In the service of democracy

a consultation paper on a policy for electronic democracy
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About this consultation

This document forms the written element of the consultation process on the Government’s policy for electronic democracy. It is available as a printed document, and can also be downloaded from the consultation website www.edemocracy.gov.uk, where you can find additional information and references. The website includes a facility to complete and submit a consultation questionnaire online.

Responses can be made:

- in writing to:
  E-Democracy Consultation
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  PO Box 626
  Norwich NR7 0ZN
- or online at:
  www.edemocracy.gov.uk
- or by e-mail to:
  edemocracy@e-envoy.gsi.gov.uk
- or by fax to:
  020 7276 3292.

Contributions should arrive no later than 31 October 2002. Individual contributions will not be acknowledged unless specifically requested. All substantive comments received during the consultation and a formal response from the Government will be published.

If you have a comment or a complaint about the consultation process, please contact:

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This consultation conforms with the Cabinet Office’s ‘Code of practice on written consultations’. The seven criteria of the code are:

- Timing of consultation should be built into the planning process for a policy (including legislation) or service from the start, so that it has the best prospect of improving the proposals concerned, and so that sufficient time is left for it at each stage.
- It should be clear who is being consulted, about what questions, in what timescale and for what purpose.
- A consultation document should be as simple and concise as possible. It should include a summary, in two pages at most, of the main questions it seeks views on. It should make it as easy as possible for readers to respond, make contact or complain.
• Documents should be made widely available, with the fullest use of electronic means (though not to the exclusion of others), and should be effectively drawn to the attention of all interested groups and individuals.

• Sufficient time should be allowed for considered responses from all groups with an interest. Twelve weeks should be the standard minimum period for a consultation.

• Responses should be carefully and open-mindedly analysed, and the results made widely available, with an account of the views expressed, and reasons for decisions finally taken.

• Departments should monitor and evaluate consultations, designating a consultation co-ordinator who will ensure the lessons are disseminated.

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The massive advances in communication technology in recent decades have touched upon almost every aspect of the way in which we conduct our working and home lives. Innovations in the television, telephone and computer industries have meant that citizens can now choose from a range of communication forms which make interaction, especially over long distances, speedier, easier, accessible and reliable. ‘In the service of democracy’ seeks to find ways of using these many technological tools to promote, strengthen and enhance our democratic structures.

At the outset it is worth stating that the paper’s primary concern is with the democratic dimension, rather than the ‘e’ in ‘e-democracy’. Participation is at the core of democratic government. The two areas for Government action, e-participation and e-voting, highlight ways in which the mechanisms of democracy can be enhanced, by modernising voting methods, improving access to ballots and broadening the scope of government consultations.

Information and communication technology (ICT) provides a means by which public participation can be increased, and we hope that with an active government policy the potential benefits can be maximised.

e-Democracy offers new ways of participating and seeks to complement rather than replace existing structures.

The aim must be to give individuals more choice about how they can participate in the political process. We want to ensure that the new technologies are enabling not excluding. Whilst ICT can improve access to democracy, without Government action the technologies themselves could become new barriers for those already excluded. Technological advance needs to be accompanied by strategies to improve access and understanding.

The Government approaches the subject with high ambitions but with realistic objectives. The strategy set out in this paper will succeed if it provides the technical basis for an improved political dialogue between public and Government.

RT HON ROBIN COOK MP
Leader of the House of Commons and President of the Council
1 Introduction

The development of information and communication technology (ICT) within the past decade has affected the life of every citizen – from the ever present mobile phone, through digital television, to the growth of the World Wide Web and e-mail in the workplace and at home, as well as Internet cafes and even e-telephone boxes.

What does this mean for our democracy?

Developments in ICT have dramatically increased people’s capacity to access information and to communicate with others in almost any part of the world – instantaneously. The volume and accessibility of information available through ICT have enhanced opportunities for greater public awareness, understanding and participation.

The Government acknowledges that e-democracy is neither an alternative to representative democracy nor a replacement for existing forms of democratic participation. Moreover, it does not expect that e-democracy will solve all the problems associated with the low turnout in elections.

However, the public’s desire for new avenues in which to express their views, the interest on the part of elected representatives and government to re-connect with citizens, and the emergence of new information technology, present an opportunity to begin a dialogue on the role that ICT may play in making democracy more real and relevant to everyday life.

Why a policy for e-democracy?

e-Democracy is about using new technology to energise the democratic and political life of the nation. However, it is still a relatively untested area. This document attempts to clarify some of the issues and proposes a policy that responds to the opportunities and challenges that e-democracy will bring.

The Government has a wide agenda to reform the UK’s political institutions and to re-engage the public with politics and governance. Hence, an e-democracy policy should be viewed in the context of those political and
constitutional reforms,¹ which seek to devolve power, extend citizens’ rights and improve the transparency and accountability of government and politics.

Regardless of what the Government does, elements of e-democracy will become a reality. Many people already see the online world as an integral part of their lives, and both the number of people using the Internet and the amount of time they spend online will continue to climb. Inevitably, if people are interested in the world around them, technology will become a tool through which they will try to influence the decisions that affect them. It is essential that government is prepared so that ICT supports and enhances our representative democratic system rather than undermines it.

This paper examines the potential uses and benefits of ICT and proposes a strategy that the Government could adopt to make e-democracy a reality.

**Why hold a consultation?**

This consultation paper is the first stage in developing a more detailed policy on e-democracy. It sets out the principles that underpin further policy development and proposes what could be done to make e-democracy a reality.

The Government welcomes views on any aspect of the paper’s content, but particularly on the consultation issues that are raised throughout the paper and summarised in Chapter 5. By consulting in this way the Government aims to:

- provide opportunities for everyone with an interest to express their views, so as to enable and inform the further development of the policy; and
- seek as broad a consensus as possible on the policy in its final form.

A very wide range of individuals and organisations, working together in formal and informal structures and partnerships, support the democratic process and will therefore take a close interest in the debate on e-democracy that the Government hopes to generate. In particular the Government is keen to hear the views of:

- the general public;
- young people whether at school, university or work;
- civil society;²
- the UK Parliament;
- the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Greater London Assembly, and their associated administrations;

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¹ A summary of the Government’s programme for constitutional reform is available on www.edemocracy.gov.uk

² In this paper civil society means the public zone between the state and private life in which citizens interact with other citizens to pursue a common interest or goal. Examples of organisations are trade unions, charities and campaigning organisations such as the Red Cross and Greenpeace.
Roles and responsibilities

Public participation is a devolved matter and the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and their executives are responsible for developing and implementing strategies on e-participation. Therefore, the ideas and measures relating to this part of the proposed policy do not imply any commitments for the devolved administrations.

It is intended that the proposed policy on electronic voting will apply to all elections and ballots under statutory control. The electronic voting policy covers reserved matters that are handled on a UK-wide basis, by the Lord Chancellor’s Department and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and also the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland Offices. The UK Government is responsible for the conduct and funding of elections to the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament and Executive do, however, have an interest in these elections. They are also responsible for local government elections in Scotland, including electoral systems and the timing and administration of elections. Local elections in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office.3

In this paper, government (with a lower-case ‘g’) means all tiers of government. When Government is capitalised, however, it refers to the Government of the United Kingdom, the elected administration.

What will happen next?

By the end of the consultation period the Government intends to have:

- gauged the extent of support for, interest in and understanding of e-democracy;
- established practical guidance for the development of e-democracy, including examples of best practice and pitfalls to be avoided;
- raised awareness of and interest in e-democracy, within and beyond government; and
- begun work on new initiatives, such as the redesign of the Citizen Space on www.ukonline.gov.uk, the Government’s portal to government information, services and news, to make it a showcase for e-democracy.

A full response to the issues raised during this consultation will be published.

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3 A fuller explanation of the responsibilities as they relate to participation and voting can be found on www.edemocracy.gov.uk
2 In the service of democracy

We live in an age characterised by a multiplicity of channels of communication, yet many people feel cut off from public life. There are more ways than ever to speak, but still there is a widespread feeling that people’s voices are not being heard. The health of a representative democracy depends on people being prepared to vote. Channels through which people can participate and make their voices heard between elections are also important.

The development of the Government’s e-democracy strategy is prompted by trends in three main areas:

- Democracy requires the involvement of the public, but participation in the traditional institutions of democracy is declining.

- Despite this decline, many citizens are prepared to devote energy, experience and expertise to issues that matter to them.

- Information and communication technology (ICT), particularly the Internet, is changing the way many aspects of society work. In democratic terms, it offers new channels of communication between citizens, elected representatives and government that may help to engage citizens in the democratic process.

The Internet provides the means by which citizens can have a direct role in shaping policies and influencing the decisions that affect their lives. The heart of this e-democracy policy is, however, not technology but democracy. The focus is on what democracy means in practice – the technology, the ‘e’ in ‘e-democracy’, is simply a tool to help make the democratic process more effective.

2.1 The challenge for democracy

The Government has sought to enhance and strengthen the UK’s democratic structures. Recent years have seen a number of constitutional reforms, which have decentralised decision-making, improved transparency and guaranteed the
rights of individuals. Government is being modernised and both Houses of Parliament are being reformed.

2.1.1 The declining turnout

The declining turnout at elections is a cause for concern:

- Turnout in the 2001 General Election was 59% – a fall of 12% from the 1997 figure and the lowest since 1918.
- Approximately 60% of 18–24 year olds did not vote in the 2001 General Election.
- In the UK, only 24% turned out to vote in the 1999 European parliamentary election compared with 37% in 1994.
- Turnout in the 2002 local elections was 35%.

Figure 1 details the turnout in parliamentary elections in the UK since 1945.

Throughout Western Europe turnouts are declining, as Figure 2 shows. In the newly democratised countries of Eastern Europe (represented by the ex-Eastern European EU candidate states) the fall has been as marked.

Figure 1: Voter turnout in UK parliamentary elections 1945–2002

(Source: The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)
Compared with national elections across EU Member States, turnout in elections to the European Parliament tends to be lower and, in some cases, markedly so (see Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Average turnout in elections to national parliaments 1945–2002**

![Graph showing average turnout in elections to national parliaments from 1945 to 2002.](source)

**Figure 3: European Union Member States – ranking of average turnout**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Parliamentary Elections Since 1945</th>
<th>European Parliament elections since 1979</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country (no. of elections)</td>
<td>vote/reg %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium (18)</td>
<td>92.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria (17)</td>
<td>91.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy (15)</td>
<td>89.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg (12)</td>
<td>89.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands (16)</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden (17)</td>
<td>87.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark (23)</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (14)</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece (16)</td>
<td>79.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal (10)</td>
<td>77.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland (16)</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>United Kingdom (16)</strong></td>
<td><strong>75.2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France (15)</td>
<td>73.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain (8)</td>
<td>73.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland (16)</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Belgium, with compulsory voting, ranks highest in turnout at both national and European parliamentary elections. Some countries, such as Sweden, see a dramatic difference between their turnout at national elections and the participation in European elections; even though the sample is smaller, the difference is significant.

(Source: The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)
Voting for a party's candidate in an election is the fundamental expression of an individual's political views in a representative democracy. The role of political parties is therefore central to our democracy and must be a key part of any attempt to modernise or renew participation, and this will be reflected in the Government's e-democracy policy.

2.1.2 Single-issue politics

This decline in turnout does not necessarily reflect a lack of interest in politics or political activity in general. Evidence from the Centre for Research into Electoral Statistics and Trends shows that people who did not vote in 2001 still have a strong interest in politics and believe that they can influence policy-making. However, they are increasingly unlikely to pursue these ends through the traditional institutions of democracy.

Membership of single-issue groups remains high in the UK. Organisations concerned with the environment, animal rights, Third World debt relief and anti-globalisation clearly have a political presence. Much public energy is being devoted to these groups as well as neighbourhood and community activities. Democracy is enhanced by citizens’ participation in voluntary and non-governmental organisations, but it also requires their involvement in the formal institutions of democracy. Democracy needs active political parties and citizens who are prepared to vote in elections and participate in issues that are important to them.

The challenge for democracy is, therefore, to:

• enable citizens’ expertise and experience to play a part in policy-making and decision-making to give individuals a greater stake in the democratic process; and
• use people’s energy and interest in politics to support and enhance the traditional institutions of democracy.

2.2 The evolving digital society

Approximately 400 million people around the world are online. By 2005 it is estimated that there will be more than 1 billion. All governments recognise that this provides a great potential to develop societies in new ways, foster economic growth and revitalise democracy. At the beginning of 2000, the Prime Minister launched
UK online, to get people, businesses and government online. The drive to make government services available electronically by 2005 acknowledges that people expect to be able to interact and transact electronically with the government organisations they deal with.

In 2002, the UK is one of the world’s most connected economies with approximately 40% of households, 95% of businesses and 98% of schools online.

To ensure that everyone can benefit from the opportunities that the Internet offers, the Government is committed to giving everyone who wants it access to the Internet by 2005. Not just physical access, but also to help people gain the motivation, skills and confidence to use the Internet. Access to the Internet can be through not only computers but also, for example, digital and interactive television.

As illustrated in Figure 5, in the UK ownership of digital television is more reflective of society in general. Research by the Hansard Society clearly demonstrates that citizens expect the democratic process to be modernised and that they will be able to participate electronically.

The dramatic growth of the digital society and the potential for the information revolution to include everyone, coupled with people’s hopes and expectations to be able to participate via the Internet, lead to the conclusion that ICT can be an effective channel that will encourage participation.

Figure 4: Proportion of households with home access to Internet, UK

(Source: National Statistics – December 2001)

Figure 5: UK DTV ownership

(Source: e-MORI Tech Tracker, December 2001)

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5 www.e-envoy.gov.uk/ukonline/ukonline_menu.htm
Figure 6: Hopes for the future
Which of the following would you like to see by 2010?

- All MPs to run online surgeries
- Internet voting
- Opportunities for the public to contribute to policy-making via the Internet
- Voting by telephone
- Webcasts of all council meetings
- None

Figure 7: Emphasis on Government
Which of the following should the Government concentrate on achieving?

- E-voting
- Greater take-up of broadband
- Making the Internet safe for children
- More public involvement in policy-making via the Internet
- The switch-off of analogue TV
- None

2.3 A connection waiting to be made

The Government’s view, as evidenced in the previous sections, is that:

- there is substantial room to strengthen our democratic system and encouraging participation at all levels by citizens will help achieve that;
- ICT could help open new channels of dialogue between citizens and government, elected representatives, political parties and civil society; and
- citizens expect to be able to use new technologies to participate in all ways, including voting, and the Government has a responsibility to respond.

ICT has the potential to break down social, geographic, physical and economic barriers to people’s participation in democratic processes. Without action by the Government, political parties and civil society organisations, however, these tools could become an additional barrier for people who are already excluded.

The Government also recognises the new technologies are not a panacea, but used in the right way, they could strengthen participation in representative democracy, particularly among young people.

The Government believes that a policy for e-democracy and a strategy for its delivery are vital to ensure that participation is enhanced rather than diminished by new technology.

2.4 A two-track policy for e-democracy

Through the use of ICT, the Government aims to:

- enhance citizens’ opportunities to participate in the democratic process; and
- enable government, representatives and political parties to seek the views, knowledge and experience of people.

In this consultation paper, the Government proposes that an e-democracy policy should be based on two separate but interdependent tracks: electronic participation (e-participation) and electronic voting (e-voting).

The reason for separating the policy into two tracks is the fundamental difference between what is involved in implementing e-voting procedures and in using ICT to encourage participation. Implementing ICT in voting is mainly a question of offering a package of electronic services, such as online voting and online registration, although there are important questions of building voters’ confidence in the robustness and security of the technology.

Using ICT to open new channels of participation between elections, on the other hand, is much more complex. It requires the creation of new relationships between government, citizens and representatives.
Consultation issues

- Are we right to focus this e-democracy policy on participation and voting?
- Do you agree that the two tracks should be separated to allow them to develop independently?

The objectives of the policy are to facilitate, broaden and deepen participation in the democratic process.

2.4.1 Facilitate participation

Facilitating participation means making it easier for citizens to exercise their democratic rights. The objective is to use ICT to make it easier for people to access public information, follow the political process, discuss and form groups, get engaged in policy formation, scrutinise government and vote in elections. People should be provided with more flexible ways to participate that reflect the variety and complexity of modern lifestyles.

ICT could also provide a new channel enabling more people to talk directly with their elected representatives, government and political parties.

2.4.2 Broaden participation

Broadening participation means bringing a wider range of people into the democratic process. The objective is to make use of ICT to open new channels for democratic participation to encourage involvement by people who may feel excluded from the democratic process or are unable to participate. People who, for different
reasons, would not consider using traditional democratic channels, should have opportunities to make their voices heard through the use of ICT.

The Internet and its associated technologies offer channels for participation that are inclusive, relatively inexpensive and unconstrained by time or distance, which can help make the democratic process easily accessible for everyone – whether people live in cities, in isolated rural areas or abroad, or have disabilities that make travel difficult. Online channels may also enable participation from people who face social or economic exclusion. It may enable political parties to reach out to new audiences both nationally and internationally.

One important target group for this policy is young people. All democratic institutions have a responsibility to ensure that young people are able to play their part. Evidence suggests that young people are among those least likely to see the democratic process as relevant to them. Young people are also among those most likely to be competent in ICT.

Figure 8: Proportion of adults who have accessed the Internet at some time, by age, April 2001

Figure 9: Turnout – UK General Election 2001

(Source: National Statistics – December 2001)

(Source: ‘Election 2001 – The Official Results’ (Electoral Commission, 2001))
2.4.3 Deepen participation

Deepening participation means going beyond a single exchange to a more sustained, in-depth interaction. The objective is to make use of ICT to build strong and active relationships between citizens and all levels of representative institutions, between citizens and government, citizens and political parties and between groups of citizens. These relationships should be based on dialogue and consultation, in which government and representatives seek to understand people's needs, values and experiences better and in which citizens seek to contribute actively with their knowledge.

Via online channels, participants can discuss policy issues in depth over hours, days or weeks, allowing time for reflection, discussion and the development of new ideas, all of which are fundamental to democratic participation. Enabling understanding, the analysis of issues and encouraging dialogue are also vital roles for political parties. ICT will enable this role to be enhanced and extended.

2.5 Underpinning principles

The aim and objectives of an e-democracy policy will only be achieved if the ICT tools are available to everyone, effective as a means for democratic participation and trusted by all participants. Therefore, the Government further proposes that the two-track e-democracy policy be underpinned by five principles;\(^7\)

- Inclusion – a voice for all
- Openness – electronic provision of information
- Security and privacy – a safe place
- Responsiveness – listening and responding to people
- Deliberation – making the most of people's ideas

These principles should be encompassed in an e-democracy charter that informs people of their rights and responsibilities.

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\(^7\) Some of these principles are already being applied through the strategy outlined in the White Paper ‘Modernising Government’. See www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/moderngov/whtpaper/index.htm
2.5.1 Inclusion – a voice for all

It is important for e-democracy that everyone should have access to the Internet. As part of UK online – the Government’s programme to ensure that the UK is a world leader in the new knowledge economy – the Government’s policy is to ensure that by 2005 everyone who wants it has easy and affordable access to the Internet, and that they have the skills, motivation and confidence to use it.\(^8\)

The Government acknowledges that, for a channel of communication to be truly democratic, issues other than access need to be considered. For example, new channels of communication should allow for the participation of people who do not use English as a first language or who are illiterate. In this consultation, the Government wants to discuss such issues and is commissioning a report specifically on what inclusion means in the context of e-democracy. This study will look at a very broad range of inclusion factors, including gender issues as well as disability, language, social and educational barriers to democratic involvement.

The process will be managed so that the report is available in time for it to be properly reflected in the Government’s response to the consultation.

The Government also acknowledges that not everyone may want to use the Internet. However, as far as voting is concerned, when postal voting was made universally available in the General Election 2001, this new method was considerably successful in terms of take-up. This may show that people appreciate more convenient ways to vote and are willing to try something new.

**Consultation issue** – The Government’s current policy is to provide access to the Internet to everyone who wants it and to enable him or her to use it. What more could the Government do to enable everyone to use ICT to play their part in democracy?

2.5.2 Openness – electronic provision of information

The Government acknowledges that the democratic process will work best if it is conducted as openly as possible.

Access to public information is essential for effective participation in the democratic process. To support democratic activity in an electronic environment, the Government proposes to strengthen the effectiveness of existing rights of access. The Freedom of Information Act 2000\(^9\) gives all people a general right to access information held by public authorities, although its full provisions will not come into effect until January 2005.

Until then, the public’s right of access

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\(^8\) Further details are in the UK online report for 2001 at www.e-envoy.gov.uk/ukonline/progress/anrep2001/default.htm

to information is governed by the ‘Code of Practice on Access to Government Information’.¹⁰

The Government’s proposal is that all information that is stored electronically, and to which people have a right of access, should be available in electronic form, whenever reasonable.

Where appropriate, this principle should also apply to make the legislatures as effective as possible. For example, information flowing from the Government to Parliament, such as answers to parliamentary questions, could be provided electronically.

**Consultation issue** – An underpinning principle of e-democracy is openness. In what circumstances would it be appropriate to restrict either participation or the ability to view who has contributed or the content of the contributions?

**2.5.3 Security and privacy – a safe place**

Security and privacy are especially important in electronic voting. The regulations governing the electoral register and the conduct of polls effectively impose security standards on the electoral system.¹¹ The Government proposes that an electronic voting system¹² should be established only when it has been shown that it is at least as secure as existing electoral practice and that people trust it. The security of online voting will be developed and demonstrated through extensive piloting and incremental roll-out.

As to e-participation, the Government recognises that the policy-making process works best when conducted as openly as possible. However, it is vital to respect people’s requests for privacy when they contribute to the process. The Government’s existing policy on written consultations is that individual contributions should be available to anyone who asks for them, unless the contributor has asked for confidentiality, or unless publication would unfairly

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¹⁰ The Code (at www.lcd.gov.uk/foi/ogcode982.htm) is non-statutory and cannot override provisions contained in statutory rights of access to information or records. The National Assembly for Wales has its own code.

¹¹ The regulations are set out in the relevant Representation of the People Acts.

¹² For elections to UK, European and Scottish Parliaments and other assemblies and councils.
affect third parties’ interests or privacy.\textsuperscript{13} The Government proposes that this principle be extended to e-participation.

\textbf{2.5.4 Responsiveness – listening and responding to people}

People will only want to participate seriously if they believe that their contributions will have an effect on policies and decisions. e-Participation will need to be integrated into the formal policy-making and decision-making processes, and government and representatives must show their commitment to listening to and learning from contributions, and should respond to them in a timely and transparent way. It is important that government and representatives recognise that e-participation – and particularly the requirement to respond appropriately – will require increased resources, skills and facilities.

The Government’s existing policy on consultation, which also applies to online consultation, is that contributions to written consultations should be analysed carefully and with an open mind, and that the results of the consultation be made available, with an account of the views expressed and reasons for the final decisions.\textsuperscript{14} As to other forms of e-participation, the Government will set standards for responsiveness and will consider how the required skills, attitudes, technologies and resources should be put in place to manage increased participation.

\textbf{Consultation issue} – What would government and representatives need to do to ensure that the principle of responsiveness is applied? What would the resource implications of this be?

\textbf{2.5.5 Deliberation – making the most of people’s ideas}

For effective deliberation in an online environment, there should be enough space and time to examine complex issues, to develop ideas and to enable constructive discussions between citizens. This will also demand an environment where people can contribute without fearing that they will be shouted down, have their ideas ridiculed or find their views lost among others competing for the same space. Variations in personal style should be accepted, so that citizens can tell their own stories and contribute in their own way. It is important that contributions get noticed and are developed. This will require skilled moderation that is based on agreed rules. However, it is important that online debates do not become sterile: they should remain lively and interesting with well-thought-through, robust arguments.

The Government is willing to provide such an inclusive and trusted online environment, as part of www.ukonline.gov.uk, but recognises that further debate is needed on whether it is appropriate for government to provide it.

\textsuperscript{13} This policy is set out in the ‘Code of practice on written consultation’.


\textsuperscript{14} This policy is set out in the ‘Code of practice on written consultation’.
2.6 An e-democracy charter – informing people of their rights and responsibilities

Citizens must have clear information, in advance, of what they can expect when participating, whether in online consultations and discussions or e-voting. In particular, standards of security and privacy – and, in the case of e-participation, responsiveness – need to be set out.

The Government proposes that, in any process of e-participation or e-voting, there will be an early and clear statement outlining the basis on which the process is being conducted and the rights and responsibilities of citizens when participating. The Government will develop guidelines for an e-democracy charter to ensure that standards for e-participation and e-voting are set and are adhered to by all participants.

An e-democracy charter – for trust and transparency

The aim of an e-democracy charter should be to inform people of their rights and responsibilities when they are participating electronically, whether in elections or in the democratic process between elections, in order to safeguard trust between citizens and government and build transparency in the process. Within the framework of existing legislation and codes of practice, a charter should provide a statement of the standards citizens can expect from any government body undertaking an e-democracy exercise. Standards should be agreed and shared across government bodies.

Examples of standards for e-participation that could be included in a charter:

- **Openness/privacy**: How an individual’s contribution to a consultation or discussion forum will be handled.
- **Responsiveness**: The way in which government will use individual contributions and provide feedback to participants.
- **Deliberation/moderation**: The rules that will govern the content of contributions and the format of online discussions.

Examples of standards for e-voting that could be included in a charter:

- **Security and privacy**: The criteria by which an e-voting system will guarantee that it is at least as secure as current electoral practice.
Consultation issues

- Would an e-democracy charter encourage you to trust online forms of participation (both voting and other forms of participation)?
- We have set out several principles for a charter. Are these the right principles? Should the charter include additional or alternative principles?

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has set out the evidence supporting the need for a policy and a proposed two-track policy underpinned by five basic principles on which the Government wishes to consult.

In the next two chapters, the Government sets out the strategy for delivering e-democracy along these two tracks and what the Government hopes to achieve. As part of this consultation, the Government wishes to seek views on the overall strategy and whether it will meet citizens’ expectations of a democracy in the 21st century.

Consultation issue – How should the Government measure the success of an e-democracy policy?
3 e-Participation

The Government’s e-participation strategy seeks to find ways in which new technologies can be utilised in the democratic process to connect politicians and the public between elections. The proposals seek to provide greater opportunities for consultation and dialogue between government and citizens. The potential benefits of ICT are great, but the Government acknowledges that they will not be realised without a clear strategy. This chapter sets out for consideration the key elements of that strategy. The Government welcomes comments on any aspect of the proposals.

3.1 Public participation and democracy

Influencing the decision-making process can take any number of forms, from voting in an election once every few years to active membership of a political party, or from responding to a government consultation to participating in a pressure group campaign to lobby politicians.

Regardless of the form of this activity, public participation in the political process is essential to effective policy-making. Government benefits from a citizenry that is active and engaged in the democratic process. A high level of public involvement means that policy can be developed with the benefit of a wide range of different opinions and evidence. Extensive public discourse also means that decisions are taken in the light of a better understanding of public opinion.

The previous chapter highlighted the decline in traditional forms of political activity in recent decades, the most significant feature of which has been the fall in turnout at elections. However, this decline does not apply to all forms of public participation.

Recent initiatives have succeeded in generating high levels of public interest and involvement. Under the New Deal for Communities, which targets help at the most deprived areas, polls on strategies have been held and the level of interest has often far exceeded local election participation. Similarly, in the 12 months preceding June 2002 there
were 26 ballots on the transfer of municipal housing where the average turnout was a highly respectable 69%.

The Government’s policy for e-participation seeks to draw on the lessons from such exercises in public participation. It is clear that where people are interested in the subject and believe that their participation will affect the final decision, there is a high level of involvement.

It is also evident that vast numbers of people are willing to use new technologies as part of a decision-making process. The success of interactive TV shows such as Big Brother or Pop Idol is largely due to the technology in allowing a greater number of people to be directly involved. The technology provides a means for mass participation.

This is the same principle that lies behind the Government’s strategy for e-democracy. Technology offers no magic solutions, but it may provide the means for more people to have an impact on the decisions that affect them. The Government is seeking ways in which technology might improve methods of consultation, enabling ministers and civil servants to hear directly from the public, and allowing individuals and groups to put their opinions directly to government.

This policy is therefore central to our plans for democratic renewal. As the Prime Minister has pointed out:

“...The democratic impulse needs to be strengthened by finding new ways to enable citizens to share in decision-making that affects them... The truth is that in a mature society, representatives will make better decisions if they take full account of popular opinion and encourage public debate on the big decisions affecting people’s lives.”

Both government and the public benefit from greater participation. Actively involving people in the processes of policy-making and decision-making will create better policies and laws that more closely reflect people’s needs.

For the purposes of the proposed e-participation policy the paper sets out four main types of political activity and interaction:

- **Citizens and government**

  Responding to government-initiated consultations is the most common means of trying to influence policy. However, ICT offers the possibility of

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much wider and varied forms of participation.

- **Citizens and representatives**
  Effective dialogue between electors and elected is essential to effective representation. New technologies can facilitate that communication, allowing MPs and local councillors to hold online surgeries and group consultations, or link to different constituencies.

- **Political parties**
  Parties remain the most important vehicle for the articulation and aggregation of public interests. Public policy, as enacted by governments, is often developed by and through the political parties. New technologies offer the possibility of far greater involvement within parties and with the public.

- **Civic activity**
  Outside the formal political channels there are various forms of public action, which have a bearing on the policy-making process. Whether this activity is co-ordinated by civil society organisations or is more disparate, the challenge for government is to direct the undoubted interest in politics into the democratic process.

The Government believes that effective democracy requires action in all four areas. In each of the next four sections we propose some possible measures designed to enhance participation and identify a number of issues for consultation. However, the Government can only directly influence the first of these areas – the interaction between government and citizens. For that reason the majority of the proposals are included in the first section. The Government can, though, help to promote best practice in the other areas and the remaining proposals seek to ensure that parliaments, politicians, political parties and civil society can maximise the potential democratic benefit from ICT.

### 3.2 Citizens and government

**Extending government consultation**

Government-run consultations on Green Papers or policy documents are the main way of gauging public reaction to new policies. The Government is committed to consulting widely in such exercises and since 1997 a number of new techniques have been employed to ensure that policy development draws on as wide a range of responses as possible.

However, the Government believes that such consultation could be further extended and that ICT could play an important role in enhancing the quality and value of such exercises.

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16 See www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/2000/consult/code/ConsultationCode.htm Guidance on the techniques that can be employed and examples can be found in the best practice guide to consultation available at www.servicefirst.gov.uk/1998/guidance/users/index.htm#cont
In the first place new technologies mean that consultations can be more interactive. Traditional, paper-based consultation has tended to mean that a government reaction is only possible once all submissions have been collated and analysed. Although official government responses would always be the final stage in any web-based consultation, the technology allows for interaction between those submitting evidence and the ministers or officials responsible for developing policy during the consultation period.

In addition, the new technologies could improve levels of participation in national or local consultation exercises. The provision of government publications on the Internet means that they are easily accessible and free of charge. Involvement in such exercises through a terminal in the local library will be quicker and more convenient for most than traditional methods and could potentially vastly increase the number of respondents. The city council of Kalix in Sweden, consulting on renovation of the town centre, found that of all possible methods of response the vast majority preferred Internet participation.

Government may also wish to target those with a particular interest or expertise in the policy area. It would be possible, for instance, to canvass the views of small businesses on regulation and head teachers on education policy, as an additional dimension to a more general consultation.

Online deliberation in Kalix, Sweden – intensifying citizens’ engagement

www.kalix.se    www.votia.com

With the aim of intensifying the engagement of its citizens, the city council of Kalix in Sweden undertook an experiment in online deliberation. It enabled the citizens to have online discussions with local politicians and each other and to give their opinions on the renovation of the town centre. Over two weeks the citizens could participate through the Internet, as well as through traditional means of communication such as the telephone, post and fax. Most (86%) of the participants chose to use the Internet. The citizens were also able to vote on the issue online. To make sure that only people entitled to vote could vote and that they voted only once, the council set up a password-protected website and issued a password to registered voters. For citizens without a computer the council arranged for PCs at schools and libraries to be made available. Around 1,200 of the 15,000 inhabitants participated, 72% of whom reported the experience as a valuable democratic initiative.
The Government’s specific proposals in these areas are set out at the end of the section, but the Government also acknowledges that realising the potential benefits of e-democracy will require further innovation and experimentation. e-Democracy is a relatively new and untested field. The Government will seek as far as possible to learn from others’ initiatives and to develop policy on the basis of best practice. In forming the policy, however, there are certain basic tenets relating to access to information, greater use of consultation and interactive dialogue.

**Access to information**

If citizens are to participate fully in the policy process, they must be informed. Electronic access to information that is already electronically stored will help. Enriching the information available online will make it easier for citizens and representatives to hold government to account. Generally any information that is currently hard to find or difficult to understand should be made more accessible.

The Government established Citizen Space as part of ukonline.gov.uk in 2001 as a base from which to build an e-democracy strategy. It was designed to provide a forum for discussion and provide participants with the necessary resources to participate on an informed basis. Individuals can visit Citizen Space to participate in discussions and find a register of central government public consultations, and can register to be notified by e-mail when consultations take place on specific subjects.

Although a worthwhile experiment, the current structure of Citizen Space has limitations. The re-design and re-launch of the website will be a major feature of the Government’s e-democracy strategy.

**Greater use of consultation**

Although access to information is a prerequisite of informed debate, by itself it is not enough to foster such dialogue. The Government wishes to use the possible benefits of new communication technologies to change the culture of consultation. At present the number of individuals and organisations that respond to government-initiated consultations is limited. The submissions tend to be from a narrow group of those with expertise or a particular interest in the subject. The Government welcomes, and indeed seeks, the opinion of experts during its consultations as this often informs policy change.

The opinion of the general public is as valuable as that of experts during policy development. A greater level of participation by the public means that the policy-making process is more
likely to reflect properly the views of the public. Use of ICT to disseminate policy developments and invite people to respond may encourage a greater number of people to participate.

In particular the technologies may be used to attract those whose voices would not usually be heard during traditional consultations. For example, the figures in the previous chapter revealed the very low rate of political participation among young people. As the Camden Council example above shows, the Internet provides a new means by which their opinions may be sought.

Young Camden – engaging young people

www.camden.gov.uk/young/index.cfm

London's Camden Council, recognising that a different approach is needed to engage young people, set up the fun and accessible Young Camden website. Young visitors to the site can participate in a survey of trees in the borough, visit the Live-n-Direct website (a Local Agenda 21 initiative) to discuss environmental issues or vote on whether Camden High Street should be closed to traffic on Sundays. They can also access discussion forums, where the council is committed to following up issues and giving feedback. The site receives approximately 1,000 hits per month.

The need for a greater emphasis on consultation as the basis for effective policy-making is also a theme of the European Union’s drive to re-connect with the European public. The Government supports the principles set out in the European Commission's European Governance White Paper designed to create a culture of consultation and dialogue in all European institutions. A central feature of this proposal is that the European institutions cannot improve European governance on their own, but that actions by Member States also are necessary. The Government will consider how to promote debate and improve consultative processes in the context of EU policy through the use of ICT.

Interactive dialogue

Evidence shows that people will involve themselves in public participation exercises if they believe their opinion will make a difference to the final outcome. Interaction between government and citizen is therefore an essential feature of e-participation. Before the Internet there was no information source that

17 The report can be found on www.europa.eu.int/comm/governance/white_paper/index_en.htm
provided such scope for direct responsiveness. Digital communication technologies break down the traditional barrier between the producer and consumer or broadcaster and audience.

The new technologies allow the possibility for dialogue with representatives of Government and with other individuals. The most basic requirement would be for all responses to be posted so that they could be read by anyone accessing the site before putting forward their own submission. At a more developed level, consultation exercises might include online discussions between respondents and ministers or the civil servants responsible for the policy.

The ability to react to the comments of others and to see others respond to yours is a big impetus to participation. Moreover, the process of dialogue may result in higher quality submissions as ideas are clarified and crystallised.

**Proposed measures**

The Government's suggestions below, on which it wishes to consult, centre on the re-design and re-launch of Citizen Space on ukonline.gov.uk as both an information resource and forum for discussion, and the development of best practice for government consultations.

The Government is looking at whether:

- 100% of central government public consultations should be accessible via Citizen Space on ukonline.gov.uk;
- all consultations on Green or White Papers should include a moderated public discussion forum, hosted on Citizen Space;
- feedback reports from all public consultations should be published online in a timely and transparent way; and
- all central government public consultations should encompass strategies on using online consultations to engage key stakeholders, and especially ‘hard-to-reach groups’, in the process.

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**Online consultation – for a better Wales**


Under the motto “Online for a Better Wales”, the National Assembly for Wales ran an online consultation on its ICT strategy. People were able to debate the policy in a special discussion forum that was linked to the consultation process. People were also able to send their comments directly, via e-mail or a special feedback web page. During the consultation over 400 electronic responses were received including 148 submissions to the discussion forums.
**Re-launch of Citizen Space**

Citizen Space could be re-designed to provide a ‘trusted area’ on the Internet where citizens can participate in the policy process. Just as people know that, for example, BBC News Online is a place to go for the latest news, there is a need to create a widely known website where citizens can make their views known to those (either at a national or local level) developing the policies that affect them. This space should allow people to participate at various levels in the policy process – from accessing background information, influencing the agenda, to discussing and shaping policies, and submitting responses to consultations.

It is envisaged that a newly developed Citizen Space would reflect the issues relating to access to information, the greater use of consultation and interactive dialogue.

**Developing best practice for consultation**

Within Government, the quality of electronic consultation exercises varies according to department and the issue under consideration. There are some very good examples of e-consultation, but in general government does not have clear guidance on making the best use of electronic media in consultation.

To remedy this, the Government is proposing to produce an e-consultation toolkit and mandatory guidance for central government departments. Such a toolkit would draw on UK and international best practice in the private and voluntary sectors.

**Piloting e-consultation methods**

The Government proposes to establish a series of pilots to demonstrate best practice in e-consultation, in the near future. To do that, the e-democracy team in the e-Envoy’s office and the Cabinet Office would work with government departments to use ICT to demonstrate and evaluate the highest standards of e-consultation.

The pilots could include the following features:

- Consultation websites could include details of key officials and teams responsible for developing policy so that participants can contact them directly.
- Readily available technology could be used to provide controlled membership for detailed discussion of specific aspects of consultation papers.
- Facilitated discussion could take place online between high profile stakeholders and responsible ministers to stimulate discussion and attract people to the site.
- The consultation could be connected to the outside world by formally setting up a web ring of sites with direct links into the sections of non-governmental organisation (NGO) sites, companies and interest groups with an interest in the issue.
Publication of all consultation responses

Central government has had uneven practice in publishing responses to consultations. The cost of administration and publication meant that this was prohibitively expensive before the Internet. New technologies have made this easier and the value of sharing the full range of views upon which Government bases its policy is clear.

In producing e-participation guidelines, the Government will require all substantive responses to consultations to be published on a website linked to the original consultation site.

Consultation issues

- What are the current strengths and weaknesses of Citizen Space on ukonline.gov.uk?
- What sorts of information or additional facilities should Citizen Space include?
- What features would encourage you to visit such a government-run website and/or submit your views to the Government online?
- What would discourage you from participating?
- Have you participated in previous government consultations? Was this a worthwhile experience?
- What features would make you more likely to participate online than through other channels?
- Are there particular methods of consultation that you would like to see developed by Government?

3.3 Citizens and representatives

The link between voters and their MP is the most crucial in our democracy. For most voters the MP is their main political contact who will provide a range of services within the constituency, is the most obvious route to Parliament and government, and is the person most lobbied when constituents are campaigning to raise an issue or to seek a change in the law.

ICT could provide constituents with greater access to, and accountability from, their MP, but also help support the work of the MP in three principal roles. The first is the constituency role, the second is the policy development role and the third is their scrutiny role within Parliament. Whilst the following paragraphs concentrate on the role of MPs, much of it will also apply to elected representatives in local government and the devolved administrations.

The constituency role

Within the constituency, MPs perform a range of tasks for their constituents. MPs often find themselves approached to help with problems ranging from blocked drains through to social security entitlements and problems with the law. A large number of such cases will fall outside the official jurisdiction of the Member of Parliament, coming under the remit of local government, private business or some other authority. New tiers of government in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and
London, as well as the European Union will also have responsibility for some of these issues. The MP therefore often provides a role as a guide through the maze of government and public authorities, directing the constituent to the right person.

Politicians will sometimes take up such cases with the authority responsible or intercede on their constituent’s behalf. The intervention of politicians in such cases can be invaluable and even where the MP has no official control, their involvement can have a significant effect on the outcome. The MP is a channel for many grievances and at the hub of a series of local and national political networks, which can then be put at the service of their electorate.

However, the volume of constituency work has increased dramatically in recent decades and for many MPs is the most time-consuming element of their work. A survey by the Hansard Society Commission on the Scrutiny Role of Parliament found more than half of our MPs spend 11 hours or more each week on constituency casework alone.

The Internet and e-mail could facilitate this element of their work and possibly reduce their workload. In the first place websites could be better used as a resource for constituents with problems. Approximately 40% of MPs now have websites and some have seen the advantage of using them to illustrate examples of constituents’ problems and how they might be solved. However, such facilities could be further developed.

Polling evidence suggests that the public might also appreciate these facilities. A MORI poll from 2001 asked voters what services they would like provided electronically from MPs. The most popular was online surgeries (39%), followed by active e-mail addresses (32%). Both would enable voters to contact their MP and elicit their representative’s views or help without having to wait for a posted reply or having to attend one of the MP’s public surgeries which might not be easily accessible or frequently held.

Policy discussion and development
One of the reasons why the MP’s constituency role is so valuable is because it keeps parliamentarians in touch with the views of their voters. Either at the constituency level or at a national level new communication technologies have the potential to vastly expand that range of opinions and experiences.

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For example, the Hansard Society has run a series of online deliberative consultations with select committees and all-party groups within Parliament. These exercises tend to focus on groups of people whose evidence would not otherwise be heard by legislators. In March 2000 they ran an online consultation in which women survivors of domestic violence gave evidence to the All Party Domestic Violence Group. In one month almost 1,000 messages of evidence were received by the MPs from the sorts of respondents who had not previously given evidence to Parliament and who, for a variety of reasons, would have found it difficult to give evidence in person. Nearly all (94%) felt that the consultation was a worthwhile exercise. Other online consultations for politicians have focused on similarly marginalised groups such as tax credit recipients, flood victims and sufferers from hereditary diseases who gave evidence to an enquiry on stem cell research.

The attraction of these sorts of consultations is that they provide MPs with the type of evidence that would not normally be brought before parliamentary committees. This means that MPs are able to base their decisions on a broader base of evidence and that the experience of a greater variety of people can influence the policy process.

As the Enfield MP Watch initiative shows (see below), the technologies can also be used in innovative ways so that MPs account to their voters, giving their views via the web on a range of issues.

Enfield MP Watch – making representatives accountable

www.mpwatch.net/Enfield/Main.htm

This project, run voluntarily by the Enfield United Nations Association, aims to make MPs more accountable through online questioning and discussion around the concerns of the United Nations. Questions have related to development, the UN and conflict, the environment and the changing world order. All three local MPs participate in the project. Each week the site organisers send questions to the MPs, who submit answers to the site. These can then be followed up by online discussions. The site is more than simply a question and answer facility: it provides background information on the main subjects discussed, information on Parliament itself (including live streamed video of parliamentary sessions) and links to other relevant sites and to local councillors and Members of the European Parliament. The site also has facilities for starting a petition.
Parliamentary scrutiny

One of the fundamental parliamentary roles for politicians is as scrutinisers of Government and legislation, by holding ministers to account in the chamber or select committees, and scrutinising and amending Bills during their passage through both Houses of Parliament. This again is a task which they undertake on behalf of the public and the Internet has opened up these activities to a much greater number of voters.

Through the websites run by the parliaments and assemblies in the UK voters can find information not just about what was said in debates but how their representatives have voted, what motions they have supported and their work in committees. The House of Commons website, for example, also includes a wealth of explanatory information about the history of Parliament, the legislative process and the Bills before Parliament.

However, the potential for direct communication and interaction opens up further possibilities. The Scottish Parliament provides live coverage of all proceedings in the chamber and main committee rooms and in January 2002 the UK Parliament began an experiment with webcasting proceedings from the chamber and select committee rooms.

This has been taken a step further with the experiment in online scrutiny of the draft Communications Bill. The Bill, which will recast the way in which the communications industry is regulated, was published in draft form so that Government could consult widely, allow MPs to consider its provisions and, if necessary, propose amendments to the Bill before it was introduced to Parliament. The Government has made plain its intention to publish more Bills in draft. The experiment in online scrutiny undertaken by the joint committee examining the draft Bill means that

The UK Parliament – providing information

As an important part of Parliament’s work to open itself up to people by allowing easier and free access to documents and information, the UK Parliament website (www.parliament.uk/) already provides:

- a full record of debates in the Commons and Lords;
- an explanation of parliamentary procedures;
- details of select committees – their e-mail addresses, the issues they are investigating and texts of their reports;
- texts of all Bills before Parliament; and
- House of Commons library research papers.

19 www.scottishparliamentlive.com
20 www.commbill.net or www.democracyforum.org.uk
a greater number of people can participate in the scrutiny process.

**Proposed measures**
The Leader of the House of Commons, Rt Hon Robin Cook MP, has stated that as part of his proposals for reform of the Commons, greater use should be made of ICT. The Commons is developing its website and online scrutiny is a welcome innovation. It is for MPs and Peers ultimately to decide whether they wish to take advantage of the new technologies; however, the Government will do what it can to foster and promote their use within Parliament to improve consultation and scrutiny.

**A democracy road map**
As part of the re-design of Citizen Space the Government is planning to provide a comprehensive online guide to how democracy works and where to find the relevant policy information. This could include, for example:

- a map of UK representation enabling users to find out who represents them at local, regional, parliamentary and European levels and providing the facility to contact them;
- a guide to UK governance identifying the roles and responsibilities of different tiers of government. It could also include a guide to local government, central government departments and the institutions of the European Union;
- links to Parliament, local government and the devolved Parliaments and Assemblies, including a guide to their work;
- advice from civil society organisations about who to contact and how to get the best out of local and national government;
- information about public participation – from voting in different elections to participating in government consultations or parliamentary enquiries; and
- frequently asked questions about politics, government and the policy-making process.

**Encouraging standard e-practice**
The Government will encourage all politicians to standardise their e-mail addresses. At present all MPs can have the e-mail address surnameinitial@parliament.uk.
yet there remain a variety of different addresses according to MP. The UK Parliament might borrow from the Scottish Parliament’s example where every MSP has the same form of e-mail address (firstname.surname.msp@scottish.parliament.uk) meaning that any voter knows how to e-mail their representative without having to search. The benefits of this minor innovation, practically and symbolically, could be significant for the House of Commons.

The Government will work with Parliament to see if there is more scope for online consultations on draft bills and we welcome Parliament’s willingness to experiment with online consultations for such Bills. The Government hopes that should the results of the initial experiment prove favourable, Parliament will introduce such elements as standard practice.

Consultation issues

- How would you like to contact Government ministers, MPs and other elected representatives?
- What innovations might improve consultation by Parliament and Government on draft Bills?
- Are there additional points of information you would find useful on a ‘democracy road map’?
- In your experience have the links between government sites and parliamentary, MPs’ or local councillors’ sites been sufficient? What additional links would you find helpful?

3.4 Political parties

Despite declining membership and the apparent growth of single-issue campaigning, political parties are central to the democratic process. General elections are held on the basis of competing political programmes as set out in party manifestos. The development of these policies within the parties provides the basis on which to govern. A healthy democracy therefore requires parties that effectively aggregate and articulate the views of the public.

The success in recent years of single-issue or independent candidates is a sign of a healthy democracy. However, political parties will remain the basis of democratic government as only they can develop policies across the broad range of issues that government must address. Even so, all the political parties have recognised that they could do more to engage with voters.

It is not for the Government to determine how the political parties should address the problems of engaging public interest and providing voters with a range of alternatives. However, both parties and the public are likely to benefit from their being rooted into communities and alive to citizens’ concerns. In this endeavour new technologies could offer clear benefits.

ICT could provide the means for parties to engage more systematically with their members and more
generally with the public during the development of policy. It offers the opportunity to consult more widely and thoroughly on policy proposals, connecting with pressure groups, civil society organisations and local communities. The Internet is also likely to play an increasingly important role during election campaigns, both as a source of information and a way of eliciting support.

As the political parties are the main channels for political activity at election time, they may also wish to consider the value of the web as a tool for education. Any citizenship education must address the role of the political parties and the parties too have a responsibility to educate citizens and encourage participation.

**Consultation issues**

- Have you contacted any of the political parties via the Internet? If so, was this experience valuable?
- Would you participate in a political party’s policy consultation via the Internet?
- Are there particular facilities or services you would like to see the political parties providing using ICT?

### 3.5 Civic activity

Participation by citizens in civil society organisations is as vital to the democratic process as the three previous interactions. Active and engaged citizens are likely to lead to more informed and effective government. That there is a high level of interest in political issues is borne out by successive opinion polls. Individuals already participate in a variety of activities that have no formal connection with the institutions of democracy. The task for government is to link this interest to the political process – and to do so in a way that reflects and responds to changes in the nature of democratic participation.

For millions of people, ICT is a routine part of their lives. It also plays an increasingly important part in many forms of public participation, whether they are political or not. For many campaigning organisations, the web is a vital tool for communicating and promoting their message and increasing numbers of people view the Internet as a means to register their opinion and influence decisions.

The notion of a formal space on the web where anyone can initiate policy ideas, contribute evidence or debate with others is a long way off. As a more realistic objective, the Government will begin by connecting with existing web activity, for example by adding to Citizen Space a dimension that includes a topical forum and links to debates going on elsewhere on the web. Citizen Space should not be just about responding to government, it should also offer opportunities to initiate and debate new policy ideas.

The Internet can support dialogue among citizens by making it easier for people to connect, to discuss issues
of common interest, and to form alliances to engage government and help shape the policy process.

**Consultation issues**

- Would you use a government-run site to initiate policy discussions? What advantages would such a site hold over independently-run sites?
- How could the Government use the Internet to engage more thoroughly with individuals and organisations from civil society?
- Are there particular links the Government needs to make or forums that the Government should be participating in or responding to?
- Are there any other e-democracy initiatives the Government should be developing to extend participation?

### 3.6 Capacity building

None of the above will work without preparation, infrastructure and training. There would be little point in developing new channels of communication only to hear from the same people who dominated traditional consultations. e-Participation should create opportunities for those who are not usually part of the policy process to be heard and it must be more than simply setting up a discussion forum and hoping someone will use it.

e-Democracy has the potential to break down social, economic and geographic barriers; however, without ensuring that people can utilise these opportunities it could simply become an additional barrier. The Government's proposals are underpinned by the belief that active efforts must be made to attract the widest range of voices possible and to monitor the ways in which different social groups are making their voices heard online. People with disabilities, people who do not use English as their first language, young people and senior citizens need to be encouraged and helped to use digital technologies in order to be better connected to government and representatives. ICT should help stimulate
and sustain community activity, fostering self-help, the ownership of local issues and the generation of common purpose.

The Government does not believe that there are any simple answers to such issues of access and understanding. There are a number of possible strategies that could be deployed, some of which are set out below; however, we welcome all contributions on how e-participation can most effectively break down such barriers.

**Digital citizenship training**

Citizenship education will be part of the curriculum for 11–16 year olds from September 2002. A Green Paper published in February 2002 proposed that all 14–19 year olds should experience ‘active citizenship’, recognised in a national diploma. The Government will consider how digital citizenship education could be an integral part of this broader citizenship programme in schools. It will consider how such facilities as UK online centres, learndirect centres and Citizen Space could be used as citizenship education resources for adults.

**Community Builders, New South Wales – strengthening communities**


Community building is about people from the community, government and business taking the steps to find solutions to issues within their communities. Community building is based on the collective participation of people, individually and as a community, who act together to create change. communitybuilders.nsw was developed in response to the desire expressed by communities to access information about what works to make their community safer, healthier, inclusive, and more vibrant and enterprising. The emphasis is on practical resources and how to do things including checklists on community building; how to use and interpret statistics; group work techniques; managing conflict; how to consult young people; funding sources; sustainable urban design; and partnerships with the community and business.

**A network of centres for e-democracy**

UK online centres, learndirect centres, libraries and other intermediaries and partners throughout the country could be used as local resources to give greater democratic voice to individuals and communities. The existence of such centres, particularly in deprived areas, could overcome one of the biggest obstacles to participation. The Government will consider the resourcing implications of the use
of UK online and learndirect centres for this additional role.

**Award schemes for e-excellence**

The Government will encourage departments, local authorities, political parties and other public organisations to find new ways of using ICT to engage citizens in the democratic process.

**Pathfinder projects**

Under the Wired Up Communities\(^{21}\) initiative, for example, the Government invested £10 million from the Capital Modernisation fund in order to develop pilot projects in areas such as Newham and Blackburn. These pilots have provided useful information on how people viewed and used new technologies, amongst other things, as a participation tool. The Government will continue to encourage such pathfinder projects in central and local government, focusing especially on areas of high social and economic exclusion.

**Consultation issues**

- How far should digital citizenship training extend? Are there issues to which special attention should be paid?
- What features should e-democracy centres include?
- What criteria should apply to award schemes for e-democracy?
- Are there particular ‘pathfinding’ schemes that you would like to see developed?

3.7 Conclusion

Many ways of consulting the public have been tried, often successfully, without any use of digital technologies. We should not be so obsessed about democracy online that we fail to learn the lessons from other democratic experiments. In recent years a number of innovative ways of involving the public in policy formation have been deployed – citizens’ juries, deliberative polls, consensus conferences and visioning exercises. e-Participation should not be a substitute for existing methods of involvement but should add value to them. There should be experimentation with mutli-media formats, combining, for example, TV debates, radio phone-ins and online forums.

The development of e-participation tools themselves should be an evolving process. There is a need to experiment and develop the right tools for the job. As new digital technologies spread they should be exploited. As citizens, representatives and government become more confident about e-participation, its contents and methods will need to be continually assessed. For this reason, the Government welcomes contributions on all the ideas and proposals set out in this chapter.

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\(^{21}\) www.dfes.gov.uk/wired/index.shtml
Electronic voting will not solve the problem of low turnout in elections. However, the system we use to elect our representatives has not changed in its basics for the last hundred years or so, and many people do not find it convenient. Experience at the 2001 General Election and with pilot schemes at the 2000 and 2002 local elections shows that people are interested in experimenting with new ways of voting. Building on this, the Government is developing a policy on e-voting to provide further convenient ways of participating in elections.

The way in which we go about casting our votes in this country has hardly changed over the last century and yet our lifestyles have changed beyond all recognition from those of our 19th century predecessors. A 21st-century democracy should provide a variety of ways of voting that reflect modern lifestyles.

“I couldn't get to the polling station because it was too inconvenient.”

“I was away on election day.”

These are a couple of the voices that were captured in a survey of voters’ attitudes commissioned by the Electoral Commission. This only gives an indication of why 40% of the electorate did not turn out to vote in the 2001 General Election, but deserves to be taken seriously.

22 The results can be found on www.electoralcommission.org.uk/moripoll.htm#2
The survey also revealed that voting on the Internet would encourage people to vote and that being able to vote by telephone or mobile phone might have made people more likely to vote in the 2001 election. This is confirmed by other surveys such as in ‘Is Britain on course for 2005? – The third KPMG Consulting e-government survey’\(^\text{23}\) which found that 57% of people with Internet access would be willing to vote online.

If people are prevented from voting because of inconvenient methods or being away on election day, it is the Government’s obligation to provide more convenient and flexible ways of voting. Indeed one innovation brought in for the General Election did appear to capture the interest of voters and to show that voters are willing to try new ways of voting. This was the facility for anyone to apply for a postal vote without having to give a reason. Over 1.4 million postal votes were cast at the 2001 election compared with around 740,000 in 1997. Further evidence of the popularity of this ‘new’ way of voting was seen in the all-postal ballots run in selected areas during the 2000 and 2002 local elections. In the latter case turnout more than doubled in some areas and was substantially increased in others.

Modernising the voting process through the use of ICT may broaden participation in elections. It may, for example, make voting more attractive to those young people who are competent in ICT but who find traditional methods of voting unattractive or inconvenient.

4.1 e-Voting systems

ICT could support the voting process in a variety of ways. The main ones are:

- online voting (either remote voting or from polling stations);
- electronic counting systems; and
- computer-assisted voting.

The Government’s view is that the greatest potential benefits in terms of more convenient participation through e-voting lie in remote online voting. Computer-assisted voting and electronic counting systems may bring benefits in terms of cost and time, but that is not the main objective of this policy. The proposed policy for e-voting, therefore, relates primarily to remote online voting.

\(^{23}\) ‘Is Britain on course for 2005?’ – www.kpmgconsulting.co.uk/research/reports/ps_egov02.html
4.1.1 Online voting

Individual voting devices are connected via a network to:

- a local or national electronic electoral roll; and
- a recording and counting centre.

A voter’s entitlement to vote is validated against the electoral roll database, and this is recorded so that the voter cannot vote twice in an election. The vote itself is transmitted securely to the recording and counting centre.

The network could be the Internet or another public or private network. The latter may be more secure than the Internet, but the Internet is now being seriously considered worldwide as a medium for remote voting, and several small-scale pilots have taken place.

Online voting can be implemented in a number of ways, including:

- poll-site online voting;
- online voting at any polling station anywhere;
- kiosk voting; and
- remote voting.

Of these, remote voting is likely to bring the greatest benefit in terms of convenience.

Poll-site online voting
This is electronic voting at any supervised polling station in the constituency or electorate where the voter is registered. A network connects the polling station to a local electoral roll and handles the transfer of votes to a counting centre.

This method would allow a little more freedom than the current system, in that voters could vote at any polling station in the electoral area where they are registered.

Online voting at any polling station anywhere
This is similar to poll-site online voting, except that the electoral database and counting centre to which computers are connected would be national rather than local.

People could visit any polling station, be presented with the list of candidates for their home electoral area, and cast their vote. The votes would then be counted centrally.

Kiosk voting
This would use the same system as online voting at any polling station but could also allow voting at other public places, such as libraries, UK online centres and learndirect centres. The devices used would have to be specific computers set up for the purpose. Election officials might or might not supervise kiosk voting.
This method might be more convenient for people, allowing a greater number of more accessible places to vote.

Remote voting
People could vote from any computer (or equivalent interactive device, such as a digital TV or WAP-enabled mobile phone), whether fixed or mobile, as long as they could connect to a network. Remote voting would involve a national database of voters and central counting facilities, as for kiosk voting and online voting at any polling station.

With this system voters could cast their votes from anywhere in the world – from home, from work or while on the move. It therefore represents the ultimate goal in terms of convenience, but presents the stiffest challenges in terms of design and security.

4.1.2 Electronic counting systems
Voters mark their choice on a ballot paper and vote at a polling station or by post. The ballot paper is capable of being read and counted electronically.

4.1.3 Computer-assisted voting
Computer-assisted voting is effectively the replacement of a paper ballot with an electronic ballot on a computer screen. Voters use a keyboard, touch screen or pointer to indicate their vote on a computer terminal in the polling station. Votes are not immediately

Internet voting in Swindon
In the May 2002 local election in Swindon, 10.8% of the voters (4,300 people) chose to cast their votes via the Internet from home, local libraries and council-run information kiosks. 80% of those who voted via the Internet also filled in an online survey, and the majority said that Internet voting had made voting more convenient and accessible. The hardware and software performed successfully without any significant problems.

Eligible voters were given a two-part security code in advance. The voting took place as follows:

1. The voter logged on to the Internet site and entered a security code. The system identified the voter’s eligibility to vote.

2. The system presented an electronic ballot containing candidate and ward details. The voter selected a candidate and marked it on the ballot. The choice was displayed on the screen and the system requested confirmation. If the voter accepted the displayed choice, the vote was recorded. The voter could then print a confirmation that a vote had been cast.

3. The details of the vote were encrypted and sent to the data centre for tabulation. The voter’s record on the database was flagged to indicate that a vote had been cast.
transmitted over a network but are retained by the individual machines to be totalled once the polls have closed. Computer voting supported by a nationally accessible electronic electoral roll could allow some of the convenience and flexibility of online voting. For example, it could allow people to vote from any polling station anywhere.

4.1.4 Scope and components of a modern e-voting system

More broadly, and in the longer term, the e-voting policy encompasses elections to the UK Parliament, the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Assembly for Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly and local councils, as well as other elections or ballots under statutory control, such as referendums and ballots required under trade union legislation. It covers voting itself and vote counting, registration of voters and application for postal voting. The Government considers it likely that the final form of a modern e-voting system will encompass:

- an online electoral register;
- online registration and online applications for postal votes;
- online and text voting; and
- electronic counting and collating of election results.

In spite of widespread interest in online voting, polling stations will continue to be the main way in which most people vote for some time and must be available for those who cannot or prefer not to use remote forms of voting. The underlying principle is that there

US presidential election 2000 – remote online voting

The Federal Voter Assistance Program conducted a pilot of remote Internet voting among US military officers overseas. It used the Department of Defense’s public key infrastructure to provide authentication. The pilot raised many issues, not least how to increase the size of the system for a larger population and how to ensure the usability of the chosen security system. A full evaluation report is available at www.fvap.ncr.gov/voi.html

24 The pilot projects being commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will also look further at telephone and postal voting.
should be a variety of different ways for people to cast their vote. The important assumption here is that people will be able to vote at polling stations, but by electronic, not paper, means.

To develop a robust, modern e-voting system will require additional investment in infrastructure, although longer-term savings could be achieved. e-Enabling existing polling stations will require substantial new resources even taking into account economies of scale and financing arrangements. However, the Government recognises the importance of supporting multiple channels, including postal voting, to build confidence in new electoral methods and appeal to the widest range of voters. Therefore, it will not be until after 2006 that there is any feasibility of reducing the numbers of polling stations, and so releasing resources to be invested in other means of voting.

4.2 Security and trust

Before an electronic voting system can be established, it will be vital to ensure that the system is at least as secure as existing methods and that people trust the system. On the whole, people trust the traditional election process because they trust the administrators, presiding officers, clerks and others who have impartial roles in the process. The process is open to scrutiny, and such scrutiny does not require special technical skills. Candidates and their agents may appeal if they feel the process has gone awry.

Equivalent checks and balances will have to be designed into any electronic voting system. The system will not be acceptable unless all participants in the electoral process trust it. Public education and information will be vital in achieving this trust, and the Electoral Commission will have a key role to play.

Local elections – computer-assisted voting and electronic counting systems

In the May 2000 local elections three authorities, Bury, Salford and Stratford-upon-Avon, piloted computer-assisted voting and electronic counting, while two others, Broxbourne and Three Rivers, piloted electronic counting only. In London the votes for the Mayor and Greater London Authority were counted electronically. All these votes took place in polling stations. None of the electronic voting schemes had an impact on turnout, probably because they still required voters to attend their usual polling station.

Some technical difficulties occurred (for example, there were problems with the electricity supply, and machines were unable to read marks made in ink rather than pencil), but as these were pilots a few teething problems were to be expected. The pilots have been evaluated and the results published at www.elections.dtlr.gov.uk/pilot/index.htm
Establishing trust in the e-voting system is likely to be gradual. Voters’ trust will come through experience, as well as through education and information programmes that underline the need for experiments and pilots while the system is implemented.

4.2.1 Security requirements

The Government acknowledges that in any voting system:

- only people who are entitled to vote can vote;
- nobody can vote twice or in another person's name (unless an authorised proxy);
- no votes are lost or duplicated in the process;
- how an individual vote was cast is secret;
- the votes cast remain secret while the vote is in progress;
- there is an audit trail to enable the detection of fraud;
- the electoral process is protected against interference and corruption; and

- there is no disruption through a failure of infrastructure.

The nature of the risks associated with each of these requirements will change with any move towards electronic systems. These risks must be carefully considered and mitigated. For example, in the traditional voting system each ballot paper is matched to the voter's name on the electoral roll – mainly as a protection against a voter fraudulently voting in someone else's name. In theory this could allow the way an individual voted to be discovered by an unauthorised person. In practice, however, the risk of this occurring is remote: election officials are trusted to be impartial, an audit could only be initiated upon a court order following an election petition, and, in any case, exploiting such information would be very labour-intensive.

Whatever forms of e-voting may eventually be introduced, however, new legal and procedural safeguards will be needed to provide equivalent protection. Technical solutions (such as ‘blind signatures’ and anonymising services) can help foster trust and protect against fraud.

4.3 The e-voting programme

A programme of work to achieve successful implementation of e-voting is already under way to ensure that robust systems can be in place for an e-enabled General Election after 2006. Extensive piloting and an incremental roll-out, together with a programme of research, will be needed.
4.3.1 Pilot schemes in local government elections

In 2000, local authorities in England piloted a range of innovative electoral practices. These included all-postal voting, changes to the location of polling stations, weekend voting, and electronic voting and counting. The experience reinforced the Government’s view that there is a need to continue experimenting with modern electoral practices. It is important to learn more about what works well, to test the robustness of new systems and to develop public confidence. An ongoing programme of pilot projects is also a key part of the Government’s approach to developing trust and confidence in an e-voting system.

In 2002, the pilot programme was expanded with 30 local authorities piloting new ways of voting or counting at the local and mayoral elections on 2 May. Seventeen of these tested forms of electronic voting or counting, including some experiments in remote online voting. All hardware and software performed without any significant problems and anecdotal evidence is that people found it easy, convenient and quick to use, particularly in the case of remote voting through the Internet. There is no evidence at this stage of any breaches of security.

The Electoral Commission offered support and advice to authorities undertaking pilots, and will evaluate...
every scheme in consultation with them. A full report will be available in early August. Initial indications, however, are that the schemes were successful. Whilst considerable numbers of people did use the alternative methods of electronic voting offered, these were limited experiments and further analysis is required before firm conclusions can be drawn about the likely effect on turnout. However, where all-postal pilots took place a general increase in turnout occurred.

Whilst at first sight this may not relate directly to e-voting, it is important to recognise that these all-postal pilots demonstrate that, where voting is made more convenient, turnout has been shown to increase. Remote e-voting will further increase the convenience of voting. In addition, the infrastructure that will support remote e-voting will provide benefits in the efficiency of the elections themselves; for example, initial estimates of costs of the pilots show that the average cost of an online vote is less than half the cost of a postal ballot.

Pilot projects – May 2002 local elections

- 30 local authorities ran election pilots.
- 13 piloted all-postal voting, some with electronic counting.
- 16 included elements of e-voting or e-counting.
- Five pilots offered Internet voting.
- Two offered text messaging via mobile phones.

Headline results

- In Swindon 4,300 people voted online via the council’s website – over 10% of those who voted. In addition over 2,000 voted via touch telephone – representing 5% of those who voted.
- In two of the three pilot wards in Sheffield over 30% of those who voted did so electronically (including text messaging).
- St Albans announced the first e-voting and counting results of the local elections just four minutes after the close of poll. In the two wards piloting e-voting over half those voting did so online or by phone (26.5% used the Internet and 23.9% the phone).

Further study of such pilot schemes will provide practical experience that will help everyone involved to explore specific issues arising from the implementation of e-voting. For example, the schemes should help answer the questions of:

- how to manage the technology – acquisition, installation, operation, cost and what skills are needed;

Further pilot schemes are proposed for future years and the experience will also help define the legal basis needed to support the most promising forms of e-voting. However, any changes made under section 11 of the Representation of the People Act 2000 to enable nationwide e-voting schemes will be made only on the recommendation of the Electoral Commission.

**Proposed measure**

*Continue and broaden pilots on e-voting*

Pilot schemes to test new methods of voting should be continued and refined, particularly pilots that support and test online voting.

The Electoral Commission should continue to offer support to participating local authorities and evaluate each scheme.

**Consultation issue** – What should the priorities be for new pilot schemes?

- Online voting
- Digital television
- Touch telephone
- SMS text messaging
- Electronic voting machines
- Electronic counting machines
- None of the above

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**Local elections 2002 – All-postal electoral pilots**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local authority</th>
<th>Previous turnout</th>
<th>Turnout May 2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chorley</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crawley</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gateshead</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwich (2 wards)</td>
<td>25% 26%</td>
<td>31% 29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hackney</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havering</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middlesbrough</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Tyneside (2 wards)</td>
<td>34% 36%</td>
<td>42% 42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NW Leicestershire (1 parish)</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preston (2 wards)</td>
<td>31% 15%</td>
<td>49% 29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tyneside</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevenage</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trafford</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- how easy and quick the system is to use – what works for voters;
- how to organise the e-voting process – when and for how long e-voting is available, how to check off voters’ names on the electoral register, how to help voters.

Just as importantly, the experiences and views of the people responsible for managing the trials and of the voters taking part will inform a serious debate on secrecy, privacy and security. This debate will be a key ingredient in increasing the public’s confidence in and familiarity with e-voting.
4.3.2 Research programme into e-voting

Any changes to the voting system must be properly researched, to ensure that the public gets a real benefit and that effective safeguards against abuse are incorporated. The Government has commissioned research into when and how e-voting could be successfully introduced for parliamentary and local government elections. The report was published on 23 May 2002.

The report looks at the attitudes of the UK public to the design and implementation of e-voting and the views of key stakeholders. It explores the technological and social barriers to implementation; legislative and regulatory implications; resource implications and the level of readiness in local authorities. It considers the options for the implementation of e-voting – their practicality and which option is likely to be the most successful. It also considers whether e-voting should initially operate in parallel with existing arrangements, as an option in polling booths, or whether comprehensive modernisation should occur, in which polling stations and remote methods of voting are integrated into one system. The key recommendations from the report are that:

- protecting the fundamental features of our democracy lies at the heart of the implementation strategy;
- there should be a multi-channelled approach to future voting arrangements;
- the conventional methods of voting will complement new, innovative techniques;
- a staged approach to developing remote electronic voting is required; and
- further pilot studies are required.

The report raises important issues such as maintaining the security of the ballot, which will feature heavily in the consideration of the issues surrounding e-voting. Having identified the enabling conditions and potential barriers to the introduction of e-voting, the next stage of research will build on this information to draw up a route map to overcome any barriers and achieve

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27 The research team was led by De Montfort University and included Essex University and BMRB International. It was sponsored by the former Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, with support from the Office of the e-Envoy, the Electoral Commission, the Improvement and Development Agency, the Local Government Association and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. The report is available at www.dtlr.gov.uk (moving to www.lcd.gov.uk in summer 2002).
an e-enabled General Election sometime after 2006.

4.3.3 Technical standards for election systems

The market in electronic voting products and services is growing. Democratic institutions across the world will benefit from agreed data standards, a competitive market delivering products that use those standards, and assurance that different systems will work together if they adhere to the standards.

OASIS is an international not-for-profit consortium that aims to advance electronic business by promoting open, collaborative development of compatibility standards. Recently OASIS formed a technical committee to develop standards for election and voter services. The committee, which is chaired by an official from the Office of the e-Envoy, is made up of government leaders, policy-makers, community leaders and industry bodies who are committed to the responsible application of technology to the election process.

The new committee will develop Election Markup Language (EML), a specification for the structured interchange of data among hardware, software and service vendors who provide election and voter services. EML will provide a standard way for systems to interact, as new global processes evolve and are adopted.

Through its involvement with the OASIS technical committee, the Office of the e-Envoy will set technical and security standards for use in electronic election systems in the UK. The Representation of the People Act 1983 (amended by the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000) empowers the Secretary of State to direct registration officers to maintain the register in an electronic form. The Secretary of State may then set the standards describing how the software managing the register should be maintained and updated.

In parallel, the Council of Europe will be working with Member States to develop and maintain an agreed set of technical standards at European level. The experiences of the States and the UK and the work of OASIS will feed into this process.

Proposed measure

Setting standards for data, to support e-voting

Election Markup Language28 (EML) will provide a specification for the
structured interchange of data among hardware, software and service vendors who provide election or voter services. EML should be the accepted standard for systems to interact.

Consultation issue – Is it important for Government to set standards for e-voting systems?

4.3.4 Local authority secure electoral register (LASER)\(^29\)

At present, voters are required to attend a particular polling station in order to cast a vote. Voters requesting a ballot paper are checked against the electoral roll (which is currently only accessible locally) to ensure they are registered. A mark is then made on the roll to indicate that a paper has been issued against that name. This assures the principle of one person, one vote.

With a central electronic electoral roll, election officials could authenticate a voter at any polling station. This would also be a vital enabler of remote online voting.

The LASER project aims to link all electoral registers across the country to form a joined-up electoral register that is maintained and managed locally. The register will be accessible on a national level to authorised users, such as political parties, via a CD-ROM. Further development and funding of the project could lead to a fully interactive online register.

Proposed measures

Build the infrastructure to support e-voting

An interactive, online electoral register will form an important part of any move to nationwide remote online voting. The LASER project, which is run by several groups in partnership, is the first stage in developing such a register and will continue to be managed effectively to ensure its successful conclusion.

Develop electronic election-related services

It is estimated that 1.5 million people\(^30\) (approximately 3% of the eligible population) were not registered to vote at the last General Election. If people could register and apply for a postal vote online, they could ensure that their entry on the electoral roll was correct and up to date and, if not, take immediate action to ensure their continuing right to vote. Online registration would allow citizens to:

- apply to register;
- confirm the details that are held; and
- receive acknowledgement of an application to register.

The 2005 e-government vision includes the provision of these services and electronic application for a proxy or postal vote. These services cannot be implemented until secure interactive electronic electoral

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29 www.idea-infoage.gov.uk/services/laser/index.shtml
30 Source: The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
registers (see above) and adequate online authentication systems are in place. The legal framework, however, is in place. The Representation of the People Act Regulations 2001 provide for the use of digital signatures to accompany applications.

Consultation issue – What other elements of infrastructure or services should the Government consider providing in order to support the introduction of electronic voting?

4.3.5 Election campaigns

Worldwide, political parties are already actively exploring the use of the Internet in campaigning. The role of Government and Parliament is to put in place the legal framework within which campaigning takes place.

Proposed measure

Campaigning by political parties

With the support of the Electoral Commission, the Government should identify the aspects of election campaigns that could be undertaken electronically. The Government should ensure that legislative requirements or other issues that are needed to facilitate e-campaigning are addressed.

Consultation issue – What issues should Government and the political parties consider with regard to electronic communication with voters during elections?

4.4 Funding

In the May 2002 local and mayoral elections, 17 authorities piloted different forms of e-voting. The technology investment – £4 million – to support the pilots was funded by the then Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. The vision of an e-enabled General Election some time after 2006 will require the delivery of an online register and access for all voters to multi-channel means of voting according to individual preference:

- online from work or home;
- by post;
- by telephone;
- at polling stations by online voting via terminals;

and all votes would be counted electronically.

In order to achieve this and maintain a ballot that is no less secure than the traditional poll, it is necessary
to complete the programme of work outlined in the earlier part of this chapter, and in particular a programme of ever more extensive pilots. This will require a considerable level of infrastructure investment, although the extra cost per vote cast is minimal. Further infrastructure investment will be required in order to ensure nationwide coverage for a General Election some time after 2006.

At this stage costs can only be tentative but the Government anticipates that over time some cost reductions can be achieved from economies of scale and a probable shift in voter preference towards electronic voting, which may mean a reduction in the number of polling stations.
Chapter 2 – In the service of democracy

- Are we right to focus this e-democracy policy on participation and voting?
- Do you agree that the two tracks should be separated to allow them to develop independently?
- The Government’s current policy is to provide access to the Internet to everyone who wants it and to enable him or her to use it. What more could the Government do to enable everyone to use ICT to play their part in democracy?
- An underpinning principle of e-democracy is openness. In what circumstances would it be appropriate to restrict either participation or the ability to view who has contributed or the content of the contributions?
- What would government and representatives need to do to ensure that the principle of responsiveness is applied? What would the resource implications of this be?
- Would an e-democracy charter encourage you to trust online forms of participation (both voting and other forms of participation)?
- We have set out several principles for a charter. Are these the right principles? Should the charter include additional or alternative principles?
- How should the Government measure the success of an e-democracy policy?

The main consultation issues are reproduced below. A fuller and interactive questionnaire is available online at www.edemocracy.gov.uk
Chapter 3 – e-Participation

Citizens and government

• What are the current strengths and weaknesses of Citizen Space on ukonline.gov.uk?
• What sorts of information or additional facilities should Citizen Space include?
• What features would encourage you to visit such a government-run site and submit your views to the Government online?
• What would discourage you from participating?
• Have you participated in previous government consultations? Was this a worthwhile experience?
• What features would make you more likely to participate online than through other channels?

Citizens and representatives

• How would you like to contact Government ministers, MPs and other elected representatives?
• What innovations might improve consultation by Parliament and Government on draft Bills?
• Are there additional points of information you would find useful on a ‘democracy road map’?

• In your experience have the links between government sites and parliamentary or MPs’ sites been sufficient? What additional links would you find helpful?

Political parties

• Have you contacted any of the political parties via the Internet? If so, was this experience valuable?

• Would you participate in a political party’s policy consultation via the Internet?

• Are there particular facilities or services you would like to see the political parties providing using ICT?

Civic activity

• Would you use a government-run site to initiate policy discussions? What advantages would such a site hold over independently-run sites?

• How could the Government use the Internet to engage more thoroughly with individuals and organisations from civil society?

• Are there particular links the Government needs to make or forums that the Government should be participating in or responding to?

• Are there any other e-democracy initiatives the Government should be developing to extend participation?
Capacity building

- How far should digital citizenship training extend? Are there issues to which special attention should be paid?
- What features should e-democracy centres include?
- What criteria should apply to award schemes for e-democracy?
- Are there particular ‘pathfinding’ schemes that you would like to see developed?

Chapter 4 – e-Voting

- What should the priorities be for new pilot schemes?
- Is it important for Government to set standards for e-voting systems?
- What other elements of infrastructure should the Government consider providing in order to support the roll-out of electronic voting?
- What issues should Government and the political parties consider with regard to electronic communication with voters during elections?

Thank you for taking part in this consultation. If your response is on behalf of an organisation, please say which one.