



E-Governance in Ireland: E-Consultation as a Public Participation Tool

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Globalised Networked Society (Castells)

- In terms of capital we have a shift to computerised global networks as the organisational form of capital (Castells, Sassen, Strange).
- In short we have a network-powered economy (Castells, 2001) or a digitally renewed economy (Hobsbawn, 2003).

Information Democracy?

- New ways of doing old politics are emerging and the question is whether this has the capacity to bring about new politics.
- Can we solve political problems with technologies? New issues emerging are - (i) that machines now enable new forms of decentralised dialogue and (ii) that the question of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically mediated discourse.



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

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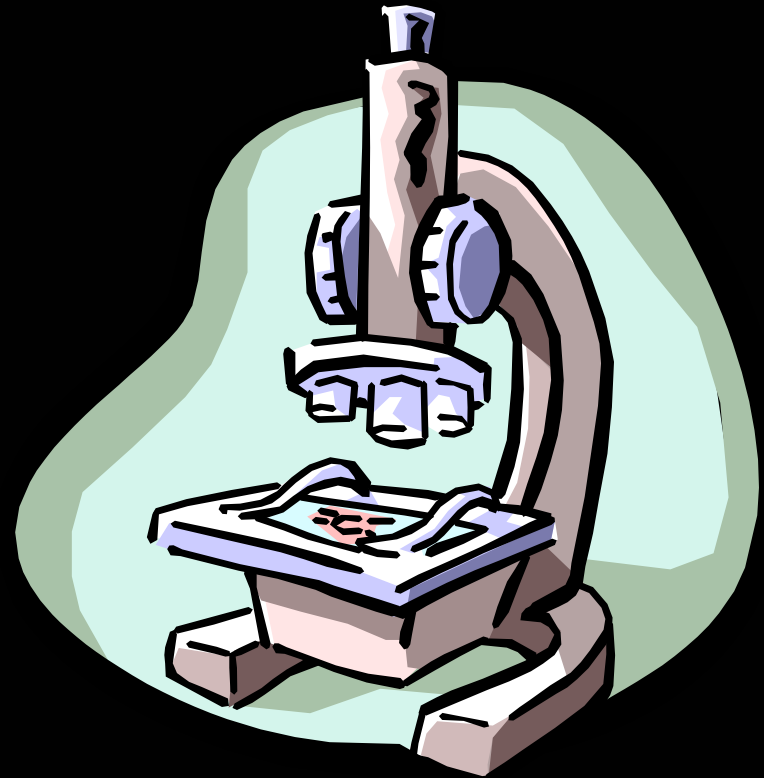


ECRP Research

- It investigates processes of consultation, the only form of participation that is a legal requirement of policy making, with a view to assessing their value as supporting tools of citizen centric governance.
- the development of citizen driven government by identifying how ICTs could support, develop or deepen the participation of citizens in policy development through that same consultation requirement.

Guide Book and Report

- The e-democracy research groups report on the cross-border research project on e-consultation, including our e-consultation trials, is now available at http://www.e-consultation.org/files/ecrp_report.pdf as a 2.8 MB PDF, file.
- An online guide for e-consultation is also now available online <http://www.e-consultation.org/guide/>



1. Digitally Renewing
Democracy?

2. Knowledge Transfer or Participation?

3 Service Provision or Citizenship
Building?

4. Citizen or Consumer?

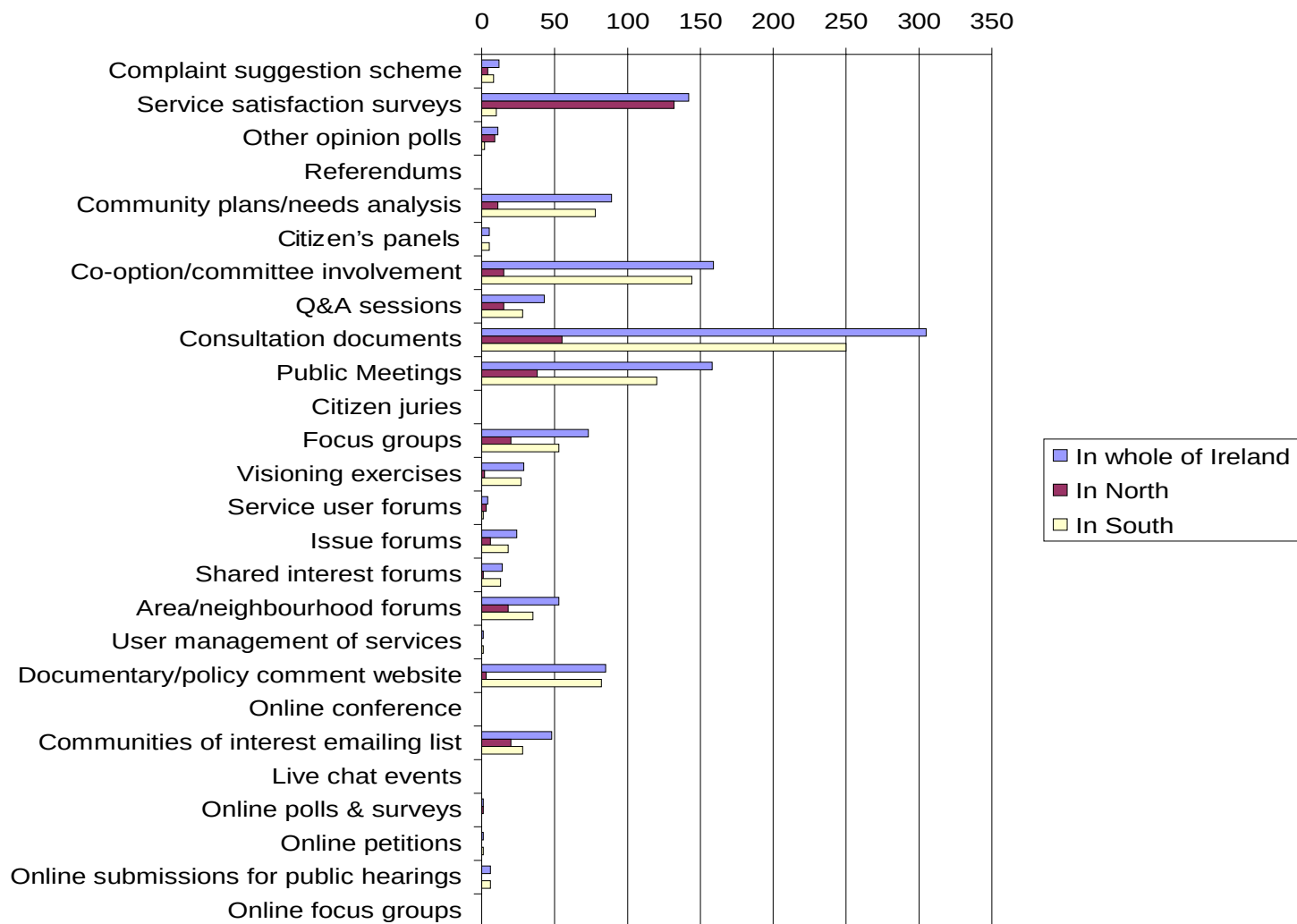
Survey questions on E-Consultation.

- Form they took
- Number and extent of processes
- Experience of processes
- Evaluation of processes
- What resources would be needed to improve processes
- Questions which gave us information on 'participation' indicators.

Data Generated

- All 12 NI central/regional government departments completed surveys.
- 25 RoI central government departments completed surveys.
- 42 out of 60 local authorities, north and south completed surveys.
- 81 respondents from the community and voluntary sectors completed surveys.
- Focus groups over a two-year period with key players in each sector.
- Interviewing, working with, and observing 3 trial partners organising consultation processes.
- E-consultation trials and tests where anonymous participants engaged with the consultation process in such modes as: story-tellers on active citizenship (wheel.e-consultation.org); story-tellers and artists on diversity (diversity.e-consultation.org); and voters and survey respondents on north/south educational exchange programmes.

Prevalence/Diversity of Techniques employed



What do you think is the appropriate level of participation by communities through consultation? Please rank.

- 1. Participation in identifying the need for policy
- 2. Participation in gathering information or knowledge that helps to inform the context that policy will be applied
- 3. Participation in policy formulation and decision-making
- 4. Participation in policy implementation
- 5. Participation in monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the policy

Local Authorities

- Public consultation is used extensively both north and south of the border at local government level.
- It is viewed by local government as overwhelmingly positive in improving service delivery and gaining knowledge of citizens' views on policy matters.
- The top three benefits from public consultation were seen to be better policy-making (selected by 82%), improvement in services (selected by 64%) and greater citizen awareness (53.6%). Fewer selected (43%) encouraging citizen participation as a benefit in itself.
- In addition it was felt that new and more inclusive consultation processes had given local communities a sense of ownership over policies and plans. 89% of authorities in the North and 65% in the South felt consultation in general had no negative effects whatsoever.

Central Government

- The overall view is that public consultation has a positive impact on policy and decision-making.
- It is seen as an extremely valuable tool in improving the quality of services and is perceived as a way of including the views of the public in policy formulation.
- Empowering communities or encouraging citizens is seen as of lesser importance, although 67% of respondents from Northern Ireland saw encouraging citizens as an important benefit, compared to 24% in the Republic.
- There exists a view that consultation should happen at the 'analysis' and 'formulation' stage of the policy making, and at the 'monitoring' stage, which would come after implementation.
- However, the reality is that 57% of the respondents do not have feedback/review structures in place currently.

Techniques used in consultation

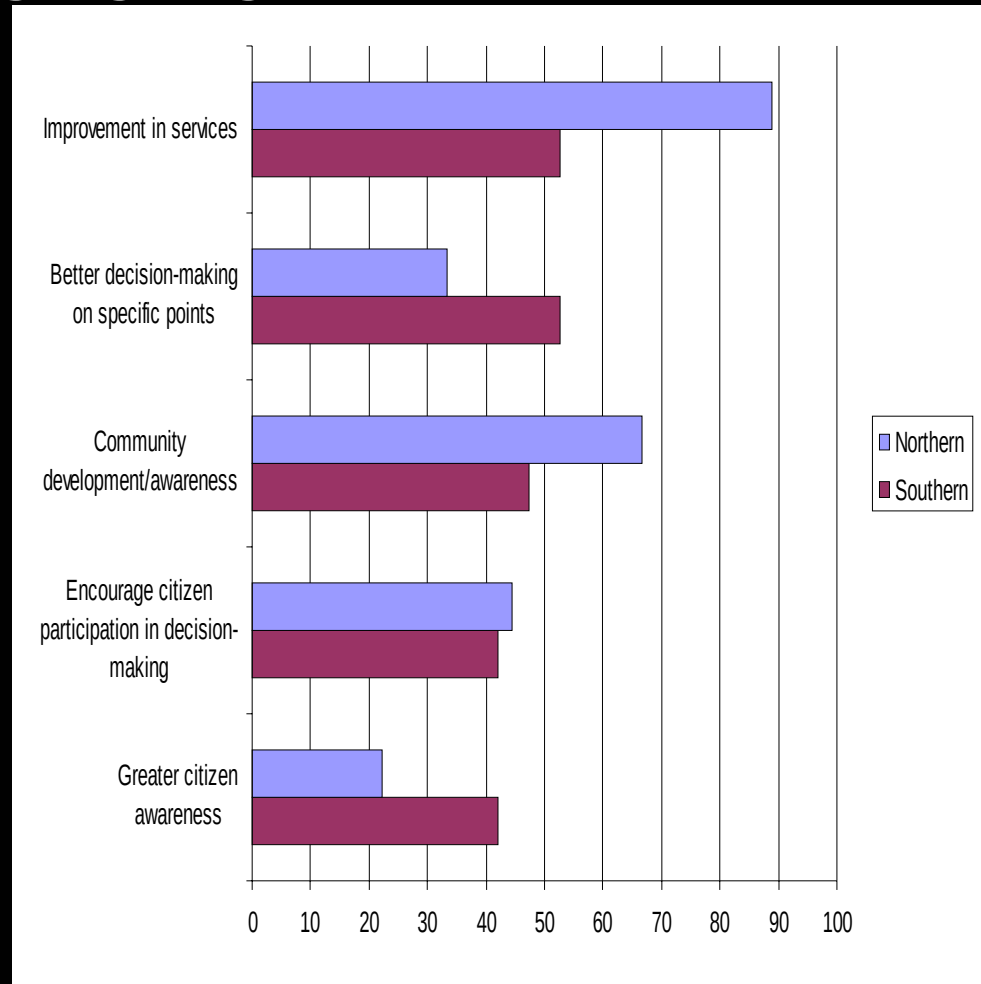
- • The most popularly used techniques are traditional; consultation documents, public meetings, service satisfaction surveys and co-option/committee involvement.
- In comparison, the use of e-techniques is far less common, with documentary/policy websites being the most popular.

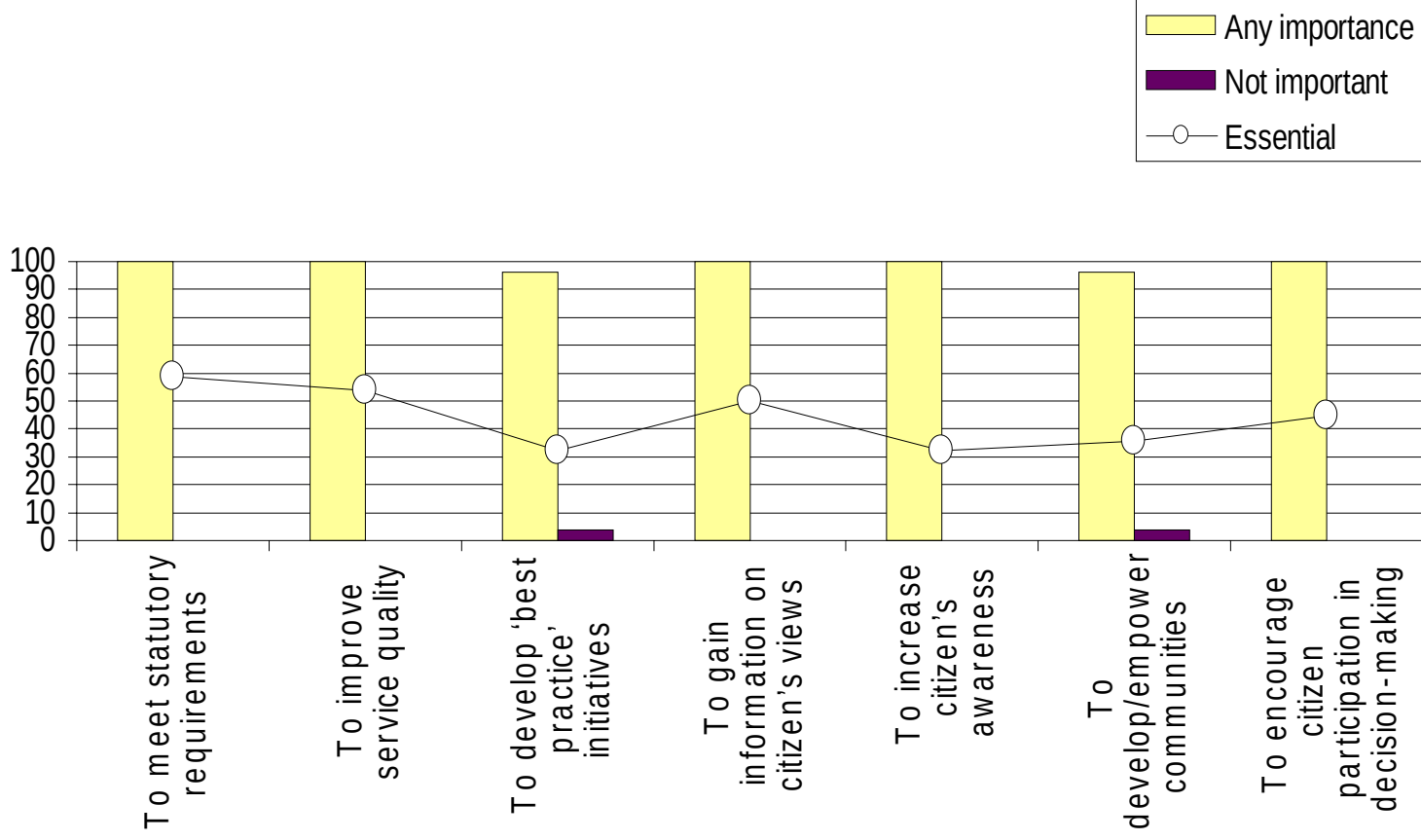




Benefits in engaging citizen's

- When we look at the perceived benefits for local authorities in engaging in public consultation, we see that encouraging citizen participation in decision-making is not the highest ranking reason.





NGO's and local communities

- Overall, the community and voluntary sector are unhappy with consultation processes as they have been carried out to date. Resource issues, the degree of participation experienced, and the lack of feedback are key areas of discontent.
- There is, however, strong enthusiasm for participation more broadly and for further developing modes of participation. It was felt that new technologies could support and improve consultation processes in the future.

Consultation Fatigue

- Consultation fatigue is NOT seen as a significant issue by authorities. While local authorities would acknowledge some issues related to it as 'difficult', the concept of 'consultation fatigue' is certainly not detrimental to the use of public consultation



NGO's on consultation fatigue

- *'We had very poor experiences of consultations over the past years. Most agencies carrying out these overwhelm you with paper. The processes used exclude and further marginalise, It is a very disempowering experience all round...'*

Consultation Fatigue Table

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

Differences in approaches

- When comparing the focus group data from local government and central government and this sector, there are notable differences in attitudes to and expectations of consultation from this sector.
- We found some very positive responses. But behind the positive attitudes, is a difference in expectations.
- Consulters recognize the possible existence of consultation fatigue among the respondents, but do not rate it highly. whereas our focus group participants from the community and voluntary sector complained strongly of the burden they faced reading long consultation documents, and taking time out from their other activities to respond.
- Consultees expect, if not involvement in decision-making, at least some impact on decision-making, recognized in feedback to the consultees. Its absence has led to frustration.



Comments from central government

- *'Greatly contributes to the policy making process, helps to tailor services to meet client/patient needs, highlights problems and can assist in prioritisation and enable creative solutions...[it] generates awareness of choices government has to make...'*
- *'Consultation is a central part of our work. It provides key material for all our reports and underpins many of the recommendations we make to Government'*
- *'...having consultation changes the agenda and highlights gaps in services...'*

Comments from Local Government

- *'Consultation has enriched the process of decision-making and has led to services meeting the needs of citizens more effectively. It has also built a sense of ownership of policies, plans and strategies among citizens...'*
- *'Where used effectively consultation enables the Council to ensure that the policies and strategies developed have the support of the people we serve. In this way it also contributes to continuous service improvement and ensures that we are accurately providing what it is that people tell us they want.'*



Comments from ngo's:

'We had very poor experiences of consultations over the past years. Most agencies carrying out these overwhelm you with paper. The processes used exclude and further marginalise. It is a very disempowering experience all round...' (Consultation fatigue)

'The Government only 'goes through the motions', does not genuinely listen'



CONSULTATION RESEARCH PROJECT

‘... [groups] contributions do not have any real impact on policy’

‘A rubber stamping exercise sometimes carried out by people who do not know what they are doing and care less. Consultation is not taken seriously especially at local level. Agencies continue to do their own thing.’



'Knowledge tranfer: One way street?'

Consultation both N/S would appear to be employed as a 'one way' street. The most widely used consultation technique is 'consultation documents' where views are elicited from citizens.



Changing the consultation process

- Capacity Building
- Participating not on the basis of 'grace and favour'
- Supporting dialogue
- Hearing many voices
- Sharing information for informed decision-making
- Count each voice equally – measuring needs and preferences
- Sharing authorship of outputs
- Team-working for endogenous decision-making

Conclusions

- where a service provision position has been taken up by local and central government on the inclusion of citizens in consultations on policy development there has been some resistance.
- Where collective participation has been managed well consultation processes have been significantly successful according to non-governmental organizations.
- Whether government has or hasn't managed collective participation their personnel still see consultation processes as an unmitigated good.
- Running consultations where the evaluation of success is based on service provision only has specific implications for citizen participation in the future.
- Digital divide and resource issues matter greatly

Technologies and New Governance – Houses of the Oireachtas



Current:
Broadcasting
Bill