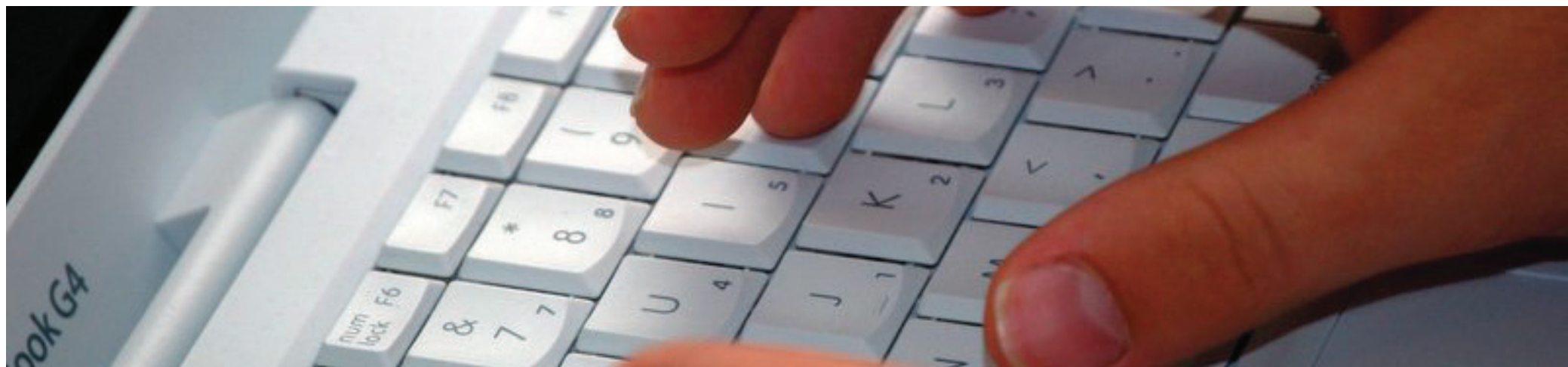


Local authorities and online consultation

National Audit 2009



Introduction

Politics, policy and the internet. Three words that, when put together, are guaranteed to make the news these days. Every week, new stories come out about people and policy getting connected online, be it councillors on Twitter, or organisations looking for a silver bullet in youth engagement through Facebook and Myspace.

But behind the clamour for innovation and doing something new lies a field that is actually reasonably mature. It's been five years now since the UK Government sponsored the National Project on Local e-Democracy, which encouraged local authorities across the UK to provide opportunities for individuals to have their say about decision making online. Many authorities have, some have not, and the range of techniques used and opportunities provided varies as widely as the types of authorities themselves.

In essence, though, as the excitement moves from one technology to another, there are a range of basics that all authorities can get right in order to ensure all residents and stakeholders can find out how to get involved, can find out more about the decisions being made and can have the opportunity to add their thoughts into the decision making process. This audit came about as an attempt to quantify what makes up these basics, and how far along the road towards them UK local authorities are.

It's been an interesting process. Some excellent examples of online work have been found, along with some that are less good. Some areas of work have clearly been prioritised over others by authorities across the UK, and some that were thought to have been good ideas a few years ago may have turned out not to have been.

In addition to this full report, each authority is being sent the results of its own audit, which will rest with them alone. This is not a project designed to rank authorities against each other, but to help each one see what they're doing now and could do better in the future.

We hope you find it as interesting to read as we did to carry out.



Gez Smith
Senior Consultant
Delib



Front cover photo by jamie3529 on Flickr

Key findings

- Nearly one in five local authorities do not have a distinct webpage for presenting information on their consultation activities.
- Only a quarter of local authorities provide information on past, present and future consultations on their website.
- Consultation information of any kind cannot be found through the search engines of nearly 10% of local authorities.
- Over one third of local authorities do not link to consultation information through their site homepages or A-Zs.
- Just over one quarter of authorities have a consultation database that can be filtered.
- One in five local authorities provide no facility to respond to consultations through their website, even in the form of a downloadable pdf.
- Over one third of local authorities provide no feedback on the outcomes of consultations through their website.
- Only one in five local authorities provide the ability to sign up for consultation notifications through their website.
- Nearly two fifths of local authorities have over 50 accessibility errors in their consultation pages.

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Methodology

Between April and August 2009, Delib, an online opinion research and public consultation company, undertook an evaluation of e-consultation elements of every local authority website in the UK. This work was undertaken through the following steps:

- Desk based research for identification of the most important elements of local authority e-participation to consider.
- Development of question matrix from research, piloted on 10 authority websites before matrix refined.
- Visiting each local authority website and evaluating it against question matrix
- Recording, coding and analysing findings.

One important aspect of this research was to test how a lay person would use a website, for example a local resident with no previous experience of online participation. Thus the tests were kept simple, and the evaluation of each site was conducted by researchers with little to no previous experience of local authority e-participation practices.

Subsequent to the initial data set being produced, quality checking was undertaken in September 2009 on 20% of the audits carried out to ensure accuracy across the audit. In addition, further data verification was undertaken during the coding process as the results were written up. Both forms of quality assurance produced very few errors (sub 1% of the sample).

There are though some caveats which must be applied to the data. The first is that it is necessarily a snapshot in time. Local authority websites are evolving all the time, and it is possible that authorities may have introduced new methods of working or presenting information in between their audit being undertaken and this report being produced.

Second, despite the data collected being quantitative in nature, there is always an element of interpretation within online practices. Accessibility errors on sites are sometimes merely alternative ways of presenting information, or flags that certain elements of a site may need to have certain human checks conducted on them.

In addition this is not a project that evaluated the software capabilities or 'tools' used by each local authority for online consultation. There are a number of different approaches in this area, and it was not our intention to produce research attempting to evaluate them, not least to avoid claims of bias.

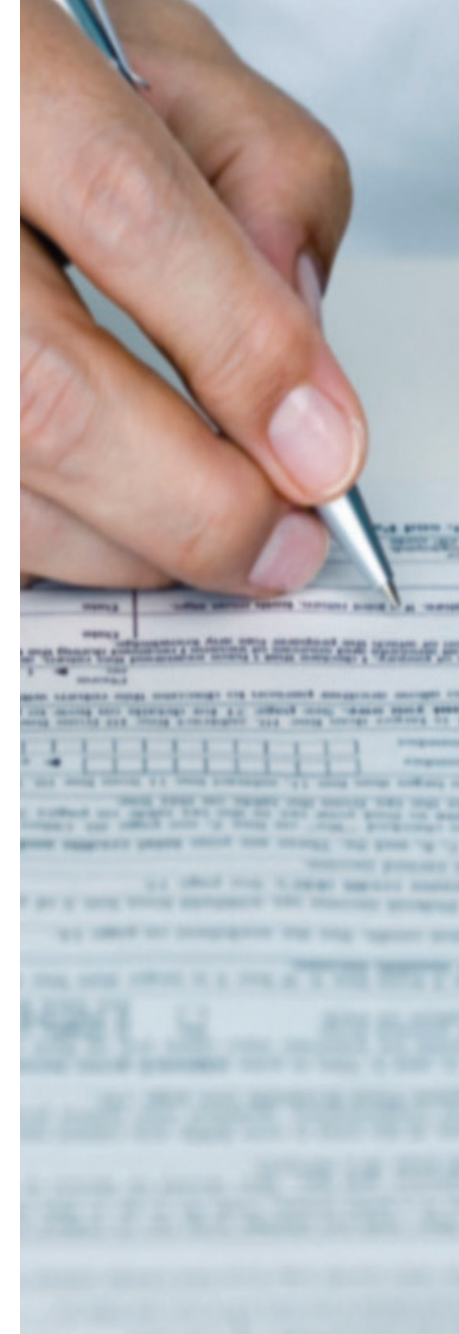


Photo by Dixie Native on Flickr

Instead what this research considers is the end user experience elements of e-participation; can a local resident even find consultation on their local council's website? If they can, how can they search for one they're interested in, and how can they respond to it? How do they know their council is listening to what they have to say? Is all of this information accessible to all groups in society, or are those with certain disabilities likely to be excluded?

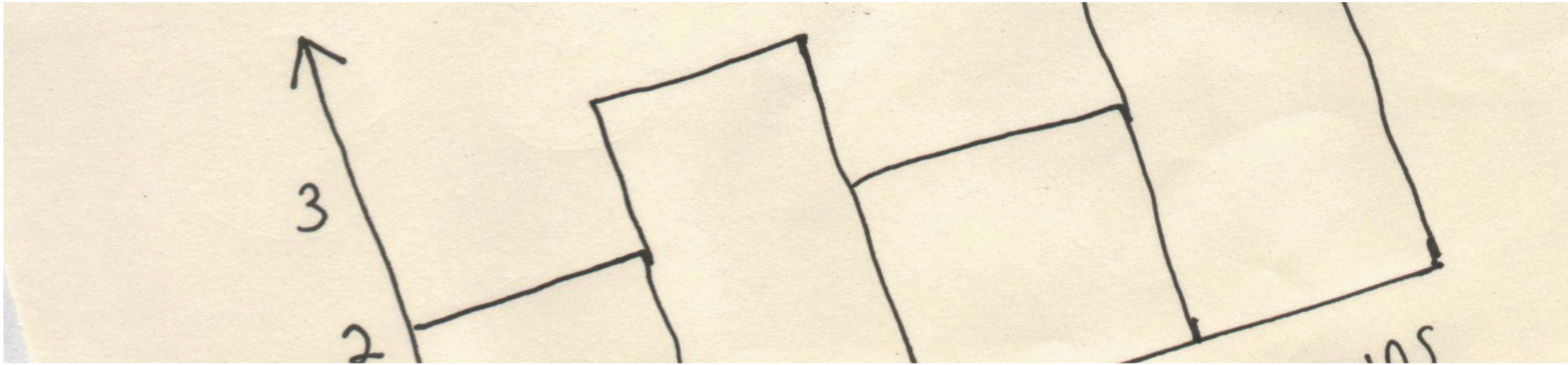
In terms of the content, this is one of the most difficult areas of online participation, and is worth its own weighty research paper alone. No matter what technology is employed, what innovative, new practices are undertaken, if the content of the consultation isn't interesting, or the language is inaccessible, then it is highly likely that usage of the technology will be low.

Evaluation of this area is often as subjective as it is time consuming, and whilst there is advice that can be offered, the content of the websites evaluated has been left out of this research project altogether.



Photo by Digital Bridges on Flickr

Results

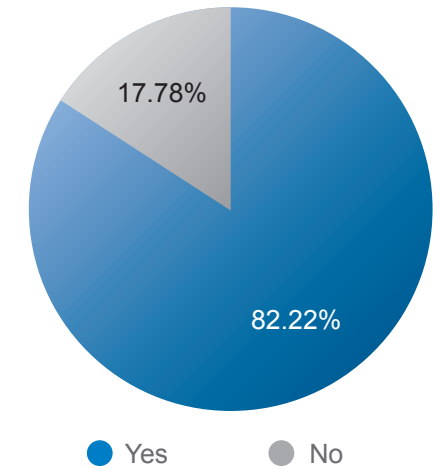


Section 1: consultation homepage

Before looking at the different performance criteria, our study checked to see if the Local Authority website had a distinct page for its consultation information.

These pages have a number of clear advantages, such as:

- providing a central point of access for consultation activities, both internally and externally
- joining up consultation activity from different areas of the authority.
- defining what is and is not considered consultation, and what is and is not consulted upon.



As an overall view, just over 82% of UK local authorities had a distinct page for presenting information on their consultation activities, while nearly 18% did not.

There were, however, inconsistencies in how these pages were presented and the information they contained. Some pages are headed 'consultation', whilst others take a more 'Have your say' branding style, and others still are merged in with the general 'compliments, complaints and comments' section of the authority's website. It is not clear the degree to which developing a common terminology for such pages across local authorities would be of benefit to the end user, however it is clear that some page titles perform better in searching for consultation information, and local authorities would do well to bear this in mind. Given the relative simplicity of creating a new page within a local authority managed website, Delib would recommend every authority ensure that they have a distinct page for consultation activity, clearly titled for ease of use.

Table 1: Presence of distinct webpage for consultation activity

Is there a consultation page?	Count	Percentage
Yes	356	82.22%
No	77	17.78%
Total	433	100%

Section 2: findability

In this section, we ran our evaluation through four different questions, each centred around the ability to find information on consultations through the authority's website.

Q2. Are past, present and future consultations listed?

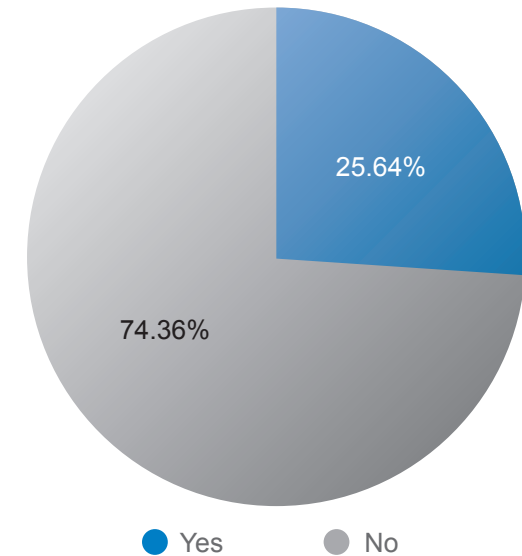
Following on from whether the authority had a page for consultation information within their site, we examined whether information on past, present and future consultations was given. These three types of information have the following purposes:

- information on past consultations, allowing a 'research library' of former public engagement activities to be built over time.
- information on present consultation activity that is currently running, allowing people to participate. This may be seen as perhaps one of the key pieces of information an authority could provide if it wishes individuals to participate in decision making.
- information on future consultations. This allows potential respondents more time to consider their response to an issue, and also assists the authority internally in planning a consistent organisation wide approach to consultation, reducing consultation fatigue.

Despite each of the above elements having different levels of benefit for different scenarios, none of them should be impossible for an authority to provide, thus the scoring for this section was collated into a simple yes or no.

Table 2: Are past, present and future consultations listed?

Are past, present and future consultations listed?	Count	Percentage
Yes	111	25.64%
No	322	74.36%
Total	433	100%



As can be seen from the above, only just over 25% of local authorities in the UK currently list past, present and future consultation activity on their websites. This is a low figure, and would doubtless be higher if only one or two of the three consultation types were considered.

However, given both the internal and external advantages of providing information on all three types of consultation activity to residents and stakeholders, it is clear there is still plenty of work to do in this area.

Q3. Are consultation pages findable via council search fields?

Despite the importance of providing a clear layout for any website, with information structured in a logical format, very often the first point of access for a website user looking for information is the search box provided on the homepage. Given this, we tested each local authority website by typing the word 'consultation' into the website search engine, and recording whether this search returned information on consultation activity within the authority.

Due to the fragmented nature of consultation activity across different departments within some authorities, this search was not required to return the consultation homepage itself (if present), but information on any form of consultation carried out by the authority.

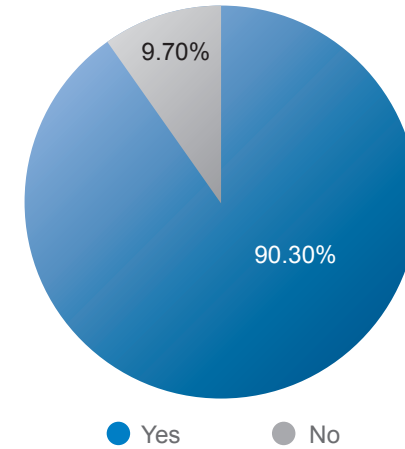


Table 3: Are consultation pages findable via council search fields?

Are consultation pages findable via council search fields?	Count	Percentage
Yes	391	90.30%
No	42	9.70%
Total	433	100%

As this question was evaluating the ability of the website's search engine to find information on consultation of any form, it is unsurprising that the figure for positive results is higher than the equivalent figure in question 1.

Recognising this, it is surprising that nearly 10% of authorities returned a negative response for this question. Three possibilities exist for this. Either the authority is not carrying out consultation, or it is not calling this activity 'consultation' at any point, or alternatively the authority search engine is performing extremely poorly.

In any of these scenarios, it would seem important for the sake of consultation 'findability' to investigate and remedy this issue.

GOOD EXAMPLE

Redcar and Cleveland
<http://www.rclsp.co.uk/portal/>

All the information relevant to consultation is presented in one simple location. The information is then presented in terms of the different ways people can get involved in a simple easy to grasp way, while still providing a thorough range of details.

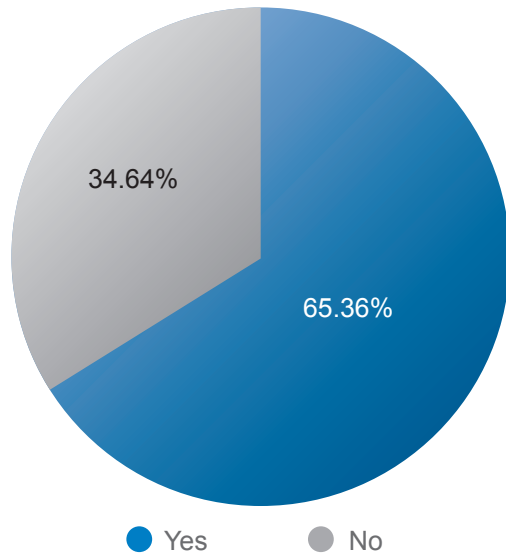
The screenshot shows a search results page for 'What can you do?'. The sidebar menu includes: Home Page, Ask Me!, What's Hot!, What are we doing?, What can you do? (highlighted), Consultation Calendar, Citizens' Panel, Live Web Surveys, Researchers' Portal, Consultation Strategy, Consultation Toolkit, Consultation Database, Maps & Statistics, Useful Links, Jargon Buster, Downloadable Resources, and Contact Us.

Q4. Are consultation pages accessible via homepage or A-Z?

Whilst consultation pages may be found in a number of ways, two of the best forms of allowing access to such pages are through the A-Z function now present on a great many local authority websites, or from a direct link from the homepage of the site itself. This latter form of access is often superior as it provides a direct 'call to action' to residents, demonstrating from the outset that the authority is listening to and engaging with the public.

Table 4: Are consultation pages accessible via homepage or A-Z?

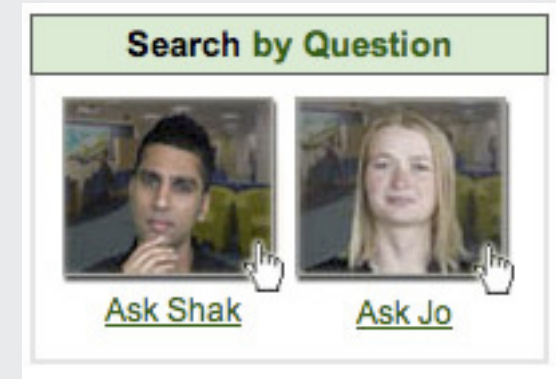
Are consultation pages accessible via homepage or A-Z?	Count	Percentage
Yes	283	65.36%
No	150	34.64%
Total	433	100%



This research allowed an either/or for this question, recording if the organisation's website had at least one of these two methods of access. Here we found that just over 65% of local authority sites provided access to their consultation pages in this form, and slightly more than 34% did not.

Given these two mechanisms are often the most important for finding site content, and this question allowed a positive score for presenting only one out of the two, this appears to be a surprisingly low result for authorities signposting consultation information in this way.

GOOD EXAMPLE



Milton Keynes

<http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk>

[/mkcconsultation/home.asp?StatusFilter=Current](http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/mkcconsultation/home.asp?StatusFilter=Current)

This scored very highly for hitting all our audit bases, but a notable point about the site, which directly affected the findability criteria in our audit, was the interesting ability to search the site by questions. It was very simple to use and the use of images instantly draws the eye to the functionality. It's an interesting way of helping people get to where they want to go, in our case the consultation pages.

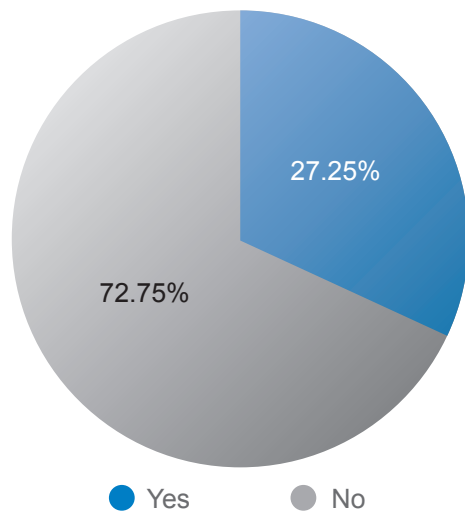
Q5. Does the authority have a consultation database that can be filtered?

Moving on to some of the specifics of presenting consultation information, many local authorities have collated information on different consultations into a single webpage or table of records. However, others have taken this further, and allowed site users to search within the records of different consultations, filtering it by different categories such as status, location, date and so forth.

As consultation filtering makes finding consultations significantly easier, this research assessed the number of local authority websites which presented the information in this way.

Table 5: Does the authority have a consultation database that can be filtered?

Does the authority have a consultation database that can be filtered?	Count	Percentage
Yes	118	27.25%
No	315	72.75%
Total	433	100%



The results here were perhaps lower than might have been expected, given the extensive piloting work on such databases that has been conducted in the UK over the last 6 years. Only around 27% of local authorities had a database of consultation activities that could be filtered, with nearly 73% of authorities not doing so.

Section 3: participation methods

Once the presentation of consultation information had been examined, the research moved on to look at the methods by which people could respond to consultations through the authority's website.

There are technically a great many forms of giving a response online, the internet after all is a tool for communication. However, in the context of local authorities, there are two primary forms of response mechanism:

- providing a form (document/pdf) that users can download, complete and either email or post back.
- providing an online form or online survey with which users can submit their comments directly through the website.

This question thus looked at whether the authority site contained either, both or none of these mechanisms, and scored authorities on this basis.

Table 6: What online methods of participation are provided? (PDF or online survey)

What online methods of participation are provided?	Count	Percentage
PDF/downable forms only	145	33.49%
Online survey only	129	29.79%
Both PDF/downloadable form and online survey	68	15.70%
Other	1	0.23%
None	90	20.79%
Total	433	100%

GOOD EXAMPLE

Bristol City Council

<http://www.askbristol.com>

With this authority, it was interesting to see how the consultation finder database is part of a suite of tools, demonstrating commitment to allowing residents to respond through many different response channels. It was really good that these were all grouped into one place instead of being dotted around the council site.



It is interesting, if perhaps not unexpected, that just over 33% of local authorities only allow participation in consultation through forms that must be downloaded and either emailed back or returned to the authority in hard copy, basically an 'offline' response of sorts.

However, just under 30% allow response through an online form or survey, and over 15% allow response in both forms. When these latter two are collated, we see that 45.49% of local authorities allow online responses to consultations in one form or another.

However, most concerning was the finding that nearly 21% of local authorities provide no ability to respond to consultations through their websites in any form.

It is worth noting that a small number of authorities that had online response mechanisms provided a variety of these, allowing users to fill in online surveys, suggest comments through a simple form or even send SMS messages to the authority on various topics. One authority provided one of these alternative mechanisms without providing either downloadable or online forms/surveys. In this instance, the authority allowed users to send SMS messages on topics of concern to themselves.

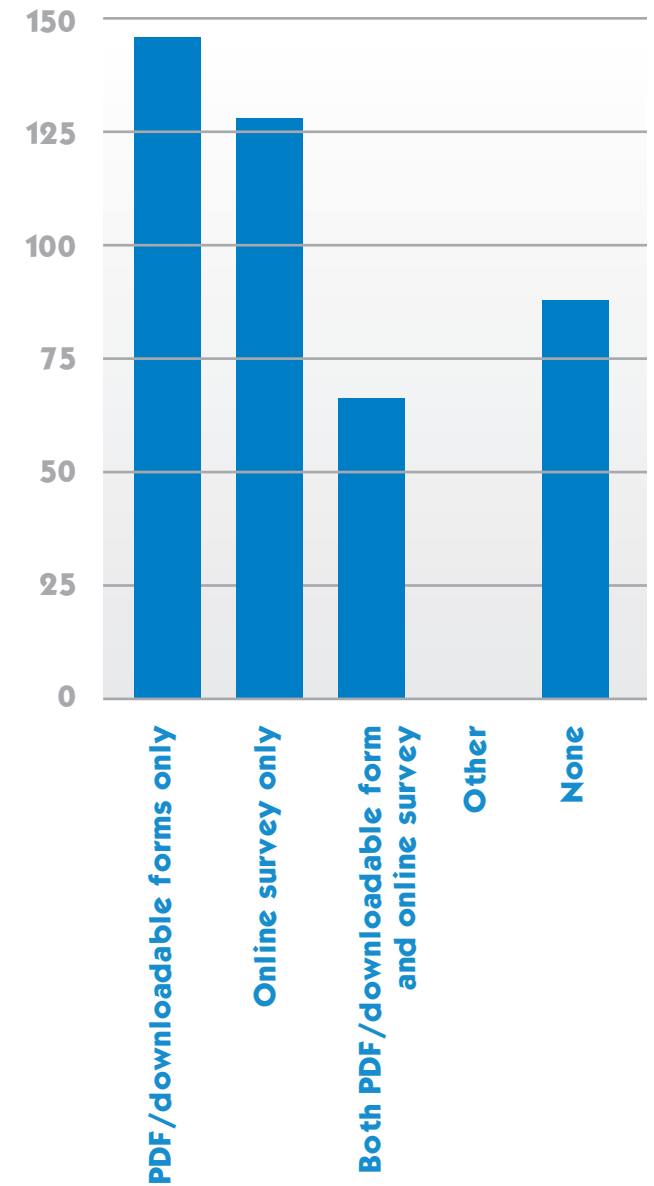


Photo by Thomas Favre-Bulle on Flickr

Section 4: feedback

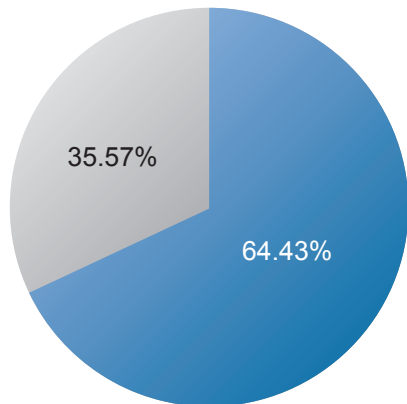
Q7. Is feedback on past results and outcomes provided?

One of the most important areas of consultation activity, as significant as it is often overlooked, is providing feedback on consultations carried out. This may be as simple as publishing the results of the consultation itself, although ideally feedback would also include the authority's response to the online consultation, and proposed actions.

Websites are an excellent means of presenting this information in a variety of formats for different types of user, thus the research examined whether each local authority website provided such information as part of their online consultation activity.

Table 7: Is feedback on past results and outcomes provided?

Is feedback on past results and outcomes provided?	Count	Percentage
Yes	279	64.43%
No	154	35.57%
Total	433	100%



The results here were relatively encouraging, in that around 64% of local authorities provide feedback on past results and outcomes of consultations. However, given the relative simplicity of providing pdf format reports on consultation outcomes through a website, this is clearly an area in which simple and quick improvements could be made.

● Yes ● No

GOOD EXAMPLE

Nottinghamshire County Council

<http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/home/whatdoyouthink.htm#consultations>

We asked...

...for your views on our registration service (which registers births, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths)

You said...

You said:

...decisions about office locations and opening hours should be taken **locally**

...you were in **favour of changing the service name** to Nottinghamshire Registration and Celebratory Services

...you'd prefer to use your **nearest** registration office

...you **don't want to travel long distances** to see and collect important documents

...you'd like to be able to **access our services online**

...you'd like to be able to access the services **at lunchtimes**

We did...

Topline consultation information was fed back through a 'we asked, you said, we did' element of the site on consultation homepage.

Although it was not used consistently for each closed consultation (and perhaps could not have been), it was a good topline way of presenting information and strengthening the consultation cycle, helping respondents feel they have been listened to.

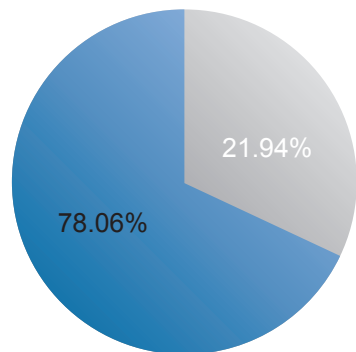
Section 5: updates

Q8. Can you register for email or RSS updates?

In April 2004, the UK government published a set of 'e-priority outcomes', elements of functionality that local authority websites must work towards providing in order to meet government targets. One of these (G3) stated: "citizen participation and response to forthcoming consultations and decisions on matters of public interest (e-consultation), including facility for citizens to sign up for email and/or SMS text alerts on nominated topics". The efficacy or worth of providing the ability to sign up for such alerts has seemed uncertain from early on, and in many places has since been superceded by the ability to share and receive information through social media platforms. This question thus looked at both of these elements, old and new, examining if interested users could sign up to receive consultation information either by email (as originally promoted by government) or using RSS functionality (which will integrate with many social media platforms).

Table 8: Can you register for email or RSS updates?

Can you register for email or RSS updates?	Count	Percentage
Yes	95	21.94%
No	338	78.06%
Total	433	100%



Here the research found that nearly 22% of local authorities provide this sort of functionality in either form, whilst just over 78% do not. It appears clear that, in this area at least, government encouragement towards an e-government goal was of limited impact.

● Yes ● No

Eden District Council

www.opinionsuite.com/eden

This authority has provided the ability to take RSS feeds of consultation information, both in terms of statuses such as open and closed, as well as on a more custom basis. Searches run in the consultation database can be saved as an RSS feed, so users can share what is produced by search results on their own websites, blogs and social networks. For example, a local councillor could take a feed of consultations affecting their ward and embed it in their blog for their readers to see and get involved with.

Open Consultations



Section 6: accessibility

Q9. How many WAI A/AA errors does Total Validator record on the consultation page/software?

Finally, the research looked at the issue of accessibility in the consultation provision within the authority’s website. Accessibility is an important requirement for all elements of a local authority website, especially for those parts of it that are designed to allow the public and stakeholders to get involved in the decision making process.

This is not just a matter of inclusivity or providing equality of opportunity. Indeed, it is a legal requirement to try to make a site as accessible as possible. UK law currently states “a service provider has to take reasonable steps to change a practice which makes it unreasonably difficult for disabled people to make use of its services.” These services include websites and information presented upon them.

For this element of the research, the authority’s consultation pages were run through an accessibility checking system called Total Validator (<http://www.totalvalidator.com/>). This gave each consultation page a score for the number of accessibility errors found in the pages and underlying software where relevant.

As with any computerised verification system, the data it produces must be considered with caveats:

- If a page has a single error on it, for example with how hyperlinks are presented, then this error can be repeated (and thus flagged up) as many times as there are links present. Fixing one problem will thus fix multiple instances of an error.
- The WAI guidelines which cover accessibility requirements are just that, guidelines, so interpretation of what exactly is an error can differ.

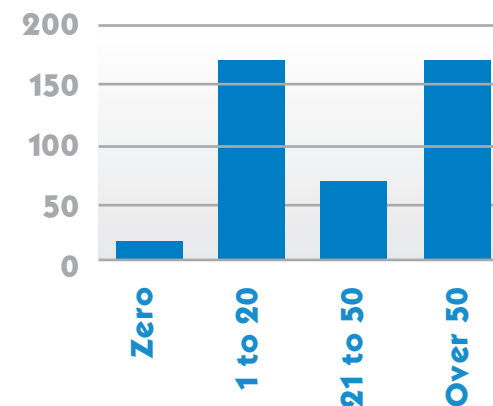
That said, the audit found a number of pages with no errors whatever, and some pages with an alarmingly large number of errors.

Given the slightly subjective nature of accessibility errors, for the purposes of scoring local authorities individually, maximum points were awarded if an authority had 20 or fewer errors. However, it is interesting to examine the results in a slightly more fine grained form for this report.

As can be seen, nearly 5% of local authority consultation pages had zero accessibility errors found, with just over 38% having between one and 20 errors. The largest proportion though, 38.8%, recorded over 50 errors.

Table 9: How many WAI A/AA errors does TotalValidator record on the consultation page software?

How many WAI A/AA errors does TotalValidator record on the consultation page software?	Count	Percent
Zero	21	4.85%
1 to 20	166	38.34%
21 - 50	78	18.01%
Over 50	168	38.80%
Total	433	100%



Conclusion

The findings in this audit give a mixed picture of e-consultation across UK local authorities. On the one hand, there generally appears to be activity of some kind from most authorities, even if it is just a mention of consultation within their website. The fact that a search for 'consultation' on the website of 10% of authorities produced no relevant results is concerning, but cannot simply be explained as that authority doing nothing around e-consultation without further investigation.

On the other hand however, there are still significant gaps amongst authorities in how consultation activity is organised, presented and promoted online. Budgets are increasingly tight, and software can sometimes be expensive, but there should be little to no cost in providing a single webpage for consultation information within the authority's existing website. Linking to this page from a site homepage or A-Z system should incur little to no cost either.

Interestingly, the audit has revealed that trends in e-participation have not worked out as predicted. Despite government encouragement, and marketing pressure from the private sector, providing the ability to sign up for notifications on consultation topics has not really caught on. Perhaps this indicates the lack of a business case for this functionality, given the reality of very low sign up rates to such systems. It is likely that RSS will overtake email sign up in this area in the near future.

The issues found in this audit are not solely ones of technology however. The fact that only one quarter of authorities present information on past, present and future consultations through their website is hugely influenced by the information on future consultations not being present. In reality, this information can only be found, co-ordinated and reported to the public through human action. Software can assist, but it cannot replace.

Similarly, the large number of authorities not providing feedback on consultations through their website, or not even providing a simple response mechanism, such as a downloadable pdf consultation document, are problems which can be solved by human activity. For feedback to be published by software, humans have to create and agree that feedback first. Indeed, in all of these processes, the internet is only a small part of the work required. If documents and reports around consultation are produced, why not put them online as standard? If they are not produced, best to examine why.

So, there is much that is positive in this audit, authorities are clearly engaging with e-consultation, at least at a basic level. The sense is that this work is still trending upwards, although of course it will take future audits to verify this more fully. The issues identified can, in many cases, be quickly resolved and the ability for the public to engage with decision making online enhanced significantly.

Ten top tips

- 1) Provide a distinct page for all of your information and links about consultation activity across the authority. Call it something easy to understand (e.g. 'Have your say' or 'Consultation') and, if possible, make sure it has a nice clear web address (e.g. www.yourcouncil.gov.uk/haveyoursay)
- 2) Publish information on past and present consultations as a minimum, and look to see how your consultation processes might start allowing you to publish information on forthcoming consultations before they formally launch as well.
- 3) Ensure that information on consultations can be found through the search engine within the authority website. Ideally the consultation homepage should be the first result given when searching 'consultation'. Consider ensuring other phrases related to consultation give the same search result as well.
- 4) Link in consultation pages into other areas of the website as well. Ideally try to get a link from the site homepage itself to the consultation page, and if an A-Z is present, ensure that 'consultation' or 'have your say' is listed within it, again linking to your consultation page.
- 5) Investigate how best to communicate consultation information to interested parties. Email sign up lists are often not very effective, and often the best approach is one that fits the existing online channels across the authority and the local area.
- 6) Once you have ensured people can find your consultation information through a variety of channels, consider how they can interact with and filter it quickly and simply. Not everyone will be interested in everything you do.
- 7) Consider how you allow people to respond to consultations they have found online. As a minimum, a pdf copy of the consultation questions or document should be available for download. Ideally, people should be able to respond directly through the website in a quick and simple manner.
- 8) Consultation is not a one off activity. Once people have found your information and responded to consultations, ensure that you use the same channels to feedback both results of the consultation and subsequent actions arising from it. Demonstrating that consultation is listened to and acted up is one of the best ways to ensure that new people start taking part in it too.
- 9) Make sure any information you present is accessible to all. Not just in terms of technical accessibility requirements, but in the language you use and the way you present it. Why not put together an informal group of local residents to comment on how you present consultation information, and suggest ways it could be made easier to understand?
- 10) Above all, start small and make sure the basics are right. The number of new tools and technologies on the internet is constantly growing, but just because software can do something doesn't mean it will work well in your area. Getting the basics right can make a big difference in improving your online consultation and engagement across the board.

Acknowledgements

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