# "What sort of Scotland do we want to live in?"

## Electronic Consultation Study

### Assessment of the E-Consultation Process

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# Executive Summary

This report is an assessment of the "What Sort of Scotland do we want to live in?" e-consultation. It assesses the structure of the e-consultant website, the content of the site and the e-consultation process.

The e-consultation was on behalf of the Environment Group of the Scottish Executive and was based around sustainable development issues facing Scotland. The aim was to equip Ministers with views to develop a policy document as input to the World Summit in South Africa in 2002. The e-consultation ran from 6th June to 8th October 2001. It aimed to inform people about the key issues facing a future Scotland and asked them to give their views on a range of issues ranging from efficient use of resources to lifestyle and transport. The web site address for the e-consultation is: http://e-consultant.org.uk/sustainability/. It received a total of 392 contributions. Of these 172 were made by individuals and 19 on behalf of organisations or groups.

The assessment is based on past experience of conducting e-consultations, the meetings of the consultation Steering Group and the users' opinions of the site as given in response to the on-line "Review Site" questionnaire. Every page of the e-consultation had a link to the "Review Site" questionnaire. This aimed to gather information about the circumstances in which people used the site, how easy or difficult they found it to use and what they thought about using the Internet as part of a consultation process.

In March 2001 the Executive set up a Steering Committee drawn from key stakeholders across Scottish Society to guide the consultation. The Committee agreed the original design specification and the content of the consultation website through an iterative process. Best practice guidelines for "traditional" consultations were followed as closely as possible. As the target audience was anyone with an interest in sustainable development in Scotland, it was important that people using any Internet enabled computer at minimum connection rates and any web browsers could use the e-consultation. Both the structure and the content of the website were designed to cater for this diverse audience. It contained a clear statement on the conditions of use of the site and also clear statement on privacy.

It was important to make it as easy as possible for any user to be able to add comments on the consultation, therefore the commenting process had to be as easy and attractive as possible. The ITC had found from previous e-consultations that users were put off by too intrusive a registration process. Therefore, it was agreed not include a registration process, instead, the users were asked to provide a minimum of personal information with each comment. Although this simplicity worked in the users' favour, it did lead to some difficulties during the evaluation process.

e-consultations provide a new mechanism to gather public opinion and as such they require new methods to promote them. Traditional promotional routes were augmented with more interactive "on-line" style promotion, "tell a friend" e-postcards and clickable logos advertising the consultation on related websites were used. The number of sites displaying the e-consultation link was disappointing, but they did have some success in involving people in the consultation. 40% of respondents to the on-line questionnaire stated they heard about the e-consultation through an electronic link. Almost half the respondents contributed to the e-consultation from their home, 30% from work, 11% from school or college, the remainder from a friend's house or community centre. Most felt that the site had been easy to use, although 7 people admitted to being confused in places and 4 found it quite difficult.

When one of the objectives of an e-consultation is to reach a wide target audience, the natural concern about the digital divide and hence the bias of an Internet based consultation has to be addressed. An e-consultation should be seen as just one route for participation and be supported by other opinion gathering events. All these participation routes should clearly link to one another. Importantly, an e-consultation provides the opportunity for deliberative participation. Well-structured background information on the website can serve to inform the debate. Allowing users to make their own comments and also to read and respond to comments from others provides a more transparent consultation process.

Finally, the e-consultation process must not be viewed as a one way process to gather informed opinions, but rather a two-way process. Hopefully, electronic consultation will make it easier for policy developers to provide relevant and timely feedback that clearly shows how they have dealt with the consultation responses. The Executive's feedback to this e-consultation will be posted on the website.

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# 1  Introduction

This report is an assessment of the "What Sort of Scotland do we want to live in?" e-consultation. It assesses the structure of the e-consultant website, the content of the site and the e-consultation process.

The e-consultation was on behalf of the Environment Group of the Scottish Executive and was based around sustainable development issues facing Scotland. The aim was to equip Ministers with views to develop a policy document as input to the World Summit in South Africa in 2002. The e-consultation ran from 6$^{th}$ June to 8$^{th}$ October 2001. It aimed to inform people about the key issues facing a future Scotland and asked them to give their views on a range of issues ranging from efficient use of resources to lifestyle and transport. The web site address for the e-consultation is: http://e-consultant.org.uk/sustainability/

E-consultant is a web-based application, developed in partnership with BT, that allows Internet users to make responses to a consultation, read related background information, see who else has contributed and the nature of their response, and return to read feedback on the outcomes of the process. The website's contents, appearance, structure and functions are tailored by ITC to meet the needs of the particular consulting body, in this case the Environment Group in the Scottish Executive on the subject of sustainable development. E-consultant addresses the need to collect responses from the wider community and informal responses generally.

After the e-consultation the outcomes are summarised and reported. For the e-consultation on "What Sort of Scotland do we want to live in?" there are 3 reports:
1. Report giving the full text of all the comments received through the e-consultation.
2. Report providing the results of the analysis of the comments entered onto the e-consultation website.
3. This report describing and assessing the e-consultation structure, content and process.

The assessment is based on past experience of conducting e-consultations, the meetings of the consultation Steering Group and the users' opinions of the site as given in response to the on-line "Review Site" questionnaire. Every page of the e-consultation had a link to the "Review Site" questionnaire. This aimed to gather information about the circumstances in which people used the site, how easy or difficult they found it to use and what they thought about using the Internet as part of a consultation process.

After this introductory section, section 2 of the report overviews the whole consultation exercise and describes the process of how the e-consultation was developed and managed. It contains an outline of the format and purpose of the consultation and the development of the e-consultant website. Section 3 provides a site map of the e-consultation and descriptions of the individual elements. It also reviews the mechanisms put in place to promote the e-consultation. Section 4 focuses on user satisfaction and is based on an examination of issues raised in the "Review Site" questionnaire. Finally, section 6 provides conclusions under the three headings of structure, content and process.

# 2  The e-Consultation Development Process

The Scottish Executive's programme for the environment included consulting on what Scotland should say to the world summit on sustainable development to be held in South Africa in 2002. In March 2001 the Executive set up a Steering Committee drawn from key stakeholders across Scottish Society to guide the consultation which was to take place between June and October. It comprised:

Sandy Cameron          Scottish Executive (Chair)
Martin Mathers         Scottish Executive

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| Donald Reid | Scottish Civic Forum |
| Debbie Wilkie | Scottish Civic Forum |
| Matthew Farrow | CBI |
| Martin Sime | SCVO |
| Kevin Dunion | Friends of the Earth |
| Bob Christie | COSLA |
| Tracey Whyte | STUC |
| Robert Wright | Scottish Youth Parliament |
| Donald Bruce/Kenyon Wright | ACTS |
| Ann Macintosh | International Teledemocracy Centre |
| Brendan Dick | BT Scotland |
| Dermot Grimson | Shell |

Two major approaches to the consultation were taken forward to obtain the views of people living in Scotland:-

- The Scottish Civic Forum organised three regional seminars: 11th June in Inverness, 19th June in Glasgow and 21st June in Newtown St Boswells.
- Electronic consultation using e-consultant through the "What sort of Scotland do we want to live in?" website which ran from the 6th June to 8th October 2001.

In addition, postcards were distributed by the Scottish Civic Forum at the 3 seminars to allow the working groups at each seminar to input comments to the e-consultation. These were basically paper versions of the 'comments' form on the e-consultation website. The completed postcards were passed to the ITC and the comments entered onto the site.

The e-consultation had two objectives:
1. To gather ideas and opinions about the future of Scotland in terms of sustainable development: about what needs to be done and how it should be achieved.
2. To encourage and facilitate discussion among citizens about sustainable development in Scotland.

While the two objectives are obviously closely linked, the second can be seen as an extension with further consequences. By listening to each other and debating issues, citizens can, hopefully, achieve the following:

- Gain information not initially provided by the website or various media. This should compensate for any bias of information provision. It also gives the opportunity for new and creative ideas to enter the debate.
- Understand how issues affect those in differing circumstances from a human perspective. E.g. the problems of traffic in cities versus rural isolation in terms of the suitability of vehicle and fuel taxation.
- Ideally, moderate their own views in accordance with others and move towards some form of consensus. This would give the implementation of policies a head start and perhaps encourage individual action by implying group support.

Although the Internet seems the ideal medium for this we are still learning about the way people interact with each other through it. There may be an opportunity to facilitate the collation of information and the sharing of ideas and opinions in a way that resembles a "group mind" (Rheingold 1993). There is also some evidence that reduced social cues (e.g. lack of facial expressions) hinder respect for other contributors, which in turn impedes useful discussion (Wallace 1999). Hopefully, the combination of contributors' increasing familiarity with the medium and designers' increasing awareness of what works well will enable continuing improvements in e-consultant.

## 2.1 Role of Steering Committee

The overall role of the Steering Committee, drawn from key stakeholders across Scottish Society, was to
- guide the consultation project;
- provide and agree content, such as the background information on sustainable development issues in Scotland;

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- help promote of the consultation.

With respect to the e-consultation, the Steering Committee agreed the original design specification and the content of the site through an iterative process. The wording for the "Overview" page, the "Background Ideas" section and the issues were based on text supplied by the Steering Committee, formulated by the ITC and returned to the Committee for approval. The text was altered until a consensus was reached. An additional page of information about the purpose of the consultation, written by the Executive, was linked to the "Overview" page and labelled "For more detailed information click here."

The Scottish Executive with financial support from BT Scotland and Shell UK funded the consultation project. The Scottish Civic Forum managed the overall project and the ITC designed and managed the e-consultation with support from BT.

The logos of all the organisations on the Committee involved (except the ITC) appeared at the bottom of the "Overview" page. The ITC logo, linked to the ITC home page, appeared in the top left-hand corner of every page. The Future Scotland logo, linked to the Future Scotland home page (set up by the Scottish Civic Forum), appeared on the top right.

## 2.2 Target Audience

For any consultation it is important to state clearly who the target audience is. This consultation was aimed at any one with an interest in sustainable development in Scotland. To this end it was titled "What sort of Scotland do we want to live in?". It was felt that this would be an inclusive title that would also help focus on individual action as well as action by government, business and non-government organisations. Only two contributors identified themselves as from outside Scotland (from England and Wales). Other nationalities visiting the site may have been dissuaded from commenting by the nature of the e-consultation title. However, Scottish contributors described schemes from elsewhere, especially those related to recycling and public transport.

## 2.3 Access

The diverse nature of the target audience had technical implications. It was important that the e-consultation could be used by people using any Internet enabled computer at minimum connection rates and any browsers (including older versions). To achieve this the website was designed to be predominantly text based with a few light graphics. The graphics were reused as much as possible, thereby keeping a consistent page layout. It was decided not to use any video, audio or animation for the above reasons. The site was tested in Netscape 4 and 6 and Internet Explorer 5. Modifications were made to ensure as much consistency of appearance as possible between browsers.

The pervasiveness of mobile phones and personal digital assistants, as ways to access the Internet, was not considered to be sufficiently extensive in Scotland for these devices to be specifically considered.

Due to the expected diversity of users, the aim was for text to be written clearly and simply with the avoidance of jargon and academic terms. However, a certain amount of clarity was lost in the rewriting of text to achieve consensus and some technical terms crept in. For example, the issue originally titled "Waste" became "Efficient Use of Resources". While this has the advantage of refocusing the debate towards cutting down on waste produced, it is less clear as a section title. It also encourages comments about efficient use of resources in terms of transport and heating where these would fit more comfortably in the sections "Lifestyle and Transport" and "Energy and Climate Change".

A genuine effort was made to make the site accessible to partially sighted users, blind users and those with images turned off. All images (including buttons) were given tags so that a textual description of their function would be available in their place for people accessing the site with a screen reader or with images turned off. However, when the e-consultant site was re-coded the size attributes of the images were not included. This meant that some browsers (e.g. Netscape 6) could not display the textual tag replacing the image when images were

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turned off. Some users also found related problems using the Future Scotland site, which is predominantly image based, and without tags. These issues are likely to become more important and may soon gain the same kind of legal backing as wheelchair access to public buildings. The Web Access Initiative recommends using tags on all images (see http://www.w3.org/WAI/).

## 2.4  Registration

It was important to make it as easy as possible for any user to be able to add comments on the consultation, therefore the commenting process had to be as easy and attractive as possible. The ITC had found from previous e-consultations that users were put off by too intrusive a registration process. Specifically, experience with conducting an e-consultation for Learning and Teaching Scotland had shown that a formal front-end registration system, where users had to register to use the site and have a user-ID and password to make a comment, actively dissuaded people from taking part.  Therefore, it was agreed not include any sort of log-on or registration process, instead, the users were asked to provide a minimum of information with each comment on the comment form. They were asked for their name (or that of their organisation) and postcode. They were asked to choose a country from a drop down list of UK countries or specify another country. The default was set to show Scotland.

The postcodes were used to distinguish contributors in the case of more than one contributor using the same name or one contributor using differing forms of their name with different comments. A couple of contributors began by providing their full name and went on to use their first name alone on further comments. The postcodes also gave an indication of the spread of contributors throughout Scotland.

Although the simplicity of the system used in this e-consultation worked in the users' favour, it did lead to some difficulties during the evaluation process. Contributors were inconsistent in the way they entered their details from one comment to the next. When the contributions were analysed repetitions had to be recognised "by eye", making counting the number of unique contributors and how many comments they made more laborious.

## 2.5  Personal Information

It was important to ensure that users understood how the personal information they entered onto the site, i.e. name, postcode, and country, would be used and who would have access to it.  A paragraph about privacy underneath the comments form outlined how this information would be used:

> "**Privacy:** The name you have provided and country will be displayed on this web site against your comment. Your postcode will be used by ITC only to evaluate where responses have come from. These will be passed to the Scottish Civic Forum who will use them only for the purpose of the 'What sort of Scotland do we want to live in?' consultation."

This information was also provided on the "Overview" page in a paragraph titled  "How do I join in?"

A link on the "Events and Links" page and a box on the paper postcard provided opportunities for people to give their email address to the Scottish Civic Forum if they were interested in receiving further information.

## 2.6  Conditions of Use

It was important to have a clear statement of what could, and could not, be typed as comments into the e-consultation. The agreed Conditions of Use in this e-consultation included the following advice:

> "Users wishing to make comments on this consultation are requested to refrain from using offensive or abusive language, to refrain from including advertising statements or including text of a disruptive nature."

This was displayed on the "Overview" page and under the comments form on the "Have your say" pages. During the e-consultation the ITC monitored the site according to the Conditions

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of Use. The comments have all been respectful, with disagreements of opinion handled gracefully and no comments have had to be removed for disregarding this request.

## 2.7  Publicity

e-consultations provide a new mechanism to gather public opinion and as such they require new methods to promote them. The web, in itself, is a passive medium and therefore any e-consultation needs good publicity to inform the public that there is a consultation in progress, that they can participate and importantly, where and how they can participate. With this in mind, traditional, off-line promotional avenues, such as press releases and news broadcasts should ensure that the web address is clearly given for the e-consultation. Also these traditional, promotional routes need to be augmented with more interactive "on-line" style promotion, such as "tell a friend" postcards and clickable logos advertising the consultation on related websites. This section describes what was achieved with respect to promotion for the sustainable development e-consultation.

### 2.7.1  Off-line promotion

 At the start of the consultation period the Scottish Executive issued a press statement from the Minister for Environment and Rural Development stressing the importance of sustainable development to all living in Scotland. Unfortunately the press release did not contain the web address for the e-consultation. Neither was the e-consultation advertised on the Scottish Executive website although it did appear under the "Citizen Space" area of the UK-Online website.

During September, as part of the promotion, the Scottish Executive arranged a visit by Rhona Brankin, Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development, to Napier University, where she used the e-consultation to answer two on-line questions from school children. This event was publicised in the News section of the ITC website. It was also added to the "Feedback" page of the site to represent some early feedback from the Scottish Executive. Unfortunately the Scottish press did not take up the news story.

The Scottish Civic Forum publicised the consultation through the three regional seminars and distributing postcards. Also, some members of the Steering Committee distributed the postcards to their associates.

### 2.7.2  On-line promotion

It was anticipated that all members of the Steering Committee would contribute to publicising the e-consultation, for example by providing a link on their web sites. In order to advance this idea the ITC developed a publicity logo. This was a map of Scotland with the issue icons combined to represent the land. It was accompanied by a couple of lines of text briefly outlining the objectives of the consultation, inviting people to join in and linking directly to the "Overview" page of e-consultant. This was sent to the members of the Committee and the webmasters of all Scottish local authority websites. Only the Scottish Civic Forum, COSLA, SCVO and the Church of Scotland members of the Steering Committee provided links on their websites to the e-consultation. This probably reflects the fact that the members of the Committee did not have management responsibility for their organisation's website.  Of the 32 local authorities in Scotland seven provided a link to the consultation. The ITC displayed the logo on its home page.
Although the number of sites displaying the e-consultation link was disappointing, they did have some success in involving people in the consultation as can be seen from the answer to the question "How did you find out about this website?" in section 4 of this report.

The e-consultation website provided a page entitled "Tell a Friend" (linked to from all pages). This was to encourage users to advertise the site to anyone they thought would be interested. It contained a 'postcard' with the text:

> "We wish you were here at "What sort of Scotland do we want to live in?" This is an electronic consultation on sustainable development for the Millennium debate on Scotland's future. Please take a few moments to join the discussion at http://www.e-consultant.org.uk/sustainability"

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The user entered their email address and that of their friend onto the postcard. An email was automatically sent to the friend. This informed them that (their friend) thought they would be interested in the consultation and continued with the text from the postcard. Also, the "Thanks" page (a confirmation page that the user was directed to after submitting a comment) encouraged contributors to use the "Tell a friend" postcard and to return to the e-consultation another time.

The e-consultation was relatively quiet considering its uniqueness in terms of the opportunity to formulate policy from the ground up. It is likely that the media (newspapers, radio and TV) would have been interested in covering the consultation had they been more directly approached, as ideas about e-democracy have been current in the media recently. An added on-line promotional technique is to have clickable banner ads on popular websites visited by the target audience. Given the diverse nature of this target audience such on-line promotion would have taken the consultation over budget.

# 3 Structure and Content of the e-Consultant Website

e-consultant is a dynamic website implemented in Active Server Pages. Scripts written in VBScript generate the HTML, and access and update the consultation data. Data is maintained in a SQL Server relational database, with the exception of the consultation's background information, which is held as static HTML. The e-consultant system resides on the ITC server, which in turn is on Napier University's network.

In summary, the main sections of e-consultant for the sustainable development consultation were designed as follows:-
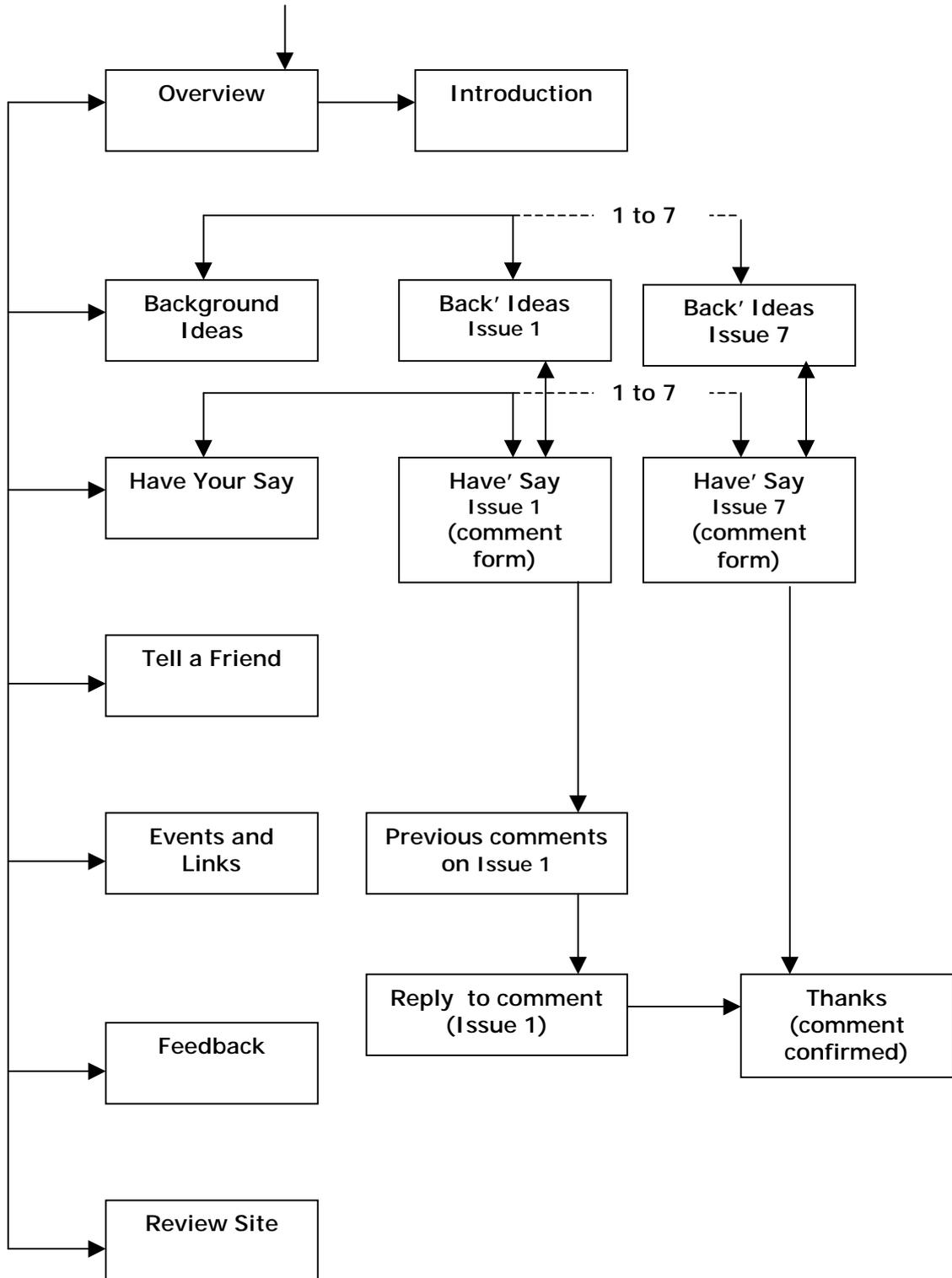
- *Overview:* A welcoming page outlining the purpose, target audience and timescales of the consultation, and with links to the main websites of the Steering Committee.
- *Background Ideas:* Structured around the 7 key issues of sustainable development for Scotland, also included were links from the consultation issues to a Comment page for each issue.
- *Have your say:* Here uses could enter their comment on an issue or respond to a previously made comment, also included were links from the comment pages back to the background ideas page for each issue.
- *Tell a friend:* Here users could email people they felt would be interested in participating in the consultation.
- *Events and Links:* Details of the seminars and links to other sites.
- *Feedback:* Space for a statement from the Scottish Executive as their response to the consultation once the consultation was complete and responses analysed.
- *Review site:* An online questionnaire for users to complete to help the ITC evaluate the e-consultation.

As well as the above end-user sections, the management of the e-consultation process was facilitated by additional password-protected administrative services. These included functions to
- monitor comments on a 24hour post-moderation basis
- remove from view comments that breached the "conditions of use" statement
- view the entries to the on-line questionnaire
- view the most frequently read comments
- view the comments added in the last 24 hours
- view the comments received from postcode areas.

The ITC had access to all the above services to support managing the e-consultation. The Scottish Executive had access to all but the first 3 of the services. This helped them assess the consultation as it progressed.

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## 3.1 Site map

```
                          Overview  ───▶   Introduction

                    ┌───────────────────────┈┈┈ 1 to 7 ┈┈┐
                    ▼                 ▼                   ▼
              Background         Back' Ideas         Back' Ideas
                Ideas             Issue 1             Issue 7

              ┌──────────────────────┈┈┈ 1 to 7 ┈┈┐
              ▼                 ▼                   ▼
           Have Your Say     Have' Say           Have' Say
                             Issue 1             Issue 7
                             (comment            (comment
                              form)               form)

           Tell a Friend

           Events and        Previous comments
             Links             on Issue 1

           Feedback          Reply to comment    Thanks
                               (Issue 1)  ───▶   (comment
                                                 confirmed)

           Review Site
```

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## 3.2   The issues

In order to give some structure to the debate and encourage discussion topics to form, questions and ideas were divided into issue based sections. The issues were also used to focus discussion on the less obvious aspects of the debate (economic and social) and help to explain how they fitted in.

It was decided to create seven issues. It was anticipated that a smaller number of issues would have caused too much overlapping of topics, whereas a larger number could have created 'unpopular' issues: less visited issues where the debate had no momentum and fizzled out. The observations of George A. Miller (1956) that people find information difficult to take in when grouped in numbers larger than 7 (to 9) is now widely accepted.

The steering Committee agreed the following seven sustainable development issues.

| ISSUE |
| --- |
| |
| **Efficient Use of Resources** |
| **Energy and Climate Change** |
| **Environment** |
| **Poverty and Social Justice** |
| **Economic Growth and Employment** |
| **Public health** |
| **Lifestyle and Transport** |
| |

This was extended to eight with the addition of the "Good Practice" section: not so much a section for debate as a space where contributors could share examples of successful sustainable development practices. The Good Practice section had a "Have Your Say" page for contributors to give examples, but no "Background Ideas" page as it was felt that the contributors were supplying the background themselves.

## 3.3   Issue icons

Each issue had its own icon. This consisted of a round image, designed to represent a major aspect of its issue. (e.g. the icon for "Public Health" depicted vegetables, the icon for "Efficient use of Resources" depicted a pile of used tyres). These icons appeared in two forms. The image in each form was the same while the text wrapped round the bottom read either "background" or "have your say".

These icons performed two functions:
1. They acted as "branding" for the issue. The icons were intended to help the user recognise where they were in terms of which issue they were reading about or commenting on. They were also intended to focus the discussion by depicting major aspects of an issue.
2. They provided links between the "Have your say" sections of an issue and the "Background Ideas" section. On the "Background Ideas" page for a particular issue, the icon was labelled "have your say". The user read the background information and then clicked on the icon to comment on that particular issue (as below).



**Efficient use of resources**

*How can our standard of living remain high while at the same time we use fewer resources? How can we use less in producing goods? How can we use less fuel in taking raw materials to factories and finished goods to shops?*

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On the "Have your say" page for a particular issue, the icon was labelled "background". The user was encouraged by this to read the background information for an issue before commenting on it (as below).

## Efficient use of resources

*How can our standard of living remain high while at the same time we use fewer resources? How can we use less in producing goods? How can we use less fuel in taking raw materials to factories and finished goods to shops?*

previous comments
<< list all issues

The images from the icons were joined to make a 'banner' image representing the e-consultation as a whole. This appeared at the top of every page. The icons were also converted into a circular image. Labelled "submit", this image appeared as the 'stamp' which allowed a user to submit his/her comment (see section 3.6).

## 3.4   Provision of Information

To encourage deliberative debate a "Background Ideas" section was included in the site. This was divided into pages according to the various issues. The first page of the section contained an introduction to the problems facing Scotland followed by a list of the issues. Each issue consisted of the issue title, a few questions to outline the issue and the "background icon" for that issue. The following are the issues and their related questions.

**Efficient Use of Resources**
How can our standard of living remain high while at the same time we use fewer resources? How can we use less in producing goods? How can we use less fuel in taking raw materials to factories and finished goods to shops?

**Energy and Climate Change**
Where should the balance lie between different energy sources such as coal, oil, gas, nuclear and renewable, like wind power? Where is the greatest scope for energy efficiency?

**Environment**
How can we protect our landscape and the diversity of wildlife within it? Can we 'clean up' our land, rivers and sea? Can industry, farming and fisheries grow without damaging their surroundings?

**Poverty and Social Justice**
How can we make poverty and poor housing a thing of the past? Can we make sure that everyone shares in Scotland's progress? Can we make discrimination a thing of the past?

**Economic Growth and Employment**
How can our economy continue to grow? How can environmental policies co-exist with economic growth? How can we provide enough work for everyone?

**Public health**
How can we increase our healthy life expectancy? Do we know how safe our food is? How can we improve our air quality?

**Lifestyle and Transport**
How do we lead satisfying lives without consuming too many resources? How should we travel around in the 21st century? Have local authorities focused too much on discouraging cars in cities and too little on improving and integrating public transport?

**Good Practice**
If you are involved in or have noticed good examples of sustainable development in action, please share them.

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By clicking on the issue title or the accompanying "background icon", the user reached the "Background Ideas" page for that issue. This contained a few short paragraphs of text outlining Scotland's current status and some of the problems being faced in improving it. Some pages contained information about government policy, public knowledge and aspects of issues that needed to be balanced. E.g. "Are we prepared for the change of landscape and visual impact from, say, 100 wind farms of 50 turbines, each of which might be needed to replace one large coal or nuclear power station?" Each paragraph ended with a question(s) to start the discussion. None of the questions had easy answers!

There was also an "Events and Links" section encouraging users to find more information from diverse sources. As well as information about the seminars organised by the Scottish Civic Forum, there was a list of links to sites containing information about sustainable development and the 2002 Earth Summit:

- The Earth summit 2002 site, the Earth Council site and the United Nations Agenda 21 site.
- The sustainable Scotland (government) site.
- The Friends of the Earth Scotland site.

The Steering Committee was keen that the links given were to Scottish sites where possible.

For more about the intended use of the site, see the Scenarios of Use in the Appendix.

## 3.5  Structuring the Debate

As well as dividing the debate according to the issues, the Steering Committee wanted contributors to think in terms of "who does what?". The following questions (from the "Have your Say" section) were used to focus on this:

> "Your comments on each issue should try and address:
> What could **you** do?
> What could **business** do?
> What could **government** do?"

They were designed to encourage people to think practically about possible policies and also to take some responsibility themselves.

This was reflected in the "Background ideas" section where different questions and aspects of information focussed on different groups of people: from individuals switching lights off to government policy on renewable energy sources.

The Steering Committee was also keen that sustainable development be seen in economic and social as well as environmental terms. This angle was apparent from the first paragraph of the "Overview" page: "We need to think about sustainable development: How can we continue our path of economic growth while we reduce our demands on the earth's resources, improve our environment and tackle poverty and social division?" It was also reflected in the choice and wording of the issues.

The success of the issue categories and their related questions is described in the "Analysis of Comments" report (Report No. 2).

## 3.6  Postcard metaphor

The e-consultation was intended to reach a wide target audience – anyone with an interest in sustainable development issues in Scotland. Therefore it was important to be able to submit comments in a user-friendly manner and in a way that seemed natural for non-IT literate users. Previous experience with e-consultations had led the ITC to design the comments page similar to a postcard that everyone could relate to. This postcard metaphor allowed users to type their comments onto a postcard and then click on the stamp of the postcard when they were ready to add their comment to the e-consultation.

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# 4  User Satisfaction

The e-consultation included a "Review Site" page. This invited users to complete an on-line questionnaire about their experience of using the site in order to improve further e-consultations. 60 users completed the questionnaire. Because of the reasons of stated previously, no registration process was included, therefore the results cannot be correlated with comments on the issues. The questions were kept simple and only 6 questions were asked. It was thought any more questions would deter people from responding. The questions and a summary of the answers are given below.

***Where have you been using this website today?***
Almost half the respondents (40%) contributed to the e-consultation from their home, 30% from work, 11% from school or college, the remainder from a friend's house or community centre.
***How easy did you find the site to use?***
Most (78%) felt that the site had been easy to use, although 7 people admitted to being confused in places and 4 found it quite difficult.
***Did you feel 'lost' at any stage?***
The majority of users  (65%) did not feel lost at any stage, however a quarter said that they felt lost a couple of times. Two people felt lost most of the time and one or two failed in their attempts to comment.
***Generally, what do you think of the public using electronic tools to participate in democracy?***
Most users (90%) felt that using electronic tools to participate in democracy was a good idea, only 2 thought it was a poor idea. However, there was much concern over access and the bias produced by a digital divide. This viewpoint was expressed by those who thought it was a good idea as well as those who did not. For example "a good idea in principal but excludes those who do not have readily accessible internet access." One person commented:  "If young and old are helped to access 'electronic tools' and someone spends a wee bit of time and patience showing them that it's as easy as flicking a light switch, then I think it's a great idea."
There were also concerns about the lack of publicity, users thought the e-consultation should have been more widely publicised, one person quite rightly commenting "people can't contribute if they don't know they can!" and another "needs a bit of promoting so its not just the anoraks like myself who use it."
Some also lacked faith in the government implementing the suggestions, asking: "Is it going to influence anything?"
***Could you see yourself using a website like this again?***
82% said that they would use an e-consultation site like this again, 12% were not sure and 3% said no.
***Any suggestions for improvement?***
There were various suggestions for improvement, including:
- Make the site as easy to use as possible.
- Allow users to see what other people thought of the site, i.e. the responses to this on-line questionnaire.
- Provide an opportunity for people to post their thoughts regarding areas that were not covered by the seven issues.
- Allow users to see all the comments of a follow-on discussion on the one page.
- Provide for users to add comments to the "Tell a Friend" e-postcard, presumably in order to distinguish the email from 'spam'.

With regard to content, one person thought the background information provided implied bad news and failed to report the good news.
***How did you find out about this website?***
35% of the users found out about the e-consultation from a friend/colleague while 29% found out through contact made with them by members of the Steering Committee. Users were not asked to state explicitly whether they found out through "paper" or "electronic" media, however, 40% stated the information was through an electronic link.

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# 5 Conclusions

## 5.1 Structure

From the experience of this e-consultation we make the following suggestions for improvements to the structure of e-consultant.

- Add a "help" or "contact us" button to every page so those users who experience difficulty using e-consultations can email for help. The addition of a map of the site might also be a good idea.
- Allow for viewing all comments for an issue at the same time – e.g. give the option to see all full comments for an issue in one list, including replies. Otherwise the user has to constantly click between pages to follow the discussion.
- Encourage contributors to return and rejoin the consultation. This can be achieved by adding an option for the contributor to be contacted when someone replies to their comment, see for example "citizen space" in UK-Online. A weekly digest of new comments (or comments on a particular issue) could also be emailed to contributors who requested one, see for example Open Democracy.
- Give the option for users to add comments to the "tell a friend" postcard, so that they can be more specific about why they are recommending the site.
- Make it simpler for users to customise the text size.
- Possibly, add a "Guest book" where contributors can say what they think of e-consultations and read each other's responses.

## 5.2 Content

From the analysis of the comments (see Report No. 2), the contributions received were useful and relevant contributions to the consultation and mostly illustrate e-consultant being used as intended. Where discussion threads formed, the debate was conducted with respect. From the experience of this e-consultation we make the following suggestions for improvements to the content of e-consultant in order to take the debate further:

- Many respondents worried about the bias of an Internet based consultation and this may have affected their enthusiasm for the whole consultation. Therefore ensure information about any associated offline consultation is clearly mentioned on pages. The regional seminars were only mentioned on the "Events and Links" page, in retrospect they should have been included in the introductory text on the "Overview" page.
- There were some misunderstandings about the consultation process that might have been avoided by clearer text. For such a diverse audience, where possible, text should be more 'snappy' with any jargon removed in order to encourage users to read it.
- Ensure that the "Background Information" includes current initiatives: including both positive and negative points of view.

## 5.3 Process

From the experience of this e-consultation the following suggestions for improvements to the e-consultation process are made. They focus on ensuring "informed e-contributions" and ensuring the promotion of the e-consultation to the wider audience.

In order to move from the mere provision of information towards a more interactive discussion and give the participation momentum from the beginning, "stakeholders" should be invited to take on informal roles. As was the case in this e-consultation, the stakeholders, i.e. members of the Steering Committee, should provide background information for the e-consultation based on their own area of expertise. They should also be encouraged to contribute comments and reply to comments from the start of the e-consultation. For this e-consultation, this happened in September, but would have been more useful earlier – the e-consultation started in June. Their early contributions could serve as an example to other contributors. There are two risks to this strategy:

1. Creating a bias (political) in the discussion. This could probably be avoided by careful selection of these stakeholders and by requesting that they use the name of their organisation when commenting (so that any inherent bias would be obvious).

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2. Creating a bias (language). Stakeholders would need to use clear, widely understood terms and concepts and avoid jargon and acronyms.

All the members of the Steering Committee for this e-consultation were aware of the need to avoid technical terms and jargon.

One of the objectives of the e-consultation was to reach the wider audience, and not just the organisations and individuals that usually respond to consultations. To achieve this objective the methods for promoting the e-consultation have to be broader than for traditional consultation exercises.

A comprehensive publicity plan needs to be drawn up and followed right from the start of the e-consultation. For e-consultations this plan needs to include:

- a high profile launch of the e-consultation
- demonstrations on how to use/contribute to the e-consultation at related events
- availability of internet connected PCs at related events for attendees to make contributions
- Through links from stakeholders / Steering Group members web sites.
- Through postcards promoting the site and inviting comments
- Through links from other web sites, for example, Scottish Parliament, BBC Online, community centre sites, UK OnLine, etc.
- Through "tell a friend" e-postcards

Also, clickable banner ads on the website most visited by the target audience should be considered and built into the e-consultation budget.

In conclusion, one of the main lessons learnt from this e-consultation with regard to the development process is to enlist the support of stakeholders who represent a cross section of the target audience. They need to take on an active role throughout the e-consultation. They should be involved in agreeing background information for the consultation website, facilitating the e-consultation debate and, importantly, actively promoting the e-consultation to their respective membership. On this last point, interactive, on-line promotional activities need to be used.

When one of the objectives of an e-consultation is to reach a wide target audience, the natural concern about the digital divide and hence the bias of an Internet based consultation has to be addressed. An e-consultation should be seen as just one route for participation and be supported by other opinion gathering events. All these participation routes should clearly link to one another. Importantly, an e-consultation provides the opportunity for deliberative participation. Well-structured background information on the website can serve to inform the debate. Allowing users to make their own comments and also to read and respond to comments from others provides a more transparent consultation process.

Finally, the e-consultation process must not be viewed as a one way process to gather informed opinions, but rather a two-way process. Hopefully, electronic consultation will make it easier for policy developers to provide relevant and timely feedback that clearly shows how they have dealt with the consultation responses.


# 6  Acknowledgements

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# 8 Appendix: Scenarios of Use

## 8.1 Example user: Clare

Clare lives in a large Scottish city. She has two children, aged eight and ten. Over the last few years the road in front of their bungalow has become busier and busier and Clare worries about the children's health, because of pollution, and their safety, because of the traffic. She lives on a convenient bus route and that's how she gets to work, but she also uses her car to get the shopping and ferry the children about.

Clare's sister, Louise finds a link to the "What sort of Scotland do we want to live in?" site on her local council website, where she is trying to find out about the introduction of "wheelie bins" in her street. She follows the link, finds the site interesting and uses the "Tell a Friend" postcard to send an email to Clare about it.

The email sits in Clare's in-box for a bit, until she finds time to follow it up. The link takes her to a page called "Overview" which explains that the site is an opportunity for people to have their say about sustainable development in Scotland. It says that their views will form part of Scotland's input to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa in 2002. Clare's not sure about the meaning of sustainable development: sustainability seems to be something to do with the environment, but the word's used to mean so many different things these days. Anyway, she reads about how to join in: it sounds simple enough and there do not seem to be any strings attached. She follows the advice on the page and goes to "Background Ideas" to find out more.

Clare reads the first paragraph to get a better idea about what the site means by sustainable development and what it has to do with her. "There is a need to achieve a balance between the economy, the environment and social needs." This seems to echo her problem with the traffic. She knows cars are bad for the environment, but when she thinks about carrying her family's shopping on the bus, her car seems like a social need. She looks down the list of issues. They're all accompanied by interesting questions that make her think about these problems in a slightly different way. Clare decides to click on "Lifestyle and Transport" first and then maybe look at another subject if she has time. The first thing she notices is the little car with its exhaust belching out smoke. She remembers this from the list of background issues. This page contains more information and questions. These are mostly about cars, but some seem to suggest moving the shops instead! This sentence seems to capture her dilemma: "Would we, as individuals, be willing to use our cars less where there is a suitable alternative? Can the experience in other countries help us?" Wondering what other people are saying and what they're doing in other countries, Clare notices that it says "have your say" under the little car. She clicks on the picture.

Another page appearswith the little car on. This time it's labelled "background". Clare reckons that if she clicked it now, it would take her back to the page she just came from. This page is labelled "Lifestyle and Transport" and has some of the text from the last page on it. Under this is what looks a bit like a postcard. It asks for her name, post code, country and comment. She's pleased it doesn't ask for her email address. However, Clare's still not sure what she wants to say. Above the postcard there appear to be three options: "Write your comment now or see previous comments
 << list all issues".
Clare decides that she has seen the list of issues and that the "previous comments" must be the ones left by other people. She clicks on that link.

This takes her to another page with the little car on it and a table. This contains a list of short comments. Clare clicks on one and is taken to another page. This has a longer comment on it and she realises that it is the same comment she just clicked on, except that the other one was only the first couple of lines. Under this comment is a smaller table with what look like the

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beginning of a couple of replies. Clare clicks on a reply and begins to read through some comments – sometimes clicking to read a whole comment and sometimes just reading the first couple of lines as given. At first she uses the "read next comment" link, which steps through the comments and replies. Then she uses the "Show all comments" link and just clicks on the ones that look most interesting.

Many of the comments are disparaging public transport. Clare thinks her local bus service is pretty good – certainly better than the one in the village she grew up in. However, she still doesn't fancy carrying the family's supermarket shopping on the bus. There are shops closer to her, but they're so expensive. Clare clicks on what looks like a little letter, labelled "post a response" next to one of the comments about how bad public transport is.

The next page shows the comment with the postcard under it. Clare fills in the box labelled name with her full name, because that's what other people seem to have done. She fills in her post code in the next box. The third box is set to Scotland, so she leaves it that way. She ignores the next box, as it says "(country)" and her country's already showing. Then she writes her comment in the box labelled "comment". She writes that the bus service in her city is really quite good, but no one wants to carry all their shopping on the bus. If the local shops weren't so expensive she might shop there. The supermarket is the cheapest and most convenient, but she really has to take the car. Next to the comment box, it says "Click on stamp to submit". In the top right hand corner is a picture that looks like a stamp, labelled submit. She clicks on that.

The next page thanks her for her comment. It asks her if she'd like to see it in the debate, whether she'd like to fill in a questionnaire about the site and whether she'd like to tell one of her friends about it. Clare wants to see her comment in the list with all the others – just to make sure the computer hasn't lost it. It's there!

Clare decides that she'll come back soon and see what everyone's saying and if anyone has replied to her comment. She reckons she'll probably look at some of the other issues next time. She might even fill in the questionnaire too- she was a bit confused by when the comment form made a new comment and when it made a reply and thinks this could have been made simpler or more obvious.

She's about to close Internet Explorer, when she notices the "Tell a Friend" button and remembered how she'd been asked about this a moment ago. Immediately, she thinks of Phil – he's always going on about the environment. She presses the button and comes to a page with a different postcard. This looks even more like a real postcard- it even says "Wish you were here". She just has to fill in her email address and Phil's and click the stamp to send it. The next page tells her that the email has been sent. She closes her browser, wondering when she'll have time to come back.

## 8.2  Example user: Cameron

Cameron lives near a small town in South-west Scotland. He's always been interested in "green" issues. He tries to keep his life environmentally friendly - buying biodegradable washing powder, recycled toilet paper and organic food, when he can get it and afford it. Most of his friends feel the same way and they talk about what's happening near them and new schemes from abroad. One night they're talking about the effect of the foot and mouth outbreak on their local area and the distances animals travel between field and plate. They're wondering how much power the Scottish Parliament has over the situation. Cameron's friend Chrissie mentions the "What sort of Scotland do we want to live in?" Internet consultation, saying that if the Scottish Executive can make an independent contribution to a World Summit, then maybe they have the power to make laws protecting the environment. A discussion follows about the difference between what politicians say and what they actually do, but Cameron thinks the Website sounds interesting and gets the URL.

The URL takes him to a page called "Overview" which answers some of his questions about who's organised the consultation and why. He notes that it says nothing about the Scottish

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Executive changing any policies. It's just about what they say at this summit. Still, Cameron feels strongly about the environment - even if it won't change anything, he still wants to contribute.

Cameron skims through the paragraph about how to join in and then looks at the buttons. One says, "Have your say". "That's what I want to do", thinks Cameron, and he clicks it.

He sees a list of links. Each link is followed by a description in the form of some questions. The questions don't seem to tell Cameron anything new, but they help to explain the categories a bit better. One category in particular catches his attention: "Economic Growth and Employment. How can our economy continue to grow? How can environmental policies co-exist with economic growth? How can we provide enough work for everyone?" Cameron thinks that's just typical of the government- they're only interested in the environment if it doesn't detract from the business of making money. He decides to tell them that and clicks on the title. He fills in the "postcard" saying that while tackling poverty is important, our materialistic throw away society is part of the problem, not the solution and that progress should be measured in terms of quality of life, rather than quantity of money. He clicks the submit stamp.

This piece about economic growth wasn't what he came here to say at all, although it does seem to sum things up. So, when the text thanks him for his comment, he presses the "Have your Say" button again.

First he decides to see what other people have said about economic growth. He clicks on that heading. The postcard again. Then he notices a link above the postcard saying "see previous comments". He clicks it and reads through what other people have said. He's surprised to find that a few people have said something very similar to him. Others talk about the importance of (free) education – fair point.

After reading most of the comments, Cameron decides to look at the other topics and clicks on "List all issues". He leaves a comment about "our disposable society" in the "Efficient Use of Resources" section and a comment about depleted fish stocks in the "Environment Section".

Cameron decides that he's said enough for now. He suspects that he could go on and on until the site was covered in his comments, but other people seem to have only left a couple of comments, so he decides to stop there. This time he actually reads through the "Thank you" text he gets after submitting his last comment. It invites him to fill in a questionnaire about the site. Cameron decides to have a look. He doesn't want to fill in a long questionnaire or give all his details, but he wants to complain about the "Economic Growth and Employment" thing.

The questionnaire looks short and doesn't ask him for his email address. He decides to fill it in. When it asks "Generally, what do you think of the public using electronic tools to participate in democracy?" he is a bit worried. He'd been so interested in giving his opinion that he hadn't thought much about people without computers. Maybe the next consultation would be more important. They can't just ask people with computers what they think. That's going to give a very biased view. Besides it's not fair. So that's what he says. When he's asked for "Any suggestions for improvement?" he says his piece about the "Economic Growth section". He answers the last question, clicks the "Post my questionnaire" button and looks at his bookmarks. He wants to find out if his local festival's still on, because of foot and mouth.

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