

## MORST: E-Consultation Wizard

In recent years, the Ministry has become increasingly committed to the concept of dialogue as a means of improving the relationship between government and the community. The challenge of enhancing the public's ability to make their opinions known to government has been a driving force behind the creation of the Ministry's E-consultation wizard.

The development of the E-consultation wizard model has met three distinct organisational needs. Firstly, it has made it easier for the Ministry to communicate with citizens, secondly, it has made it easier for citizens to talk to us and finally it has made the way in which we can achieve this more efficient and streamlined.

The origins of this tool came from a public consultation held by the Ministry in 2002 on the Biotechnology Strategy discussion document. This made use of e-consultation and allowed citizens to not just read the discussion document on our website but, in a first for MoRST, have a say by lodging their submission online. The E-consultation option was offered as a compliment to more traditional written submissions that were also accepted in this exercise and manually entered into the database.

Some of the major lessons learned include the importance of developing a full range of robust, user scenarios, testing these and then testing again. It was also critical to the success of the tool that it could cope with the widest possible variety of user scenarios and still maintain the integrity of the database. One instance of this is where a user may chose to partly fill in the submission, save it online and then return at a later date to complete it and finally submit.

It also became obvious that the objectives needed to be clearly defined. What outcome are you looking for? Do you want statistics for a Minister or are you after public opinion on a piece of proposed policy? When you have clearly defined this then you can determine the best form of question to use to obtain your outcome. Questions can be open or closed, yes or no, graded responses or even a mixture of types.

It is vital to use Plain English and to test the questions for clarity and grammar.

The design of the e-consultation needs to have a very clear navigation path that is obvious to users. Users should always know where they are, how to return to the home page, how to save their work, how to quit the site and how to return.

In order to make people aware of the consultation taking place it is necessary to promote it with a sound communications policy. Of major importance is the concept of a whole process with a beginning, middle and end. The beginning is the launch, the middle is the collection of data and the end is the analysis of the information and resulting feedback to both participants and stakeholders.

The feedback we received on the initial E-consultation process from the 30 electronic submissions was encouraging and positive. Some of the suggestions were particularly

useful around the area of including a downloadable version of the submission form and allowing more space in the submission design so that general comments to be included.

The e-consultation was internally web hosted using Microsoft technologies. The web pages were developed in ASP code and all results were stored on an SQL database. Subsequent reports were also ASP pages that queried the data stored on the database.

One of the most significant outcomes of this initial E-consultation has been the decision to use the lessons learned to develop a wizard as part of our website redesign. This wizard creates a set of public consultation pages complete with a questionnaire. The submissions are stored on a database that can be interrogated by query reports. The tool enables Ministry staff to quickly and easily build a tailored e-Consultation without the need for technical or IT expertise. An online consultation, survey or questionnaire can easily be put together without any need for external technical assistance. The e-Consultation can be tailored to be either open (to the general public) or closed (such as to a specific interest group such as stakeholders).

Pages offering links to background papers and external web sites can be built to support each e-consultation. Branding can be applied to give each consultation a distinct look and feel.