Informing	Members of the public and key stakeholders
Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)	Panel	Listening	Experts

Our research shows that online engagement exercises with clear objectives have fared better than those with undefined goals. Websites that combine careful planning and appropriate marketing with the development of reflexive engagement strategies have a greater chance of success. In such cases, policy leads have benefited from user input with government departments seeing enhanced public trust and receiving positive feedback from stakeholders. In turn, end-users report more faith in the political process and better understanding of government.

In a pattern familiar to anyone involved in online discussions, many visitors to government engagement sites do not contribute directly to discussions – instead preferring to read other people's posts. This means that site moderators were not required to manage as large a volume of traffic as many had initially feared they might. A key part of their role was to generate interest by providing content, encouraging posts, managing responses and giving feedback about the policy process – as much facilitation as moderation.

Successful online engagement exercises stimulate high quality interactions: in such cases, moderators provide guidance to participants and invite reasoned input – quality rather than quantity of posts is valued and timely interventions (such as summaries and debate triggers for users) to keep discussion flowing are valued. Simply by explaining how user comments are being processed (or how the public can take part in the policy process) engenders high levels of user satisfaction.

Members of the public visited the Digital Dialogues websites for a range of reasons – from general interest in online engagement to a strong interest on the policy matters being discussed. Many had previously not engaged in political processes; even when they had, most were initially critical of government. Such distrust was overcome when moderators facilitated open discussion and provided information to website users.

When government departments were reticent, they courted controversy and disengagement became inevitable. Some websites failed to gain traction (measured through few repeat visits) because users did not believe that anyone was listening or responding to their perspectives; in such cases, departments were paralysed by a sense of 'risk' and failed to harness the range of engagement opportunities at their disposal – responding only on topics deemed 'safe'.

The most successful websites devote resources (time, people and technology) to their online engagement exercise and this makes it possible to satisfy user requirements and provide professional standards of deliberation.

Some online engagement exercises are not designed to have a policy impact; in one such case, a blog set up to inform the public, had sufficiently high level of ministerial and policy team involvement that a user comment was nonetheless able to stimulate a policy review; websites that were disconnected from their policy or ministerial brief, or constrained by a long chain of command, engendered less user satisfaction (both among participants and the government officials running the exercise).

Most participating departments observed – at a minimum – that online engagement provided them with organisational, data handling and transparency tools; those with good marketing strategies (or who achieved media attention) noted that their exercise had led to the broadening out of engagement to people on the periphery of the policy process; those who were able to generate a sustainable community of practice noted that online deliberations allowed them to bridge space and time.

The government departments that benefit the most from online forms of deliberation engage the public (and/or stakeholders) at various stages in the policy process: where government departments were too fixed in their approach, they failed to capitalise on their investment; those with a reflexive and experimental approach were able to adapt to meet the challenges posed by online engagement.

Online engagement speeds up existing process; departments that connect their online and offline processes are more likely to have an integrated and efficacious approach to policy; in such cases, democratic disengagement becomes less of a risk than in departments that lack a coherent approach.