BUILDING DIGITAL BRIDGES

Creating Inclusive Online Parliamentary Consultations

Nicola Hall
Hansard Society e-democracy Programme

"I believe that the information revolution can revitalise our democracy. The Hansard Society through its innovative electronic media programme is pioneering new ways of involving people of all ages and backgrounds in citizenship through new internet and digital technology. That can only strengthen our parliamentary democracy and I welcome it."

Rt Hon Tony Blair, Prime Minister

Why is the Hansard Society, an independent educational charity existing to promote effective parliamentary democracy, interested in e-democracy?

- We are aware that there is a prevalent sense on the part of the public that Parliament is remote from them - that it is not necessarily very interested in what they have to say. This was one of the main findings from our research into public perceptions of Parliament after ten years of cameras in the Commons.

- The new communication environment is characterised by the interactive nature of ICTs. This capacity to link citizens to their representatives, irrespective of distance or space, offers opportunities of strengthening the connections that constitute democratic representation.

- It is undoubtedly the case that efficient parliamentary business relies upon the expertise and experience of people beyond Parliament. The evidence traditionally taken by select committees is a good example of this. It is sometimes said that Parliament and Government rely too much upon 'the usual suspects' - 'the great and the good' whose knowledge is already respected. Beyond this group there are undoubtedly many others whose voices could also usefully be heard.

Most modern states are currently interested in e-commerce and e-government. E-democracy is something of a junior partner alongside them and relatively under-studied.

The concept of e-democracy is associated with efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their representatives using ICTs. Hague and Loader, in their introduction to Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision-Making in the Information Age, explain their idea of e-democracy:

'Strong democracy requires strong and interactive links between the state and civil society, between government and the governed...we have the prospect of national and local governments interacting with citizens with citizens via web sites, e-mail addresses and public information kiosks. We also have experiments with electronic voting, electronic voter guides, citizens juries and the like' (p.13)

The Hansard Society is interested in e-democracy as a means of making representative democracy stronger and more effective. We are piloting inclusive ways of involving citizens in the parliamentary process: linking people with relevant experience and expertise via ICTs to select committees, the scrutiny of legislation and other democratic processes. We are exploring new ways of informing representation and facilitating the broadest democratic communication.
Foreword

Parliamentary democracy in the UK grew up in the age of the penny post. Communication then was slow, centralised and rather exclusive. The age of the internet is witnessing huge changes in the way people work, shop, learn and interact. It would be surprising if it did not have an effect upon the way that representatives represent and the expectations that citizens have about how they are represented.

The Hansard Society e-democracy programme was established to examine how democratic institutions, such as Parliament, must adapt to the information age. At the outset we rejected exaggerated claims that the internet was about to make representative institutions obsolete and introduce ‘push-button democracy.’ Our interest has been in strengthening representation through better communication.

A key part of our work has been concerned with setting up and evaluating online parliamentary consultations, enabling citizens to have a direct channel of communication to their representatives. In March 2000 women survivors of domestic violence spent a month giving evidence, based on their experiences and expertise, to the all-party domestic violence group. Details of that consultation can be found in our previous report, New Media and Social Inclusion.

This present report, written by Nicola Hall, is a study of our most recent online consultation, conducted in collaboration with the House of Commons social security select committee, chaired by Archy Kirkwood MP. The committee was particularly interested to hear directly from recipients of tax credits. This is a study of how that consultation was organised and the lessons learned. A separate report, available from the Hansard Society, includes a summary of the evidence from the consultation.

This report seeks to address the real problems of social exclusion faced by online consultations and discussions. The UK Parliament has been pioneering in using this process, but it is not alone; parliaments, assemblies and governments all over the world are now experimenting with or planning for the online consultation process. Nicola Hall’s excellent study should serve as a useful guide to best practice for many of these projects. The Hansard Society’s emphasis is upon digital bridge-building rather than accepting the inevitability of the digital divide. I hope that this report will inspire debate and critical responses.

Dr Stephen Coleman
Director, Hansard Society e-democracy programme
Edemocracy@lse.ac.uk
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Executive Summary

Consulting with socially excluded groups raises important questions about the digital divide, both in terms of physical access to new information and communication technologies, and access to training, education, language and IT skills.

This report is a study of the most recent in a series of online consultations to be run by The Hansard Society. It was conducted in collaboration with the Social Security Select Committee, chaired by Archy Kirkwood MP. The Committee wished to hear directly from recipients of Working Families Tax Credit to see how the new system was working. This is a study of how the Uspeak consultation was organised and the lessons learnt. The report particularly sheds light on the barriers to public access to online consultations.

- The consultation ran online for 5 weeks during February 2001.
- The consultation was organised in cooperation with Church Action on Poverty, Public Data Web, and local councils in Durham and Sheffield.
- 96 individual members of low-income families participated and nearly 300 messages were posted on the website.
- 79% of all participants had never previously been involved in any form of consultation exercise.
- Claimants and working families gave evidence directly to a Parliamentary Committee. The Committee gained evidence to which they cannot gain access during ‘standard’ Parliamentary procedures.

Uspeak
The forum received messages in the course of the month from around 100 participants. There were six main sections; Tax Credits, Work, Benefits, Disability, Childcare and Recommendations. The forum contained people’s experiential accounts of living on Working Families Tax Credit. The fora were highly interactive - people replied to previous messages, contested or questioned other people’s point of view, and raised and debated many important points. The forum was password-protected to allow people to protect their identities if desired. The discussion was moderated - online discussion requires moderation to ensure at the minimum that no foul, abusive, libellous or defamatory statements are made, and at the maximum to facilitate and encourage balanced and considered debate.

Who participated?
Participants were:
- 3/4 female 1/4 male
- 74% white English
- One third were married or living with a partner
- Two thirds were single, separated, or divorced
- 40% of participants had children under the age of 16 in their household.
- Work situation: 44% were in some form of paid work, 22% were unemployed, 7% were students and 9% were retired.
- Half the working participants were in semi-skilled or clerical jobs.
Benefits: 85% were on some type on benefit. 27% were on Tax Credits. 24% were on disablement benefit.

The majority lived in rented accommodation (53%).

**Physical access to the internet**

One of the key problems in getting low-income families online was providing physical access to the internet. Access must be free to use, and easy to locate. Hands-on help must be provided at point of access. A free phone number was available to register for the consultation and locate the nearest free internet access point.

*Where did people access the consultation from?*
- 73% at home
- 6% at a library
- 3% at an internet kiosk
- 18% at ‘other’ access point

*Various factors affected people’s physical access to the internet:*
- 36% of participants did not have internet access at home or at work. It proved difficult to find alternative modes of access.
- The costs incurred of accessing the internet were prohibitive.
- Time and inconvenience prevented many from finding time to access the internet.

**Limitations of the various access points:**
- Home PC – accessing the consultation at home was the most convenient method for most people. However the cost of telephone calls from prolonged use of the internet, the constraints of sharing a home PC with other members of the family and the difficulties of balancing a domestic routine all curtailed home internet usage.
- Library – most libraries offered free internet access, but equipment can be very outdated and slow, and there were rarely staff there to help or advise with the technicalities.
- Kiosks – internet kiosks provided simple touch-screen access to the consultation, however the time-consuming nature of participating in a deliberative exercise discouraged people from using street kiosks, Participation was also a very ‘abstracted’ and individualistic process which differed from using computers at home or in a library.
- Computer donations – three computers were donated to the consultation but were not internet-enabled in time for the consultation (they will be available for future consultations).

**Future improvements to access:**
- Digital Television – once analogue switch-off occurs, most homes will have digital television and therefore potentially access to the internet and email. The Hansard Society will be exploring this avenue in advance of switch-off in order to develop best practice for consulting online via DTV.
- Roving internet access – itinerant internet kiosks, perhaps in mobile libraries would be especially useful for populations that are geographically dispersed or with limited mobility.
• Match people to resources – must match groups of participants to a particular PC in a communal area (such as community centre or library) to minimise the difficulties described above.
• Indoor kiosks – place kiosks in indoor communal locations (such as community centres or communal housing)

Non-Physical access to the internet
A further set of issues beyond physical access caused people to remain excluded from the process. These included:
• Limited IT literacy – many participants lacked IT training and could not find help with using the website. Although the site was fairly intuitive to those with previous internet experience, almost 25% of users found the website quite, or very hard to use. A ‘Users Guide’ was sent to all registrants; only about 31% of users used this.
• Difficulties in using the website itself – several participants had difficulties navigating the threads of the discussion, reading the font sizes and following links on the website. The site must be clearly organised and labelled so that it could be immediately understood by first time users.
• Literacy barriers – potential participants may have limited language and literacy skills, or dyslexia which impeded their participation. Members of lower income groups are 10% more likely to lack basic literacy skills than the average citizen.
• Abstractedness – participants felt some uneasiness about using the internet in isolated circumstances to ‘talk to Parliament’. The experience differed greatly from face-to-face talk. Participants tended to feel less ownership over the process of online consultation than over more traditional consultation methods. This can be combated by creating an inclusive online space in collaboration with community groups, and by offering IT training and information about the work of parliament so that they feel empowered in the consultation process.
• Fear of computers and typing – a few people submitted handwritten evidence because they feared that they would lack the ability to learn new skills in order to participate.
• Complexity of registration procedure – people felt intimidated by the registration procedure. In future telephone registration should be used more to combat the fear of filling in forms.
• Self confidence and self identity – many participants lacked the self confidence to express themselves and did not believe the relevance of their own experience to Parliament.
• Learning and education – many people lacked access to the skills and training they needed and feared learning new skills later in life.
• Disenfranchisement and disassociation with the political process – we found it difficult to convince people that the process was worthwhile.
• Suspicion – many participants feared authority figures and were suspicious of the process.
• Time and resource constraints – people had a limited amount of time and money to go online to participate.
Recommendations
A full set of recommendations are presented in the main report which may help to make online consultation more inclusive in the future:

- Redesign website and software – to cater for people with various disabilities (eyesight difficulties) and limited IT literacy. Make the site intuitive to new users.
- Work closely with a variety of skilled and experienced partners such as special interest groups and nationally recognised organisations.
- Work closely with local authorities – linking into local scale projects
- Lengthy lead-in time (at least six months)
- MPs’ role – work closely with the Select Committee in question and with MPs with special interests in the subject, and All Party Groups. Issue passwords to enter the discussion and provide weekly digests/summaries of the discussions to keep them up to date.
- Encourage MPs to participate by posting questions and comments onto the site.
- Use wide variety of access methods – DTV, touch-screen kiosks and community access points - link individuals to resources on a small scale
- Freephone number – this proved very successful for recruiting participants and should be used more widely in future consultations
- Wider use of local press and radio to publicise event at local scale. This proved particularly useful for enlisting participants. Inform national press of the project and its development.
- Web links – arrange for the consultation website to be linked to as many relevant websites as possible.
- Extra information – make the website value-added by giving as much information available through it as possible
- Explore use of voice recognition technologies to convert speech to text to aid participation.
- Set up smaller scale consultations with training package included for those in lowest income deciles and the most disenfranchised who could not participate in this consultation.

Conclusion and summary
Online consulting is not intended to replace other forms of consultation. It is not a panacea to the disconnectedness many citizens feel from their own MPs and the Parliamentary process. It is however a potentially useful and inclusive mechanism for giving traditionally excluded citizens the opportunity to participate in a Parliamentary procedure.

Archy Kirkwood MP, Chair of the Select Committee said “Online consultation would enhance the ability of the Committee to do its work and for individuals interested in social security policy development. So I think it’s an experiment that has been a success. I think if it were rolled out on a more widespread basis it would enhance the work of parliament.”

With further development and investment of time and resources, these pilot online consultations can provide a new and successful means of using electronic communication to allow democratic communication and enhance Parliamentary democracy.
1.0 What this report is about

Consulting with socially excluded groups raises important questions about the digital divide, both in terms of physical access to new information and communication technologies, (the digital 'haves' and 'have-nots') and access to training, education, language and IT skills.

According to official statistics, 32% of households have access to the internet via PC and digital television. This is three times the figure for two years ago. The level of internet access has been growing in all income deciles but is growing slowest among the lowest five deciles. On average, only 7% of homes in the lowest three income deciles have home-based access to the internet compared to over 51% in the top three.

This report uses qualitative and quantitative research to shed light on the physical and non-physical barriers to public access to online consultations.

2.0 Methodology

The Uspeak consultation was conducted as a research exercise. The research methodology involved qualitative and quantitative methodologies, conducted during and after the consultation period.

The research methodology was seven-fold;

- **Registration forms**
  All participants had to register for a password to enter the discussion. Part of the registration process was a non-compulsory personal detail form. The response rate for registration forms was 47%. (See Appendix 1 for a copy of the registration form.)

- **Further details forms**
  A questionnaire on the homepage of the website requested extra socio-demographic details about participants. Completion of this form was non-compulsory. (A copy of the form is available in Appendix 2.) The response rate was 35%.

- **Post consultation questionnaires**
  Two questionnaires were used - one for those who did and those who did not log on. The questionnaire was initially posted on the site during week 4 of the consultation. All participants for whom we had contact details were also contacted with the questionnaire after the consultation. (We did not have contact details for 65% of the 395 passwords created, either because people did not wish to give us their contact details or because the password was created speculatively and was never passed onto a participant. We also did not contact the MPs via this method, comprising a further 7% of all the passwords created.) Of the remaining 28% of participants for whom we did have contact details, around half responded to the survey (via the website, via email, by post or by telephone). Copies of the questionnaires are available in Appendices 3-4.

- **Partner summaries**
  All the partners who helped co-ordinate the consultation were contacted after the consultation. A copy of this questionnaire is available in Appendix 5. Response rate = 67%.

- **In depth telephone interviews**
  Three participants were interviewed by telephone after the consultation.

- **Site statistics**
  The software package ‘Webboard’ generated site statistics and user profiles.

- **MP interviews**
  The chair of the social security select committee, Archy Kirkwood MP was interviewed after having received the consultation findings. (Questionnaire in Appendix 6)

The data were collated, tabulated and manipulated in a statistical software package (SPSS) and graphed using Excel. All interviews were transcribed.
3.0 Initial feedback

The messages posted as evidence in Uspeak were of a very high quality. Participants gave serious consideration and measured thought to their contributions. Many of the participants used valid personal experience to ground their recommendations. The findings report presented these comments to the social security select committee and was well received.

The project partners viewed the consultation as a worthwhile exercise:

"It is very worthwhile because a model of best practice in consultation has to be developed so that it can be used in all aspects of administration/consultation" Shaun Topham, PDWeb.

"From CAP’s point of view it was worthwhile as a means of assessing whether consultations with grassroots groups and people with firsthand experience of poverty can be effectively carried out online." Niall Cooper, CAP.

Most of the participants responded positively to the consultation. In the post-consultation survey nearly three-quarters thought it was a worthwhile exercise and 64% said they learnt something from other contributors.

Did you think it was a worthwhile consultation?

- Yes 72%
- No 14%
- No reply 14%

"Thank you. I hope there will be more consultations like this, and I would encourage people to take part.” Social Justice Desk, participant.

"I can see, if used correctly and acted upon, these consultations can be a powerful tool in getting grass roots feelings to the right ears.” Thompson, participant.

An overwhelming percentage said they would participate in another online consultation if offered the chance, and the Hansard Society offices have received many follow-up calls from participants interested in participating in further consultations.
Would you participate in another online parliamentary inquiry?

![Pie chart showing participation in another online parliamentary inquiry]

No 3%  
No reply 3%  
Yes 94%

The consultation process raised a number of key issues, which underlie *Uspeak*'s overall success. The next chapters will explore these issues in depth.
4.0 Details of the discussions

The forum received over 270 messages in the course of the month. There were six main themed sections; Tax Credits, Work, Benefits, Disability, Childcare and Recommendations. The forum contained people’s experiential accounts of living on Working Families Tax Credit and related benefits. Messages described people’s struggles to balance work with welfare and childcare and the issues arising from this. There was a section of messages from people living with disabilities on benefits. The fora were highly interactive – people frequently replied to previous messages, contested or questioned other people’s point of view, and raised and debated many important points. The atmosphere was welcoming and not dominated by any one section or individual. There was no use of distasteful or foul language and no warning had to be issued or comments removed.

No. of messages in each conference

![Graph showing distribution of messages]

Participants were asked if they changed their minds about something during the discussions. 14% said they had. This is an interesting indicator that some people did learn something from the consultation and used the new information to re-form their opinion about something.

4.1 Community?

In the Womenspeak online consultation (March 2000) a definite community grew up within the participants – to the extent that many of the women continued talking online after the consultation had ended by setting up their own web forum. This was less strongly the case in Uspeak, however some of the more involved participants did get involved in longer conversations and build up an online rapport. The main difference with Uspeak was the topic. For survivors of domestic violence it is therapeutic to talk about experiences and share them in a secure place with fellow survivors who can understand and sympathise. Talking, in this
case, can help emotionally. In the case of Tax Credits, talking cannot 'help' or be therapeutic in quite the same way. Though some participants in Uspeak said they drew comfort from finding out that they were not alone in their problems and difficulties, this was not universally the case as it was in Womenspeak.

4.2 Interactivity

Participants were asked if they liked the interactive format. It appeared that interactivity (the ability to reply to other people's messages and receive replies) was a popular trait.

Did you like the fact that you had a chance to reply to other peoples' messages?

- No 8%
- No reply 11%
- Yes 81%

Participants were also asked if they preferred writing or posting messages.

Did you prefer replying to other people's messages or posting individual messages?

- Both 14%
- Preferred replying to other messages 17%
- Preferred writing individual messages 36%
- No reply 33%
The results here appear to be fairly even. Over a third preferred writing individual messages. This was the participants’ chance to put across their views to Parliament and writing their own message was a good method of doing this.

"I think that because you could start off a new thread or you could like comment on something specifically. It made it easier to group it so if someone was just interested in disability they just really needed to expand down there." Allye, participant.

Webboard’s structure allowed people to start a new thread of discussion for a sub-topic that they felt deserved a mention. This gave people the power to begin a conversation and state their own point in a way that group face-to-face activities may not allow. This also made the discussions easier to follow because you could follow a sub-topic such as 'Student benefit issues' through one thread of the discussion.

17% preferred replying to messages. This could be because they enjoyed the interactive nature of the discussions and enjoyed refuting or agreeing with fellow participants. Around 14% of participants enjoyed both - starting new topics and replying to previous ones.

4.3 Topic

Participants were asked which topic they found most useful.

Which section did you find most useful?

![Pie chart showing the distribution of usefulness of different sections. Benefits 42%, Tax Credits 25%, Childcare 9%, Disability 9%, No reply 9%, Work 6%]

The majority found the 'Benefits' section most useful, followed by 'Tax Credits'. These sections contained the most messages and were most popular and therefore most useful. People with a disability or with children would have found specific sections more useful.

We asked participants whether the consultation tackled all the relevant issues. The results were mixed. It is difficult for a one-month consultation to tackle all the issues that may be relevant to a sufficient depth.
However, the consultation was participant-led, and there was nothing to stop people raising any issues they deemed relevant.

"Up to participants to raise issues if they want to add extra." Mbandamer, participant

The moderator exists to keep people within the realm of the select committee's remit and keep the debate lively and open. If a topic was not tackled it was probably due to lack of time, or the fact that no-one raised it.

Do you think this internet consultation tackled all the issues you thought were relevant?

![Pie chart showing responses: No 36%, Yes 36%, No reply 28%]

4.4 How well informed were the participants?

Some participants mentioned the knowledge behind the comments.

"I quickly realised that the views of most respondents could be easily dismissed as they are not closely argued. I spent a lot of time researching my contributions, but hesitated and ran out of time." Name withheld, participant.

"We see our own situation and are expert of it but the discussion could have been better informed on issues and questions raised in an interactive way so that replies could have involved advice or correction of misconceptions." Mbandamer, participant.

There are always going to be difficulties with information and research in these consultations. People speak from their own experience and do not have the time or inclination to research the context of their position. Indeed we don't expect people to have all the facts and figures at their command. That they do not have access to all the information they need is an important point in itself. These forums are experiential. People are encouraged to give their experiences of living in a certain situation. This is the on-the-ground information to which Parliament cannot usually gain access.
4.5 Format of discussion

"I like the idea of a claimant-only discussion, but it is not a substitute for representation by claimant-based organisations as these are able to draw on more knowledge and argument. I should like to see parallel forums running alongside for different groups, e.g. the "expert" debate, the "political" debate and so on. With membership restrictions in each, but all open to viewing by the other groups and cross-commenting." Name withheld, participant.

This is a valid point. Previous consultations have experimented with expert-only forums alongside usual forums. Uspeak did involve some representatives as well as claimants and these people can bring useful additional information to the forum. Running parallel forums is a good idea – but there is no reason why all parties cannot participate together in a moderated forum.
5.0 *Uspeak* organisation

*Uspeak* was project managed by the e-democracy programme, directed by Dr Stephen Coleman. Beccy Earnshaw co-ordinated the project and Nicola Hall was the programme researcher. A number of voluntary organisations with expertise in the subjects of low incomes and tax credits collaborated on the project.

5.1 Project partners and their role

We worked formally with Church Action on Poverty, Public Data Web and local authorities in Durham and Sheffield. We met with these organisations at least once face-to-face and had regular contact with them during the consultation.

**Church Action on Poverty (CAP)**

CAP is a grassroots poverty organisation. We had an initial meeting with Niall Cooper, the director, to agree upon their role in the consultation. Niall Cooper played a role in distributing the registration forms and getting the idea out to grassroots members of their organisation. This was done via email – around 50-60 contacts were emailed three times before and during the consultation period. The consultation was featured on the CAP Newsletter, which goes to CAP’s 1200 members across the UK. During the consultation, CAP staff were encouraged to pass on the information about the project and get people involved in the process on a one-to-one basis.

**Local Authorities**

We worked with two local authorities: Durham and Sheffield. The nature of the relationship was useful for local publicity of the consultation and for gaining community contacts in specific local areas.

In Sheffield City council, Ken Bellamy, Corporate ICT manager arranged our relationship with PDWeb (see below). He emailed details of the consultation to Heads of Service and Community Partnership team members.

In Durham council, Peter Brookes of the Community Support Unit provided access to individuals and organisations that could reach out to participants and help publicise the event. He informed the Chief Executive and key staff in social services, such as employment. He provided information to key parties for the consultation. We had hoped to publicise the consultation in Trimdon, a wired village where community centres are connected to the internet. However, members of Trimdon village did not participate at all. This was because the information about the consultation never reached them.

The local authorities were not able to provide direct grassroots access to participants, and owing to time constraints, their role was somewhat limited. However, their approval of the project was invaluable in providing recognition for the consultation in local press and by local people.
Access providers
We worked with Public Data Web (PDWeb), an organisation producing street-based internet booths for city centre locations to deliver government and information services online. The booths deconstruct and simplify the internet via a touch screen control panel, helping people to use the internet without realising they are doing so. The screens require no mouse or keyboard skills offering a touch-screen alphabet instead. They provide a useful method of access to the internet for people without previous computer experience.

PDWeb ran email functionality for the period of the consultation whereby people could email their comments from the kiosk. This facility was tested several times but only used once by someone who sent a short exploratory message. In the future we should set up an experimental area (test run) to ensure that full functionality is offered to participants (i.e. not just email functionality but full online deliberation and interactivity).

Informal partners
We contacted the following organisations in a less formal manner (usually by email or telephone); EAPN (Birmingham), SPAN (Bristol), Gingerbread, West Midlands Low Pay Unit and Oxford Local Authority. These informal partnerships proved most effective. Some groups encouraged participation and awareness of the project via face-to-face meetings and workshops. Others used online methods such as emailing their mailing list or providing a link from their website. Others featured the consultation in their newsletter.

5.2 Registration procedure

Uspeak was a password-protected forum. This ensured participant anonymity and encouraged frank and open discussion without the worry of disclosing personal details. 395 passwords were registered for use in the following ways:

- **Face-to-face registration (1)**
  Receive a form by hand from a community contact, return it using a freepost envelope, password confirmed by post. A rather time-consuming registration method but most likely to encourage people to participate because of the face-to-face contact with a trusted source. Under 1% registered this way (See graph below).

- **Face-to-face Registration (2)**
  Consultation co-ordinator attended a community event at West Hendon estate where the site was set up and people were registered face-to-face. Under 1% registered this way.

- **Telephone registration**
  Telephone the Uspeak free-phone number to register, password allocated verbally and confirmed postally afterwards. Method ensured that people could go online immediately. Telephone registration was a popular registration method, 16% registered this way.
Email registration
Email for a password through the homepage. Was successful for people who saw the URL in the publicity material or arrived via a link from another website. Password issued immediately via email and confirmed by post. 50 applications for passwords arrived via this method, comprising about 10% of total registrations.

Speculative pre-registration
Sets of passwords speculatively issued to various community groups. (e.g. 20 passwords issued to Hackney City Farm and to Oxford City Council.) Nationwide Citizens Advice Bureaux and members of the select committee were registered speculatively. 73% of passwords were registered this way; however method was the least successful at getting people online, since the recipients had not individually requested the password.

Registration procedure

Out of the 395 passwords that were registered, 96 participants entered the discussion forum (24%) and of these, 62 individuals posted messages (65%).

Registration Pack
We sent a registration pack to all participants (see Appendices 7-10) containing:
Confirmation of password/username and welcome letter
Users’ Guide to the website
Flyer to explain the consultation
Copy of select committee acceptance letter (first two weeks)
Copy of publicity material from launch (second two weeks)
Registration form with free-post envelope

The pack explained to all participants what was happening and how to get involved and use the website.

Form-filling
Community contacts in Durham noted that some participants were put off by having to fill in a form. This probably prevented a significant number from participating, although it is extremely difficult to quantify this figure. People may have been put off for a variety of other reasons. The form may have been too time-consuming (although it was designed to reduce length) or they may simply have forgotten to return it. People can tire of
filling in forms and revealing personal details; the low response rate in this consultation may have been due to research fatigue. More compelling is the argument that people were wary of form-filling in conjunction with what could be perceived as a government initiative. The following phrase was inserted at the top of the registration form to assure participants. 'All personal details will remain confidential and information will not be used individually. This information will not be passed onto government or related organisations.' However, the registration pack could be mis-read as part of a DSS or government venture. We know that one individual was put off participating because the person perceived the exercise as 'government electioneering'. This would understandably reduce people's willingness to disclose personal details. The Hansard Society as an independent organisation is committed to making sure that nobody feels excluded from this process of consultation. It will be important in future consultations to ensure that people understand the context of the consultation and feel able to participate.

The registration procedure needs to be reconsidered in future consultations. The need to collect data about participants in order to contextualise and legitimate the discussions must be balanced with the chance of losing participants by scaring them away with complex, lengthy or repetitive forms. A compromise must be reached between these two dimensions - one that services the Parliamentary process and facilitates better understanding of access issues for disenfranchised members of the population.

**Postal passwords and privacy versus access for all**

We received complaints from people who unexpectedly received their password by post. This procedure is uncommon in an internet forum and caused problems where people used their online banking password as their Uspeak password.

"I made a mistake – I used a username and ID that could possibly have identified me. I later realised that to speak freely I should have preferred anonymity." Name withheld, participant.

In future we should clearly specify that details will be sent by post so that people can make allowances to combat the security risks. Furthermore, we know that the time spent waiting for the paperwork to arrive and the complicated nature of the paperwork put two people off participating. This must be avoided where possible.

We could combat this by confirming everyone's password via email, however this excludes people without an email address. People on community access or library PCs may not have their own email address, and we cannot exclude users of these forms of internet access, particularly as these access points are most likely to be used by people without home access to a PC. We could encourage the use of Hotmail or other such email accounts (free for all users) via a link from the site, but for people unfamiliar with the internet this procedure may seem like a large investment in time just to participate in the consultation. It may also prove difficult for people with limited web experience and limited time.
Postal passwords timing issue
Some participants felt that the time lag between applying for a password and receiving confirmation was too long when relying on the post.

Main reasons for not participating: "I ran out of time to go online - applied at end of consultation and couldn't start when I had applied online, when I had some time to spare. I had to wait for the pack to arrive." Karen, participant.

Uspeak was labour intensive to organise - each application had to be processed by hand rather than automatically. Therefore applications that arrived overnight had to be dealt with the next morning which created a 24 hour delay between applying for a password and getting online. In the future we should encourage telephone registration which facilitates instant access to the site, and should remind people that they do not need to receive the postal pack before they can actually use their password.

5.3 Forum Design

The consultation used an off-the-shelf discussion package called 'Webboard'. There are other packages available which offer similar functionality but after careful assessment of the needs of our audience we decided to use 'Webboard'. It was imperative to make the site as easy to use as possible since we anticipated that many users would never have used the internet.

Background/user information
In order to analyse the interaction on the website and contextualise it with socio-demographic data, we had to be able to identify individual users when they entered the site. This required a registration and password procedure.

Passwords
Users could choose their username and password. The username was what would appear on the site to identify them. Users were required to enter this combination each time they logged onto the website. 'Webboard' kept count of the number of times each user logged-on and how many messages they posted.

Layout of the site
The Uspeak homepage contained information about the consultation, a description of the select committee members, the 'further details' questionnaire, and the password application and log-in area. After logging-in, users were taken to the main discussion area. The discussion area was split into halves. The topics and discussion threads were listed on the left-hand site, and the message content was displayed on the right, updating as people clicked to read different messages.

Navigation around the site
We wanted to minimise the number of clicks users had to make before being able to read a message. There was some difficulty in that to
minimise the clicks needed, you lose the interactivity of the message reply structure, moving from a tree structure of threaded messages to a linear structure. This detracts from the interactivity and reduces the quality of the discussions.

**Information on the site**
A number of ‘click-throughs’ on the homepage provided extra information - for example about the select committee and about Tax Credits. 18% of respondents said they used these to gain extra information. A ‘click-through’ Help Page was also provided on the site. 25% of respondents said they used this Help Page.

**Alterations made to Webboard**
We made several alterations to the basic Webboard package to make it more user-friendly:
- Less use of jargon – altered some of the wording on the site, for example replaced ‘Conferences’ with the words ‘Talk About’ to make the topic structure clearer for first-time users.
- Re-wrote the Help Page – giving clearer information on how to use it
- Scrolling banner – introduced a ticker tape across the top to inform people of latest news
- Colour scheme – selected a bright, but simple colour scheme
- Photographs – included photographs of people and families

We could not achieve all that we would have liked to with Webboard. For example, using pictures makes the site more welcoming and friendly, but slows download times, particularly on slower computers. There are currently no off-the-shelf packages that fulfil all we require of the software.

**5.4 Publicity**

**Uspeak** was publicised in the following ways:
- Press release to local newspapers one week prior to the consultation and throughout the period of the consultation. Aimed to advertise Uspeak and enlist participants from across Britain.
- Targeted press releases for select committee MPs’ constituencies and for MPs from the areas of focus (i.e. Durham)
- Mail out to all MPs (x 659) in December 2000: flyer to advertise Uspeak. Accompanied by targeted letters to select committee MPs and MPs in whose areas it was occurring to explain Uspeak.
- Specific MPs contacted in January to inform them of the date change for Uspeak.
- Radio interviews (live and pre-recorded) with Beccy Earnshaw, Project co-ordinator. With LBC (London area) Sun FM (Sunderland) Radio Lancashire and Radio Cumbria.
- Launch in Sheffield of street-based kiosks (PDWeb). Attended by Richard Allan MP.
- Official launch in Parliament during second week of consultation. Attended by Archy Kirkwood MP, Chair of social security select committee and three participants.
- Work by project partners: email circulation, monthly newsletters.
Participants heard about *Uspeak* from a number of sources. The pie chart below illustrates which publicity methods were most successful.

Over a quarter of respondents heard about the consultation from a local newspaper. 6% claimed that they heard about it on the television news. To our knowledge the consultation was not featured on any local television, these people must have confused television with another source of media. 62% of people said ‘Other’. The graph below shows a breakdown of ‘Other’.

This graph illustrates the networking of the project through community groups nationwide.
**Which publicity methods worked?**

The press release sent out to local newspapers resulted in many articles written about Uspeak (for example in Tunbridge Wells, Bristol, Northern Ireland). These articles advertised the freephone number for registrations. We still received calls about the consultation prompted by press reports up to three weeks after the consultation had finished.

LBC radio did a feature on Uspeak, repeating the contact details every morning and provided details on their website. Many people quoted LBC as their point of contact.

The links to Uspeak from other websites proved successful and should be exploited more next time.

Reminder emails were sent round to participants (reminding them of the extension and encouraging them to participate) were well received. One participant found the 'click-through' straight to the site very useful in a hectic time schedule.

"When you go on the internet you usually just do the normal things, like check your email and whatever. Your emails reminded me to have a look at the site straight away"

*Pauline, Participant.*

**5.5 Moderation**

Online discussion requires moderation to ensure at the minimum that no foul, abusive, libellous or defamatory statements are made, and at the maximum to facilitate and encourage balanced and considered debate.

Beccy Earnshaw moderated Uspeak. Dr Stephen Coleman added other comments.

Moderator actions included:
- Welcome message to Uspeak
- News announcements
- Opening questions for the topics
- Further questions for the topics
- Corrections/verifications
- Confirmation of the role of the MPs
- Statement about 'Spamming' incident (see Appendix 12)
- Addition of two new topics (Disability and Recommendations) to accommodate trends in the original forums.

**Level of moderation**

There are arguments for and against visible moderation:

For strong moderation:
- Keeps the consultation on-topic
- Keeps the flow of the discussion going (by throwing in new questions or adding new ideas)
- Can explain issues to users (such as the 'Spamming' incident)
- Can set negative and positive tone levels for discussion (what is not acceptable, what would be useful)
- Gives a friendly face (first point of contact if any difficulties arise)
- Provides assurance that someone is paying attention

Against strong moderation:
- Difficult position on key issues - how far should the moderator defend the MPs' role?
- When does encouraging people to get involved become too forceful?
- Can interfere with the natural flow (if it is too regular it becomes overpowering and detracts from the interaction between participants)
- Difficult to get the tone right - it is easy to patronise people

There are a series of difficult questions to be answered, and the answers themselves will differ according to the type of discussion being moderated. What the participants thought about the level of moderation is crucial.

Would you have liked the moderator to have steered the discussion more?

- Yes 19%
- No 45%
- No reply 36%

The results here are rather mixed. Under a fifth wanted more moderation yet almost half did not. This suggests that the moderation level was about right. However, several participants did not realise there was a moderator and over a third declined to reply to the question. This probably results from people visiting the site infrequently or rarely posting controversial messages. But is it a problem if people do not realise there is a moderator? This is something that must be considered in future consultations. For example, if people do not realise there is a moderator, and act responsibly in their messages then is there a need for concern? We would suggest that participants may benefit from knowing there is a moderator in terms of feeling 'secure' and able to ask questions and explore the margins of the debate.
6.0 Who participated?

Uspeak had 96 individual users who logged onto the online consultation. The figures below are based on all the returned registration and further details forms.

6.1 Individual characteristics

The participants were three quarters female and one quarter male.

![Gender of registered participants](image)

The participants were predominantly White English, with representation of other ethnic groups such as Irish and Indian.

![Ethnicity of participants](image)

27% of participants were either married to and living with or just living with a with a partner. The remaining two thirds of the participants were either divorced, separated or never married.
Participants in this online consultation were very likely to have dependants living with them. 40% of the participants had children under age of 16 in their household. 27% of participants had 2 or more children under the age of 16 in their household. The figures also revealed that one third of participants were single parents (they were divorced, separated or never married to a partner).

24% of those with children had one or more children aged 0-5 years; 44% had children aged 6-10 years; 29% had children aged 11-15 years and 12% had children over the age of 16 years.

6.2 Job situation

44% of participants were in some form of employment (whether self employed, part-time or full-time). 22% were unemployed and seeking work. Several individuals were either students (7%) or retired (9%).
44% of the individuals were in a household where there was only one earner. 50% of the working participants were in semi-skilled or clerical work and a further 25% were in low-level managerial type jobs.

6.3 Benefits and weekly income

85% of participants were on some type of benefit. 15% were not on benefits or chose not to reply to the question. The graph below demonstrates Combined Weekly Household Income after tax and benefits. Several participants declined to reply to this question. It is vital to note that this is combined household income; the households earning over £501 per month all had between two and five people within them.
The participants received a variety of benefits. 27% were receiving Working Families Tax Credit. 24% were on some form of disablement benefit. 64% were on some form of benefits for dependent children.

Benefits received by participants

6.4 Further details

Accommodation type
The majority of respondents lived in some form of rented accommodation (53%). A significant proportion lived in property that they were buying with a loan or mortgage. Only four respondents owned their property outright. This depicts some instability in housing tenure for low-income families.
Education
This graph illustrates the educational qualifications that respondents had completed.

The level of education was high amongst the respondents compared to the population as a whole. 64% of respondents had completed GCSE or equivalent (this is higher than the national average). A further 53% had completed some form of further education (A-Levels or GNVQ) and a further 44% had completed some form of higher education (a degree course or similar). Of the respondents completing higher education, 40% had taken masters degrees. This is far higher than the national average of less than 1%. This raises some serious issues about education and literacy, which will be explored later.

Political awareness
We asked participants about several indicators of political awareness and activity.
- 9% of participants were a member of a political party
- 56% had contacted their local MP before this consultation
- 91% voted in the last election
These figures suggest that the participants were on average more politically active than their counterparts in the rest of the population.

We also asked people about their news-watching habits.
- 97% said they watched the news on television and of these, 71% said they watched it every day
- 26% never bought a newspaper
- 24% bought a newspaper every day
- The majority (44%) bought a newspaper 1-3 times a week

30
Respondents bought a variety of newspapers as illustrated below.

Which newspaper do you buy?

![Pie chart showing newspaper distribution]

Geographic dispersion
The geographical spread of the participants was quite mixed with participants from Northern Ireland and across England.

![Map showing geographic dispersion]

It is obvious from this data that Uspeak did not involve the widest range of participants and was skewed towards more highly educated and better-off people in the groups targeted. To involve the really poor requires a high investment of human resources and the development of community contacts at a very local scale.
"I believe that to be effective you need a wider circulation of getting people. One should try and build up database of individuals interested as well as groups. There has to be more money and input to promote this" David, participant.

There were some activists involved in Uspeak – and those individuals who did go online tended to be more active and participative than the average citizen.

"Activists involved and not the socially excluded” Barbara from EAPN, participant.

The reasons for the make-up of the participants are explored in the following chapters.
7.0 Physical access issues

One of the key problems in getting low-income families online was providing physical access to the internet. This group is particularly excluded from resources and new technologies. Access proved to be a big challenge for the Uspeak consultation.

"The majority of people you targeted, like single parents, people on benefits, people on low incomes are not going to have access to a computer and a modem at home" Allye, participant.

"Very few of the grassroots contacts that I or CAP has, have direct access to the internet, for obvious reasons. Even the handful who did, do not appear to have actively participated/posted comments, even if they visited the site."

Niall Cooper, CAP

The problems of access go beyond physical access to more deeply rooted issues discouraging or preventing people from participating online. This chapter will deal with physical access; the next chapter will deal with non-physical barriers. The results in this section are based on the post-consultation surveys with people who did and people who did not log-on.

7.1 Failing to gain access?

It was important to contact people who did not log-on to the website to explore their reasons. This group were the most difficult to contact and the results presented below are based on the responses of the dozen or so individuals that responded. The statistics for how these people were registered are vital to understanding why they did not log-on.

How did you apply for a password?

- Given Application by someone 9%
- Call Freephone 27%
- No reply 9%
- Website 55%
The pie chart illustrates that 82% of respondents who did not log-on actively requested a password. The 27% who called the freephone may have had internet access problems. It is interesting to note that 55% actually applied online via the website. Therefore a lack of internet access cannot explain their non-log-on and other factors must be to blame. All participants were asked if their registration pack arrived with confirmation of their password. The pack had arrived in every case and can therefore be ruled out as a reason for not logging on. These participants were asked where they had intended to access the internet.

Where did you access the internet?

- At home 55%
- Library / Organisation 27%
- At work 9%
- No reply 9%

The majority had access either at home or at work (64%). The remaining 36% had reduced access to the internet and were therefore less likely to be able to log-on. 36% of respondents said their mode of internet access was not ‘free of cost’ - this is another important determining factor in whether people logged on or not.

When asked the main reasons why they did not log-on, the results were interesting. A lack of physical access was not explicitly mentioned as a reason for not logging-on.

What were the main reasons that you did enter the discussions?

- Applied too late/ too busy 28%
- Illness 9%
- No reply 18%
- Problems with password 18%
- No Effect on policy / not appropriate 18%
- Was not a member of target group 9%
A lack of physical access was not the main reason for registrants not logging-on, therefore several other factors come to the fore. 18% had problems with their password. This could be due to
(a) human error on the part of the Uspeak organisers when producing the password or the registration pack
(b) a technical error with either the computer used or with the website at the time they tried to log on
(c) limited experience of computers and the internet on the part of the participant.
Furthermore, 18% expressed doubts that their involvement would affect policy. A quarter registered too late or ran out of time to post a comment. These issues will be dealt with in the next chapter.

7.2 Gaining access

People who did log-on to the consultation gained physical access to the internet in a variety of ways. During registration, participants were asked where they would access the internet. Each respondent used at least one method of accessing the internet. The graph illustrates the various modes of access.

Methods of internet access for this consultation

This data is very revealing. 73% of all respondents said they would be accessing the consultation from a home PC. 6% said they would use a library, 3% said they would use an internet kiosk and 18% did not reply or said 'Other'. These figures may be skewed since participants had to fill in the form online. Therefore people using the internet at home had no time restrictions on their participation and due to all-inclusive internet packages may incur no further costs by staying online longer to fill in a form. At public libraries internet usage is often limited to half-hour slots. This reduces the time available to participate in the consultation thereby reducing the propensity to devote time to filling in online forms.

After the consultation, participants were asked whether they had had any problems getting access to the internet.
Was it difficult for you to find a computer to take part in the consultation?

No reply 8%
No 50%
Yes 42%

50% had no problems gaining access to the internet. 42% said they did have difficulties. The following section will assess each mode of access and the difficulties surrounding it.

Home PC internet access
The majority of participants accessed the consultation from a home PC. High levels of home-based PC access are uncharacteristic of low-income families and of the British population as a whole. Currently in the UK, around 32% of homes have access to the internet. The figures suggest that the participants in this consultation were not particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to new media.

"Probably you'll find like myself and the other lady who was at the opening, that it's the slightly better educated people who have access and knowledge of PCs" Allye

The main disadvantages of using a home PC for the consultation were the cost of telephone calls, and the constraints of time of sharing the PC with other family members and with other home based activities.

The Uspeak participants tended to have knowledge and experience of PCs and the internet via home and work usage. This was not the case for all participants – particularly those who accessed the website from outside their homes.

Library access
Some individuals used library internet access. From experience registering individuals by telephone and discussing modes of free access, we know that this figure was probably significantly higher than the questionnaire
results suggest. Most libraries across Britain offer free internet access if on somewhat outdated equipment and for limited time periods. The freephone was provided for people to find out where their nearest free internet access was located.

Participants encountered several problems with library access; namely the lack of staff and lack of guidance there to help new users.

"There's no-one there at the libraries to help you. They're so short-staffed and nobody could help me. They started me off and left me." Muriel, participant.

These issues must be considered when encouraging people to use their libraries for access. We must ensure that the site is as easy to use as possible and provide useful support material to help people.

**Internet Kiosks**

Kiosks were available in a variety of locations but had a limited impact on the consultation. One questionnaire respondent used a sponsored internet kiosk in a shopping centre in Kensington offering free internet and email access. Another participant used an internet kiosk in the Bransholme estate community centre in Hull. We received only one email from the PDWeb kiosks in Sheffield city centre. This was an exploratory email asking us to reply if we received it. We received no 'proper' contributions via the PDWeb kiosks. The reasons for this are explored below.

PDWeb hit a number of difficulties which prevented them from participating fully in the consultation.

- **Software difficulties**

PDWeb's system deconstructs ordinary web pages making them easier to use through a specially designed front-end user interface. The webboard software used presented them with several complications which proved difficult to overcome. The end product offered email functionality for users and limited interactivity.

"We had less time than we envisaged to overcome the technical/software problems we were faced with. The consultation went live very late onto the kiosks." Shaun Topham, PDWeb.

- **Lead-in time**

PDWeb's contribution would have benefited from a longer lead-in time in order to overcome difficulties with the software and the timing of the consultation alongside their installation project across parts of the UK.

"If we had had more time to be prepared technically, the results would have been different. The delay in deploying the infrastructure meant that the publicity aimed at the public did not take place." Shaun Topham, PDWeb.
It is doubtful whether many individuals had success using internet kiosks. This could be for a number of reasons:

- **Winter timing** – It was too cold in February to stand in the street at a kiosk and participate in a deliberative exercise. Participating in an online consultation is a time-consuming exercise involving time to read other contributions, think about, plan and type your own contribution.

- **Personal involvement** - This is much more time consuming and involved process than sending a simple email or accessing government services online. It is also on a more personal, emotive and potentially private topic which some people may not feel comfortable writing about in the street.

- **Not well publicised** – the availability of the consultation through the PDWeb kiosks was not well publicised and it was doubtful that many people knew to access the consultation from that access point.

- **Ease of use** – the PDWeb kiosks deconstruct the internet to make it easier to use, however the consultation format was a more complicated piece of software to adapt to the kiosk system and only offered email functionality. It may have proved more complicated to use for some people than the regular functions of the kiosk.

- **Invisible rewards** – the rewards of participating are not immediately visible i.e. if no-one replies instantly to your message then you may feel ignored or invisible. Some participants in libraries felt that because no-one replied to their message instantly, the process and effort was wasted; so people standing in the street would be even more likely to feel distanced from the Parliamentary process. Furthermore, the feedback mechanism to MPs in terms of the final report is not a tangible outcome to the participants until long after the consultation period. Therefore the role of the MPs during the consultation period is vital and will be discussed at length in a later chapter.

- **Abstracted process** – participation in Uspeak via the kiosk was an individualistic experience, abstracted from the group experiences of participation in a community centre or at home.

- **Delayed start date** – Uspeak wasn’t available via the kiosks until the end of the consultation period, this severely limited people’s ability to participate.

**Freephone**

A freephone number was provided for participants to find out where their nearest internet access was and how to use the website. Many callers used this method to register for Uspeak and to locate their nearest free internet access; it proved to be a very useful and welcome addition to the running of the consultation.

**Community centre PCs**

Several participants accessed the internet via community based PC access, including several CAP members and a handful of users at the One Parent Families centre in York. One user accessed the internet via the Bransholme Estate community centre in Hull. At these centres, we sent pre-registered passwords so that users could access the site immediately, and encouraged the centres to publicise the event locally to encourage people to participate.
Community based access points are important access points for people with low incomes, providing free access limited only by the availability of the PC at certain times. Community based access should be utilised fully in exercises such as this. One of the main difficulties is convincing the centres to offer their office PC for such consultations for a certain amount of time each day. Centres which have more than one dedicated public-use PCs are highly useful access points. Another key problem is identifying the locations of such PCs since there is no national database and only library and local council funded PCs tend to be widely advertised or catalogued.

**Provided access**

We received three PCs from a computer refurbishment and recycling firm, C.A.N. Limited, that specialised in providing charities with ex-corporate PCs. We planned to distribute these to three locations for community based access: the Green Man Community centre in Barnet, London, Hackney City Farm and West Hendon estate community centre, London. Unfortunately the PCs lacked the necessary software to be able to access the internet and owing to the time constraints and costs of buying and installing the necessary software, they were not internet-enabled by the time the consultation finished. It is hoped that these PCs will be fully operational for the next online consultation.

**Alternative access methods**

There are a few other avenues of access that were suggested as a result of this consultation including digital television and ‘roving’ internet access. For example, once analogue switch-off has happened (expected in 2008) most homes will then have access to digital television which is capable of providing email and internet functionality.

> "Would you participate in another online consultation? "Yes, but not necessarily by internet, maybe telephone or TV instead."
>  
> K Shaw, participant."

The Hansard e-democracy programme will be exploring this avenue in advance of switch-off in order to develop best practice for consulting online via DTV.

Another participant suggested ‘roving’ internet access (for example itinerant internet kiosks similar to mobile libraries).

> "You get lap-tops and dial in networks and that, and go into some of the major towns, and putting out adverts in advance at the local citizen’s advice... and saying ‘we’re here for one day’ and getting those organisations online and trying to encourage people to use the internet.” Allye, participant.

Roving access would be particularly useful for dispersed rural populations and people with limited mobility due to personal disability or limited transportation facilities.
7.3 Summary

It is obvious from this discussion that providing access to the internet is a major stumbling block when working with socially excluded people. Aside from those who used home-based internet access, access must be provided for small groups of targeted individuals. People must be matched to resources – either via the freephone number or via the work of grassroots community leaders to make their facilities available to local groups. Access can only be achieved by raising people’s awareness of their options and linking suitable free access points to those in need.

In future consultations, we must ensure that all participants have equal access to the consultation functions; the offer of an email facility through a kiosk put some participants at a disadvantage in that they could not participate in a fully deliberative exercise. We must allow a longer lead-in time for preparation so that no participants suffer. We also need to question the likelihood of people ever using a street kiosk to participate in such a consultation exercise. Perhaps kiosks in indoor locations would fare better - such as kiosks in communal housing or community centres. The idea of the touch-screen kiosk should not be abandoned, for access is only the first step; making the internet more usable is also a vital development and must be pursued.
8.0 Non-physical access issues

Even where people can gain physical access to the internet, a further set of issues can cause people to remain excluded from the process. This chapter explores the issues arising from the research on Uspeak that may aid an understanding of social exclusion.

8.1 IT Literacy

IT literacy was a crucial factor in this consultation. We anticipated that few participants would have vast experience of using the internet, and that most would have never used computers or the internet. Even those who did have internet experience may not be familiar with the webboard software and web-based discussions.

8.1.1 Previous internet experience

The statistics from the post-consultation questionnaire illuminate IT literacy clearly:

Where did you access the internet?

No 8%  No reply 0%
Yes 92%

The overwhelming majority of Uspeak participants who logged-on to the site had used the internet before. This figure may be skewed slightly since people with previous internet experience would be more capable and willing to fill in an online form. However, the post-consultation form was distributed in a number of formats (via the website, via personal email, via post and telephone interviews) in order to reduce this skew. We know of one participant who was 70 years old and who had never used a computer before, but still posted messages. This is an example of inclusion via online consultation - however, we need to ask some serious questions about participation in Uspeak; whether the online consultation process can be rewarding for socially excluded populations, and how this can be improved for next time.
8.1.2 Problems with the website

The statistics about people's difficulty in using the website are interesting. 50% of users found it very easy, which is good news for the design of the website, but hardly surprising when you consider that over 90% of people had previous experience of using the internet. A significant percentage (39%) thought the website could have been improved.

Cross-tabulating 'Ease of use' with 'Previous internet experience' confirms that people with previous experience found the website easier to use than those without. So what factors made use of the website difficult for new and inexperienced users?

Participants found the site difficult to use for various reasons:

(1) **Navigation of discussions**
72% said they could follow the discussion structure with no problem, but a quarter had difficulties doing so. Some found the structure difficult to navigate - particularly if they did not visit the website regularly.

"It was easy to log on and both view and post messages, however it ended up being a very fragmented discussion, with so many different strands of discussion being posted even within a single theme. So other than posting individual responses to individual comments, there was no means of trying to draw together threads, or try and give focus to the discussion (in the way in which you could in a face to face discussion, by periodically directing everyone to think and go in the same direction)." Niall Cooper, CAP.

"The index makes it really hard to find comments, so if you don't contribute immediately you lose the comment that you want to reply to. The interconnectedness of comments made the index
quite circular rather than linear, if that makes sense.”
Mblindamer, participant.

From the layout of the site it is not easy to visualise the ‘timing’ of the discussions. The way that messages appear on the screen relates to topic rather than to timing as it would be in real-time conversation. This makes it difficult to follow chronologically, but easier to follow in terms of keeping on-topic. We suspect that the structure of Webboard is easier to use if you are following a topic rather than following the discussions temporally. Webboard does include functions that allow users to see ‘New’ messages or messages posted since a certain date, but these are embedded deep within the sub-menus and are not obvious to infrequent users. This format makes the discussions very different in character from real-time discussion. It has the benefit of allowing several conversations about different topics to occur concurrently and allows the same people to be involved in different conversations at the same time. It creates an instant record of all that is said (unlike real-time conversations, unless instantly transcribed) and can allow people time to alter their previous comments (during one visit-period) or reconfirm any ambiguities or inconsistencies.

The written format of discussions means that people can move away from the topic and talk about broader issues - which is not generally tolerated in a face-to-face discussion. Feedback is not guaranteed in an online discussion - whereas the etiquette of face-to-face discussions requires that some sort of minimal response be given when a question is asked. In the online world it is much easier to be ignored.

"The discussions could have been guided more closely. There didn’t seem to be any particular “shape” to the discussions.” Gavioli, participant.

"Didn’t see it as a discussion - just putting views across and explaining recommendations. Didn’t see it as interactive.” Zaccheus2000, participant.

The role of the discussion moderator is to encourage interaction and response, and to ensure that people remain on-topic. This is difficult to achieve in a face-to-face discussion and even harder to achieve online because there are no guarantees that people will respond positively to direction or correction. It is important for the moderator of online forums to foster an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect and tolerance so that discussions can ensue in a comfortable, wholesome and productive manner. It is also the role of the moderator to try to elicit responses to questions and issues raised by participants from the MPs.

Did the moderator do enough? "More commitment to get replies to specific questions... Want to encourage users to come back. If everyone got replies then it would be a lot more interactive and more worthwhile.” Barbara from EAPN, participant.

This is particularly difficult to achieve and a comprehensive strategy to do this should be developed for future consultations.
(2) Depth of discussions
Some thought that the discussions did not tackle issues deeply enough. Niall Cooper criticised the discussions for being superficial and merely scratching the surface of the issues.

"My impression is that it is very 'bitty' - few of the themes were developed in any depth and still fewer in terms of identifying, via the discussions, specific policy recommendations. This was partly conditioned by the episodic nature of participation in the consultation - and contrasts with some of the other ways in which we try and work with groups of grassroots people over a period of time top help them develop a collective understanding of their own experiences, of the policy context and of the possible policy recommendations." Niall Cooper, CAP.

This perceived 'shallowness' seemed in part due to the nature and format of the discussions. The role of the moderator should be to tease out the important points in any discussion in order to combat 'shallowness'.

The summary report of the consultation is a vital part of the process. The Uspeak summary report drew together the details of the discussions after the consultation had closed. This process can take account of the format of the discussions when pulling out the key findings and can deconstruct the layout of the discussions to bind together issues that may not have been physically close on screen.

(3) Sign posting
The 'click-throughs' for extra information on the home page need to be more obvious to users. For example one user read the words 'click here' on the web page and did not realise that they had to use their mouse to reach the additional information.

"There was one where it said 'click here' underlined. Now I kept looking at all the keys but I couldn't see a key for 'click here'." Muriel, participant.

The use of icons and pictures would make this clearer, for example saying 'Click on the photo to read more about the select committee' with a photo icon.

(4) Font sizes
The font sizes on the website were criticised for being too small.

"Maybe some of the points should be in large type and font." David1

Larger fonts are needed for people with eyesight difficulties. The Royal National Institute for the Blind suggests a series of options that can make internet usage easier for the partially sighted or blind;
- **Screen Magnification software**
  Use this software to magnify a portion of the original screen. Magnified area follows the cursor around the screen.

- **Speech support software**
  Use this software to 'speak' the content of word documents, menu items and icons using speakers.

- **Web browser alterations**
  The background and foreground colour options can be altered and font sizes can be increased to suit preferences, via the browser.

- **Refreshable Braille**
  The text on the screen is displayed in Braille next to the keyboard.

- **Larger Monitor**
  Using a 19, 20, or 21-inch monitor can greatly increase the viewing area and the area available to magnify. Monitors with a faster refresh rate (90Hz) are more suited for visually impaired people. A resolution of 640 by 480 (VGA) or 800 by 600 (SVGA) is recommended.

- **Keytop stickers and large keyboards**
  Keytop stickers can be placed on the keys of the keyboard to make their positions more obvious. Larger keyboards with bold letters can be bought with keys up to four times larger than ordinary keyboards.²

(5) **Special features**
Some participants lacked dexterity with the technical features of the site. For example Allye, though a high level user of the site, had problems searching for specific messages.

"It was either today's postings or I had to keep scrolling through and clicking on the plus sign and seeing if anyone had posted any new ones." Allye, participant.

There was actually a search function that could pull out all the messages from a certain date onwards, however these features were buried well into the site and not obvious even to high level, experienced users. *Producing a Users' Guide for Advanced Users* as well as for *Beginners* should make these features more accessible to experienced users.

(6) **Download times**
Some participants suggested that the site was quite time-consuming to use - in terms of download times and in terms of having to trawl through lots of messages each time. These aspects are due both to the software used and due to slow PCs with limited memory. We tried to minimise the download times by having few graphics on the site.

(7) **Extra information on the site**
Some participants desired more information on the site - about the benefit system generally and about the process of consultation.

² See the RNIB factsheet "Low Vision. Technology in Learning and Employment" available at www.rnib.org.uk/technology
"There needs to be a set of good links to hard information. Background briefings with facts and views, heavy on facts." Name withheld, participant.

"Need more information about planned government initiatives or changes to existing system." M Brook, participant.

The parliamentary (not governmental) nature of the consultation confused a few people and this adversely affected their participation.

"This was just a sop to the coming election." Chris, participant.

We need to provide optional extra information about parliament and the difference between its role and that of government. Users might benefit from knowing:

- What is a select committee? (Click here to find out more)
- What does the social security select committee do? (Click here to find out more e.g. information about inquiries)
- Who are the members of the social security select committee? (Click here to find out more)
- How will this consultation help the social security select committee in their inquiry? (Click here to find out more)

Each should click-through to a pop-up page with a short paragraph and possibly photographs explaining what parliament is, what the role of select committees are and how they function, and how this consultation is feeding into that process\(^3\). Participants must be offered the information to understand the difference between parliament and government so that they are not put off by what could seem to be a 'governmental' initiative. This information was not made clear enough to users during Uspeak. Links through to a set of relevant websites should also be provided (relevant pages of the parliament website www.parliament.uk and to related information sources – online newspaper articles, benefits information etc). The potential of the web to provide a cluster of relevant information – an online resource – was under-explored in Uspeak. It would aid people’s understanding of the parliamentary process in which they were participating, and would inform and empower citizens who are normally excluded from this type of information.

(8) Format of the discussions
Several participants suggested that wider use of questions would have been useful, e.g. a question and answer format to spark off the debate.

"Perhaps a question and answer section (like this) would have helped the participants to be more specific, the range was too broad." Susan, participant.

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\(^3\) Each pop-up page should have a symbol in the top right corner saying 'Click here to return to the main page' so that participants do not get lost when manoeuvring around the site
Though the concept of online deliberation goes beyond Q&A sessions to informed and reasoned debate, perhaps the use of questions could have been exploited more in order to stimulate debate and make the existing debate more accessible and less intimidating to newcomers. If people see a list of questions (open question style) this may encourage them to ‘take the plunge’. It would also help people to focus their minds and their comments and avoid irrelevant material being posted. Other participants preferred to put their experiences into their own words rather than being tied down to rigid formats.

One participant suggested having specific ‘times’ for specific issues. These could be advertised in advance - for example, people wanting to discuss children’s tax credit could come online on Friday afternoon. This is a valid idea, and may prove a good way of encouraging participation by MPs.

(9) Finding the home page
Some participants had difficulties locating the home page and then difficulties entering their passwords and getting into the discussion.

"Totally worthless, I tried to get through five times but was unable to connect." RossRevenge, participant.

Being unable to find the home page prevented a handful of people from participating. We were unaware of any technical problems with the site during the consultation period, but certain individuals may have entered the URL address wrongly, or worked on a PC with a slow or malfunctioning internet connection. If people had difficulties with their passwords they were encouraged to either email us or phone up and we would rectify the problem. A few people used this facility successfully during the period.

(10) Jargon
We tried to avoid using jargon on the website. This proved fairly successful.

"There was none of this jargon used a lot of the time – it was quite plain language." Anonymous, participant.

However, it is imperative to remove all traces of computer jargon from a site so that first-time internet users can understand it in its entirety without the need for specialised knowledge.

8.1.3 Provision of IT help
We provided all participants with a one-page Users’ Guide to help them connect with and make sense of the site. Around 31% of participants used this, though few when questioned mentioned that it was particularly useful. It seemed that the site was fairly intuitive for those with previous internet experience. For those without experience, help was probably gained via the Users’ Guide and through other support mechanisms such as library or community support staff.
We did not provide specific training for individuals, although in some locations local leaders were available to provide one-to-one help with using the website.

"CAP staff did directly sit down with individuals to assist them in posting messages" Niall Cooper, CAP.

The provision of training may help potential participants to overcome their limited IT knowledge. In post-consultation research participants commented that the style of the training sessions was vital; group sessions or in-depth sessions may not necessarily overcome people's limited IT literacy. In fact, people just want to be shown how to use the site without an abstract lesson on using the internet generally.

"Probably not training, but kind of if you had it set up and so you had someone there to help and say, 'to post it you click this and then you can type in here and then you post there'. Just a five minute session and then letting people just come in and type what they wanted would be a better way of getting an overall view." Aliye, participant.

This mirrors the community access point provision offered in this consultation - where local community leaders sat down with participants to help them. This one-to-one help also occurred for some participants at local libraries with library staff.

The style and purpose of training provision needs to be explored. Arranging labour intensive one-to-one sessions will allow a handful of people to get online. On a large scale this would allow more people to get involved, but it requires a huge investment of time and energy on the part of volunteers across the country or a huge capital investment to pay trainers.

8.2 Literacy barriers

Underlying the issue of IT literacy is the need for basic language skills so that people can participate in a written consultation. People had to combine complex IT skills with grammatical, spelling and language skills. The site did not offer a spell-check facility.

The participants in Uspeak were better educated than the national average, resulting in a well-informed, educated and articulate debate. According to OECD's definition of literacy, around 23% of adults are illiterate or lack basic language skills. In low-income bands, this figure increases to 29%-33%. It is doubtful that Uspeak reflected most low-income families across the UK.

"Looking at the quality of what you had on there, it seemed to me that most people were quite well educated and quite well

informed about things and could put their point across very well. And I think you’ll find, certainly from the point of view of some of the clients I used to work with who are on benefits or are single parents, they probably wouldn’t be able to articulate themselves that well.” Allye, participant.

"Many of the single parents on Income Support have achieved university degrees, and have put forward well structured arguments and points of view. We deserved to be taken real notice of! But so do those who are less articulate – and there are probably many people with valid grievances who did not know about the consultation, or were not able to formulate their point of view sufficiently well to have the confidence to take part." Beth, participant.

That the participants were well educated led to a high quality of discussion and informed debate. It is possible that the existing messages on the site looked overwhelming for newcomers. The early posters in this consultation were articulate with good grammar and spelling – this could have been intimidating for less well-educated or less confident participants. Non-participants did not give ‘intimidation’ as a reason when interviewed - however there were many potential participants who we could not contact (due to incomplete contact details, or non-return of their questionnaire) and these are the most likely people to have been put off in this way. This number is unquantifiable, yet vital to bear in mind.

From talking to participants at the Hendon estate community centre it became apparent that some doubted that their literacy was good enough to participate. They asked the project co-ordinator to put their stated comments into written words onto the site. Limited self-confidence in literacy is a key off-putting factor.

All participants’ messages in Uspeak were in English. For many low-income families in the UK, English is not the first language and they lack confidence participating in English. Multi-lingual online consultation should be explored for future consultations.

Even first-language English speakers may feel uncomfortable typing up their views and experiences rather than talking about them. Participants at Hendon felt uncomfortable at being asked to write free-style. This process is an unfamiliar method for asking people’s opinions and people may feel more comfortable filling in a form, even if they don’t like to do it.

**8.3 Email evidence**

We accepted several emails as evidence in cases where people could not access or use the site. In these cases we logged on using that person’s password and posted the message in their name.

It is possible that people felt less intimidated writing an email because it is more familiar and habitual than participating in online discussions. It is also less time-consuming and less expensive than surfing the net. Of the
people who did email us, most did not log-on to the site. Only one participant both posted messages online and emailed us – this was because they ran out of time and had more to say after the consultation had finished. Email is increasingly used by people – at home and at work – and is familiar to more people than the web. Those who emailed were at a disadvantage because they could not participate in the full deliberative aspect of the consultation. They could not see if anyone replied to their comments and did not have any chance to reply.

8.4 Interactivity as an abstracted process

Most participants were unfamiliar with communicating online and had little experience of doing so.

"The fact that it is not a "dialogue" is a little discouraging - knowing that many people can read your messages, and take them out of context." Did you prefer replying or posting? "Neither – the internet is a very artificial means of communication." Susan, participant.

Communication in an online forum can seem qualitatively different from talking at a public meeting. Niall Cooper of CAP argued that the online consultation process is too impersonal and that face-to-face consultation works better.

"Few had the time or inclination to participate in what to them might have appeared as a fairly abstracted process. Our experience of working with grassroots people is primarily via participatory groupwork, which works on the basis of face to face contact, a facilitator to draw people into the process, and a sense of group ownership of the process which validates individual contributions. Sitting at a PC on your own, posting messages to an unknown audience is clearly a different type of experience which may have been too intimidating for some.”

Niall Cooper, CAP.

This comment touches on three points – the differences between face-to-face and online communication, the feelings of ownership of different forms of communication and the differences in feedback from different forms of interactivity.

- **Face-to-face versus online talk**

Sitting at a computer can be an individualistic process, and one with which many people are unfamiliar. People who work with computers and have experience of using email and the internet to communicate have had time to adapt to the new medium of communication. However, socially excluded low-income groups are less likely to have this previous experience to guide them. We should not underestimate the effect of individualism and the distance between people communicating by electronic means. One cannot see or hear the person with whom one is communicating - unlike the telephone or face-to-face meetings. It is difficult to visualise the person at the other end of the communication, particularly when that other person
is ‘parliament’ or a ‘select committee’ or some other abstract phenomenon. CAP representatives believe this abstractedness may have deterred people from participating. Overcoming this can only come through familiarisation with the medium (via education and training), group-based participation (in community or family access points) and information on the site to explain and familiarise the participants with each other and the process in which they are participating.

- **Ownership**
Participants traditionally excluded from parliamentary processes as well as computer-mediated communication are unlikely to feel any ownership over the process of online consultation, partly because of its abstracted nature. These feelings can be combated by two mechanisms. Firstly, by the creation of a website that is welcoming, open and inclusive and offers a democratic space for people to raise their own comments and thoughts without the fear of being mocked or demeaned for any comments they make. The website should be created in collaboration with community groups in order that the wording, style and presentation are appropriate and open to all. Uspeak had a welcome message by the moderator to welcome people: “Uspeak is your space - for you to tell your story and state your view in your own words. The social security select committee is waiting to hear your experience of tax credits, work incentives, the benefits system and childcare. This is your chance to help shape future policy.” More should be done to involve people in their deliberative space. Secondly, more should be done to offer people information and training in the use of computers and about the work of parliament so that they feel empowered and included in the consultation process.

- **Feedback**
The feedback which can be expected in an online consultation can be sparse in the short term - it is not live chat - so if no-one is on the website at the same time as you, you may not get an instant reply unlike in face-to-face conversation. This resulted in disillusionment by several participants when their comments went ‘unheeded’.

"I felt I was just making isolated comments, and had no feedback from MPs or other callers.” Gavioli, participant.

What would have helped you to contribute more? "More response to messages posted. A quick response to every initial issue raised, rather than most of them having no response.” Mbandamer, participant.

"You couldn’t tell if anyone was taking your views seriously." Sally H, participant.

To combat this we could include a ‘What to expect’ information section on the website including information on how quickly to expect a response, what the MPs’ role is, and what format the responses may take. We should also explain why the process is worthwhile even if you don’t get an instant response because all comments are presented to parliament in the final summary report.
8.5 Fear of computers and typing

A few people submitted hand-written evidence postally, which we typed in and posted on the site. This could suggest that people didn’t want to type it in themselves, possibly due to a fear of typing on computers or lack of word processing knowledge. People can lack the confidence to tackle new technologies and learn new skills, particularly when there is limited support and when they have not grown up with the technology. They may fear that they lack the ability to understand and overcome their difficulties. They may not see the need to develop such skills. This diminished the interactive nature of the website since some people never used the site and therefore never had the opportunity to reply to other people’s comments or see the MPs’ reactions. It undermined people’s experience of the consultation process.

Aside from a fear of computers or typing this could be due to other factors such as lack of access.

8.6 Registration procedure

In several instances it was indicated that the registration form was off-putting to people. Steve Thompson from Durham City Council and other community contacts suggested this.

"People put off by questionnaire – be anonymous, invading privacy" Carol, Pack distributor.

Also, participants on the Hendon estate did participate but did not want to fill in the registration form.

The form was designed in consultation with CAP. It was reduced to one A4 sheet and the additional questions were posted on the website as an optional extra. Completion of the form was not necessary to participate. The form may have been too complex or too long. It may also have been too ‘official looking’ and people may have overlooked or doubted the statement at the top which stated that no information would be passed onto government. There may have been some confusion about the nature of the Hansard Society – some may not have realised it is an independent organisation.

To combat this, we should encourage more registration by telephone in future consultations – this method is easier, quicker and less intimidating for participants. We could also put the registration form online making it more anonymous because no ‘official body’ is so visible. This has the disadvantage of making it more costly for people to fill in (and possibly more complicated) and may cause more suspicion than it alleviates. People are invariably suspicious of data collection – we need to ensure that people understand the purposes for which the data will be used.

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5 Giving more information on the website, as previously discussed, should combat this.
8.7 Self confidence and self image

People at the Hendon estate were hesitant because they did not think their story was relevant or worth telling. Was this because they didn't believe their opinions to be important enough to be listened to or because they didn't classify themselves as relevant to the consultation?

Several participants doubted that they had any valuable knowledge or opinions – they did not see their opinions as worthy of being listened to. The point of online consultation with socially excluded groups is precisely because these people have experiences and knowledge worth listening to. Online consultation has to tap these experiences and feedback to help parliament better understand the on-the-ground experience of policy making.

People’s self image often prevented them from participating. They did not identify themselves as ‘poor’ and did not want to be seen as being knowledgeable about being ‘poor’. It was a question of pride and of not feeling qualified to take part – ‘I’m not poor so therefore why would I want to take part and why would they want to listen to what I have to say?’ Furthermore, participating in groups creates added pressures. People do not want to look foolish or say something at which others in the group could laugh. People perhaps felt a pressure to perform because an ‘official’ (i.e. Hansard Society staff) was present.

It would have been interesting (yet methodologically difficult) to see what would have happened if an ‘official’ had not been there - would people have gone online at all?

8.8 Dyslexia

Dyslexia poses a problem for online consultation. Though we did not ask participants whether they suffered any disabilities, this could severely restrict people’s ability and willingness to participate online. The lack of a spell check facility may have deterred some people from participating; having to write your own comments without this security can be off-putting and may cause people’s comments not to be taken seriously for the wrong reasons. We believe that people would be more inclined to make a contribution if help was provided. We should therefore consider including a spell check in future consultations. There are some sites that allow you to cut and paste your work from Word but these are not well-known and should be made more widely available.

8.9 Learning and education

In order to participate in the consultation, people needed to use technical skills including word processing and navigation of the internet. These skills may be learnt and acquired through school or the workplace. People who
did not have access to education or training at work may have had
difficulties or been unable to participate in the consultation.

Information and communications technology (ICT) has been compulsory
for all pupils aged five to 16 since the inception of the National Curriculum
in 1986. ICT skills are developed within the context of the other subjects
of the National Curriculum.

Anyone who left school more than 15 years ago may not have learnt ICT
skills. People working in office environments now tend to use computers
and increasingly the internet. If people have not used computers at work,
or had no training since leaving school it is unlikely that they would have
the skills to be able to participate.

Using a computer for the first time is a daunting prospect and some
participants may have felt fear in trying to learn a new skill. IT knowledge
is usually gradually accumulated over a period of months and years -
learning enough to participate in the consultation could take a lengthy
amount of time.

8.10 Lack of interest

It is not always easy to convince people that this sort of exercise is
worthwhile. Disenfranchised people and those without a voice most
frequently feel disillusioned and sceptical about exercises such as this. It
was up to the organisers of Uspeak and CAP volunteers across the country
to convince people otherwise. It is only by delivering a truly open and
listening forum that people will feel encouraged to participate – access to
the forum must be as inclusive as possible and must consider all efforts
possible to achieve this. It could be said that we only reached already
active people or people that are used to exercising their voice in these
types of arena. This may be the case for some participants, but certainly
not the case for all. We are sure that this consultation did give some
groups of people access to a select committee in a way that they have not
had before.

8.11 Limited physical network

We worked with CAP to gain access to the participants for this
consultation. This proved to be a difficult task since CAP had no physical
network of access points for participants to use. In previous consultations
we worked with larger partners who had a physical network of shelters
(such as Women’s Aid) which all had PCs that could be used by residents
and visitors at certain times in the week. Because the CAP network did not
have a set of centres or locations to reach the socially excluded we had to
direct people to alternative free access points such as local libraries.
People who are not in the regular habit of visiting their library, or using the
PC there may find this an inconvenience and, unless they are strongly
motivated to participate, they may not do so. In future consultations we
must embed computer access through community access points as the
mainstay of accessing the consultation, and couple this with secondary
access methods.
8.12 Fear of authority

We were aware that some participants might have a fear of authority figures and official organisations (government, benefits agencies, Hansard Society etc). This fear of revealing personal details was demonstrated by people’s reluctance to fill in the registration form, and reluctance to come online at all. In some ways the opportunity may also have seemed ‘too good to be true’ and people may have been suspicious of it. This is a novel concept – people are unused to having direct online interaction with representatives (they are unused even to having face-to-face interaction with them) and therefore may doubt the reality of the process and the reality of the outcomes. It is the Hansard Society’s role to promote this as an effective mechanism for consulting with Parliament. By providing information to participants and convincing them of the validity of participation we can create a trusted and successful best practice model.

8.13 Making a difference

When participants registered they were asked their opinions of the role of the MPs in the consultation. 79% thought MPs would be interested in the results of the consultation and 71% thought MPs were interested in their views. Over a quarter (26%) thought MPs would not be interested in their views. There appeared to be a generally positive attitude towards the involvement of the MPs and the impact the consultation might have. Some of the people who doubted that MPs would pay attention could have been deterred from participating.

After the consultation, surveys revealed a lot of cynicism about whether the consultation would make a difference to policy makers and policy making.

"I think there is a long way to go to convince people that taking part in such an exercise can make a difference" Ken Bellamy, Sheffield City Council

"It is important to our work that we have an impact on policy makers. I am undecided as to whether [Uspeak] has proven the case either way" Niall Cooper, CAP.

"I was aware that there was very little chance that comments you received would make any difference to current policy and time is too precious and short to waste on useless action” Chris, participant.

We hope that people would feel encouraged (via information on the site and the design of the site itself) to participate despite any doubts they may have – through participation, excluded sections of the population can have a voice.
8.14 Time and resource constraints

Time was a major constraint that limited the amount of involvement participants could sustain. Many participants said that a lack of time limited the number of times they could log-on and the amount of time they could spend online. About half of those questioned who never logged-on said that lack of time was the main constraint.

A lack of time also limited the amount of preparation that the community partners could put in.

"Excellent project, would have benefited from a longer 'lead-in' time to canvas support/recruit participants" Peter Brookes, Durham County Council.

"We were principally reliant on staff/workers in other organisations being willing to pass on the information and/or directly involve grassroots in the process, and my impression is that few workers either had the time or the inclination to participate... Whilst CAP staff did sit down with individuals to assist them in posting messages, this was quite a labour intensive one-to-one process. With a busy work schedule, it was not possible to do this on more then a handful of occasions... I'm aware that I didn't put a great deal of time into the consultation once it got up and running, which I guess reflects the fact that I didn't feel stimulated to participate, even as a named sponsor. To make it work successfully we would need to put more time and resources into face-to-face work with individuals and groups to encourage and facilitate their participation." Niall Cooper, CAP.

Producing an online consultation is a highly intensive and time-consuming process. We relied heavily on the network of our partners to provide access to the participants for the consultation. This meant convincing people that with the necessary time input, the process would work. Yet without the time investment the process was less likely to be successful – a catch 22 situation. Convincing people about the validity of the internet as a mechanism proved difficult. Niall Cooper argued that larger rewards could be reaped from a much smaller investment of time (such as in face-to-face group work to provide oral evidence to a parliamentary inquiry). This point is valid for a small organisation such as CAP, which lacked the physical network and human resources to pump into an online consultation. Online consultation with socially excluded groups requires direct face-to-face contact with community contacts and their members and physical provision of IT access and expertise on a minute local scale. It requires matching handfuls of people to one PC or to one local contact person. This is very difficult and time-consuming to achieve but crucial for these projects to reach the really socially excluded.

No matter how much time is invested, the feeling will remain that more could have been done and more people could have been contacted. Online
consultation is a highly qualitative process involving in-depth evidence giving from members of a group with first-hand experience of the issues. It intends to provide qualitative evidence from a small sample of people who can reflect the views of that group more widely. It should be seen as an additional and highly useful consultation mechanism for disadvantaged and excluded groups.
9.0 Role of the Social Security Select Committee

We were supported in this exercise by the clerk of the social security select committee, Philip Moon. The committee’s chairman Archy Kirkwood MP endorsed the consultation and agreed for the committee to be involved in Uspeak. The Committee agreed to formally accept the findings of Uspeak in a summary report after the consultation.

We wrote to all the committee members to inform them about the consultation and issued them all with passwords so that they could have a look at the site. Of the members of the committee, two logged on to look at the site: Karen Buck MP and Archy Kirkwood MP. Philip Moon also logged on. Karen Buck MP and Philip Moon both posted messages. Archy Kirkwood MP attended and spoke at the launch of Uspeak in parliament during the second week of the consultation and formally received the findings on behalf of the committee in April.

Other MPs were also issued with passwords – including Richard Allan MP who logged on and posted several messages.

9.1 Participant feedback

The MPs’ role was quite minimal within the forum and the response from the participants to this was mixed. In the post-consultation survey we asked people if they were satisfied with the MPs’ inputs. Only 11% were satisfied and almost 45% were not satisfied. 14% of people did not realise that MPs were involved online. In terms of whether MPs were interested in what was said, more people were optimistic – a third said they thought MPs would be interested in what was said. However, one third did not reply to this question or said they did not know, and 25% said they did not believe that the MPs were interested in what they said.

Some people thought that having the MPs online was empowering and felt a real connection – as though their comments were really being listened to.

"At least they’re actually using it as well, that was quite sort of empowering, that you had a contact." Anonymous, participant.

"It enabled people to speak directly. People could speak and know the committee was listening." Zaccheus2000, participant.

Others recognised that the MPs’ role was limited but still highly useful and an important facet to people’s enthusiasm.

"There was a real fly of interest when one of the MPs, was it Richard Allan, actually posted. There were quite a few posts back to him and I think maybe if you’d had a couple of the others actually a little bit more active then it would have been better.” Alilye, participant.
Other participants were less optimistic and were disappointed that the interaction with the MPs was so limited online. Some expressed doubts that the MPs would even take an interest in the findings report. Only 19% thought the consultation would make a difference to policy on welfare and work. A much higher percentage 36% had doubts about this. The remainder (45%) did not reply, which also would suggest some scepticism.

"I hope the in-put will make a difference to their thinking. How will we know?" Spanmember, participant.

What would have helped you to contribute more? "More assurance that contributions would have some use to government. I could do with more proof that the committee will not only read but use the data in policy-making." I Cunliffe, participant.

"I feel slightly frustrated that the promised response from MPs has not materialised, although we have been told that they have been reading the messages. A few more replies would have confirmed that fact." Beth, participant.

"Those in government have never had to live on benefits, and cannot know what it is really like. Now that they have been clearly made aware of what it's like, I feel that these issues will be brushed aside as irrelevant or unworkable." Beth, participant.

Even when the MPs did come online some participants wanted a stronger commitment and clearer answers to the questions raised.

"There's no real answer from Archy Kirkwood or anybody, and to me it seemed a waste of time. There's no answer - and you must have answers mustn't you? People are complaining and nobody's getting back to them." Muriel, participant.

The participants desired accountability from the committee - calling for a firmer commitment as to what the outcomes of the exercise would be. Some participants clearly felt that participation during the consultation was as important as reading the report afterwards. Although MPs can only handle casework from their own constituents, many members of the public desired closer interaction online with the MPs and more evidence that they were listening.

"I think you'll find certainly towards the end you're thinking, I know its all going to go into your report but its not the same as coming online, then how much good is it going to do?" Allye, participant.

What would have helped you to contribute more? "The feeling of interaction on behalf of parliamentarians and their researchers. I think that MPs have to respond and perhaps initiate areas of interest." David, participant.
One in-depth interviewee was so disillusioned with the lack of response that she rejected the process as a whole and said she would rely on written communication in the future.

"The better thing is writing. And then you can keep a copy for reference. I thought I'd go along, but really it's better to phone or write letters." Muriel, participant.

This was mainly because of the lack of replies – Muriel believed that she was more likely to receive a response from a formal written letter. She also had to access the computer from a library and could not keep going back to check if there were any responses.

"You really need a computer at home to get onto these people and I would never do that, never buy a computer. It takes so much time. And it's expensive." Muriel, participant.

If MPs made time to come online and ask specific questions or respond to certain issues this would make the exercise more fulfilling for the participants in that they would discover exactly what the MPs would like to know about. But until IT access is more widespread, this method can only be an addition to existing contact methods - not a replacement.

What would have helped you to participate more? "Knowing what the select committee's intentions were and what types of evidence and information they were seeking" Jean, participant.

Many people called for more exercises of this type. It appeared that the consultation did make people feel more closely connected to parliament and MPs even if the scale of their involvement was at times disappointing.

"More inclusion of this type - so one can have direct contact with those at the top and of course to the institutions that influence government." Aquilla 5, participant.

"Please keep doing things like this and hearing from people who live the problems politicians seek to solve." J Higgs, participant.

With enhanced publicity, exercises such as this could become a useful and inclusive method of consultation.

"I think if our local MPs in the paper saying 'this is what we're asking you to do, the computer will be set up here'... it will attract a lot more attention." Allye, participant.

**9.2 Committee feedback**

Archy Kirkwood MP, the chair of the committee, was interviewed after receipt of the Uspeak Summary Report. He viewed the consultation as a very successful experiment which contributed to the committee's work programme.
"[Online consultation] would enhance the ability of the committee to do its work and for the individuals interested in social security policy development. So I think it’s an experiment that has been a success and I think if it were to be rolled out on a more widespread basis it would enhance the work of Parliament." Archy Kirkwood MP

Archy Kirkwood felt that the main benefits of online consultation lay in the ability of the medium to go beyond anecdotal and individually based evidence to providing an overview of the benefit system as a whole and what improvements can be made to its service provision.

"You’ve got people who are not so much arguing the case for an increase in their disability living allowance using their own practical circumstances but saying I have been a customer of this service in the widest terms and I think if I was in charge of it I could do it better by doing the following two or three things. That’s the value for us because you’ve got at one and the same time somebody’s who’s been at the sharp end, been through the process but who’s not just coming to you get increase in the benefit they’re actually interested in improving the service. And we need to know about that. The more information, facts and circumstances we can accumulate in that area the easier it is for us to do our work as a committee and put recommendations to government ministers, because they’re the people who have the opportunity to change the policy." Archy Kirkwood MP

He was confident that the findings would be useful to the committee.

"Even if they don’t generate a whole lot of Parliamentary activity in the short term, they are banked and we will be doing reports about some of the subjects that have been covered in the consultation and they will always be available to us as a resources over the middle to longer term. But I hope that we will be able to get some written Parliamentary questions. There are some rather obvious things that have been suggested that I think are perfectly valid subjects of written Parliamentary questions." Archy Kirkwood MP

Archy Kirkwood identified a number of difficulties with the consultation that would have to be ironed out in future projects to make the process more suitable for parliament.

- **Timing**
  The timing of the consultation in the run-up to a general election was rather awkward for the committee and meant that many members devoted less time to it than they would have wished.

  "The work of the committee has been slightly distracted by the imminent onset of the general election." Archy Kirkwood MP
• **Resources**
The online consultation places additional pressure on office costs for the MPs involved.

"I know that some of my colleagues feel that the burden of responsibility of the committee work already produces for them is great and there is an issue about getting some better resources for all members of Parliament through the office cost allowance. I think for [online consultation] to be really made use of properly, we would need to get some extra resources in our own offices to make sure that we take advantage of it fully."

Archy Kirkwood MP

To make these consultations work properly, MPs would need a dedicated part-time member of staff devoted to it.

"If you could it would enhance the work of the committees and All Party groups here enormously."

• **Technical difficulties**
Some of the MPs had problems accessing the consultation via the Parliamentary Data and Video Network (PDVN) due to the restrictions of the firewall in accessing outside sites.

"After that, once you'd been in once or twice I don't think it was difficult, I found it easy to use. I think whoever did it knew what they were doing. Once you were in I found it very useful. " Archy Kirkwood MP

• **Participants' backgrounds**
Archy Kirkwood recognised, as this report has pointed out, that the participants in Uspeak were not at the very poorest levels of the benefit system. The range of the participants would need to be expanded for future projects.

"What we would really, really get most value from as a committee would be looking at some of the people in the really excluded areas of the benefit system. I think that a process like this, even though it was only a pilot and you were encouraging people and giving them help, they were still daunted by the thought of sitting down in the middle of a nightmare existence and trying to sit down and pick their way through it and be sensible about what policy changes should be made to the public service" Archy Kirkwood MP

Archy Kirkwood suggested that to encourage truly socially excluded people in this process requires small scale one-to-one projects combining one-to-one internet training sessions and group-work to get people involved. He recommended that a small-scale project could be undertaken in the future to try to pilot this.
The committee welcomed the findings of Uspeak as a novel and worthwhile method of consulting with specific groups online. Archy Kirkwood recommended that keeping the consultations focussed on policy issues and directed to committees and all party groups with interest and expertise in those areas would ensure that the procedure is suitable to be adopted as part of the parliamentary process.

During Uspeak the Hansard Society had a good relationship with the clerk of the committee which is essential for a route direct to the heart of the committee. In the future we would like to establish a closer relationship with the members of the committee.

We hope that further online consultations will be formally accepted and formally responded to by the relevant committee. We would hope for closer connections with the members of the committee and a commitment from several (if not all) members to go online. We would like to set up an initial meeting (with the whole committee or just with the chair) to assess and explain what we will do for them, and explore what issues they would like to have raised in the consultation and a formal meeting afterwards where the committee can respond to the proposals made.
10.0 Conclusion

The *Uspeak* online consultation was well received by the committee; its findings and recommendations were of a high quality, based on real people’s experiences of living, working and bringing up children on the Tax Credit and related benefits system.

The participants who did read and post messages, though not particularly reflective of low-income families in terms of education, did understand and make valid points that were based on their own experiences and those of their friends and acquaintances. The majority were in receipt of some form of benefit and a good proportion received Working Families Tax Credit, the focus of the consultation.

Many of those who did not take part (and those who did) faced extreme difficulties and barriers to participating including limited access to the internet and limited finances to pay for such access. They had to combat and overcome limited computer and internet skills, as well as problems of literacy and confidence. There were many other barriers to participation: the user-unfriendliness of web-based software, the lack of face-to-face support to use the computer, the difficulties in participating in an abstracted process with no immediate visible gains and the general lack of visible MPs’ involvement. In order to run consultations such as this successfully, we must come to understand these barriers and learn and develop new ways of combating them in order that as many people as wish to participate can do so.

Online consulting is not intended to replace other forms of consultation (including face-to-face consultation) and is not a panacea to the disconnectedness many citizens feel from their own MPs and the parliamentary process. It is however a potentially useful and inclusive mechanism for giving traditionally excluded citizens the opportunity to participate in the affairs of parliament and contribute direct evidence to a committee specialising in and interested in their views and experiences. The Hansard Society is of the view that, with further development and investment of time and resources, these pilot online consultations can provide a new and successful means of using electronic communication to facilitate democratic communication and enhance parliamentary democracy.

A series of practical recommendations are presented in the next chapter as a result of the experience of running *Uspeak*. If pursued in future online consultations, they may go some way to improving the process and making it more inclusive in future.
11.0 Recommendations

- **Memorandum of understanding**
  Set up a formal agreement and understanding of what will be done by all parties and shared responsibility for the project's success. This 'memorandum of understanding' would outline the mutual needs and benefits and would secure commitment on the part of the major partners.

- **Partnerships**
  Work with a nationally recognised (or nationally networked) lead partner and some smaller local groups. It is important that they have a network of locations (whether charity shops, hostels, community centres, weekly meetings) where members of the organisation can meet to get involved in the consultation. Computer access will be required at network locations. Partners must have some enthusiasm or interest in 'e' project and 'e' solutions.

- **Local authorities**
  Take a more targeted approach to working with local authorities. Link the online consultation more closely into local projects. Inform all local authorities as soon as the details of the consultation are fixed and try to link into local scale projects in various areas.

- **Sub-partners**
  Include more sub-partners in the network. Establish a tiered approach because it is impossible to foresee which partnerships will work best - so much depends on 'on-the-ground' enthusiasm for the project and individual personality. Allow longer lead-in time to allow time for planning more widespread publicity (for example, many newsletters are monthly, so contact people at least a month prior to 'lift-off' so that information about the consultation can penetrate their publication cycles).

- **Lengthy lead-in time**
  All partners benefit from a lengthy lead-in time giving time to prepare software and raise awareness of the consultation over a longer period.

- **MPs' role**
  Contact all MPs with details of the consultation at least one month before it starts. Incorporate a press release, thereby providing a publicity opportunity for MPs in their constituencies. Reach an agreement of what level of involvement MPs will have. Provide a weekly digest/executive summary of what has happened in the consultation discussions. Suggest that different members with various interests take on a particular section of the site (a specific thread) and monitor it, place comments etc.

- **Website design**
  Utilise the feedback from previous partners to make the website more usable for the target audience. Meet the web designers regularly to make further improvements for next time. Explore the possibility of getting accessories that would help target audiences - such as magnifiers for computer screens for older people or those with eyesight difficulties.
• **Fixed dates**
Avoid changing dates and timings unless for vital reasons. (*Uspeak*’s start date was delayed to allow for the Christmas holidays – this affected the production of publicity material.)

• **Press releases to local press**
Send out all press releases at least one month before commencement, allowing a longer lead-in time for registrations. Send a reminder press release in the week prior to commencement.

• **National press**
Approach national papers early (as soon as initial details are confirmed: topic, select committee, dates, target audience) and keep them updated.

• **Targeted press**
Target specific and relevant press publications and specific sections of national newspapers (e.g. health section of Guardian etc.)

• **Partners’ PR machines**
Make use of the public relations machines of our larger partners.

• **DTV**
Incorporate a test-dimension in our next consultation that offers online consultation access via digital television. DTV will have a huge potential next time in terms of giving access to a wider number of people through a new medium of consultation and be a source of excellent publicity.

• **Web links**
Link our website to as many relevant websites as possible (parliamentary, community, edemocracy and media websites).

• **Moderation**
Experiment with different styles of moderation on smaller scale projects in order to evaluate the effects of higher versus lower level moderation.

• **Combating IT literacy problems**
Explore using idea of story telling method (soap opera style) using multimedia (voice recognition, video etc) for those who do not have IT knowledge and experience.

• **Kiosks**
Have the full consultation running on the kiosks prior to the start of the consultation, particularly in kiosks in indoor locations. This would combat any unwillingness of people to participate in an outdoor location. Run a test on a few kiosks before rolling-out to all kiosks.

• **Telephone registration**
Encourage this method of registration over all others in future consultations. The freephone number proved to be a very useful registration method since it allowed immediate creation of the username and password.
• **Research versus questionnaires**
  Balance the need to collect data about participants with the possibility of putting them off with a lengthy form. Develop a compromise based on extended conversations and advice from various community workers on how best to word the form. Some advice was taken this time, but this could be extended in the future.

• **Email confirmation**
  Consider the alternatives to sending registration details by post. If people register by telephone, we can tell them their password over the phone and avoid the need to send them a password by post. For people registering by email, we can email their passwords to them thereby avoiding the need for post.

• **Reminder emails**
  Use reminder emails with a ‘click-through’ to the website at regular intervals during the consultation (weekly and when important events occur – such as the launch or a message by an MP). These worked well and should be used to more effect in future.

• **Local radio**
  Local radio interviews worked well (particularly LBC in London) as one of the most effective procedures to encourage registration. Target more local radio stations next time with a view to increasing this dimension.

• **Users’ Guide**
  Produce a tiered *Users’ Guide* for users with different levels of experience – ‘Beginner’, ‘Intermediate’ and ‘Advanced’. Beginner should be fool-proof for those who have never used the internet before. Intermediate should cater for people with some experience of the internet but not of Webboard software, and Advanced should explain the full functionality of Webboard (including search mechanisms etc) to advanced users.

• **RNIB recommendations**
  Give people access to the RNIB recommendations of how to make the site more usable for the visually impaired (via a link on the site and by incorporating them ourselves). Try to adopt as many of the recommendations within our site as possible (for example, specific font sizes and background colours).

• **Extra information**
  Make the website value-added – so that people can learn as they use the site. Offer ‘click-throughs’ to extra information (such as ‘What is a select committee?’ ‘What do they do?’ ‘How can my participation help the committee?’) and links to other sites (such as the parliament site, government department sites, NGOs and public information sites). We had a link to the Citizens Advice Bureau and gave a freephone Tax Credits number –these avenues should be explored next time.
• **Voice recognition technologies**
Explore the potential of Voice Recognition Technologies in allowing people to participate who do not have IT or basic literacy skills or who do not have English as their first language. Make the consultation multi-media by recognising that particular methods of participation will suit certain people and not others.

• **Small scale virtual committee**
Set up a small-scale online consultation, targeted at a localised group of people, in the lowest income decile, where training is provided for an intensive short consultation period. This sort of project would aim to involve people who were excluded from this consultation due to language or literacy problems or due to apathy and lack of interest or dissatisfaction with the political process. Being small scale it would be able to target grassroots people who did not hear about or get involved in Uspeak.

**Generic recommendations**

20 recommendations for running online consultations linking citizens to parliamentarians:

**Before the consultation**

- Allow at least a six-month pre-consultation phase.
- To assemble the evidence-giving group, contact organisations and interest groups who have knowledge of the subject and access to relevant participants.
- Establish an expert advisory panel who can both assist in assembling the evidence-giving group and formulate relevant opening questions for the consultation.
- Make sure the participants have sufficient understanding of computers and the internet so they can access the consultation. Basic internet training must be given when necessary.
- Provide the participants with a short IT-manual which explains how to get onto the site, how to post messages in the debate forum and how to cut and paste offline (in Word, for example) in order to cut costs.
- Inform the relevant representatives about their role in the consultation and provide them with background information and guidelines on how to use the site.
- Develop a system that ensures the site is sufficiently safe and secure for the participants to log on. Ideally, use computer generated software to create random usernames and passwords - or allow 5-6 days in order to guarantee confidential user-ID.
- To secure confidentiality and validity, participants in a consultation must fulfil the relevant requirements. In the case of the online consultation on domestic violence, access to the secure discussion section was allowed only to survivors of or workers in domestic violence.
- Make sure that participants are authentic by establishing a thorough registration process. Participants must fill in a questionnaire on social demographic factors and domestic violence before they are granted a
password and username. In the case of the online consultation on
domestic violence, registration forms were available only via women's
organisations and refuges with personal knowledge of the women, or
from the consultation co-ordinator who registered individual women
over the phone by taking them through the questionnaire step by step.

During the consultation

- Create a web site which is logical, easy to use and takes the
  participants through the information needed in a sensible order. As
  many of the participants will be first-time users of the Internet, a clear
  and welcoming design is essential - the participants must feel at ease
  so they are able to navigate the site and post their messages in the
  right locations.
- For the evidence giving to be as useful as possible, there must be a
  secure section which only approved and registered users can use. As
  well as this private section, there should also be a public section in
  which non-registered citizens can contribute to the debate.
- Include relevant background information on legislation, latest
  government initiatives, links to organisations and interest groups
  working in the area, and most importantly list a contact address for
  support and help.
- Inform the media about the consultation. This secures as broad a
  participation as possible and recruits participants who might not
  otherwise hear about the consultation.
- Introduce the moderator at the beginning of the consultation to
  establish a personal tone and create an encouraging and inclusive
  atmosphere where participants are willing to submit frequent and
  personal evidence.
- Daily monitoring and moderation of the site. The moderator must:
  1. Ensure that the debate proceeds in accordance with the ground-
     rules: no user must dominate the debate to the extent that they
     discourage new users from joining in. The language must not be
     inappropriate or too aggressive.
  2. Post messages and information with relevance to the debate forum
  3. Post a minimum of one summary of the discussion in the
     consultation period.
     This helps to steer the discussion and keeps the debate focused on
     the opening questions.
- Encourage the representatives who have agreed to participate to do so.

After the consultation

- Post a post-online consultation survey on the site in the last days of the
  consultation in order to gather feedback from the participants. Send a
  hard copy of the survey to participants who do not complete the online
  survey.
- Allow enough time to analyse the evidence of and the interaction on the
  site.
• To apply a quantitative methodology to the qualitative data, use content analysis. An inductive coding framework using the statistical SPSS-software is a useful tool for data reduction.
• Post any results, analysis or reports based on the consultation onto the site for the participants to read.
Appendix 1  Registration form

Registration Form for Uspeak
www.Uspeak.org.uk

Please complete this form to register for Uspeak, the Hansard/CAP online consultation. All personal details will remain confidential and information will not be used individually. This information will not be passed onto government or related organisations.

Please choose a 'name' to use as a log-in for the internet discussion (e.g. Your own name: JSmith)
Please choose a memorable word or number of at least three digits to be your password for the consultation.

Please make a note of your username and password, as you will need to type this in each time you join in the discussion. We will send you confirmation of these details by post.

Please give a postal address to which your registration details should be sent:
Miss/Mr/Mrs/Ms _______________________________ (Full name)
Full address ____________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________
Postcode

Telephone number: ________________________________
Email address (If applicable): _______________________

1. Male / Female (Please circle)
2. What was your age last birthday?
3. How would you describe your Ethnic Background
   (Please tick)
   □ White English
   □ White Irish
   □ White Scottish
   □ Black - Caribbean
   □ Black - African
   □ Black - Other Groups
   □ Indian
   □ Pakistani
   □ Bangladeshi
   □ Chinese
   □ Other (Please specify) _________________________

4. What is your marital status?
   □ Single, never married
   □ Single, and living with partner
   □ Married, living with husband/wife
   □ Married, and separated from husband/wife
5. How many people live in your household? __________

6. How many of these are under the age of 16? __________

7. Which of the following best describes YOUR job situation?
   - Unemployed
   - Student
   - Retired
   - Self employed
   - Housewife/Work in the home
   - Paid Work: How many hours per week? __________

8. If working, which of the following best describes your job?
   - Manual/unskilled labour
   - Semi-skilled labour/secretarial
   - Skilled/clerical work
   - Self-employed/Shop-keeper
   - Low level managerial/Teacher
   - High level managerial/professional/Doctor

9. How many OTHER people in your household are currently in paid employment? __________

10. Who earns the main/highest income in your household?
    - Yourself
    - Wife/Husband/Partner
    - Son/Daughter
    - Other relative
    - Other member of household
    - No main earner

11. What is the combined weekly income for your household, after benefits and tax? (Please tick)
    - £0 - £50
    - £51 - £100
    - £101 - £150
    - £151 - £200
    - £201 - £250
    - £251 - £500
    - £501 - £1,000
    - £1,001 and over

13. Which of the following benefits have you, or any member of your household received in the last 12 months?
    (Please tick as many as appropriate)
    **Benefits for Parents**
    - Child Benefit
    - Guardian's Allowance
Maternity Allowance
One-off Maternity Payment
Other (please specify)

**Disability benefits**
- Industrial Injury Disablement Benefit
- Disability Living Allowance
- Disabled Persons' tax Credit
- Severe Disablement Allowance
- Invalid Care Allowance
- Incapacity Benefit
- Other (please specify)

**Retirement Pensions**
- Basic retirement pension
- Income support (minimum income guarantee)
- Private Pension
- Other (please specify)

**Widow's benefits**
- Widows Pension or War Widows Pension
- Other (please specify)

**Low Income Benefits**
- Income support
- Working Families' Tax Credit
- Jobseekers allowance
- Council Tax discount/benefit
- Housing benefit
- Other (please specify)
- Others
- Winter fuel payments
- Community Care Grants
- Crisis loans
- Other (please specify)
- None of the above

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14. Would you be prepared to participate in any other events related to this consultation?  

Y / N
Appendix 2 Further details form

This form was available online via the homepage of the Uspeak website.

Further Details Form for Uspeak

Please complete this form after you have registered for Uspeak. All personal details will remain confidential and information will not be used individually. This information will not be passed onto government or related organisations.

What is your username for Uspeak: _______________________

1. Please list the ages of any children living in your household. (E.g. Seven and five years) (Text box to fill in)

2. Which of the following best describes your living accommodation? (Please tick)
   □ Own it outright
   □ Buying it with help of a loan or mortgage
   □ Pay part rent and part mortgage
   □ Rent it from a Local Authority/charity/Local Housing Company/Housing Association
   □ Rent it from a private landlord/letting agent
   □ Rent it from a family member or friend
   □ Given accommodation as part of occupation
   □ Bed and Breakfast/Other Temporary Accommodation
   □ Squatting/Homeless/Hostel
   □ Other (please specify) Text box to fill in

3. Have you ever used the internet before? Tick Yes / No

4. If yes, how often each month do you use it?

5. Where will you be accessing the internet for this consultation? (Please tick box)
   □ At home via Digital Television
   □ At home via computer
   □ In a street internet kiosk
   □ At a library
   □ At a community centre
   □ At another public place
   □ Other (Please specify) _______________________

6. How did you hear about this consultation? (Please tick box)
   □ At a local meeting
   □ At a local library
   □ In a local newspaper
   □ In a national newspaper
   □ On the television news
7. Are you a member of a political party? (Please tick)    Yes / No

8. Have you ever contacted your local MP before?    Yes / No

9. Did you vote in the last election?    Yes / No

10. Have you ever been in an internet discussion before?    Yes / No

11. Do you think that MPs will be interested in the results of this internet discussion?  Yes/ No/ Don’t know

12. Do you think that MPs are interested in what you think?  Yes/ No/ Don’t know

13. Do you watch the news on television?    Yes / No

14. If yes, how many times a week do you watch the news on Television?  

15. How many times a week do you buy a newspaper?
   - Never
   - 1-3 times a week
   - 4-6 times a week
   - Every day

16. Which newspaper do you buy most regularly? Text box to fill in

17. Which of the following educational exams have you taken? (Please tick if completed)
   - O Levels / GCSEs
   - A Levels
   - GNVQ / B-Tec
   - BA / BSc or other degree
   - HND or similar
   - Masters degree
   - Other (Please specify)

Once you have completed this form please click on the SEND button below.

Thank you for filling in this form.
If you have any questions about this form or the consultation, please call Nicola Hall on free phone 0800.
Appendix 3 Post consultation questionnaires (Did log-on)

This form was available online via the homepage of the Uspeak website. Participants were also interviewed over the telephone and postally. There was a space for added comments after each question.

**Username:**

Did you think it was a worthwhile consultation? Yes/No/Don’t know

Did you learn anything from other contributors? Yes/No/Don’t know

Had you ever used the internet before? Yes/No/Don’t know

How did you find using the website? 1 Easy 2 3 4 Hard 5

What did you find easy and difficult about using the website?

How many times did you log-in and take part in the discussion?

Did you like the fact that you had a chance to reply to others peoples’ messages? Yes/No/Don’t know

Did you prefer replying to other people’s messages or posting individual messages? (please tick)
- preferred writing individual messages
- preferred replying to other messages
- Don’t Know

Would you have liked the co-ordinator, Beccy Earnshaw to have steered the discussion more or less? More /Less/Don’t know

Which section did you find most useful?
- Tax credits
- Work
- Childcare
- Benefits
- Disability

What would have helped you to contribute more?

Did you use any of the links on the front page to gain extra information? If yes, which ones?

Did you use the blue User’s Guide? Yes/No/Don’t know

Did you use the Help page on the website? Yes/No/Don’t know

Did you make any new contacts as a result of the consultation? Yes/No/Don’t know
Have you participated in other online discussions/consultations? 
Yes/No/Don’t know

Would you participate in another online parliamentary inquiry? 
Yes/No/Don’t know

Did the fact that it was linked to the Social Security Select Committee make a difference to your participation? Yes/No/Don’t know

Do you think that MPs were interested in what you said? Yes/No/Don’t know

Were you satisfied with the inputs from the MPs to this discussion? Yes/No/Don’t know

Do you think that this consultation will make a difference to policy on welfare and work? Yes/No/Don’t know

Was it difficult for you to find a computer to take part in the consultation? Yes/No/Don’t know

Did you have any other problems participating in the consultation? Yes/No/Don’t know

Did you think the discussions were reasonably easy to follow? Yes/No/Don’t know

Could the discussion have been improved? 
If yes, please give details?

Is there an example of where you have changed your mind or opinion as a result of this discussion?

Do you think this internet consultation tackled all the issues you thought were relevant?

If you could name one issue or problem that MPs should work on after this consultation, what would that be?

Do you have any other comments to make?

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this form.
Appendix 4 Post consultation questionnaires (Did not log-on)

The respondents to this questionnaire were contacted by telephone and postally.

Username/Password

Where did you hear about the online consultation? (LBC Radio, local newspaper, local community group, from another website, newsletter from an organisation, word of mouth etc.)

How did you apply for a password? Did you go to the website/call on the freephone/were you given an application form by someone? (if so, who?)

Did your pack arrive? Yes / No

What were the main reasons that you did not use your password to enter the discussion?

Where did you intend to access the Internet?

Was this access method free?

What factors could have encouraged you to participate?

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this form.
Appendix 5 Post consultation questionnaires (Project partners)

Please could you type your answers to the following questions into the spaces provided and email the document back to me (by the end of the week if possible) to edemocracy@lse.ac.uk

If you do not wish to answer all the questions or do not have time you do not have to, and any written comments you make will be very useful while we are evaluating the successes and failures of this consultation. The first half of the questionnaire is about your involvement in organising it, the second half is about what you thought of the consultation personally.

Name:  
Organisation:  
Telephone number:

PART 1

Did you think it was a worthwhile consultation? Why/why not?

Please could you describe your role and involvement with Uspeak:

Please could you list all the mechanisms you used to inform your network about the consultation: (e.g. emails sent and who to, letters sent, mail shots etc)

Did you find it easy or difficult to get people involved? Why/why not?

How did you persuade people to join in?

For what reasons did people not wish to participate?

How many people did you inform about the consultation in total?

How many of these do you think actually logged on?

How many of these do you think actually posted messages?

Do you think it was worthwhile for people to get involved?

PART 2

Did you log onto the site?

How many times did you log-in and take part in the discussion?

Did you post a message?

Did you learn anything from the messages that were posted?
How did you find using the website?
1 Easy
2
3
4
5 Hard

What did you find easy and difficult about using the website?

Did you like the fact that you had a chance to reply to others peoples' messages?

Would you have liked the co-ordinator, Beccy Earnshaw to have steered the discussion more or less? Why?

Which section did you find most useful?
- Tax credits
- Work
- Childcare
- Benefits
- Disability
- Recommendations

What factors would have helped you to contribute more?

Have you participated in other online discussions/consultations?

Would you participate in another online parliamentary inquiry?

Did the fact that it was linked to the Social Security Select Committee make a difference to your participation?

Do you think that MPs were interested in what was said?

Were you satisfied with the inputs from the MPs to this discussion?

Do you think that this consultation will make a difference to policy on welfare and work?

Did you have any problems participating in the consultation?

Did you think the discussions were reasonably easy to follow?

Could the discussion have been improved? If yes, please give details?

Is there an example of where you have changed your mind or opinion as a result of this discussion?

Do you think this internet consultation tackled all the issues you thought were relevant?
If you could name one issue or problem that MPs should work on after this consultation, what would that be?

Do you have any other comments to make?

Thank you
Appendix 6  Questionnaire for Archy Kirkwood MP

Questions for Archy Kirkwood MP, Chair of the Social Security
Select Committee

What do you think the benefits are of this method of consulting?

Will the findings be useful?

Would you recommend this procedure as a method for evidence gathering
for other committees?

What are the main problems with it from the committee's point of view?

What did you think of the design and layout of the website?

How could we encourage MPs to go online more in the future?
Appendix 7 Contents of Registration Pack – Welcome letter

Date: January/February 2001

Dear Ms/Mr/Mrs/Miss

Social Security Select Committee Online Consultation

Thank you for registering for Uspeak.

Your Username is: sample
Your password is: sample

The consultation begins on 29 January at 10am and ends on the 25 February. The web address is www.uspeak.org.uk. During this time you can post messages, reply to points made by others, make suggestions to the MPs and read their comments. In March all the findings of the consultation will be presented to the Social Security Select Committee.

Enclosed is a user guide for Uspeak. If you have any problems accessing Uspeak please call 0800 018 4745 and someone will be able to help.

We look forward to your contributions.

Yours sincerely

Beccy Earnshaw
Online Consultations, Project Manager
Uspeak User’s Guide

If you are having any difficulties using *Uspeak*
call freephone **0800 018 4745**

- **Finding Internet access**
Most local libraries now have access to the internet. To find out about internet access in your area you can call Learn Direct - 0800 100 900 and ask one of their trained advisers or call the *Uspeak Helpline* - 0800 018 4745.

- **How to get to Uspeak**
Once you are online type [www.uspeak.org.uk](http://www.uspeak.org.uk) into the internet address space at the top of your screen. Hit the enter button and you will arrive at *Uspeak*.
The first page is an introduction. Click where it reads 'If you have a Uspeak username and password, [click here](http://www.uspeak.org.uk)' Enter your username and password and you will reach the *Uspeak* discussion.

- **How to post a message**
Choose which subject you want to ‘Talk About..’
Click on the title - For example *Childcare* or *Tax Credits*

- There are three ways of posting a message:
  1. Click on the **Post** button at the top of the screen
The posting box will then appear.
  2. Or click on **post** at the top of any message.
The posting box will then appear
  3. If you want to reply to a particular message click on **reply** at the top of that message
The posting box will then appear.

- **Posting box**
Type your message in the box. When you are happy with your message
click on the **post** button at the bottom of the box and it will appear immediately in the discussion.

- **Reading Messages**
Choose which of the ‘Talk About..’ discussions you want to read and click on the title - for example *Childcare* or *Work*.
All the messages in this discussion will appear below the title - click on the one you want to read and it will appear on the right-hand side of the screen.
To look at all the messages on the screen click and hold the left mouse button on the down arrow on the bar running along the side of the messages. The messages will move down. To move back up the page click and hold on the up arrow at the top of the bar.

- **What to write**
  The first message of each 'Talk About..' subject is a list of questions to guide you in writing your message. Feel free to write about your experiences, suggestions and ideas on the issues in the discussion. You can respond to other people's comments or start a new area for discussion. You can ask people their opinions or answer their questions. Remember this is your space to express your views.
What is www.Uspeak.org.uk?

A web-based consultation giving families living on low incomes the chance to tell the Social Security Select Committee about their experiences of tax credits and the benefits system.

Who is running it?

The Hansard Society - which exists to promote more effective parliamentary democracy. 
The Hansard Society runs a wide ranging Edemocracy Programme and has previously ran successful online consultations covering issues such as domestic violence. 
The Hansard Society is working on this consultation with Church Action on Poverty, a charity with extensive expertise and knowledge on the issues connected with low income. 
The project is endorsed by a number of local councils - notably County Durham, Lewisham and Sheffield and supported by the Halifax Online.

What is the aim of the project?

The project will link people with experience of living on low incomes to the Social Security Select Committee - channelling their views and suggestions into the heart of Parliament.

How will it work?

Over the period of one month people will be able to contribute to a web-based discussion forum - posting messages and replying to points made by others. Participants will be required to register and will be issued with a password to access the site ensuring security and anonymity. Members of the Select Committee and other MPs will take part in the consultation - replying to the views expressed, asking and answering questions.

When does it start?

The consultation will run for 4 weeks from Monday 29 January to Sunday 25 February 2001
Who can be involved?
Anyone who has experience of living on a low income and wants to have their opinions heard by Parliament.

How can I access the web site?
The website can be accessed through any internet-enabled computer. Call our free phone number for information on your nearest free internet access point and the availability of web training in your area. Check the Uspeak User’s guide for help in getting on to the site and posting your messages.

What will the outcome be?
An in-depth and detailed analysis of the consultation’s findings will be formally presented to the Social Security Select Committee – enabling them to consider directly the views of benefit and tax credit claimants. A further report will assess the effectiveness of online consultation as a method of engaging citizens and informing parliament.

How can I sign up?
Go to www.Uspeak.org.uk
Free-phone: 0800 018 4745
Alternatively email edemocracy@lse.ac.uk or write to:
USPEAK
The Hansard Society
St Philips Building North
LSE
Sheffield Street
London
WC2A 2EX
If you require further information on Uspeak contact Beccy Earnshaw on 0800 018 4745.

For details of The Hansard Society’s Edemocracy Programme visit our website - www.hansardsociety.org.uk
You can find out more about Church Action on Poverty at www.church-poverty.org.uk
Uspeak – “Getting involved is like having a direct line straight to the ministerial offices.”

Archy Kirkwood MP, Chair of the Social Security Committee

The Uspeak online consultation on tax credits, benefits and work incentives was praised in Parliament yesterday. At the official launch of Uspeak Archy Kirkwood, Chair of the Social Security Select Committee, said

“If people get online and feed in their views and experiences, I guarantee the Social Security Select Committee will read them and make best use of the evidence you supply us with. Getting involved is like having a direct line straight to the ministerial offices.”

If you have not already participated in Uspeak you have just 2 weeks left to get your views heard. If you have already contributed please continue to visit the site to check whether other participants including the MPs have replied to your comments and to respond to the new points raised.

The consultation runs until 25th February after which date all the findings will be formerly presented to the committee.

If you have any problems logging on to www.uspeak.org.uk or finding internet access in your area please call the Uspeak freephone line 0800 018 4745
Appendix 11 Durham Press Release

January 19, 2001

Low income families to have a voice on Parliamentary Select Committee

Internet consultation connects local families to Westminster

Low income families are being offered the chance to air their views directly into the heart of Parliament and help influence social security policies which could affect their daily lives.

The Hansard Society - an independent education charity which works to promote more effective parliamentary democracy - has been asked to produce evidence on issues surrounding low income for the all-party Social Security Select Committee.

The month-long internet consultation starts on January 29th and will provide MPs on the Social Security Select Committee with first-hand views and experiences of people on low incomes throughout the country. MPs will take part in the consultation process, responding to the views expressed and asking and answering questions - all via the internet.

The Hansard Society is looking for volunteers to take part in this consultation. Project co-ordinator Beccy Earnshaw said: “We want to hear from anyone who has experience of living on a low income and who wants to have their opinions heard by Parliament. You can join in anytime during the month and you don’t need to be a computer expert - we supply easy-to-follow instructions and let you know where the nearest free internet access points are in your area.”

Any one wishing to take part should contact the Hansard Society via the Freephone number 0800 018 4745

Although participants will be required to register with the Society, they will be issued with a password to access the consultation site and to ensure security and anonymity.

Once the consultation project has ended, an in-depth report on its findings will be presented to the Select Committee in March

For further information contact
Beccy Earnshaw (Project co-ordinator) on 0207 955 6237
Virginia Gibbons (Press Office) on 0207 955 7458 or 07932 485 490 (mobile)
Appendix 12  Forum abuse incident

During the final week of the consultation an incident occurred whereby a campaigning organisation tried to utilise the consultation to meet its own agenda. The incident was similar to a Spam attack in that unsolicited e-mails were posted onto the website. It is generally not considered good netiquette to send spam and is the online equivalent to unsolicited phone marketing calls.

What happened?
We received an application for a password via the Uspeak website. The applicant’s email address included a ‘.org’ suffix which suggested they represented an organisation. The organisation, NACSA is a campaigning organisation on behalf of people who have grievances with the CSA (Child Support Agency). It had its own website www.nacsa.org.uk. This was not a problem initially since a lot of organisations had been involved in the consultation already. However the NACSA website contained an aggressive ‘call to arms’ for all its users.

"So give this service some stick about the CSA. Tell them how unfair the system is" NACSA website

The initial registration request was followed by a flood of requests from people who heard about it via the website. We received 28 requests overnight on the 27/28 February plus two answer phone messages and 13 over the following day. These were large numbers compared to an average of two to three email requests overnight every day. Some of the email addresses used to apply with were derogatory and offensive, and referred specifically to certain MPs.

We decided to issue passwords to the first batch of applicants on the 28 February. During the evening of 28 February a large number of messages were posted on the site which were off-topic – they did not relate specifically to Working families Tax Credits – and were beginning to swamp the forum and exclude other users. We decided that immediate action was necessary. We prevented NACSA registrants from accessing the website by blocking their passwords. In the interim between deciding to prevent them from logging on and the technology being enabled, we put all the messages they posted into a special discussion thread called ‘Webcheck’ which could only be seen by users with ‘management status’ (i.e. Hansard Society staff). Stephen Coleman posted this message to explain to all users what had happened and what action had been taken.

"We are aware that a number of people have registered today for this consultation in order to protest against the Child Support Agency. The anti-CSA campaign web site urged its supporters to register for this online consultation so that they could make their point. Several have posted messages in the last few hours. The Hansard Society is opposed to spamming; we want this consultation to include the voices of people with experience and knowledge of tax credits rather than organised groups seeking to dominate the debate and lobby the select committee. There
are other places on the web for campaigning groups to state their case; we are not prepared to let this consultation be sidetracked.” Stephen Coleman

In the aftermath of this decision the Hansard Society received several emails complaining that access had been denied.

“I feel the whole thing was a big con. You invite people to register with your website letting them believe they can take part, and when they try you block them. I know I am not the only person who had the same experience.” Mary, NACSA participant

The Hansard Society sent a response by email to explain the decision. No further communication was entered into by either party.

The decision to ban these users was difficult to make. The NACSA people logged on as individuals, responding to an advert on a website just as many other individuals did from other community websites. It was not centrally organised unlike other lobbying actions and individually these people had no intention other than to put across their thoughts about the CSA. However the NACSA participants began collectively to dominate the forum and posted messages not strictly fitting in with the aims of the consultation, some of the messages were of an increasingly aggressive nature and since it was the final days of a very successful consultation we felt that our action was justified. It was crucial for us to protect the quality messages and safe atmosphere that had been generated in Uspeak. Few other participants realised what had happened – the forum was able to finish safely.

“Pleased that debate was not cluttered with lobbying.” Zaccheus2000, participant.

Lessons for the future
We can learn several important lessons from this incident;

- Re-evaluate the registration procedure – should we have to check out the credentials of all who apply through the site. How much can we trust and how much should be checked out? It is easy for people to register with a false name and an anonymous internet email account. As these consultations become larger scale, more widely publicised and more frequent it is more likely that these types of events will occur. We need to develop a strategy to deal with this.
- Moderation techniques – we could consider going into pre-moderation mode overnight, so that all comments are stored and not immediately posted onto the site. They can then be checked the next morning before being posted. This would avoid offensive messages getting onto the site during the night. We need an open moderation technique so that people realise this is a moderated forum and what they can expect. I.e. what is acceptable and what will not be tolerated.
- Guidelines - We need to protect existing and trusted users from potentially offensive material. We do not wish to alienate already established users. We therefore recommend setting up clear guidelines
and rules for users which they can refer to, via the site and which they have to sign up to when they register. These guidelines would outline a ‘Code of Conduct’ detailing what is and is not acceptable and what action will be taken to deal with breach of the guidelines. For example it would deal with issues of relevance and topic, the use of libellous and defamatory language and swamping or over-use of the forum. It would detail the consequences such as temporary or permanent ban from the forum or removal of messages.

- Appeal procedure – we could introduce an Appeals procedure for users offering them the chance to re-word their message in order that it be publishable. This could only be done if we had the email address for all users since it involves emailing the message and offering the chance to revise. This is a more democratic and user-friendly method of moderating the forum, giving all users a second chance. We aim to be open and transparent in all our moderation decisions and to give all users access to the reasoning behind the decisions taken.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Halifax plc for supporting the research for this project. I would like to thank Thorsten Faas for his skilled research assistance on this project and all the participants in Uspeak who gave up their time to reply to the questionnaires and surveys.

Nicola Hall,
Researcher,
Hansard Society e-democracy programme
The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and the Hansard Society, as an independent non-party organisation, is neither for nor against. The Society is, however, happy to publish these views and to invite analysis and discussion of them.