

e-Democracy

Report of Research Findings

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COI Communications, on behalf of its client,
the Office of the e-Envoy

Prepared by:

Creative Research
43 The Broadway
London W13 9BP

: 020 8567 6974

Fax: 020 8567 6979

E-mail: creative@creativeresearch.co.uk

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

- This report presents findings from a project conducted by Creative Research on behalf of COI Communications and the Office of the e-Envoy, looking at the impact of proposals for e-democracy.
- The government intends to look into ways in which information and communication technology (ICT) could help to support the democratic process. A set of policy proposals has been developed, with three key objectives; to *facilitate, broaden and deepen* participation in the democratic process. There are two separate but linked strands to the policy proposals:
 - e-Participation – using ICT to develop new channels through which people can participate effectively in the democratic process between elections
 - e-Voting – utilising ICT to provide new methods of casting votes in elections or other ballots under statutory control. This also covers activities that underpin the electoral process, such as registration and absent voter application.
- There are six key principles underlying the proposals:
 - inclusion – ensuring access to the internet for all who want it
 - openness – ensuring people have electronic access to the information they need
 - security and privacy – giving people the confidence to participate online
 - responsiveness – ensuring that government listens to contributions and responds

- deliberation – providing an electronic space for public participation in policy and decision making
 - the e-democracy charter – setting out rights and responsibilities involved in participating online.
- A public consultation on the policy proposals has been carried out which will help inform further development. A consultation document asking for views on a number of e-democracy issues was sent to a wide range of organisations and individuals. It was anticipated, however, that certain groups might not be able or willing to participate in the consultation.
- The Office of the e-Envoy therefore commissioned Creative Research to conduct research at the same time as the consultation amongst those who are currently excluded from the democratic process and/or potentially excluded from electronic participation by practical and/or attitudinal barriers.

1.2 Objectives

- The objectives of the research were to:
 - identify specific issues of inclusion/exclusion that need to be considered when developing policy proposals on e-democracy
 - explore current barriers to participation in the *entire* democratic process (not *only* voting) and to evaluate the potential for ICT to overcome these
 - evaluate the potential benefits and drawbacks of e-democracy for particular politically excluded groups
 - evaluate the potential for specific policy initiatives to motivate and increase participation among particular groups in society (for example, online government forums, citizen-led discussion groups, remote online voting).

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Sample Structure

- The research was conducted using a qualitative methodology and consisted of a total of twenty focus groups, two paired depth interviews and three one to one depth interviews. These fell into three broad categories: general public, ethnic minorities and people disadvantaged by disability or homelessness.
- Each focus group was made up of between six and nine respondents. In terms of demographic variables, the groups with the **general public** and **minority ethnic communities** were structured according to **lifestage** because it is known that this variable has a greater influence on peoples' attitudes than age alone, and **social grade**. All groups except one, were single **gender** because it was suggested that there might be a relationship between gender and peoples' attitudes to technology and to voting. The only group which was mixed gender was the pre-family unengaged group; this was because being younger, it was felt likely that any differences in attitudes in these areas would be less marked.
- Since we wished to explore the effect of the **level of current engagement with the political process** on the response to e-democracy, this was also a key variable. For the purposes of this research, a person was said to be 'unengaged' if they:
 - EITHER: Would like to be able to put forward their views but lack the confidence, time or opportunity
 - AND/ OR: Used to vote but have not in recent years
 - OR: Have never voted
- An 'engaged' person was someone who said that they:
 - EITHER: Liked to make their views known (e.g. by attending MP's or councillors' surgeries)

– AND/ OR: Voted at many or all elections.

- The ‘unengaged’ groups were made up of people with a mix of **attitudes to the internet** in order to look at the effect of e-democracy on those who were more or less disposed to using new technology. Among the ‘engaged’ groups, on the other hand, we were interested in what might be the effect of e-democracy on those who either had used the internet but preferred not to do so or had never used the internet and had no interest in doing so.
- The **general public** sample structure is summed up in the table below.

1	Swansea	Unengaged	Mixed Gender, Pre-family, C2D, Urban
2	Greater Manchester	Unengaged	Female, Family, C2D, Rural
3	Southampton	Engaged	Male, Family, C2D, Urban
4	Gloucester	Engaged	Female, Family, E, Rural
5	Birmingham	Unengaged	Male, Family, E, Urban
6	Southampton	Unengaged	Female, Post-family, C2D, Urban
7	North Wales (Caenarfon)	Engaged	Male, Post-family, C2D, Rural
8	Manchester	Engaged	Female, Post-family, ABC1, Urban
9	Birmingham	Unengaged	Male, Post-family, ABC1, Rural

- Rural groups near metropolitan areas drew on residents from outlying villages.
- All groups from the **minority ethnic communities** were made up of respondents who were unengaged in the democratic process and had varying levels of exposure to new technology. All these groups involved people from the lower social grades. The sample structure is shown below.

1	Black Caribbean	Female, Family, C2DE	Catford
2	Black African	Male, Pre-family, C2DE	Catford
3	Bangladeshi	Female, Family, C2DE	Elephant & Castle
4	Pakistani	Female, Pre-family, C2DE	Elephant & Castle
5	Indian	Male, Post-family, C2DE	Southwark

- While the original intention was to conduct groups 3-5 in cities outside London, we experienced problems with finding people who were unengaged from the democratic process (see 8.1.5).

- The Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian groups were conducted partly or wholly in the appropriate alternative language, meaning that the verbatim quotes in this report taken from these groups are frequently translations of what was said.
- The full recruitment questionnaires are provided in the appendices.
- Respondents in the groups with **disadvantaged** people were involved in the research via support organisations. People were asked if they were interested in taking part and then the group was put together so as to arrive at a mix of gender, age, level of severity of disability (as relevant) and interest in the political process.
- These groups were conducted in training centres, day centres and charity headquarters in the Home Counties area. One focus group was conducted with each of the visually impaired, physically disabled, people with mental health issues and homeless people. Two groups were held with people with learning difficulties because these needed to be shorter due to their limited attention span.
- Paired depth interviews were conducted with those with a hearing impairment because they involved a BSL interpreter and we felt this would be an easier format than a full discussion group. Their quotations are in effect therefore, the words of the interpreter.
- In addition, short interviews were held with some of the representatives of the organisations, in part to discuss their views on the issues but primarily, to gain their help with recruitment.
- Respondents for the focus group amongst homeless people were recruited via a training centre run by a national support agency. It should be noted that these respondents all lived in temporary accommodation (e.g. hostels) or had recently moved into permanent accommodation, rather than currently living on the streets. They had also all received some training in ICT from the organisation. While, for these reasons, they may not be strictly representative

of the entire population of homeless people, they did regard themselves as homeless, and in many cases had spent time living on the streets.

- Discussions with each of the audiences lasted between one hour and one and a half hours.
- The fieldwork was carried out during October and November 2002.

1.4 Outline of Discussion

- The content of the discussion varied to some degree from audience to audience and the full topic guides are provided in the appendices.
- Here we have outlined the general flow of the discussion:
 - word association with the term ‘democracy’; projective exercise on what it means to live in a democracy
 - identification of issues important to respondents, and discussion on how they would go about getting their views across on these issues
 - general discussion on methods of participating and attitudes towards doing so
 - investigation of attitudes to voting including projective exercises on the reasons for and against doing so
 - assessment of the perceived importance of increasing participation
 - detailed analysis of attitudes towards new technology, including two projective exercises. These were a word association with the prefix ‘e’ (as in e-commerce) and a psycho-drawing of respondents’ relationship with new technology
 - initial impressions of the concept of e-democracy based on a synopsis of the concept

- discussion of e-participation including evaluation of possible methods
 - discussion of e-voting including evaluation of possible methods
 - wrap-up discussion of impressions of e-democracy after the likely methods have been revealed. This included a projective exercise where respondents were asked to write a mock postcard to the ‘people behind moves towards e-democracy’, detailing the key messages that they would like to get across about how to make the system effective.
- Before each group, participants were asked to complete a form detailing their level of familiarity with specific items of new technology.

1.5 Outline of this Document

- Our Conclusions and Recommendations are provided in Section 2 while Section 3 provides a summary of the main findings. For those who do not wish to delve into the detail of the research, these two sections provide a good overview.
- The main body of the report is provided in sections 4-8, which discusses the detailed findings of the project. Sections 9 and 10 highlight the specific differences coming out of the research among the minority ethnic communities and disadvantaged groups. Finally, in section 11, we set out some of the key points arising from the research that may be relevant as the proposals are taken forward.

2 Conclusions & Recommendations

2.1 Core Findings

- This research was conducted among those people whom one might expect to be less attracted to proposals for e-democracy; those who feel unengaged or find it difficult to become engaged in the political process at present, and those who dislike using computers and particularly the internet. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that the response was largely lukewarm except among audiences with very specific needs that might be addressed by the technology's ability to provide easier access. Amongst all audiences, e-voting was seen as more relevant than e-participation.
- The proposals may encourage some of those who are unengaged, whether because they are disinterested or disaffected, to participate by voting at some point in the future because of the greater convenience, but they are unlikely to make a significant difference to attitudes. In themselves, they address underlying feelings of disillusionment and detachment only very marginally.
- Even amongst the most technologically savvy unengaged respondents (**technophiles**), the level of comfort and familiarity with the internet and computer technology was not high, so that the potential offered by these channels was not especially appreciated. Given that these respondents were nearly all from social groups C2, D or E, it may be that this finding is due to this bias in the sample.
- Those who were already engaged (to some degree) but did not use the internet generally did not see these initiatives as a major incentive to learn more about computers and the internet. Their response to the proposals varied from the few who considered the concept to be unnecessary and a waste of money, to the majority who appreciated that it potentially broadened access to democracy (even if they would not use it themselves). The key concerns for these people related to the validity of the views expressed and the need to ensure that everyone could give their views if they wished, even if they did not have access to the technology.

2.2 Issues and Recommendations

- Issues raised by this research in developing plans for e-democracy cluster into two areas; operational and communication. They include:
 - Inclusiveness / equality of access; particularly reassurance that current methods will still be available and that new methods will include relatively familiar technology such as *Touch Tone Phones*. Consideration could perhaps be given to offering lower tech methods of participation such as voicemail
 - The principle that access to e-democracy, in particular for voting, should be free
 - The communication of results; ensuring that opinions expressed via **all** channels (not just via the internet) are taken into account
 - Greater transparency about how the opinions expressed feed into the decision-making process; ideally, how (at least sometimes) they **do** make a difference
 - Consideration as to the user interface to ensure that it is simple to use, that incorrect inputs can be ‘undone’ and reentered and that feedback is provided that entries have been received
 - Communication of the facility to choose from where to vote (ie. not via a single kiosk or phone) and to register to vote via the internet
 - Reassurance about security and confidentiality (difficult, as concerns are largely based on ‘fear of the unknown’ rather than concrete knowledge of specific issues)
 - The need to use terminology that promotes a broader definition of e-democracy. For many, ‘e’= computers and the internet, and ‘democracy’ = voting, so ‘e-democracy’ = voting by computer

- The role of trusted intermediaries in day centres, hostels, residential homes, cultural centres and the like, to help those who wish to use the new technology
- Encouragement of those who are comfortable with the technology to show others how to use it if they are interested. This might include informing secondary school children (say, as part of the Citizenship curriculum) about the new methods so that they can encourage their parents
- The importance of using appropriate channels / languages / formats (i.e. having the new methods available in these languages / formats; promoting the new methods via appropriate channels and in relevant languages / formats)
- The potential for ICT to provide plain English independent overviews of party/ candidate information.

3 Summary of Key Findings

3.1 Participation

- It is important to note that the research targeted people that logically would be the hardest for e-democracy initiatives to attract; those who felt disenfranchised, and those who disliked using computers and the internet.
- By and large, engaged people were more likely to participate than their unengaged counterparts. This difference was by no means clear-cut however, with some engaged people voting but having little interest in politics, and a number of unengaged respondents having participated in other ways (e.g. going on marches or signing petitions).
- There seemed to be two quite different types of unengaged respondents. Some were **disinterested**, regarding events at Westminster or their local council as being of little consequence to their everyday lives. Others were instead **disaffected**, and often reported that they had attempted to participate in the past but found doing so made little difference.
- The areas that respondents were concerned about tended to be either narrow issues that impacted directly on them (e.g. drug dealing in the area in which they lived, access to housing, the state of local transport), or broad, vaguely defined, national issues (e.g. 'crime', 'health care'). Where respondents had been motivated to actually put their views across (e.g. by writing to an MP), this tended to be about an issue that had a significant direct impact on them (e.g. assisting an immigration application by a relative).
- Underlying all the groups was a feeling of disillusionment with the current state of the democratic system. This was muted in some groups but pronounced in others. The main reasons given for this were a feeling that politicians made up their minds on issues without taking note of the views of 'people like us', even when large numbers made their views known, and that their one voice was unlikely to make any difference.

- The key form of participation for most people was voting and many defended the importance of voting, at least in principle. Most believed that it was desirable for as many people as possible to participate in important decisions, although this was often ‘taken as a given’ rather than passionately argued.
- The general consensus was that people were becoming less inclined to participate and vote, and that this was something that needed to be addressed.

3.2 Voting

- Respondents were often more likely to vote at general elections than local elections, saying that these were more important (in that they were perceived to have more influence on the ways ‘things’ are run).
- The key arguments in favour of voting were that it is the citizens’ duty, and, in the words used in many of the groups, *“If you don’t vote, you can’t complain.”* A number also argued that there was always the chance that their one vote could be the one that decided the result.
- Arguments against voting centred on the belief that it made no difference. This was variously because:
 - the person elected might not listen to their views or might break promises they had made
 - their one vote was highly unlikely to influence the result
 - the result was often obvious in advance
 - they saw little difference between the political parties
 - or there was no-one electable who advocated the policies that they supported.

3.3 New Technology

- Participants' attitudes to new technologies such as the internet broadly fell into four groups
 - **Technophiles** liked the technology and used it on a regular basis, even though most of those we came across only used computers at a very basic level
 - **Hesitant Users** were people who conceded that the technology was important but were not yet comfortable with using it (often relying on others to show them how)
 - **Rejecters** consisted of those who disliked the technology (often because they saw it as impersonal) and / or could never see themselves using it even though they might be able to
 - **Access Denied** referred to those who were not especially negative about the technology but believed that they were never likely to be able to use it much themselves (often citing financial constraints or a lack of knowledge).
- Mobile phones (but not text messaging) have clearly moved into the mainstream, and are not seen as intimidating and 'unknown' in the way that other new technologies are.
- An important factor discouraging people from using new technologies more was a fear of making mistakes. Respondents were also very concerned about internet security (often confidentiality), with this being based largely on fear of the unknown and news stories rather than concrete knowledge or direct experience of the internet's shortcomings.
- Many of those who used computers reported relying on an 'expert' (usually a friend or relative) to help them 'navigate the mysteries' of their PC. It seems possible that these people may act as pioneers for e-participation and e-voting, serving as an example for those who would like to participate but feel nervous about the technology.

3.4 e-Democracy

- The preliminary reception for the e-democracy concept based on a general description was lukewarm at best among the general public and minority ethnic groups. Respondents generally felt that while it would be good to have services like these available in case they wanted to use them, they themselves would be unlikely to do so unless something came up that they were very interested in. The proposals were largely seen as something that would appeal to people who were both very interested in politics and comfortable with using the internet. A few respondents described the concept as a waste of time and money because (they believed) no one would use it.
- Many believed that introduction of the new methods was inevitable, based on the availability of the technology and some (but minimal) awareness that new methods had been tried out at the last election.
- After discussing the concept and the specific technologies that might be used for e-participation and e-voting, a number of respondents expressed some interest in 'having a look'. Participants generally felt that the proposals would not make a great deal of difference as they addressed the widespread feeling of disillusionment and detachment in only a very minor way. However, as described below, when faced with the options for new ways of voting, the appeal of e-voting increased for some.
- The term 'e-democracy' itself carries connotations that may not be especially helpful. For many respondents 'e' implies computers, and 'democracy' suggests voting and elections. As a result, 'e-democracy' comes to mean voting by computer, a concept that many respondents are uncomfortable with.

3.5 e-Participation

- Although there was some muted interest in the idea of an *Online Government Forum*, *Citizen-led Discussion Groups*, *Bulletin Boards* and *E-mail or Text Messaging* for expressing one's views on an issue, the general consensus was that they were not aimed at 'people like me'. Respondents felt that the main users would be people who were both seriously interested in politics and

very comfortable with using computers, as well as people with vested interests and 'fanatics'.

- The most popular of the four options tested was the *Online Government Forum*, largely because users would be able to address their issues directly to someone who could make a difference. Many also reacted positively to the idea of being able to send a message to an MP / councillor using *E-mail* or *Text Messaging*, seeing this as essentially a faster version of existing methods.
- Chatrooms were, for many, strongly associated with misuse of the internet (e.g. users impersonating others, inappropriate discussions). Since it was a form of chatroom, and because they felt that there was no guarantee that anyone influential would be monitoring the results, respondents were not particularly positive about *Citizen-led Discussion Groups*. *Bulletin Boards* were not a popular choice for similar reasons.

3.6 e-Voting

- Despite some initial resistance (mainly relating to security and confidentiality), there was reasonable support for e-voting, particularly where the techniques were simple and made voting more convenient. As with participation, respondents wanted to be assured that existing voting methods would still be available, and also that there would be no charge for voting (e.g. for voting via text messaging). Whilst the largest single group said that they would probably stay with traditional methods using pen and paper at the polling station, more than half the respondents (including some who had never voted before) stated that they would vote using one of the five methods tested.
- For most, the term 'e-voting' was instinctively linked with computers and the internet. As a result, participants were surprised and quite pleased to see voting by *Touch Tone Phone* amongst the options. This was something that they were familiar with and that they felt would make voting much faster and more convenient.

- *Digital TV* was also a popular option, but required some explanation. In each group where there was an advocate who could explain how it might work, a substantial proportion of respondents selected this as their preferred option.
- Most of the respondents felt that *Internet Voting* would require a level of comfort with computers which was currently beyond them, although there was a very positive reaction when one participant suggested the possibility of including hyperlinks to candidate profiles and a comparison of party views on key issues.
- *Text Messaging* was something of a surprise inclusion. Most felt that this was a good idea but would choose another option instead. The groups considered *Computer Kiosks* to be something of a 'halfway house'. Respondents generally believed that this would be reasonably easy to use if they felt so inclined, but saw little point. Benefits such as the ability to vote at any polling booth did not come up unprompted.

3.7 Minority Ethnic Communities

- The Indian (post-family men), and especially the Pakistani (pre-family women) and Bangladeshi (family age women) groups, fell into the **disinterested** category of non-voter discussed earlier. They were more focussed on issues affecting their local communities (often defined very narrowly) than those in the general public groups and felt that the actions of central government had little direct impact on their day to day lives. Many also identified language as an important barrier to participation and, in certain cases, it was clear that participation by the women was something that was controlled by their husbands.
- For Black Caribbean respondents, and to a lesser extent, Black Africans, the causes of non-participation were more related to disillusionment. Most of the Black Caribbean respondents had been born in the UK and their concerns were similar to those of the general public. Black African participants were often more recent immigrants and suffered from the same cultural barriers as the Asian groups (although to a lesser extent).

- The e-democracy proposals may go some way to addressing the causes of disinterest although barriers such as language, culture and access to technology would still need to be addressed. Overall, it seems that it would be very difficult to encourage woman respondents such as those in the Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups to participate to any great extent unless this was done through a trusted local cultural centre. It should be noted, of course, that the minority ethnic groups were specifically recruited to involve only unengaged respondents, and that in certain communities outside London it was difficult to identify those who were unengaged.

3.8 Disadvantaged Groups

- Of all the groups, the e-democracy proposals, and especially e-voting, may hold greatest promise for those people who face problems at present with accessing democracy due to mobility problems or sensory impairment. Registering to vote, getting to a polling station and into the voting hall, using the polling booth and casting one's vote can all present enormous barriers. The ritual of voting, while part of the attraction of voting in person to some, may also act as a barrier to those with mental health issues who happen to feel unable to cope on election day.
- While many will continue to feel that voting in elections is something that they are not interested in doing or feel disaffected from, others will welcome the broader range of options open to them. The choice of preferred methods for voting varied but *Touch Tone Phones* were well received by those without access to a computer or experience of using one. *Internet Voting* found appeal among those who were computer literate, the largest groups of whom were among those with some form of visual or hearing impairment. Increased participation delivered through technology was not of great interest to the majority in these groups but those with internet access could often see the potential of this channel and felt that they might use it at some point on an issue that was important to them.
- To ensure that the potential offered by the new technology is realised, it will be vital that it is delivered in the relevant formats. For example, text-based

websites with a minimum of graphics can be read most reliably by the screen readers used by the blind. The language and style of expression also need to be as simple and straightforward as possible to facilitate understanding for those who experience difficulties with communication and whose first language is not spoken English (eg. those with learning difficulties and hearing impairments).

- The group of homeless people that were involved in the research were unusual in that, through their use of a charity for the homeless that offered IT training, they were all at least reasonably computer literate. Some also participated in the democratic process via the charity although they were very cynical about the efforts that had been made to identify and support homeless people. While none were currently living on the streets, half the group had done so at some point and made a distinction between their attitudes at that point in their lives and now that they were more settled in hostels and similar accommodation. Issues of intoxication, denial of identity and mobility meant that those on the street were unlikely to be interested in voting or to be prepared to register to do so. Once in a hostel however, it was suggested that *Internet* access or a *Computer Kiosk* within the hostel, with trained staff on hand to help, could help greatly with registration and encouraging those who wish to vote.

4 Participation (including Voting)

4.1 Overview

- In this section, we look at current attitudes to participation in the democratic process and the reasons underpinning the choice of whether or not to express one's views on specific issues or to exercise one's right to vote.
- In terms of their level of participation in the democratic process, there seemed to be four main categories of respondent whom we go on to describe in greater detail in the following subsections. These are the:
 - highly engaged
 - mildly engaged
 - disinterested
 - disaffected.

4.2 Current Levels of Participation

4.2.1 *Engaged versus Unengaged People*

- Generally speaking, engaged respondents were more likely than those in the unengaged groups to participate in the democratic process in the broadest sense although this difference was by no means as clear-cut as might have been expected.
- Some engaged people were **highly engaged**. In addition to voting, respondents were (or had been) involved in activities like:
 - writing to MPs
 - joining local committees (residents' associations, school committees, football club committees)

“And you could belong to a local government association where you can perhaps start finding ways of getting into things, so that

you can talk to people that can make a difference. And actually the Liberals are particularly good with a sheet that they hand out to every household in the area in what they have done. And you can just really phone them up and say ‘hey look, there is a pile of rubbish at the end of the road’, or ‘the whole of our area is dreadful, what can we do about it?’” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- becoming a councillor (one respondent, many years ago)
- Others in the engaged groups were **mildly engaged**. Generally speaking they voted, but participated in no other way. These people often saw voting as something they did almost automatically rather than feeling heavily committed themselves

“I vote when it's necessary and that's about all.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Several of those who were unengaged with voting, on the other hand, had been quite involved in other ways. Overall, these people seem to be closest to the **mildly engaged** category.
- Notwithstanding this, the general impression was that whether a person voted or not was indicative of their overall level of participation.

4.2.2 *Types of Unengaged People*

- There were two distinct types of unengaged respondents, with some crossover between the two. Some were **disinterested** in participating. While they often viewed the political system quite negatively, this group's main characteristic was that they did not regard the system as part of their lives. Often these people faced barriers to participating (e.g. language or access to technology) which reinforced this perception.
- Others had participated, or considered doing so, in the past, but had since become **disaffected**. These people had often been frustrated by the lack of action that appeared to result from their efforts and/ or from the efforts of others. In effect, where the **disinterested** might be termed ‘passively unengaged’, the **disaffected** were ‘actively unengaged’, in that they had consciously chosen not to participate.

4.3 Current Frequency of Voting

- The sample structure divided the groups into those who voted at some or all elections ('engaged') and those who did not vote or saw barriers to participating more ('unengaged'). There was, however, a great deal of variation within this
 - some respondents made a point of voting at each and every election, and were highly involved in the process
 - others voted at every General Election, but chose not to do so at local elections
 - another group (including some unengaged respondents) cast their votes only at 'important' General Elections, when the result was unknown or there was likely to be a change of Government, figuring that their vote would be more likely to make a difference. According to these people, 1997 qualified as an 'important' election, whereas 2001 did not

"The time with the Conservatives it reached a point where you find that, I don't normally vote, but I did that time just to get the Conservatives out and get Labour in just to see some form of change really.

...What about the last election?...

...Tony Blair, I didn't like his leadership so I didn't vote...

...Why not vote for an alternative then? You all said by the time the second campaign came in you didn't trust him...

...I'd just rather not vote at all. I wasn't going to vote Labour and there isn't an alternative to Labour." (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Current non-voters fell into two categories; those who had voted in the past but had stopped doing so and those who had never voted.
- Those who had voted in the past but had stopped doing so were often **disaffected**. They frequently described having been enthusiastic about

voting when they were young but becoming frustrated with their vote's apparent lack of impact

"No, because I think they're going to make their own mind up anyway, and I used to vote – but they all promise the same sort of things anyway. And so it doesn't really make a great deal of difference who gets in, because all it changes locally are things like the one way systems and how many roundabouts we should have. The little things that don't actually concern, you know, us, my family and my children that live in it." (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

"Usually hoping for a change, an improvement, but I mean I must admit, you get very disillusioned." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"Well this is how I feel, why vote for one party, I think why am I bothering to vote for one party when I've got no faith in any other party so I just haven't bothered to vote the last twice. The only time you hear your MP is when it comes round to voting and all of a sudden he's round. You never hear of him otherwise." (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Respondents who had never voted were, as might be expected, largely in the **disinterested** category. This was the group that found it most difficult to talk about the institutions of government and the meaning of political terms such as democracy. While they took a dim view of politics, they were not hugely negative about it. Rather, they were simply not interested in finding out more about it.
- One unengaged respondent who had never voted and was not particularly interested in doing so explained why he had nevertheless registered to vote.

"It came round to my house about 2 weeks ago. On there it said you can get fined £1,000 if you don't fill in and return this letter.

...I think what you're talking about is the Electoral Roll. Have you actually registered to vote?...

...Yes. The only reason I did it is because it said I would get £1,000 fine.. And also, because I'd like to be able to think that if the time came when I felt that I would like to vote that I could." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

4.4 Arguments in Support of Participation

- Whatever the level of familiarity with the term, the general consensus was that democracy was a good thing and better than any other system. It was also accepted that it was important for as many people as possible to participate in it. However, this gut-level belief in the overall system was largely something that was ‘assumed’, rather than passionately argued. Respondents simply accepted this as an innate truth, rather than reasoning it through with specific rational arguments

“Very important, because again, going back to what we first said, you know, when you get changes that you want, or keep things as they are, if you like that.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Respondents were asked to explain what they understood by the term ‘democracy’. Their definitions fell into two broad categories: voting / elections; and freedom.
- Some took the literal approach, and focussed on the mechanics of voting. Words elicited included ‘voting’, ‘MPs’, ‘politics’ and ‘one man, one vote’. It was apparent that participants were mainly referring to General Elections rather than those for local councils.
- Others focussed on freedom of choice and freedom of speech. Their definitions included:

“You’ve got freedom of movement, freedom of speech” / “Equality” / “Equal rights” / “Fair play” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Men)

“Innocent until proven guilty” / “Fairness” / “Choice” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Women)

“Justice” / “Freedom of speech” / “Workers’ rights” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Men)

- A few found the term unfamiliar and difficult to define

“I’ve never heard of that word.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- The two core arguments in favour of voting were interlinked and were often expressed together. The first of these was the belief that, if you were privileged enough to live in a democracy, then you had a responsibility to contribute to that democracy by voting

“I think we’re very lucky to be able to do it because if you saw all those things on television not long ago, in Africa, where people couldn’t even get in to vote and they were queuing for days. We’re very lucky that we can just vote.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I think really to keep a democracy, it’s vital that you vote.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- The second core argument was that if you opt out of the responsibility of voting, then you forfeit the right to complain about the decisions that are made by the elected representatives

“Because you can’t complain if you have a right to exercise your vote and you do not. You chose not to do it. Say for the sake of argument, you were dissatisfied with the state of things. You had the right to change it a year or two before. You cannot complain that nothing has been done.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“You can’t complain if you don’t cast your vote. I don’t think you’ve any right to voice an opinion if you’re not prepared to go out and vote.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“Basically, we all agree that if you don’t vote you have absolutely no right to criticise the Government, no rights to whinge and moan. The only way that you can change things is to vote.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Well, when they had the chance to put their votes forward, and they didn’t do it, as you said, they have the cheek afterwards to criticise the government when they already had the chance to put the other side in, or which other side they vote for.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Reasons for voting that came through at much lower levels included:
 - it was something that they had always done and there was no compelling reason to stop

“Mainly because we were brought up to do it. We were the generation that was brought up to vote. It was considered something that you did.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- the suspicion that, while it was unlikely, you never knew when your vote would be the one that determined the final result.

“Yours could be the last vote. Yours could count.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

4.5 Arguments Justifying Non-Participation

- Underlying many of the comments about participation was a widespread feeling of disillusionment with, and detachment from, the current democratic system. This was present in all discussions, although it varied from being quite muted in the most engaged groups to being very pronounced in the groups that were most unengaged.
- Many respondents felt that they had become less interested in politics and participation in recent years and considered this to be a widespread phenomenon. As will be discussed in a later section, declining participation was clearly seen as a problem that needs to be addressed.
- The reasons for this disillusionment clustered into a number of recurrent themes:

- a feeling that politicians have become detached from the wishes of ‘ordinary’ people

“I think we should all be allowed to have our say in how the country is run, but at the moment, we don’t seem to have anything to do with it.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- a feeling that the only time politicians are interested in people’s views is at election time

“You know, people are getting so disillusioned by voting these different governments in and all the big promises once they are in, and once they have your votes, once they are back into the

cushy job in Parliament, they don't want to know you.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

“It's the only time you are going to see them is when they want your vote. Then they wonder why you are quite abrupt with them and don't want to talk to them because if that is the only time they are going to come round then they can sod off basically. I'm not going to stand at the door and they say, 'what's your issues?' Well, they've had all year to address those issues.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- concerns that promises will not be kept, often backed up by examples from the past. These might be promises made at meetings with an MP or councillor, or promises made during election campaigns

“I've been to MPs about various things and you feel as though they're smiling sweetly at you and saying, 'Oh yes, we'll see into this' ... you have a feeling in your head, they're not going to do a damned thing about it.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“But why I voted in the big one that time because I wanted Conservative out and Labour in and now that's happened there's no change, nothings happened. If you aren't making your way with the big votes you think why bother with the smaller votes.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I used to live not far from the BNRR, and it was in its early days of being designed. And I got very much involved with the resident's association and went to see Norman Fowler who was our MP who sat there saying, 'yes of course I'll bring this up, I'll do this, that and the other.' They did sweet bugger all about it at the end of the day and his view was publicly totally opposed to what he told me he was gonna say.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Just recently, I must admit that I always maintain that I don't hold strong political views, I have got to the stage now where I think they are all a load of lying gentlemen and ladies! And I have been told that it is a strong political view when it comes up in discussion. But no, I just felt disillusioned in the past, and I think as every next election comes up, I probably get more and more disillusioned with the whole thing. It all seems that they all set out these marvellous proposals, and great agendas. And when it actually comes down to the nitty gritty, yes, I am sure that everybody would like everything done that they have mentioned, but practically you are talking an impossibility.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- suspicions that people in power are much less likely to heed the views of individuals than those of powerful and wealthy lobby groups

“Democracy means it depends what class you are in to what you get. If I was a millionaire, there is a different democracy for me, isn’t there.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“I know you can't beat the system. You tend to get browbeaten into it...

...You can have little digs at it. You can't beat it because they just close ranks. They won't talk to you so then you can't do anything.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Men)

- similarly, a feeling that the views of local MPs and councillors are likely to be overwhelmed by those of the wider party / Parliament / council whom they are pressured into supporting

“Yes, we vote an MP in, he should do what we all want him to do, but they don’t, they just toe the party line. So really, we’re all starting to feel a bit naffed off with this.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“The bigger people make the promises but the little people like the local MPs who you can speak to and you can like talk to them, they try to do stuff for you. But at the end of the day when it all boils down to it, they can’t get through to the bigger ones like.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“Going back to what we were saying originally ... he’s only gonna toe the party line and it doesn’t matter how many e-mails or protests you do.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“It was a meeting with the council, right, and all these people were around, and they came up with who is voting for Mr X? So everybody else looked around at this guy, and he shook his head. So another name came up and he nodded ‘yes’. All hands went up, one man was running the show. You have got small cliques that control a lot of people.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- the view that politicians are self-serving or in other ways, present poor role models

“Most MPs, probably 90%, are old crooks. They're all in it for their own good. They're all there for their own benefit otherwise they wouldn't be there.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

We've just had twenty or thirty years of people who I think are just in it to line their own pockets.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“If politicians stopped lying, behaving themselves and giving us proper role models.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- certainly, politicians are not ‘people like me’, a view most prevalent in the minority ethnic groups, but also present on occasions amongst the general public

“I think we need minorities in government. We cannot have representatives of colour, so what is the point.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Not being prejudiced or anything, but in Oldham you find that Asians are just running everything now.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Often these comments appeared to be coloured by a degree of nostalgia. Many firmly believe that it used to be easier for people to participate in the system and to have their views heard. Similarly, most older respondents felt that politicians used to make more of an effort to stay in contact with their constituents by appearing at local meetings and canvassing door to door

“But don't you find they don't tend to come forward like they used to years ago? All of a sudden, I've never heard of him before and all of a sudden he's your candidate. I was a young Conservative. I was so keen on politics when I was in my 20s and members of the Conservative Party used to go to social dos and all this business and you knew personalities. But you could look at this and you don't even know what candidate is for what party.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“The local MPs and things, they used to come round and they used to put letters through your door and things and say, ‘We'll do this, we'll do that’. You think, ‘Right okay, we'll vote them in’. You never see it done.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- In many cases, this feeling of disillusionment could also be interpreted as apathy. In other words, participants felt that the actions of politicians did not reflect the wishes of the general public, but they were often sufficiently disengaged that they had only a vague idea of what action politicians had actually taken.
- With respect to voting specifically, respondents often expressed the fairly rational belief that their one vote was unlikely to decide the outcome of an election (i.e. if they had chosen not to vote, then the result would not have been different).
- While it is highly unlikely that their one vote would actually determine the outcome, there was evidence of what might be termed 'quasi-rational' voting. Respondents felt that they would be much more likely to vote in an electorate that was marginal, and much less likely to vote in a seat that was safe. A substantial proportion of non-voters reported that they lived in seats that had not changed hands for many years

"I think because of the political system in the country sometimes your vote doesn't count. If say, you believe in Labour and you live in a Conservative constituency. If you vote Labour the Conservatives win. You might as well not have bothered."
(Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

"We're a very strong Tory constituency and it would not matter a lot that a lot didn't vote, they'd still get in. That's the problem you've got is this apathy, this lack of commitment to say we've got to get off our butts to vote because you get strong areas and strongholds and people do sit back and say well we're gonna get in anyway..."

...What you're saying is why fight a battle you're gonna lose in effect...

...This is what I'm saying why get off your butt if you're gonna win?" (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Men)

- The last major strands of this argument were that there was little difference between the political parties, and that the sorts of policies that the respondents wanted were not being put forward by parties that had a realistic chance of winning

“Labour are trying to be like Conservatives and the Conservatives are trying to be like Labour. Labour is trying to get Conservatives’ votes and the Conservatives are trying to get Labour’s votes.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I think we are all about the same sort of age and when I left school it was a Conservative government and when I started school it was a Conservative government and when I left it was a Conservative government and the government we’ve got now is, you know, what’s the bloody difference?” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“It’s like the last local elections – it’s like the BNP were fighting to get in in Oldham, and you would go to the local polling station and there were loads of people outside with banners, VOTE BNP. But they were all lads with skinheads and things like that. And I think a lot of people would go for something like the BNP but seeing people like that outside, puts you off ... They’re forcing you in to vote something else then, even though you want BNP.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I have certain issues I’m sure some parties don’t address and that’s another reason why I didn’t vote because there are certain things that I don’t think any of them are doing anything about.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Finally, several argued that an essential element of freedom of voting was the freedom to choose not to vote

“How can there be a full democracy if the government demand that you vote?...”

...They are taking part of the democracy away from you.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Men)

4.6 The Issue Spectrum

- Generally speaking, when respondents were asked to nominate an issue that they felt strongly about, they were likely to mention either narrow, localised problems, or broad, vaguely defined issues affecting the nation as a whole.
- In the first category were issues such as drugs on the local estate, street rubbish, or helping a friend or family member with an immigration application. Planning enquiries and concerns such as the expansion of Heathrow Airport

and the new road to the North of Birmingham were also shared concerns in certain groups.

- The second category included factors such as ‘crime’, ‘transport’ and ‘health care’, with little consistency in specific elements within these broad definitions. Overall, the range of issues mentioned was very varied, with none that was particularly dominant.
- The situation in Iraq came up on numerous occasions, mainly as an example of an issue many people felt concerned about, and on which, there had, to date, been little public consultation. This was not discussed fully however to determine the extent to which people felt there should be such a debate.
- Where respondents had actually made an effort to express their views on an issue (often by writing to an MP), this was frequently on an issue that directly affected them and their family

“I was a treasurer of the local residents’ association...

...What motivated you to get involved in that?...

...Well, nobody else would go on it and I’ve been on it for 10 years and I can’t get off. It was when this BNRR was first mooted and the thing was 300 yards opposite my house in ... So all the residents formed an association to fight this and we went to court, we went to this and that and we still did no good. They’ve only got to put it the other side of the A38 and it doesn’t affect any houses and this way it affects about 120 people. I’ve come to terms with the fact that I’ll just enjoy my compensation when it comes.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Only a few people had become involved in an issue in which they had only an altruistic interest
 - one Southampton respondent had participated in the Countryside Alliance march, saying that he had done so more to support his friends and show strength in numbers than out of a passionate belief in the issue

“I went up there and just carried a banner, because some people I know at work and they do go out hunting and they are

quite good friends and they have got a livelihood and they would even lose their homes...

...What impact do you think it had?...

...What motivated us? It was all in the papers, it was like a big spread in the papers on the Monday, all front pages where people marched. And in some ways if people band together, even small people, band together in a big way, they can make a difference. The trouble is most people are too set in what they want to do, if it affects their life they are not really interested... What impact has one person got compared to 500? 500 stops traffic. I was helping just by being one person, and the more people that do that...

...How strongly did you feel about the issue?...

...I didn't really feel strongly about it at all, but there's people that, my friends that do feel, it's their livelihood." (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- a young Birmingham resident who had never voted said that he might sign a petition in order to recognise the effort that someone else had put in. His use of the words "someone my level" illustrates the distance this person saw between himself and decision-makers

"Someone my level has gone out of their way to do something to make a difference, so I've got to support them." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Several participants similarly said that the reason that they had not become involved in the past was that they had not been faced with an issue that directly affected them

"Because I'm not directly involved, it's not affecting me personally, I suppose that's what happens in life. It takes something that's going to affect them personally for people to get up and decide to do something." (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

"I think we're quite an established country so the general way that we live is not bad it's just certain issues that we have problems with. So we're too busy looking around so we don't have time to worry about the way the country is run, it's not falling into complete disrepair, there's just little things that I don't

think are at all important enough.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

4.7 Increasing Participation

- Most respondents recognised that, in theory at least, more people should participate in the democratic process. They could appreciate, from the arguments that had been put forward about the pros and cons of participation, that if they wanted the situation to change, then everyone had to take part more actively. If everyone adopted an apathetic stance, then this could have negative results

“True apathy, it doesn’t affect you. There’s a gang of blokes, we all sounded off about this new road, nobody wanted it but there’s only half of us done anything about it. It’s divided apathy, divide and conquer.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“What we’re saying is the apathy side of it, I think political parties ought to be very, very worried by this tremendous apathy that they’re getting ‘cause it’s showing that people really can’t be bothered or don’t care and that’s dreadful ‘cause it means you’re not reaching those people.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Several identified a link between apathy at national level and at a very local level

“On a smaller scale, like if you are on the committee now, like both of us are a member of a football club, and you know there is about 1700 members there, and I have been on the committee and you are getting slagged off, people are always slagging you off, where the people – they won’t go on the committee themselves, they won’t go to the AGM’s, and you know, they won’t turn up to watch, and yet they are slagging the committee off and they are trying to do their best...”

...The biggest mouths...

...Well it is usually the ones that didn’t turn up to the AGM or the Annual, whatever the monthly meetings, they are the ones that are objecting to whatever issues they have had.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Men)

“I am wondering whether people don’t look at the telephone book enough. Under the Southampton City Council, there is dozens and dozens of lists, and perhaps we don’t phone up and

make a complaint or ask for advice enough, I mean we say that we will do this, do that, but of that long list, I mean if you see the lights aren't working, there is a system for that, you just phone a number." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Several mentioned low turnout in elections as an increasingly common problem, as shown at the 2001 general election. Respondents felt that this undermined the legitimacy of the decisions made by the elected body. It therefore formed part of a never-ending spiral in which low turnout would mean that decisions would reflect the wishes of only the small percentage of the population who participated and would, in turn, make people more disillusioned, and so further discourage them from participating

"Did you watch the news the other night? They stopped people in Manchester and said, 'Who are these people?' And showed politicians. They had no idea, they didn't know anyone. Get to Eastenders, and they know them all! It's frightening because they've no concept." (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"How can there be a democracy when half of the people don't bother voting?" (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Non-voting and non-participation were seen as being particularly prevalent amongst young people

"Did you see in the paper, they couldn't even identify Tony Blair? They stopped people in the streets and you know, and these were young people." (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

"My daughter couldn't wait to become voting age so she could vote. And at the age of 29 she's as disillusioned as me having been to University and had her grant cut half way through University and she's still now paying off the debt because of this and the fact she went to the University of London made it worse. I can remember she couldn't wait to become 18 to vote and she did vote, now it's not what she's took from me this is herself who's been out in the world, travelled a lot, lived in London for 6 or 7 years and wouldn't be interested now at all. So if they want to get the younger generation they're gonna have to do a lot of different things to what they have been doing." (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- It should be noted that there were a few who felt that it was unnecessary and impractical for everyone to have their say on every issue. These people defended the current system of elective democracy, where voters elect somebody to represent them and make decisions on their behalf

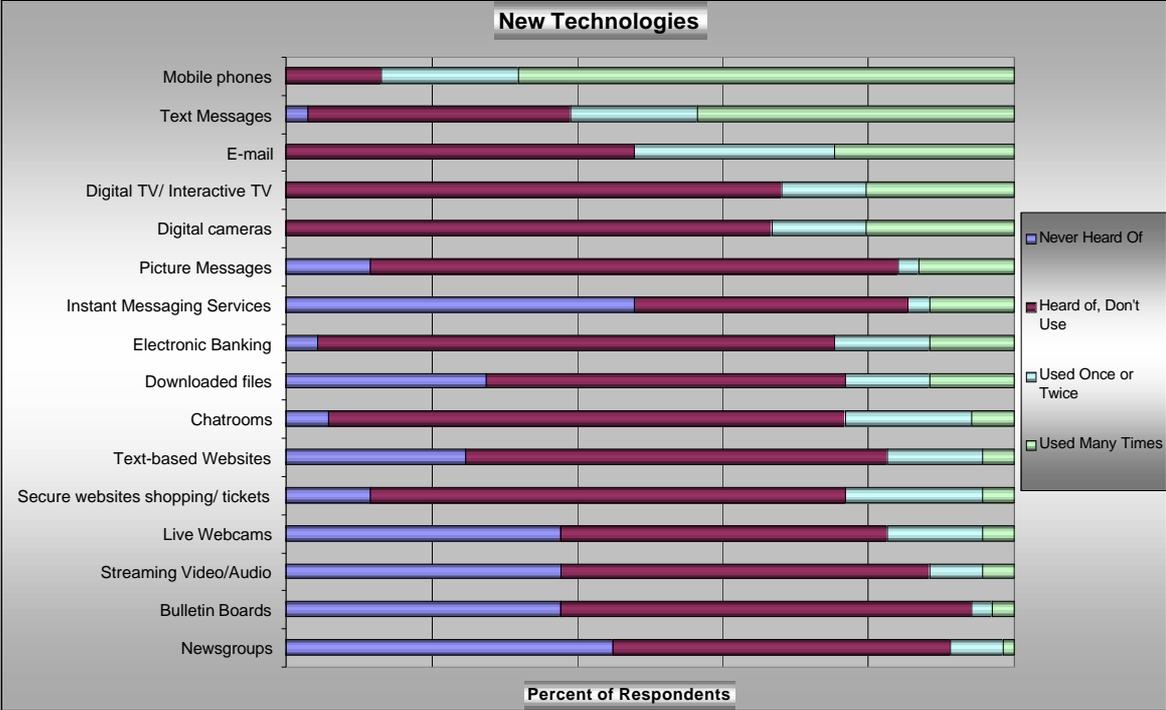
“If we’re the ordinary people, we expect the clever and the elected to know that, don’t we? Or the so-called elected. We don’t tell them what to do, we elect them and then we have to accept what they do. I think that’s the way it’s meant to be. You don’t elect somebody because they’re going to be a puppet for you.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“They’re paid to do a job. They should do it.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

5 New Technology

5.1 Use of New Technologies

- The chart below presents the results of an exercise included in the focus groups in which respondents were asked to indicate how much they had used specific technologies. **This is by no means a rigorous quantitative exercise and should not be treated as such.** In addition, the numbers in the chart below are from the nine general public groups only, and the sample size is very small (n=69). It does, however, give some indication of the groups' level of familiarity with technology.



- It should be noted that in a number of cases (especially 'text-based websites'), there seems to have been some confusion over the jargon, that is, respondents may have actually used the technology, but not recognised the term.

- Mobile phones and text messaging were clearly the technologies that respondents were most likely to have used. Just one in eight said that they had never used a mobile, with around two-thirds using one on a regular basis.
 - mobile phone use was one area where there was little difference between engaged respondents (who were recruited to be uncomfortable or inexperienced with using the internet) and those who were unengaged (who had a mix of positive and negative attitudes to the internet)
 - unengaged respondents were, however, more likely than their engaged counterparts to have used text messaging. Seven in ten participants in the unengaged groups had used text messaging, compared with four in ten in the engaged groups. While this can, in part, be explained by the younger profile of the unengaged sample, in the older groups too, those who were unengaged were more likely to use texting than those in the engaged groups. This suggests that an antipathy to the internet is often linked to a resistance to text messaging.
- As would be expected, there were substantial differences between the engaged and unengaged groups on internet-based technologies such as e-banking and downloading files. Less obvious differences included:
 - *Digital Cameras*: three in ten of unengaged respondents had used these many times, compared with less than one in ten of those in the engaged groups.
 - *Instant Messaging Services*: no engaged respondents had ever used these, compared with one in four unengaged participants.
- Even amongst the most avid users of technology, the internet was not used to any level of sophistication. By and large, most only used computers and the internet for specific tasks that they were confident they knew how to perform, and they were nervous about straying outside these boundaries

- while nineteen out of twenty had heard of e-banking, only one in eight used it on a regular basis

“I like the quickness of it all. Go up to the bank, get into the queue, there is always a queue, always a queue at the Abbey National anywhere, and I don’t know what I would do with the time I was saving when I wasn’t queuing, you know, but I would like something fast, for me.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- one in twenty had used shopping sites many times
- only one respondent said that they had used newsgroups many times

“Newsgroups, does that mean newspaper?” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

- similarly, only a few respondents used live webcams, streaming audio, chatrooms and bulletin boards

“What’s the difference between a bulletin board and a newsgroup and a chat room? Aren’t they all the same thing?” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- All respondents had heard of digital TV and one in three had actually used one

“I found it quite straightforward really. It’s like all the things are there and you just move your arrows to which one you want.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

5.2 Key Attitudinal Groups

5.2.1 Overview

- Respondents ranged from real **technophiles** to those who had had little involvement with new technologies. They broadly fell into four groups which we have characterised as follows:
 - Technophiles
 - Hesitant Users

- Rejecters
- Access Denied

5.2.2 *Technophiles*

- A small number of unengaged people used computers and the internet on a regular basis and liked doing so. These respondents were often relatively young, although there were a few older participants who used computers regularly

“It is the way forward. Look at years ago. Websites have been around for years. The army used to use them going back years and years and look what that’s done for businesses. Say if I’m a little geezer with a little stall selling little ornaments, go on the internet and you’ve got lots more people looking at your stuff to buy and I think it’s a good thing, I do.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I was looking yesterday, I’m going to New Zealand in a couple of months time. Got the name of the hotel, I jump on the Internet, find the web site for that hotel, I can look in individual rooms in that hotel, I can see the menu in that hotel and find all the prices. I can send them a message to say I’m arriving on so and so, can I have a room? It’s marvellous really.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I’ve got a big smiley face (in his drawing). There’s nothing complicated about it...”

...What do you particularly like?...

...Anything that’s around to make life easier. I haven’t found anything that’s particularly hard to use.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

“I don’t actually need it, but it is fun to e-mail. I love being able to e-mail and getting a response back immediately.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- As noted in the previous section, these people were far from experts. Rather, they were comfortable with using their computers for specific tasks and were reasonably keen to learn more. They were hesitant, however, to try new areas or tasks without some form of guidance or tuition

“No, but I think like one of these ladies said, she can do what she can do. And I can. And I don’t want to do any more. Fortunately, if it breaks down, I just ring him and say, ‘Something has happened, will you take over?’ And he just does it from his house. So I don’t have to know really, and I should do.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I can check my e-mail and do all that, download some music and I think I’m alright on the computer and that and then you go onto some technical stuff, try and do any programming or anything like that and that’s it, it’s all over.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“No, I’m actually learning at the moment, I’m learning to write letters and a few other bits and pieces, I’m just exploring, you know.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

5.2.3 Hesitant Users

- These people regarded new technologies as the way of the future but were not yet comfortable with using it and had only limited knowledge of how to do so.
- Some in this group felt forced to use it, grudgingly conceding that it was something that they had to learn but resenting the fact that they had to

“I’ve had enough of it. No privacy. You can’t get away from it. I remember when the computer came into a more daily use to cut down paperwork, reams and reams of paper, there was twice as much paper. In the supermarket, the computer’s not working, the scanners not working, it hasn’t been programmed in properly ... You can’t stop it, you can’t run away from it. I object to the way that your age group, my sons and daughters are brow beaten into everything. Newest mobile phone and this and that. I’m fed up with it. But it’s the constant upgrading of everything and it is intrusion.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I think when it started, I looked upon it as more of a necessary evil. And then you just kind of get used to it...”

...So the key word there was ‘evil’?...

...Yes. I am afraid so.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“It has been forced upon myself really, you know I have had to adapt.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Others genuinely wanted to use the new technology as they could see the potential benefits but had to rely on someone else to show them how

“It’s the way forward though, computers is.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I find it a bit difficult to learn, but once you’ve learnt it, I find it’s very good. It’s creative, you know.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

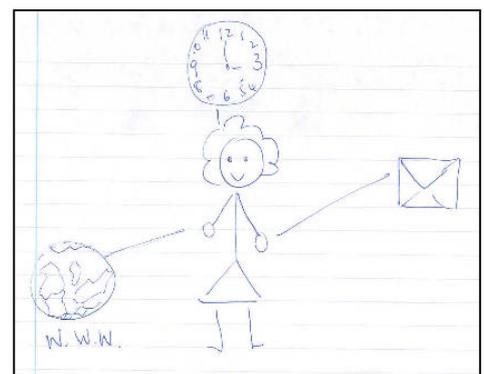
“The way we live our lives in the West, you’ve got to keep up if that’s what the job requires. You’ve got no choice really. It’s so popular, so many people use it, you’ve got no choice, you’ve got to.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

“I’ve got a computer at home. I’ve been lazy, I’m not on the internet because my daughter, who lives at home at the moment but she’ll be leaving in a month, has got a lap top so she’s done it. But eventually I do intend to go on the internet for myself as much as for my grandsons who stay with us a lot. She’s been living with us for 9 months and I just say, ‘find out this for me’ so it’s laziness but I intend to go on the internet before the end of the year I think.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Often these people cited the amount of time and effort that they felt that learning ICT would require. This psycho-drawing from Southampton illustrates this point

“I just haven’t got the time and energy to sit down and do it.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

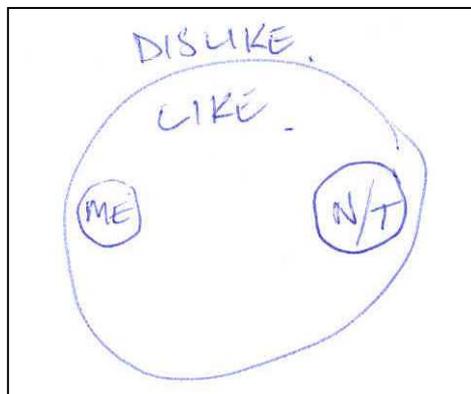
“I have to say, my husband is brilliant on computers. But then he went on a course. So I guess that has helped. At the time I wasn’t particularly interested, but he was thinking of retraining. But we have got over that by retiring so that has sorted that out, and I have to say, I resent the time that it takes. And I usually run out of patience, so I have drawn a bucket full of patience, which is absolutely lacking, and a clock, because the time just flies away. And I have to say, I am happier to let him come in, waste his time on it and then he sets it up, does all the downloading, and all the bits for me, and I go in and do the easy things. Because it is easy. I thought I was a patient person I have to say until I was introduced to the computer! And I am not



so patient as I thought I was. So, for me, I guess if I was really, really interested in it, I would have the patience, but perhaps underlying, I am thinking, 'why bother, he can do it'. And you can book tickets on line, that is nice and easy, much easier than going to the travel agent. Shopping even, isn't too bad, but it still takes time." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"You can then send ideas around the world. So it's time really that's stopping me going further." (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- This psycho-drawing and quotation from one of the Birmingham groups summarises the perspective of **hesitant users**



"I like everything that is available that new technology is about, if you like, and I'm beginning to kind of accept it and learn it but we're on different sides of the circle. I'm still learning and trying to get a little closer to it. I'm all for it but I just find that it's progressing quicker than it is. It's difficult to keep up with it." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

5.2.4 *Rejecters*

- Most of these respondents did not use the technology and had no intention of doing so. Some were strongly against the technology, believing that it signified 'much of what is wrong with the world'. One of these respondents' main concerns was that the new technology was impersonal and discouraged human contact. They envisaged scenarios where computer users only communicated with other people via e-mail and the internet, seeing this as a highly undesirable outcome

"It does destroy your family life you know... No-one talks, they are always on the bloody machine." (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

"I understand it but not as comfortable as old methods I was brought up with. I thought of something else actually and that's impersonal. If you send a letter, you're almost sending a bit of yourself, aren't you, your handwriting, they can almost see what

you're like, whereas an e-mail is just something that is totally impersonal and it's just there as, it's really a business type thing. If you want to write a letter to a friend you would do it hand written you wouldn't do an e-mail." (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

"Are we all going to be stuck in offices with headphones on, not being able to communicate with one another, with mouth pieces on and you know, or pressing buttons. I mean that, to me, is inhuman." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Others had no particular problem with the technology but had very little interest in using it. As distinct from the **Access Denied** group, these respondents could have used computers if they wanted to (sometimes having internet access at home) but they simply could not see a way that the new technology would become a significant part of their lives

"My husband's got a computer but I don't understand it. And he's always trying learning, you know, he's on the internet and things like that. I'm not really interested." (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

"I can't really be bothered, I know it sounds awful. Isn't that dreadful?" (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"Yes, that is fine, and you know, I had no problems with that. And we have got a computer at home, and I, every once in a blue moon, I do use it. My son was a computer programmer..."

...Why not use it more often, if you have got it there...if the facilities are there?...

...I have no need to, no need. I can shop online, that is the only need I have got for it and when I was looking for a dog. But other than that..." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"But since I've finished work which is 5 years ago, almost, I don't have a computer at home. That's why I left really because it was becoming too complicated." (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- A number of older respondents identified a generation gap in attitudes to technology and described their own sense of alienation from it

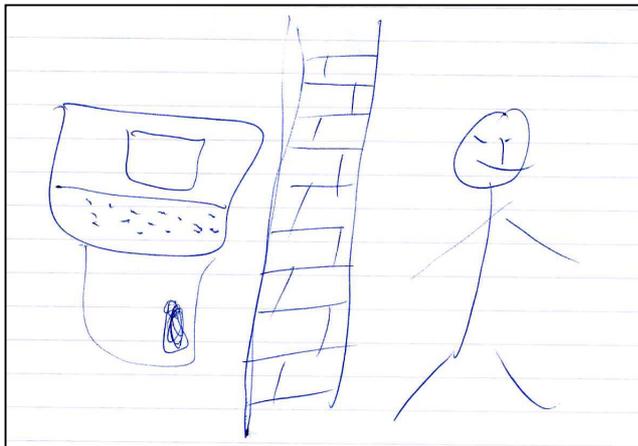
“When we were kids, we didn’t have television & radio. And all the family were sitting in front of the fire altogether at night... Now they come over and where is everybody? In the bedroom with the computers...”

*...It was a threat at one time to be sent to your bedroom!”
(North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Men)*

“Now if you talked to my son, now he’s 20 years of age he’s gonna tell you bullshit basically, he does everything by e-mail, be it personal or not. That’s the way he’s been brought up, everything is done on the computer. It’s a different generation, isn’t it?” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I’m from the older generation and haven’t got anything to do with it.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- One Manchester respondent’s psycho-drawing is shown below:



“That’s a computer and there’s a brick wall between us.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

5.2.5 Access Denied

- The people in this group felt that they were never likely to be able to use new technology, either because they lacked access to it (often because they were unable to afford it) or lacked the requisite knowledge

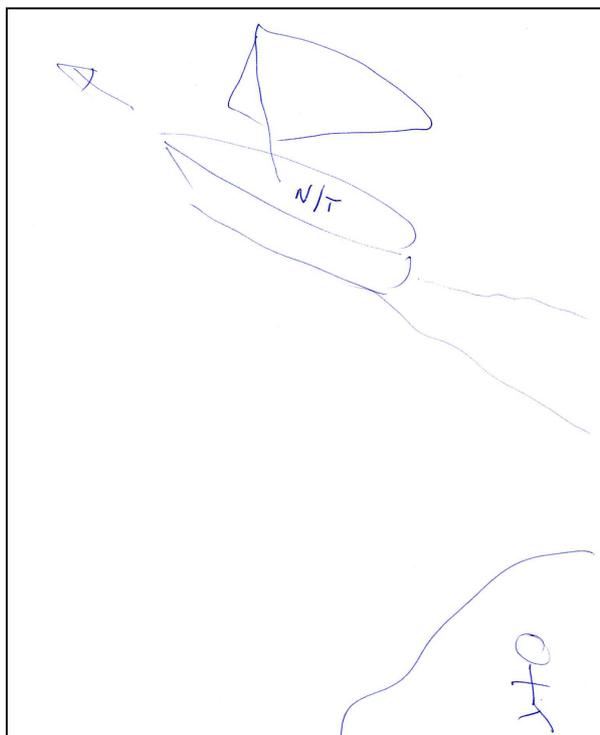
“I know, watching that mouse go round that computer like that, I would never, ever be able to do it” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Language came up as a significant barrier in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups (although some knew of people who regularly used websites in their particular language).

- In some cases, respondents regarded computers as much too expensive for their budgets yet owned other technology that would seem to cost at least as much (e.g. digital TV). The implication here is that they may have been able to afford a computer but regarded it as less important than other items

“The price of the computer now is atrocious.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

- This psycho-drawing from one of the Birmingham groups is by a respondent who did not use computers



“That’s me on this island and that’s new technology sailing away from me. It’s just getting away from me faster than I can get on top of it.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

5.3 Mobile Phones and Text Messaging

- An interesting observation coming out of the groups is that mobile phones seem to have moved into the mainstream and are no longer seen as being new technology. Level of use varied greatly from those who used them ‘all the time’, to many others who rarely did

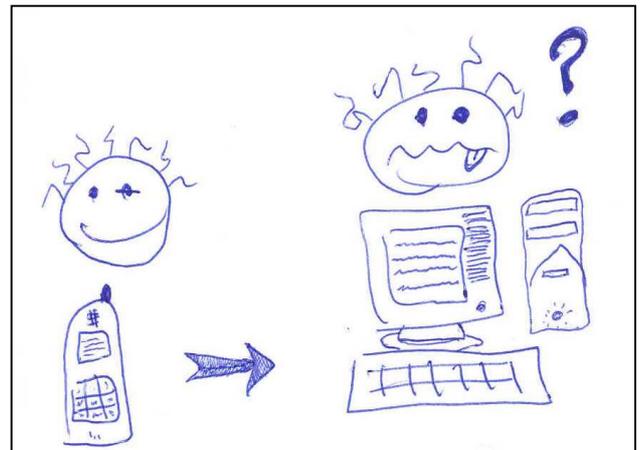
“I can’t get off my phone at all. Because I don’t live with my parents. I used to live with my parents. As soon as I got a house they can never get me because I’m on the phone 24 hours a day because my boyfriend lives in Germany, he’s stationed in Germany in the Army so I phone him all the time.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

“You can walk round with your phone. You can stay in touch everywhere you go nowadays. That’s a good thing. Emergencies.. Years ago, if you’ve just had an accident you used to have to run miles for a phone box. Now you can just go in your pocket and make the call.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Yes, I’ve got a mobile phone, my husband bought it for me at Christmas. And, do you know, I’ve only put a top up card on it about twice. I’m just at home, so I don’t need it. ..It’s just when I was pregnant, I was ill, so my husband, if I was doing school runs and things like that, so if I needed him, I could get hold of him. So for that reason and for the children, at school – if ever anything happens to them at school, we can always be got hold of, either through my mobile or through his. So we can always be contacted.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I keep it switched off, I want to conserve it!” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

- As illustrated by the psycho-drawing to the right, mobile phones have the advantage over computers and the internet of being essentially quite similar to technology that respondents have long been familiar with (i.e. landline telephones). As a result, learning how to use a mobile phone seems to be a much smaller step into the unknown than using a computer.



- Text messaging, on the other hand, is a little more unfamiliar. It was strongly seen as the domain of the young although the evidence in the groups suggested that at least a few of the older respondents were using it occasionally

“These days, it’s all text messages. They don’t even phone each other .. my daughter, 20 text messages coming in in half an hour.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I do use it but I’m not one of these whizzes at it, like the youngsters who sit there all day texting millions of people all the time.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- For ‘textophiles’, who were also often technophiles, texting was quick, efficient and convenient

“Well, I’m a driver like, I get a text with the job number and the site address and then I just get in the car, look at the text and go, you know what I mean. I’ve got all the information on the phone.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“In some places, you can’t phone, but you can text ... this incident [where someone was lost] on the mountain, the signal wasn’t good enough to phone, but he could text...”

...They wouldn’t be able to rescue me, because I couldn’t use it.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Men)

- Others, however, thought that it would be difficult to type in a text message and generally failed to see why sending a text would be superior to making a telephone call

“My niece does it like that with her thumb. And then she says, ‘Text someone’ and I’m like A, B, C. She said, ‘You just don’t spell it like that’. And I said, ‘Just leave it’.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

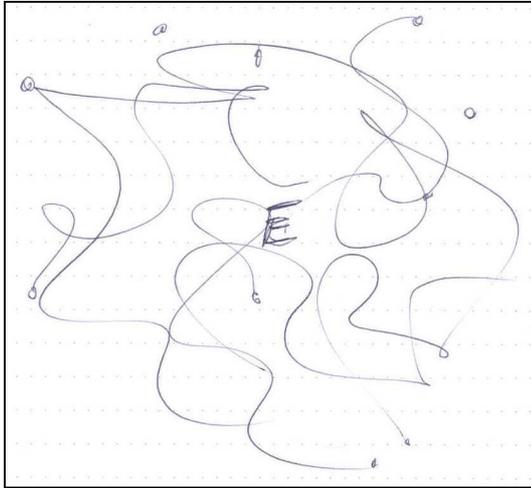
“I use the phone a lot and I can’t text, it’s quicker to phone people I find” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

5.4 Anxiety about Using Computers and the Internet: Common Themes

- In discussing respondents’ concerns about, and resistance to, using computers and in particular the internet, several recurrent themes emerged which seemed to have a significant influence on attitudes.

5.4.1 Concerns over Complexity

- One important theme was the belief that computers and the internet were unfamiliar and complicated. This will be discussed in greater detail below, but the psycho-drawing below illustrates the viewpoint of many respondents



“My E - is one mass of tangled wires but they do lead somewhere in the end. And very often it is very interesting if I can get somebody else to do it. I have a few experts in the house, and it can go off the fashion, and cooking, and you can read your horoscope, and you can take you in to a whole wide world, you can go anywhere and you have got pictures and places of Outer Mongolia, and it is wonderful. And really I have got to get there.”
(Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“The trouble with all this is that everything gets harder. The first video recorder you get, it was dead easy, you could just do this and do it. And then suddenly, by the time it comes now and you’re getting it, you don’t know how to make it work. I still can’t use the video.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- As noted earlier, many **technophiles** were not confident with using computers and the internet outside the tasks that they normally performed and this was largely because they felt that computers were unfamiliar and complicated, and that it would be easy to make irreversible mistakes

“I can go on the internet and work all that but some things they don’t half get me. I don’t understand it. I do things on the computer and somebody has to come and correct it after me because I’ve gone on to things or erased something or downloaded something on there six times and it’s taken up too much room or something like that, but the simple things I’m alright with.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“If you make a mistake, and you don’t know how to correct it, you can’t just unplug it and start again, you have got to get your way out of it by which time, you are sort of up the wall.”
(Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“You get frightened because you press the wrong button.”
(Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

5.4.2 Internet Security

- One of respondents’ deepest concerns regarding the internet was that of security. In some cases, these fears can be seen as rather irrational because they are founded on negative experiences with other electronic technologies

or incidents that respondents have read about. The extensive news coverage of internet fraud and the unwitting disclosure of personal details has, however, clearly had an impact

“But they do steal your numbers and use them again...

...They’re doing it all the time...

...That can be used from the garage or whatever. I had £900 taken out.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Women)

“I think it’s like, if you want to buy something, I think you’re just a bit wary of putting your details into something you can’t control. And so you know, you’re just a bit afraid that your number or your account will be used for something.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I’ve already been asked about this touch tone telephone banking. They phoned me up the other week about it. And he said he would give me a password and I could just phone a number, give my password and he could give me all my details on the phone. Was I interested? And I said, ‘Indeed I’m not!’” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- This response in part reflects the impression noted in the previous subsection that computers are unfamiliar, complicated and rather mysterious – you just cannot be certain what is going on and it could be something bad! There seems to be a large emotional component to peoples’ attitudes rather than one founded in direct evidence

“Hackers can get to you when you’re on line, hackers can get to you if your computer’s off and you’re not by your machine.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“People can get details about you at a touch of a button. They get your postcode and your name and they know everything about your life.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“Nearly all of your e-mails are read anyway every day. So nothing is anonymous, even on the computer.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“And then they have these viruses going around. There was a virus going around about obtaining your credit cards.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- By and large, while many non-users accepted its value as an information source and communication tool, the internet was seen as something of a ‘Wild West’ - people could put what they wanted on it, there was no effective policing of the system and it was frequently used for criminal activity

“I guess it’s quite easy for children to get on to it. And go into different areas that probably wouldn’t be safe for them to do so. So I don’t really understand it enough. That’s probably one of the reasons why I don’t have it.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

“Technology is coming out now to stop all that. Once you go onto the internet, it’s like a room full of computers. Every time you go on the internet, it goes to this room. Say if you say certain words when you type on the internet, it will go to a main system and it’s a big database and they’re seeing these words and say if you say ‘bum’ or ‘toes’ or something, it clicks on there so they know what you’re doing. It’s good because it stops what you’re doing...

...It didn’t stop Garry Glitter did it? And the policeman who were involved in the Jessica and Holly murder.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Men)

5.4.3 Chatrooms

- Chatrooms were, for many, the *bête noire* of the internet and one of the main causes of its poor reputation. While few respondents had used them, almost all had heard of them (or at least were familiar with the concept once it was explained a little), and most of what they had heard was negative

“Because most of the people that go in the chatroom from what I’ve seen, I’m not really interested in talking to. I don’t particularly want to go and speak with an Eastenders star personally.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Respondents recalled news reports about:
 - chatroom users becoming addicted and spending all their time in the chatroom rather than ‘getting on with their lives’

“For lonely people!” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I don’t agree with them. I think with that, it becomes addictive. people lose communication with people, very easily. If it was young people, very dangerous.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- chatrooms being used for activities that respondents considered to be immoral or clandestine (e.g. cybersex)

“I think the only time I have ever heard of chatrooms is for sex, I’ve never heard about any other issue, so everyone is assuming chatrooms equals perverts.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- users impersonating others in order to mislead (e.g. paedophiles)

“You need to stop kids getting messages from perverts” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“It’s the way it’s used I object to. Mystery people in chatrooms.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- other forms of inappropriate behaviour

“If you have a chatroom, you see my wife monitors one, she gets people come in and abuse it you know, and they can hide behind the internet, and you don’t even know who they are, and they come in and abuse people, so she can ban them. She is like a referee, the ombudsman. Sometimes they are swearing, and sometimes the sexual innuendoes and sometimes filthy language, and you don’t want that, you have kids on the internet.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- It should be noted, however, that a number of the most positive comments related to friends and relatives being able to talk instantly with people on the other side of the world

“I think getting through to China and Japan, which I do, that is so good, because they actually get in contact with us, and I don’t think they would write.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“My wife is always on the chatrooms. First thing in the morning, cornflakes, ding, ding, and you know, and then she goes to work, and then she is back again, ding!” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

5.5 Importance of 'Guides'

- Finally, the sheer frequency with which respondents made use of friends or family members to guide them through using computers and the internet warrants some detail on this phenomenon. From the quotes below, it can be seen how reliant people are on these perceived 'experts'

"One of my clients is an IT consultant. So he said to me 'if anything goes wrong, I'll do it'. I watch him doing it and thought, 'My God, I will never be able to do this, ever'. Obviously he does it really quick and it's, 'okay, you're alright now'. And he mends the computer." (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"If someone in the house is quite good at it and they are available, you wait until they come home and say 'could you do this for me please' and as long as they are doing that, you are getting away with it." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Many respondents who had computers at home had bought them in order to help in their children's education while others anticipated doing so when their children were older. For the most part, they had not been persuaded or tempted to become involved themselves but there was some evidence of children trying to introduce relatives to the wonders of computers

"It's not my computer, it's my daughter's computer." (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

"My niece comes in and says, 'Get out of the way' and she just does it all, and I say, 'Why do you do this?' and she says, 'It's no good showing you because you will never get it'." (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"Well, I have got my grandson to try and show me how to use it! I do try and make out that I am listening." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Others had been encouraged to learn more by the fact that they had a computer available and saw their children using it. Several reported that they had been motivated by a desire to keep up with, or at least not be embarrassed in front of, their children

“When you’ve got a 7 year old saying, ‘Go on mum, I’ll show you’. That’s why I don’t like learning a computer, it’s like, ‘I’ll show you mum, come on’. ‘No it’s alright, I can do this, thank you!’ I’m there thinking I’ve got a 7 year old and he’s using computers at school and he’s going to be coming home and asking ‘Mummy can you do this, can you do that?’ And it’s like ‘I don’t know, where do you switch it in?’ That’s why I’m getting used to using it because eventually it’s just going to be an everyday thing, every home is going to have one, like they have a TV and a music centre – they’re going to have a computer. And you’re just going to have to know what to do with it. And it’s like the banking now, it’s on the computer. My son’s in a football team, I have to look on the computer to see whether he’s playing now.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- It may be that the role of such ‘guides’ needs to be considered in respect to the help they can give in using the tools of e-democracy or in leading the way in terms of usage.

6 e-Democracy

6.1 Introduction

- In this section, we describe the overall response to e-democracy. We cover initial reactions when the outline of the concept was presented and then consider how these developed once respondents had the opportunity to discuss the specific channels through which it will be accessed.
- In sections 7 and 8, we look at the response to these individual mechanisms and in section 11, sum up the key issues that are coming out, in particular with respect to communicating about e-democracy.

6.2 Initial Impressions

6.2.1 Spontaneous Suggestions

- As the groups discussed possible methods for increasing participation, the possibility of e-participation and e-voting came up without prompting on several occasions. It should be noted, of course, that respondents had been asked several questions about their use of technology in the recruitment script and had completed the 'use of technologies' questionnaire before entering the group and so may have been 'tipped off' as to where the discussion was heading.
- Several respondents argued for increased use of what amounted to quasi-referenda on key issues and thought that this could be facilitated by using the internet

"There's no reason why they can't come back to the public via the internet really these days. I would have thought that was the easiest way because they just say, 'do you want to put your vote, yes or no.' Anybody can use the internet, you can get it free at any library..."

...I would have thought there was one or two issues every four or five years. You need that sort of a vote...

...Also, if the Government did go down those lines, they'd bring a lot more interest back into politics...

... Yes, but not everybody's got that facility...

...But everyone can go to the library. I was just trying to think of a cheap way of getting to the public quickly and efficiently. Say if they put one out every three months, an issue say like hunting, it would bring a lot more interest back into the politics of the country from the likes of us. If you've got an issue, you know that every 3 months there's going to be 2/3 issues if you tune into a channel or phone a free phone number." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Men)

- A few suggested that the internet might be used to make voting more convenient

"I think it will come before long where we'll be able to vote on your laptop, it'll happen over the next 5 or 10 years." (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

6.2.2 *First Response to the Outline of e-democracy*

- When the word, 'e-democracy', was first mentioned, participants generally assumed a much narrower definition of it than that which is actually proposed. When expressed in this context, for most participants:

- 'e' meant computers and the internet
- 'democracy' meant voting and elections
- consequently, 'e-democracy' was assumed to mean voting over the internet.

- As an introduction to the e-democracy proposals, respondents were read the following description:

"The rise of the internet, mobile phones and other forms of electronic communication has affected the way we communicate with each other a great deal. The Government is now looking at ways we might use this new technology to make it easier for people to get information about public issues and to have their say about them.

At election time that might mean having the option to vote using new methods. In between elections, you might be able to use electronic communications to let government know your own views or to work with others towards influencing decisions. If you wanted to, you would still be able to vote & participate in the same way you can now."

- Before hearing about the specific proposals, respondents' initial response was that e-democracy was tentatively a good idea. There was, however, much caution and no evidence of great enthusiasm

"It can only encourage those people to vote, those people who haven't got time to go to a polling station. Otherwise, if you can't be bothered to vote, if you don't think it's going to make any difference, what difference is it going to have letting them have it on the TV? If you don't want to vote, you won't vote. It's just a matter of convenience. It would be a good idea to register electronically because I've never registered to vote because I keep moving every time letters went round." (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

- The initial focus of the discussions was often the belief that it was an inevitable development. Whether respondents liked the idea or not, or whether or not they wanted any part of it, computer technologies were clearly seen as the way of the future and something that everyone would come to grasp eventually

"I think the future, for young people in the future, they will vote like that." (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"There is two things there, isn't there? Do you like it, do you want it, is it going to happen? It is going to happen and you would get used to it, and get on with it." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"Overall, it will happen, I can't see it happening tomorrow or next year, I see a lot of difficulties. If it takes ten years to come in it will come in by which time a load of old wrinklies will have died so you won't have to bother teaching them and all the kids coming out of school are absolutely bang up to date. They really are. So in 10 years time I would say there was no excuse for anybody illiterate or anything like that." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

"With this technology nowadays it is going to come eventually." (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

"It's not going to change the content of politics but the world is changing in technology so it's likely to happen, everything is going to be like this soon I reckon." (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

- By and large, respondents' first response was that e-democracy would find an audience but that they would not use it themselves. They felt that the main users would be people who were both very interested in politics and comfortable with using computers

"You'd get the odd few that do vote through this and go online...

...Yes, some people are quite into it all, aren't they?" (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Women)

"Younger people who are interested in politics would probably use that. If they weren't interested in politics, I don't know whether they would bother." (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

"This would be a good way if you were doing Politics at university, or something like that. They could go on and air their issues couldn't they, finding out what people think." (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- From their own perspective, unengaged respondents felt that they would only be motivated enough to participate in exceptional circumstances

"I guess it would make things a lot easier, wouldn't it but I'm never going to vote." (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

"If you had got a big issue affecting your life at that moment in time." (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Similarly, engaged respondents (who did not use the internet) stated that if they were motivated enough to want a say on a particular issue, then they would probably participate via conventional channels. In ordinary circumstances, however, they would not.
- Most felt that it would be good to have these services available in case they felt inclined to use them on some future occasion (although they saw this as unlikely in the short term).
- It became clear that there is a definite need to emphasise that the present methods of participation would still be available. On several occasions, respondents assumed that non-internet users would be excluded from participating, despite the inclusion of the final sentence of the synopsis contradicting this assumption

“Good idea as long as they can make sure it works because not everyone’s got mobile phones and I can’t see my mum agreeing to vote by text message.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

“Both my parents are 78 years old. They’re not going to get a mobile phone to vote.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“There might be elderly people who want to cast a vote, who haven’t got a mobile phone, who haven’t got a telephone perhaps, who haven’t got a computer, who haven’t got a digital TV.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I think it is outrageous. Whichever system they bring in, I hope it doesn’t discourage certain people from voting. Especially the older people because if it is too complicated, you could discourage people and that would be a bad thing.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

“The population of Britain is an ageing population. They’re assuming that everybody has got access to all this technology. Not everybody has. So how are they going to do it, you know. Are they going to train everybody to use it?” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

6.3 More Considered Response

6.3.1 Greater Definition Leads to More Positive Response

- There was a good deal more enthusiasm about the e-democracy proposals after the specific methods had been discussed, although reactions were still muted and mixed. Revealing the specific methods (particularly *Touch Tone Voting*, *Digital TV* and *Online Government Forums*) helped to broaden the definition of e-democracy beyond simply ‘voting over the internet’

“Go for it. Why not? Whether it will change my mind, I probably won’t vote anyway but that’s my opinion. If it makes life easier for people, why not?” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

“I think that if we have more people vote, that is a good thing. If it costs more, so be it. You need as many people to vote as possible.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Many felt that e-democracy would make it easier and more convenient to participate, and as a result, encourage those who did not currently participate to do so

“I think it's quite a good idea. I think it will encourage people who can't actually get to the voting stations to vote but I think like you said, there aren't that many people who want to vote that don't go. I don't think there are that many.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

“But if they made it more obvious and advertised it then it would get a lot of people back to into politics.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“It would be a hell of a lot more voting. You might get the right people in Parliament as well.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Older respondents often thought that it would be particularly appealing to young people

“It has to be teenagers. It is something to do with their schoolwork as well, isn't it?” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- A few of those who did not currently participate or vote said that they might use one of the methods simply out of curiosity or to 'give it a go'

“I probably would have a little nosy at it. I'd have a nosy if I was assured that it was secure.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

6.3.2 Perceived Impact on the 'Disillusioned'

- While respondents thought that e-democracy would help, they felt that its efficacy would be small because it would address the underlying disenchantment to only a limited extent.
- As noted in a previous section, even some of the participants who were highly engaged and participated regularly were nevertheless quite disillusioned with the democratic process. Many respondents felt that current non-voters would only be a little more likely to vote and / or participate if these initiatives were in place

“I think it will facilitate people who want to vote and don't have time to do it but I don't think it will encourage people who don't want to vote to vote. They're not going to do it just because they can do it easily.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

“If it's easier for you, then go for it, but personally I think it's whatever the policies are being discussed and proposed at the time, I would decide whether I was going to vote or not, how it affects you personally.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

“Unless they address the bigger political picture, the number of voters, regardless of how you can vote, is still going to continue to fall. And if there was something there, if they really came at you with something that you think would change things drastically, then I think a lot more people would vote, regardless of how you do it. If I felt strong enough I would go and vote.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“I don't think even young people would use it, because I think they're less inclined to vote than we are. I think they're totally disinterested and I don't think this is going to get them interested, to be honest. That's what I would be worried about.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- The perception that their vote or voice would still have negligible impact on the overall direction of policy was frequently and vehemently expressed and led to much cynicism

“I reckon the best way to get more people to vote is to stop telling lies and telling us things that we want to happen and that would get more people to vote than all this stuff. That's why a lot of people won't vote. Don't get me wrong, this will help some people who come in from work who can't be bothered to go out to the polling station so they'll just phone up or get on the computer and vote that way. But I reckon the biggest way you want to get more people to vote in Britain is by telling the truth and doing things when you've told us. Saying I'm going to get the hospital better - do it instead of saying it. I've heard it since I was younger. It's a joke.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“No, they're trying to make us feel that we've all got a say, and we haven't got a say at all, they do exactly what they want. They are trying to con us again.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“Bad idea. They are still not going to listen. They just want votes.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I think the biggest issue we've got here is nobody believes what we do matters.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I don’t think it’s methods of voting I think it’s that people are disillusioned that whatever people say or do makes no difference to their policies.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

6.3.3 *Primary Concerns*

- The main concerns relating to both e-participation and e-voting were **exclusion** and **security** (especially reliability and confidentiality). The way that these apply to e-participation and e-voting specifically, will be discussed in greater detail in the next two sections.

7 e-Participation

7.1 General Impressions

7.1.1 Overview

- There was muted, as opposed to overwhelming, interest in using the new methods for putting one's views across. Once again, the initial assumption was that e-participation meant computers and the internet, and it was apparent that the proposals would have greater appeal if a broader definition of e-participation were promoted.
- In the groups in which it was raised, there was sometimes greater support for the idea of a more structured form of participation, along the lines of the quasi-referendum brought up spontaneously, or a short questionnaire on a specific issue.

7.1.2 Perceived Users

- The general consensus was that the techniques would make participation easier but that they nevertheless were not aimed at 'people like me' (i.e. those who were not engaged with the political system, and those with negative attitudes to the internet)

*"This is supposed to be, I suppose, spreading democracy."
(Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)*

*"Not part of my life, I don't think. No really and truthfully, I wouldn't give it another thought. I like interaction."
(Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)*

- As a result of this observation, respondents were often convinced that the reliability of the results would be brought into question by the limited range of people participating. The groups believed that most of the people participating would be:
 - those who were seriously interested in politics (i.e. those who would be interested enough to spend their spare time

participating in political discussions - a rare breed from the perspective of most respondents)

“They’re politicians, they’re assuming that Joe Public out there is interested in every single thing that’s going on. And I don’t think they are.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“It’s for the people who bought John Major’s book. This is for these people, they’re really into politics and all of that.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“This is for like people who write to Oldham Chronicle about things, every week!” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“You would only really go on there if you had something to say or something to look for. You wouldn’t generally, I wouldn’t personally go on there to surf the bulletin board or whatever because it just doesn’t interest me but if I had something to say or something to look at then I would do it as a necessity, some sort of need. If I was sitting on the computer at home bored I wouldn’t log on to www.onlinegovernmentforum.com.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- those who were very comfortable with computers
- fanatics and radicals

“But if you say right you can go to a library and do it, then you are only going to get people who are going to do it if they are really fanatical about something. But if they are just casual blokes in the street, they are not going to be bothered” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- vested interests and lobby groups

“You would get all them fanatics going every single day. But ordinary people going about their own business wouldn’t.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- people who enjoy pretending to be other people and expressing opinions that they don’t in fact hold.

- Having said that, reasonable numbers thought that they might ‘have a go’ if an issue came up that they felt was important enough

“You would go if it was something that was really, really very important. You wouldn’t just go for the general things.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I would have a butchers.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“It’s nice to have other opinions. As much as I like to hear my own voice, it isn’t right all the time, I’m sure I’m not.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“You’ve got to feel really strongly about something haven’t you, about the issue, to make the effort to do this.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I don’t think anyone would tell lies because I think the people who’d go on this are actually going on to be serious because you’re not going to go on this to have a laugh, are you!” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

7.1.3 Proof of Impact

- Given the undercurrent of disillusionment and cynicism in many groups, it was not surprising that most respondents felt that it was critical that the results of the consultation process should impact on, and be seen to impact on, the overall direction of policy. There was some feeling that it was easier to ignore or ‘lose’ mail sent through the ether of the internet than the hard copy that is a letter

“I think it will come because people like that sort of thing, but I don’t think from a democracy point of view it would have bugged all impact. I think the impact whether writing a letter or sending an e-mail, I think the impact would be the same. They would just throw them in the bin, whether it be an electronic bin or a recycling bin it would be the same effect, that’s my opinion.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“You only want to get in touch with an MP if it’s going to do some good.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“That would be a bit easy to ignore, wouldn’t it?” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I think it might be good for local issues, I think that might be good where you could all put your thing in and you’ve got 24 hours to do it and as long as they had an independent person

*who can analyse the results of what come out fairly.”
(Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)*

- There is an inherent qualification in this, however. By and large, it seemed that the only way that respondents could be certain that the Government had listened to the consultation was if it actually changed policy to fit with the majority view. If there was no change, the groups' faith in politicians was sufficiently limited that most would assume that the consultation had been ignored, even in situations where the government had genuinely taken the results into account but considered them to be unwise or unworkable.

7.1.4 *Exclusion*

- For the most part, it was felt that widening the choice of methods for voting and participation was a good thing because it might encourage those who had problems with finding the time or gaining access to conventional methods to participate. There were, however, some concerns about exclusivity. These were based largely on the perception that more conventional methods would be given a lower status so that, for example, policy might be affected by submissions from internet users more than from those writing letters or visiting an MP's surgery.
- Respondents were asked to consider a scenario in which a Government policy was changed following discussions on an e-democracy service such as a website i.e. they were given evidence of their views being noted and acted upon. Reactions tended to be mildly positive, even amongst those who felt that they would be unlikely to use the methods themselves.
- A number thought that this would be a step in the right direction as it would indicate that the Government was making an effort to listen to the views of at least a section of the public

“It is working, people are putting their opinions, and something has happened and I would then feel very confident about it then, and I would think oh, I should get on there, and put my opinions on there.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“Well, I would feel that was democracy working with us. The public are able to influence the government. Because I mean we feel these days that we have no influence once they are there, they can do what they bloody like...”

... But at least if they were on this thing, and they were listening to you, and they changed your mind, well okay, great, they have listened for a change.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Men)

- Some among those not using the internet (in all groups) were suspicious, however, that the section of the public participating in e-democracy may not be representative of the entire population. As discussed above, respondents anticipated that it was likely that the only people that would use the service would be those who were comfortable with using computers and highly engaged with politics and it was therefore likely that such people were not representing ‘their’ viewpoint

“I wonder what sort of people do that?” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“It would just be the view of these few people. You can’t go on that.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I know that probably I wouldn’t have been one of them. And kind of left out of the running and thinking well hang on, it can’t just have been me that is sat at home and not logged on, so this really can’t be a true result.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“Well, I would just think it was a hard core of people who said what they thought. And the majority of us wouldn’t have said anything. So I wouldn’t like that.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“The only thing is, that down there the population is bigger a lot of people giving – you know we live up here totally different to what people do down there, we are behind with the wages and everything. And those people would speak over us. Because there is not as many of us up here, is there? We are the small minority part of the country. And it might be 99% of the people in this part of the country would be against it, and you know, we would be overwhelmed by the population of the other part of the country.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- While exclusion was a significant issue in general discussions about e-democracy, when faced with this scenario respondents were more likely to

raise the above concerns than state that they would be annoyed because they would be effectively prevented from participating. A few did raise this issue, however and often it was on grounds of being unable to afford to participate

“Unfair, because obviously those people that haven’t got a computer and haven’t got those facilities, can’t put their views across. It’s like a lot of things, ‘if you want to do this, go to www’ – you know, and I can’t do that. A lot of things now are like that...”

...That’s not fair, is it, because it’s put back into what you can afford. And the lower class people can’t afford the Internet and the computers and they’re not having their say, whereas these people who are on a lot of money. They’ve got the facility there, so they get the information, whereas I can’t afford it. So because I can’t afford it, I’m not allowed this information. No, it’s not right.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Women)

“It is also going to cost you money to do that, and that is another issue, isn’t it? Every time you are using your computer, it is costing you money.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

7.1.5 Security and Confidentiality

- These were prominent issues, with some respondents who currently felt unable to express their views openly (on issues such as drugs in the area in which they live) also expressing fears about expressing them on the internet. They suspected that others could access what they had said and this could have dangerous repercussions

“When you get things, especially to do with government, you can upset all sorts of people. When you’re talking on the internet, it’s easy for them to find out who you are and where you are. It’s easy to be traced. So if you start discussing things with certain people, you don’t know who you’re talking to.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

“But the point being, if you say something, you can walk away ... can’t you and say, ‘Well, I never said that’, but if you put it down on the computer, you have said it, here it is. I mean it’s more like Big Brother every day anyway. They could use it as ammunition. They will use it, they’ll save it.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

7.2 Specific Methods

7.2.1 Overview

- The groups clearly preferred the methods by which they could raise the issues that they felt strongly about with someone who was in a position to do something about them. The impression gained was that they wanted primarily to unload their problem to someone rather than spend time debating it more generally with strangers. Moreover, they often did not feel comfortable enough with the technology to want to ‘take on’ others who might be highly proficient

“Well, the second two [Online Government Forum and E-mail/Text Messaging] are the only two that I could see any point in doing because you’re going to get to an MP or a Government Minister or something whereas the others are just general public chit chat.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“It’s just a Bulletin Board. You just look at it, don’t you? It just tells you things that are going on. When you can speak to them, it’s even better. You can ask them then in detail what’s actually going on.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- As a result, *Online Government Forums* and *e-Mail / Text Messaging* were the most popular of the four options tested, with *Citizen-led Discussion Groups* and *Bulletin Boards* well behind.

7.2.2 Online Government Forums

- This was the most popular of the four options because it allowed participants to take up their issues directly with someone who might be able to deliver results

“I could put across individual points as opposed to voting for somebody who’s got a load of good points and a load of bad so it’s maybe a way of doing that.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I think it’s good because you can actually put a point over on a subject that you’re interested in, can’t you? You vote the people into office for running the country basically and taking all the decisions, doing all the decision-making but with that, you could

put your minor concerns over.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Compared with *e-Mail* and *Text-Messaging*, it had the advantage of presenting a reasonably novel approach in a way that people could easily understand. It was often seen as a more convenient version of attending MPs’ surgeries.
- The main drawbacks, however, were:
 - an unfamiliar concept based on a technique that only the most internet-savvy had used before (similar to chatrooms or instant messaging)
 - the system might prove so popular that it would get overloaded, and that users would not be able to ask their own questions because their MP (for example) was busy answering inquiries from others. Respondents felt that they would be reduced in this case to little more than an observer and that this defeated the purpose

“But wouldn’t you be in line with about 40 other people? You couldn’t have a one to one with that sort of thing...”

...Well yeah, then you’d never be able to have a chat...

...It wouldn’t work, you could listen but you’d hardly get a voice...

...Unless you pre-register your questions...

...He’s choosing what he wants to answer then, it doesn’t work.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Men)

“So if six people are trying to reply at the same time, I mean a lot of people could get in on this, couldn’t they? So how would you get a chance to have your say, because it might be jammed with other people?” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I can’t honestly believe that you would get through to an MP. Surely you’re going to have hundreds and hundreds of people trying to get through to him.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- that you could never be certain that the person answering the questions was really the person that they said they were

“How can you prove that it’s that person because like when someone is ringing you up, if you don’t like the bloke you can go ‘blah, blah’. So how do you know he ain’t giving you the run around and he’s got some mousch to do it?.. Because you don’t really know because it’s not, nothing like his voice is it? ..So really you wouldn’t know who you were really talking to and that’s the trouble with all the thing isn’t it. Like these chat rooms you don’t know really who you are talking to.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- that it would be easier for someone to get away with lying in print than face to face

“You wouldn’t be able to see his eyes lie, would you?” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“I also feel as though you’re being more convincing face to face.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I think it sounds good, but it is not quite the same as sitting down with somebody and asking questions, and you can see if they are trying to wheedle out of it.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“It can tell a pack of lies. It might be lies when you’re speaking to a mouth but it’s coming from a mouth so you tend to believe it more.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“The thing with the Government ministers being there as well like, would they tell you the truth any more than they would if you wrote a letter and they replied with like a load of brush-offs?” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

- Several could see this developing in the future into a form of video-conferencing. As noted previously, however, few had used webcams and most seemed to have little knowledge of how such a system would work (e.g. the technology that they would need to purchase in order to use it). This seemed related to the perception that videophones were the logical next step on from traditional telephones, and perhaps formed part of an almost ‘science fiction’ stereotype of the future

“Surely this type of photo imaging is gonna come in in the very near future where you’ll have this chat and see the person...”

...That'd be better...

...The only thing with that is it requires some very fast connections and all sorts ...

...We used to have video conference with the US 'cause it stopped us going over there and vice versa and that was a bit - the guy's mouth would move and then his head would move and it was a bit disjointed to see it but it worked quite well. Technology a few years ago was obviously not as good as it is now and that was quite good, that saved a huge amount of money." (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Men)

7.2.3 e-Mail and Text Messaging

- Many liked the idea of using email, with the main perceived positives being that it was:

- a logical progression from pen and paper
- comparatively simple to use since many already used it
- convenient to use and could be answered quickly

"I would like to speak to somebody face to face, but there again, you have got to get in a room, you know..."

...Absolutely, it has to be all set up, doesn't it...

...Oh yes, it is not, it is certainly not quick. Whereas yes, the computer is quick." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Women)

"Well, I think if you feel really strongly and you wanna get it out of your system you put the anger into the letter and you want him to get it straightaway, don't you?..."

...Strike while the iron is hot." (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Men)

"Give her an e-mail. I don't know if she'd return it though..."

...You'd actually send an email directly?...

...Get straight online, that's a good move." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- direct contact with someone who can make a difference

“Quite often when you do a phone call, you might say to a secretary, ‘I am not in’, and I am in, or whatever, but at least with a text you know he is definitely getting my message. He can’t dodge out, can he?” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- While *Text Messaging* was seen as a good idea, its inclusion did come as a surprise to many people as it did not require the use of a computer. A number of those who had already used text thought that this would be a good way to have one’s say. Others saw it as something that they could use if they felt so inclined but believed that they would prefer to use another method.
- As with other methods, some respondents suspected that e-mails and text messages might not end up reaching the person that they were intended for

“The text through the phone, he’d probably get his secretary to answer or something.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Especially with housing associations and places like that, you always have to keep note of when you sent it, how you sent it, and all the rest of it. So sending a text message is going to be quite a lot easier than a letter to get rid of.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I think if you e-mail your MP then you can just as good as write, it just means they can get rid of it quicker. It saves them actually having to physically open an envelope and throw it away, they can just press the button, can’t they?” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

7.2.4 Citizen-led Discussion Groups

- *Discussion Groups* were perceived as a form of chatroom and suffered from the association. Participants envisaged a situation where users would be able to impersonate others and where they could introduce inappropriate and irrelevant topics

“You would just end up in loads of rowing.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- Once again, it was seen as moderately complicated and something that only the experts and ‘political junkies’ would use. The groups therefore questioned

whether any decisions made because of the forums would be truly representative.

- Respondents also felt that it would be virtually impossible to be certain whether anyone in power was paying attention to the progress of the discussions. As a result, they believed that the *Citizen-led Discussion Group* would inevitably be an ineffective sounding board reflecting a narrow range of opinion

“Why would you want to? It doesn’t do any good, it just airs your own views for the sake of it.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“There’s no point in me talking. It might be very pleasant to talk to somebody down the road or in the middle of Aberdeen but I’m not going to gain anything am I, apart from venting my feelings.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Despite this negative reaction, there still were some advocates (although most of these still preferred *Online Government Forums*)

“Well, I would like to put my opinion over and hear what other people have got to say. And it is fast.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

7.2.5 *Bulletin Boards*

- The term ‘*Bulletin Board*’ was superficially familiar to many people in particular in relation to bulletin boards and noticeboards in workplaces. Several argued that these were an effective way of getting across information and collecting feedback

“You have them in factories and places of work. There are these notice boards where you can go up and pin your own, well you know, do they still use them now...”

...Yes, but I mean on the internet, you have boards that come up when you get news on what is happening for different things, and you know, I don’t use them myself but I know a lot about it, because my wife is good at it, you know....” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Men)

- *Internet Bulletin Boards*, however, were a much less familiar concept. As discussed above, many respondents had not heard of internet bulletin boards

and hardly any had used one. Even when prompted during the groups, few recalled having visited a bulletin board or guestbook on an internet site, and none said that they had made a submission to one. Most of those who had seen a guestbook said that they had not added to it because they had not felt sufficiently motivated.

- Given their understanding of a low-tech bulletin board, a few argued that it could be effective as a way of presenting new developments and information on the internet

“It's the first stage, isn't it? You can see what the Government is up to or your local MP's up to or what's in the pipeline and where we are with the airport expansion, etc, current situations. And if you want to take issue with any of those and you haven't received the right answer then you can get on the e-mailing and internet. It's just adding to the news. You can pick it up on the news like the fireman's decision to go on strike, a 6-day strike or whatever. That was announced at 4.30 on one day and you could probably get it before the news in some cases.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- As with *Citizen-led Discussion Groups*, the main line of criticism was that there was no way of guaranteeing that anyone important would be paying attention, and that the discussions would be likely to be unfocussed and dominated by a narrow range of contributors

“Can I just mention something on this bulletin board? What you're likely to get is these radical people who they're the ones gonna use it 'cause it's 20% make 80% of the noise, isn't it? It's like all these people that go on these marches and make the most noise. I think they're the people who would use that bulletin board to put across a point of view which isn't representative of the general view of the public.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“It's just a board, you can't speak to anyone, can you? You can't speak to a bulletin board.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Not members of the Government but just members of the public? So you are just putting your voice across on a topic, you are not trying to do nothing about it, you are just saying what you feel.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- One respondent argued that, if the boards were edited to remove off-topic and inappropriate contributions, then this risked being seen as censorship. He also felt that people would tend to use it to post their own viewpoint without looking at the range of other people's opinions

“They are only going to allow bulletins there to be posted that are relevant to them and what they are trying to achieve and it's bound to be censored. If you really vent your fury on a bulletin there is no way in the world they are going to put it on there. And you certainly are not going to go on there and read anyone else's, you are just going to say what you've got to say and then get off there, I reckon. You ain't going to sit there all night reading someone else's.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

8 e-Voting

8.1 General Impressions

8.1.1 Overview

- There was some initial resistance to the concept of e-voting. This often reflected the assumption that the term implied voting via the internet. As already noted, proposals such as voting by *Touch Tone Phone* and *Text Message* therefore generally came as a pleasant surprise and broadened e-voting's appeal considerably.
- Supporters believed that e-voting would make it more convenient to vote and was likely to encourage some people to vote who did not do so at the moment

"It would be a real plus for increasing the number of voters but I can see in time that the touch screen television will be the answer." (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Two respondents who had never voted stated that they would consider e-voting for its novelty

"I'd have a butchers, whether or not I'd try it or not, I don't know. I'd have a look at it just because, out of interest, I would want to see what it was about. Then it goes back to whether I would vote or not anyway..."

...Would you be more likely to do that than walk the five doors to the polling booth?...

...Well, I'd have a look even if I was voting or not. If I wasn't going to vote I'd still have a look to see what it was about just because it's there in front of me. It's in my house on the TV so I'd have a look but it would still be down to the fact of whether or not I voted. It wouldn't make me vote anymore than going down to the polling station. If I wanted to vote I'd vote no matter where it was. It would definitely make me more aware of voting. It would list all the issues and stuff and would make it more accessible to people." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- When illustrating why e-voting might be more convenient, the groups repeatedly used the example of inclement weather

“It would be more appealing, you wouldn’t have to be out in the cold and walking down to the polling station and queuing up.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“Say you come home from work and it was pouring down with rain, or you’re up to your knees in snow, and then if you do understand the digital – I would probably do the digital...”

...It is like having the booth as well. Lots of people you know, stop in supermarkets on the way home to pick up something for tea or something like that, and if the booth was there, they could vote there, rather than go home, have their tea and then trudge out again.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Participants could also see other circumstances under which e-voting would be more convenient

“I would say so because it would make it more easy for people to vote who have got a busy work schedule. Say like, most people work from eight until five, sometimes six, and by the time you’ve finished you can’t be arsed to go down to the polling station. You could drive past it and think, ‘oh bollocks, I ain’t getting out of the car.’ But if you go home and sit in front of the TV and you’d think, ‘oh, I can vote now’ and there you go, done. It’s ease isn’t it? That is all it boils down to, ease. Because the society we are in now, it’s all work all the time now, isn’t it really.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“Would that work for people who are abroad at the time or would you have to be in the UK to do it?...”

...Possibly...

...Right so if I was working in Peking I could quite happily vote for who I want.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“As somebody said, it would affect me on the local elections because obviously I wouldn’t bother if I was stuck for time to go down to the polling booths, but on the general I don’t think it would effect me at all, I would still go down there.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

8.1.2 Security and Confidentiality

- e-voting was the area where disquiet over the security of the internet and electronic media was most salient. Within the broad category of security, confidentiality was the primary focus

“Being honest, it’s things like voting and things like that – at the moment you have to have your address and your name, and you have to go to a specific place. Whereas if it was done through text messaging or on the internet and things like that, I mean they’re a lot more secure now, so anyone could just go on and send it in, do whatever they wanted. So I don’t think it’s very secure.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

“Well, from my point of view, it’s secrecy and security, they are my only two issues really. Technology-wise, from my point of view, I’ve got no problems with any of the ways, so those are my two concerns.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- In contrast to this lady’s confidence in the current system, some of the concern about e-voting seemed to be based on a perception that the current method of voting was not secure

“I think what puts me off voting is, it’s supposed to be private isn’t it, and it isn’t at all. I don’t know whether you’ve seen it. When you used to go, you have a book and this part has got lots of dots in with a number on, and it’s the same number. And I said to her, ‘How come you are writing my name on that? You will know how I’ve voted’. ‘No, no we don’t’. And a friend of mine, her son was 21 and he got a card from the Houses of Parliament from the Conservative Party. How did they know he voted for them? He was the only one in all of them. And after you vote, the guy comes round and says, ‘Thank you for voting for me’. And I said, ‘How do you know who I voted for?’ Your number is on that little slip.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I voted Liberal one year because I couldn’t think who to vote for, and she came the next morning, ‘Thank you very much for voting for us’. My God, ‘How do you know?’” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- While they recognised that providing a password would be necessary to vote, there was still a suspicion that it would be easy to link passwords to the votes cast. Many still argued that e-voting would be more likely to be traced

“The touch tone telephone one, alright, you’re getting a password, but they know your phone number. Your phone number comes with an address. They know your name and address then, don’t they?” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“But each piece of paper has got a serial number on it and they can track the serial number through the electoral register, but that’s not electronic and the thing that worries me about electronic things is that it’s just so easy to do it. Whereas if it, because every vote in the country is on a piece of paper and some bugger has got to sift through all the bits of paper and that is going to take him a long time to do it. Okay, they might end up with the same result at the end of the day but because...”

...But when you go into the polling station, your name is there anyway and your address...

... But if you vote on the telephone banking type thing, all they’ve got to do is just tap in your password, how did so and so vote? Oh it’s done. You will get some 12 year old nipper who will hack into it and it will be printed in the paper, you know.”
(Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Men)

- Suspicions over the reliability and corruptibility of the system were the second element of the security concerns. Some worried about how the votes would be counted and felt that it was more likely that mistakes would be made and that some votes may not be counted

“The computer can count things wrong. There would have to be a manual system to check it.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“If they lost the box, the black box, then they know about it, don’t they? If they lose ten thousand text messages, they wouldn’t know, would they? They would just say ten thousand people didn’t vote. But if a lot of black boxes went missing, someone would notice.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- Others thought that e-voting would make multiple voting more likely

“Our Asian friends have got three names in Oldham, and they all sign on, and they could register their vote three times couldn’t they? And get away with it. And some go back to Pakistan, but they will still have their vote.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“You can vote as many times as you want, nobody would know, would they?” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- Several argued that it would be easier to cast a vote on behalf of someone else (perhaps without their permission)

“To be assured that they’re not open to abuse and have it proven to me because I don’t believe. I just see those are open to abuse. You’d have to have a number code and a word code, otherwise there’s 60 million people. You’d just have to put in any name or any word, somebody’s bound to have picked it. Any surname or mother’s surname or maiden name. It would have to be quite secure.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Some people who don’t, aren’t bothered about voting, they could give their votes to other people, couldn’t they? ‘You can have it if you want it’.” (Greater Manchester, C2D, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

8.1.3 Exclusion

- The other major issue was whether those uncomfortable with the technology would be excluded from voting. If anything, this was more of an issue for e-voting than for e-participation. In order to manage the discussions, moderators often had to repeat the qualification that current methods would still be available

“They’re all good. The only comments I’ve got to make is I think you’ve still got to keep the same situation we’ve got at the moment with voting, be it the x or computer kiosk, because a lot of people haven’t got access to touch tone telephones, digital TV, mobile phones, internet. So you’re going to get a proportion of the population that will only be able to vote via a cross or they can upgrade that to a computer kiosk which is going to be straightforward. That’s the problem I think you will get.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Even when this fact was repeated, some were still not convinced. Because they saw e-democracy as inevitable, these people suspected that the introduction of these systems would be the ‘thin end of the wedge’

“Generally something like that, you would eventually lose a choice.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

8.1.4 Cost

- There were two aspects to the issue of the cost of the new system, firstly, the cost to the voter and secondly, the cost of setting up and running the system (part of which, it was suspected, might be passed on to the voter).

- The potential cost of casting one's vote came through as an important underlying issue. This was clearly a concern based mainly on principle rather than finances however. Participants believed that imposing any cost for voting, no matter how small, would discourage or even prevent some people from voting

"No, if you've got 12 pence left on your phone, who are you going to text – the polling station or whoever you're going out with that evening? You're not going to do it, are you?" (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

"Mine is 10p a text, would I have to pay 10p to vote?" (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

"I think they're all acceptable. Just looking down the list I think the first four cost money. Unless the Government give an incentive to potential voters and that's what they're not doing at the moment, a financial incentive, free calls, convenience calls what have you, it would have to be that. How it would work, I don't know. The only free one on there is the computer kiosk where it's not going to cost an individual to vote so I think all those would have to be free." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

"I would expect them to be free. They're asking you to vote." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Some people suspected that given the high cost of participating in some telephone and text based polls such as *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*, there was likely to be a charge for voting on top of the charges imposed by the phone company

"I'd do that email or texting if I was going to do it. It depends how much the texting would be because some of them are very high..."

...I would imagine it would either be free or a local call text...

...Some of them charge you 12p for your text messaging and then you get charged 25p on top of that for sending it." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- With respect to the cost of setting up e-voting systems, some thought that the costs would be likely to be much higher than the present system

“Because this technology must cost something from someone. You know, if they’re saying they’ve got no money now, how are they going to find the money to set something like this up, because the people that do it at the local schools, they’re all volunteers. They’re not actually getting paid anything. So now they want to spend more money into something that is unnecessary.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

“It’s just going to cost millions and millions and millions to bring this in. I can appreciate the fact that there is going to have to be something done because in say, 60 years time there’s going to be hardly anyone voting. There’s going to be like 2% of the population in this country voting and obviously something needs to be done about that...” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

- Others argued that any (reasonable) expense was worth it if it resulted in more people participating

“If it costs more, so be it. You need as many people to vote as possible.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

8.1.5 Loss of Excitement

- A few engaged respondents also feared that e-voting would lessen the ‘excitement’ of election day. These people mentioned either:

- the ritual of going down to the polling station

“It’s the only day you see neighbours as well, isn’t it?” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- election night broadcasts which they thought, for whatever reason, would be removed

“But I enjoy watching that on the telly. I’ll be watching it all hours of the morning.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“What would Peter Snow do when all this comes in? Look at all the people they employ to do that. They’re up all night, David Dimbleby and all those people like that.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- When trying to recruit unengaged people from Southern Asian communities for the research in more established areas (e.g. Coventry and Bradford), we

found that potential respondents often talked about going to the polling booth with a group of friends or family members, and enjoyed the sense of occasion.

8.2 Specific Methods

8.2.1 Overview

- The largest group of respondents thought that they would stick with voting by pen and paper at the polling station. People who preferred the existing method felt it was:
 - more tactile and tangible so that it would be less likely that they would make a mistake, easier to prove that they had voted and more likely that their vote would be counted

“I am very satisfied when I go into a booth and put that pencil mark on a piece of paper and stick it across. You know you’ve done something then. I think if you just send a text message, what’s to say that it’s arrived? That’s the same with if you send an e-mail or something, you think did it arrive and you think you’ve voted and you find out afterwards that you hadn’t voted.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“Personally, I wouldn’t vote by any other method than putting a cross on a piece of paper whether I post it in or go into a polling booth and do it. I think I am happy and secure that when I put a cross on a piece of paper, then I know the job is done. I think any other method, I just wouldn’t do it.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“Wouldn’t feel as if you’d voted though. You wouldn’t know if you had voted, whereas when you push it down, you know you’ve actually done it.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- more familiar and in keeping with tradition

“So you’re taking away the traditional. Being honest, when it’s your first turn at it, you just want to tick the box. That’s what everybody does, you know.” (Rural Gloucestershire, E, Family, Engaged, Woman)

“Yes, I mean it is tradition, we have done it for years and years, put a little cross on paper for years and years. So perhaps it has changed. It might be my age. It comes down to familiarity.”

We don't like change. (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"This time in my life, I would rather stick to the old traditional way." (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

"I might, you know, I would be pushed probably at the end of the day to do it. But I would rather stick to the old traditional – I think that personal touch, from my point of view, I know then that it is 99% secretive." (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Postal voting came up several times as a way of potentially increasing turnout

"I would do it on a postal vote. Like you all just get a bit of paper from the electoral register. They send you a polling card, why don't they just send you a thing where you can put the cross on it and seal it up and post it back again, why don't we all do that instead?" (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- However, a substantial proportion of respondents, including many of the unengaged, said that they would choose one of the new options. They were most likely to choose those that were already reasonably familiar and that would require the least effort and as a result, *Touch Tone Phones* and *Digital TV* were the most popular options of the five tested

"You've got to go with something most people have got and most people have got telephones. In 2006, if it's right, will everybody have a digital TV and it could be something we could look to in the future." (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- It should be noted that participants often wanted to put conditions on their support for a particular option. These were typically:

- if it was raining that day

"Telephone probably because it is there, available, and saves me going out. But if it was a fine day, then, you know, a piece of paper would probably be it. Go and have a chat around the polling booth." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- if it was late in the day

“Well, if it got to ten to nine and I hadn’t been up the road or whatever it was, then I would use the telephone and it might make me vote more.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- if it was simple to do.

8.2.2 *Touch Tone Phones*

- Respondents were often quite surprised to find *Touch Tone Phones* among the list of options for e-voting and a number of those who had been very negative about the concept suddenly turned around and became mildly positive.
- *Touch Tone Phones* were a concept that people were familiar with. Almost all had encountered Touch Tone systems many times in the past for such things as contacting utilities or for telephone banking

“That’s what I would use because it’s one I’ve used.” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

“I think most people are forced into this touch telephone now, it’s like everything, we know how to do it now.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- The groups therefore believed that they would find it easy to learn and use, and that they would be unlikely to make a mistake

“It saves trotting off round the local village hall. Most people know how to use a telephone, don’t they and it’s just listening to instructions...”

“...I think everybody’s phoned one. You have these bloody almighty switchboards where you have to press one for sales, press two for accounts or whatever, but I think we could all do that.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- The method was also seen as being very convenient as just about everyone had a phone in their house

“Perhaps the telephone one is good for the older generation, if they can’t get to the station or whatever, they choose the phone rather than the internet.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

“Nearly everybody has a phone, not everybody is on the internet.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Respondents felt that the system would have to be as simple as possible. Several spoke through gritted teeth about being forced to wade through endless touch tone menus before arriving at (hopefully) the right person

“Touch tone telephone, I could do that! ‘If you want this, press 1, if you want that – press 2! If you want to speak to the doctor personally, the line is engaged! Please hold! You’re next in the queue!” (Manchester, ABC1, Post-Family, Engaged, Woman)

- The potential to vote from any telephone was not immediately apparent, with a number assuming that they would only be able to vote from their home telephone. Some saw this as having potential for a loss of confidentiality

“If you’ve got a number, it then says where you live and everything else...”

...Your personal details...

...They know everything else about us.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Men)

8.2.3 *Digital TV*

- While all respondents claimed to have heard of *Digital TV* and were aware that it **could** be used interactively, many had only a vague idea of how this would work.
- In groups where hardly anyone knew anything about the interactive capabilities of the technology, there was little interest in voting this way.
- Where there was one respondent who was familiar with the technology, this person often acted as an advocate for its capabilities. He / she generally described the concept of being able to vote with the remote control whilst sitting in the lounge at home. Where an advocate was present, a substantial proportion of respondents switched to supporting the introduction of this method and claimed that they would choose to vote this way.

- The main reasons for this were simplicity (easy to understand) and convenience (do not have to purchase special technology, do not have to leave the house)

“Through digital TV probably yes. I would feel more comfortable in the living room with the family, you know the remote control going from one person to the other, as opposed to the internet and with all the rumours about hacking and everything.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“Well I’d use the TV. I am normally sitting in front of it, watching it anyway. You don’t need to get up, do you?” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

“Anything that makes it easier for people who can’t get out their house, in wheelchairs, to save the hassle, old people who can’t get down to the booth, it’s got to make it easier for them. If they can vote through their TV, most old people have got TVs, it will make it a lot easier won’t it? It will save dragging them out because they go round in a minibus, drag you out, ‘oh, we’ll take you to the polling station to vote’. Wouldn’t it make it easier for people who are ill and sick just to vote through the TV?” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

- Some concerns were voiced about privacy

“It sounds alright but thinking about that you usually vote in private and if you’ve got a digital TV and the family is there and you’re all going to vote, you’re privy to their voting. It usually comes up yes or no.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Some thought that access to the technology would be an issue

“It is okay if you can get a signal where you live. In Southampton, you can’t always get a signal, well, not a strong enough digital signal.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- The reasons why a few preferred *Digital TV* to the *internet* reflected the ‘fear of the unknown’ associated with the latter

“I prefer the TV to the internet. It’s more secure I think.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

8.2.4 Computer Kiosks

- These were seen as something of a 'halfway house' between traditional methods and true e-voting. Voters would be using new technology but would still have to leave the house to go to a polling booth (or wherever the machine was sited)

"You still have to go out, you have to physically do it, whether you put a thumb print on a screen or whatever." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- On the positive side, the technology proposed is reasonably familiar with most having come across touch-screen technology at museums, galleries and shopping malls. Most respondents therefore felt that they could use it without difficulty and some thought that, if they were at their polling booth, they might use a *Computer Kiosk* simply out of curiosity

"You would give it a go wouldn't you, first time you'd think, 'oh, I'll give that a go', it's new isn't it?" (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

"For the novelty I suppose, I would go for the computer. It would be a way to start, a way to get people thinking along those lines. We're thinking that way ahead but to get everybody thinking that way, they should make it side by side with the pen and paper and that would get people a bit more. It's like weighing your veg at Sainsbury. You just push the apple and it does it for you." (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- As they would still have to leave the house, however, many could not see the point of introducing such a system

"Why bother? Who is going to fund the cost of all the cost of all these computers! You are!" (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- They might still have to 'brave the wind and rain', so once they were at the polling booth, they might as well not challenge themselves and vote the traditional way

"That one's too similar isn't it? If you're going to walk in, there's no hardship to stick an x as push a button so that's almost the same thing isn't it, a kiosk to a voting station. It's just easier rather than double clicking and reading where you've got to

double click next or to click onto this or that.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Although the technology was familiar, respondents felt that some people would still be intimidated with or uncomfortable about using it.
- Potential benefits, such as the freedom to vote in a wider range of locations and at places other than traditional polling booths, did not come up without prompting.
- When the facility to choose where to vote was raised by the moderator, respondents regarded this as a definite step in the right direction. While it did not instantly make them hugely enthusiastic about *Kiosk* voting, it did provide an argument in the system’s favour

“This would be simpler. You walk into Tesco and there is a screen in front of you, you put in your code, and your election paper comes up.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

“You have to go to a specific school and ...but to have these kiosks all over, go where you want, if you are in town. Or if you were away on holiday and you were putting in your personal voting number. And you know, that machine has the technology to bring your local papers up. You would definitely get them all voting then.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Several argued that *Computer Kiosks* would create security and confidentiality issues, and that the passwords required to address these issues would add a layer of complexity to the system

“If it was just like, you go in and push a button and you don’t have to put any passwords in, so there is no way of tracing which button you pressed back to you, then I think I would go for that.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)

8.2.5 *Internet Voting*

- There was only limited support for *Internet Voting*, reflecting the lack of enthusiasm for, and expertise with, the medium.

- While respondents recognised it as similar to *Digital TV* and more visual than *Touch Tone Voting*, it still involved dealing with technology that many found challenging and nerve-wracking

“It depends if you are computer literate. It would be no good for me. I would have to use the paper. Unless by then I had learned to use a computer.” (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Several pointed out that voting in this way requires the person to have a computer, to go to it, to switch it on and log on to the site. This compares to *Touch Tone Phones* and *Digital TV*, where respondents believed that they could simply flick over to the correct channel with their remote control

“It takes longer to get your computer on, get online, blah, blah. Telephone is just there.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- It was in relation to this technology that respondents were most concerned about security.
- In one of the last groups, a respondent suggested the possibility of the e-voting website including hyperlinks to information on the election, such as candidate profiles and party policies. In this and other groups where it was raised, it was seen as a particularly good idea as it would help to clear the ‘fog’ that many felt about the candidates and the political system

“I was just thinking the internet can either be very good ‘cause you can have a picture of all the candidates on the screen, what their general principles are, where they live in the area and how long they’ve lived there, what the turnout was last election.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Well yes, as a candidate, I could walk in, bloody hell, and take a piece of paper and put it in the boxes. I would find it much easier if people were all on the internet and I could just give my little speech on the internet.” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

“I think that if you have got one in the house, then I would use it, you could always call somebody over to come and look at it!” (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Indeed, where some had access to the internet, this feature was instrumental in persuading them that they might opt for this method of voting

“You can get pictures, words, everything else onto it...but I think that’s the best all round one because you get everything on it. You can’t do that just on a telephone. You might get some pre-recorded message but how many people are going to sit there and listen to some message about some guy rattling on about a political party? It’s much more interesting, I think.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Firstly, I said the system should be very simple to use. If it’s anywhere near difficult, people aren’t gonna use it. I think it should show basic details of the candidate if it’s on a system like digital TV or the internet, and a photo. But certainly the details of the party, the main political aspirations, personal and general details ...a bit like what they bung through the post but you can instantly get it all for each candidate. That could make a difference.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

8.2.6 Text Messaging

- This option was seen as even more ‘out of the blue’ than *Touch Tone Voting*, and most thought that it was quite a good idea. Respondents still, however, generally saw it as not being aimed at ‘people like them’.
- Just as texting was often seen as the domain of the young, so, many thought that it would help motivate young people to vote. Indeed, respondents who thought they might vote in this way were often relatively young. These people thought that it was the most convenient of the five new options tested

“I would have no preference actually. In my current situation I would text because I’ve got a mobile phone. I haven’t got a direct line phone, I haven’t got the internet, I haven’t got digital TV so I would either text or walk down to the computer kiosk basically.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Out of these ones here I reckon text messaging would be the easiest one...”

...Why would texting be easier?...

...Because you’ve got your phone in your pocket. You don’t have to load your computer or wait for your computer to load.” (Birmingham, E, Family, Unengaged, Men)

“It would make me vote if I could do it by text message because I can never be bothered going into the building. I know it sounds lazy, but I can't.” (Swansea, C2D, Pre-Family, Unengaged)

- In many cases, *Text Message Voting* was seen as a good idea and something that they could consider using but most thought that they would instead choose another option

“It's okay but I think you're looking more at the younger generation, someone under 30.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- As with *Touch Tone Phones*, the groups generally assumed that they would have to vote from a specific phone.

9 Minority Ethnic Communities

9.1 Overview

- The research included respondents from five minority ethnic communities, all of whom were unengaged from the political process. The structure of this part of the sample was as follows:

1	Black Caribbean	Female, Family, C2DE
2	Black African	Male, Pre-family, C2DE
3	Bangladeshi	Female, Family, C2DE
4	Pakistani	Female, Pre-family, C2DE
5	Indian	Male, Post-family, C2DE

- The Black Caribbean women came across as the most integrated into general society of the five groups, with most having been born in the UK or having lived in the country for many years. Although there were some differences, their attitudes and experiences tended to be fairly close to those expressed in the general public groups.
- Black African respondents came across as somewhat less integrated, with some having only been in the UK for a few years. Some faced language difficulties although they were clearly less isolated than the three Asian groups.
- The Indian men had generally been in the UK since the early '60s or '70s, longer than a number of the Black Africans. Despite this, they felt less involved or interested in participating in wider issues, with the focus being on their local communities.
- The Pakistani women were a mix of those who had been born in the UK and those who had arrived in the UK within the last five years. This group was particularly insular, with language difficulties being a significant issue (even for one or two of those who were born in the UK). A couple felt that their husbands tended to 'hold them back' from participating more and some

expressed the view that their lives were restricted by their community's expectations of them as women.

- Bangladeshi women were the most isolated of the five groups, with language difficulties and gender again significant factors. They tended to live in areas with a high density of Bangladeshi residents and communication with the outside world seemed to be largely routed through community organisations/centres and their husbands. Many seemed to be shy and lack confidence, and their education levels were low.
- In terms of their attitudes towards participation, voting and technology, along with their response to e-democracy proposals, the gap between these ethnic minorities and the general public was largely one of degree, rather than a fundamental difference. Generally speaking, while each group faced specific issues relevant to their culture, the overall themes underlying these issues were broadly similar.

9.2 Participation

9.2.1 Relatively Engaged (Black Caribbean, Black African & Indian Respondents)

- The Caribbean women appeared to be the most knowledgeable about how to participate in the democratic process. They were often able to nominate a wide range of ways that people could participate in the system and there was some evidence of their own participation. A number claimed to have signed petitions, joined a union and voted in local and general elections (in the past). They appreciated that there were both local / micro ways of getting their voices heard and more macro ways – i.e. contacting people in power directly.
- The African men and the Indian men were also relatively aware of the range of ways of participating in the democratic process, arriving at similar lists to the Caribbean women. A minority of respondents in both of these groups had been involved in contacting local MPs and councillors on matters of immediate and personal interest such as problems with immigration.

“I had to write to my local MP to interfere [with the Home Office].” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

9.2.2 *Least Engaged (Bangladeshi & Pakistani Respondents)*

- The three Asian groups largely fell into the **disinterested** category of non-participants. In other words, they had no particular problem with the system, simply believing that it was not part of their lives.
- The lowest levels of participation were amongst the Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. Very few felt they had either cause to contact any political body/person in authority or the ability to communicate with them. The most traditional and least integrated respondents in these groups faced a number of barriers preventing greater participation:
 - lack of language skills
 - lack of awareness of whom they could go to
 - lack of confidence to approach people/organisations directly

“It’s fear, our fear that’s stopping us.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

 - being held back by their husbands and community because they are women

“The ladies should not go out of their houses. They are scared of sending their ladies [wives] and daughters to such things.” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“They keep you, they pull you back and keep you behind closed doors.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)
- The barriers identified above made these respondents particularly disadvantaged and disenfranchised.
- The only issues that they showed any real interest in were those that had a direct bearing on their lives and which they could justify to their husbands as legitimate cause to contact people in authority. These were to do with their housing (usually council) and, perhaps, the education of their children. One or two women had contacted their local councillor regarding specific and pressing housing problems e.g. housing needs due to a disability.

- A small number explicitly claimed that their husbands said that they did not need to vote and that they were actively discouraged from taking a more active role in the democratic process. For these women, the role of community organisations and workers were key in providing:
 - access to services
 - language and emotional support
 - a ‘safe’ place to socialise: women could justify to their families why they were going to these centres.

“Because they [Asian support workers] know our problems, they are of our culture, the language problems.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

9.2.3 *Increasing Participation*

- Most people, regardless of personal levels of participation and barriers experienced, felt that getting more people to participate in the democratic process was very important. As in the general public section, however, this tended to be a fairly knee-jerk response rather than something that was argued through in great detail.
- Those respondents who felt that they could participate but were not interested in doing so, thought that they might participate if they felt more trust in government and could be assured that they would be listened to. As noted in the general public section, this seems likely to be extremely difficult, if not virtually impossible

“If politicians stopped lying.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Several thought that they might have more trust and feel more involved if there were more people from minority ethnic communities in positions of power. This could provide a potent signal of the importance placed on the involvement of these communities

“I think we need minorities in Government. We cannot have representatives of colour, so what is the point?” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“If you had your own Asian speaking member speaking person in the Parliament or in the House of Commons.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- For those who faced barriers to participation (e.g. lack of confidence, language skills), the key issues were education, raising awareness (of the process of participation and associated benefits to them) and finding other ways to reach people like them. Some suggested that this could be done with the support of individuals and organisations that they are used to using to access/communicate with service providers and those in authority

“You need to get involved at the grass roots level.” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“You need to encourage discussion within the community, use Bengali influencers.” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

9.3 Voting

9.3.1 Current Frequency of Voting

- The groups contained a mix of those who had voted in the past but had stopped doing so, those who voted only on rare occasions, and those who had never voted at all.
- Most had not voted at the last general election although many had done so in 1997. In the same way as the general public, this reflected a belief that participation was more important at some elections than at others. The decision to vote in 1997 was largely driven by a desire to oust the Conservative Government and effect a change. Given that most respondents were Labour voters they had exercised their voting rights to bring a Labour Government into power

“To get the Conservatives out.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“The one where there was a change.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Before I did, yes. I wanted Labour to take over.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

- The 2001 election, on the other hand, was seen as a foregone conclusion and they did not need to vote to secure the result they wanted. In addition, many reported feeling disillusioned with the Government’s performance yet not finding a suitable alternative to vote for

“Tony Blair, I don’t like his leadership, so I didn’t vote.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I wasn’t going to vote Labour and there wasn’t any alternative to Labour.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Some had taken part in local council elections, with several having only voted at these elections. This contrasts with the finding amongst the general public whereby respondents were more likely to participate in general elections. This seemed to reflect the ethnic minorities’ greater focus on life in their local community

“I think it’s our own community as well...”

...The Government can listen to us if we are really strong, to present ourselves like, what problem we have and we together, otherwise who will listen to individuals, we are all individuals...

...It’s like saying you have to sort out your problems at home before you go out, do you know what I mean? So we, as Asians, we need to sort ourselves out in our community before we go and face the Government.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Women)

- With the exception of the Caribbean women, a few respondents in each group claimed to have never voted. The main reasons given for this were language difficulties, not being encouraged/advised to by partners, or the lack of importance attached to their personal contribution

“My husband never let me go.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“We don’t understand what we are voting for.” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“I don’t see any reason. I don’t see any importance.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Several Asian respondents expressed the view that some women simply followed their husbands’ voting patterns rather than it being a process in which they were actively involved.

9.3.2 *Arguments in Favour of Voting*

- Perhaps even more so than in the general public section of the research, respondents in the minority ethnic groups believed that voting was important. Voters and non-voters alike shared this belief. The key arguments were that:

- ‘If you don’t vote, you can’t complain’

“If we don’t vote, we deserve the Government we get. It’s down to us.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- democracy is about the will of the people, so one has a duty to vote
- effecting change requires collective participation

“We feel responsible deep down in our hearts that we should vote, because if we don’t vote, everything would be in a shambles. You can’t make any rules even within your own home if you didn’t discuss the matter, if you didn’t get together. If you didn’t have an assembly, you can’t go ahead, you know, you can’t make progress any more. We should do really but you know, I know, you get cheesed off.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

- the right to vote is a privilege (particularly relevant as many had lived under a non-democratic regime in the past)

“It’s important to vote, it’s your right to vote. You can express your views by voting, on the principles of the party you support, if you like its policy or something. That is the people’s Government, our Government.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

“It’s important to vote because we can.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“Back home, I remember someone coming to our houses, saying they’d pay us to vote and we took the money.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

9.3.3 Arguments Against Voting

- Many felt disillusioned with, and apathetic towards, participation and voting. The main threads of this argument were generally along the lines of those expressed by the general public:

- general apathy (voting is important, but it is not a priority)

“Last time I just couldn’t be bothered. It’s the same old continuation.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“We are too busy with everyday things.” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- a belief that their one vote was unlikely to make a difference to the final result

“Individually you are just a number.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

“I don’t cast my vote for anyone. I cast my vote for myself.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- a feeling that politicians have become isolated from voters and particularly, voters like them

“Who wants to listen to people like us?” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“We are aloof, we don’t get involved, we don’t believe we can effect change.” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“They won’t listen. They don’t listen.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

- disaffection with past performance of Government(s), often focussing on promises that are perceived to have been broken or not delivered on

“I think it’s a waste of time. You are putting these people into power and then, at the end of the day, there is nothing for you.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)
- some also mentioned practical barriers faced by all voters that could also reflect a degree of apathy (e.g. work commitments making it difficult to get to the polling booth).
- There were, however, some areas on which respondents in the ethnic groups placed more emphasis than those among the general public:
 - some Indian men felt that they were too old to participate and that the time for them to become involved had passed
 - a number felt that the elected representatives failed to represent people like them

“There is no point because they are men.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

“There is not people from different cultures who can understand us.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)
- Several expressed a view that, compared to those living in non-democratic countries, people like them living in the UK had little reason to complain. If they did vote, it would effectively be an indication of dissatisfaction with the status quo. This attitude was heard most clearly in the Black African group

“Because if you come from a different society where things are much worse. When you get to this country, you might have cause to complain but when you compare to where you came from, it is not worth it.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

9.4 New Technology

- As with the general public, while there were some technophiles, most had very little confidence in using new technology and used it rarely, if at all. Many expressed a great deal of fear of this new technology, citing a lack of knowledge, a lack of confidence and a belief that it was simply 'not for us'.
- The four categories identified in the general public section also held true amongst the minority ethnic groups although these respondents were comparatively more likely to fall into the **Access Denied** group. The general themes were similar:

- **Technophiles**

"I think the computer helps a lot, there are a lot of things you can do in your house using a computer." (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- **Hesitant Users**

"The world is going forward, we can't stay behind." (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"I think, once you get familiar, you can support them. It's quite frightening looking at a computer, especially if you're going to go on the internet and you don't really know where to start. You know what you want to look for. I suppose unless you try it, you don't really know." (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- **Rejectors**

"Confusing, difficult, the children know more than me, I do not know how to use in case it fizzes." (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"I think, in a way, I think we're going to be deprived of so much intelligence that we used before we used computers. I think it's going to be damaging to our basic skills like additions and minuses and all that." (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

– **Access Denied**

“It’s modern and very, very helpful in modern life. I think we are going to be deprived.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

“It feels scary.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

“They are not for us. The expense of buying and using technology.” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Awareness of new technologies was highest in the Caribbean and African groups, with the African men generally being the most likely to have used specific technologies. As in the general public section, respondents were most likely to have used mobile phones, digital TV and, to a lesser extent, digital cameras

“I think with the mobiles, especially when you’ve got children, when they’re at school, you’re not pinned to the house. You can go out and you can be contacted. With my mobile, I ring, receive calls, send a text and that’s it.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Caribbean women were generally aware of the range of technology researched in the groups except newsgroups, bulletin boards and instant messaging. Five had computers at home, with around half saying that these were primarily for their children’s use. Those who used computers did so in a limited way e.g. for e-mail and word processing rather than for internet surfing
- African men expressed the greatest level of confidence and ease with new technology. Some African men (mostly students or people employed in a clerical role) were confident in using it and had greater knowledge of the range of facilities available. Most were aware of almost all the items on the technology list, with a number frequently using text messaging and e-mail. A few had also used chatrooms, instant messaging or electronic banking.
- Apart from one or two women who were obviously comfortable with some of the technology, there was generally very little awareness or usage of technology amongst the three Asian groups.

- The Bangladeshi and Pakistani women had the lowest awareness of new technology. The younger respondents had commonly used e-mail and / or text messaging while a few of the older respondents had used digital television and digital cameras. Those who were students had access to computers at college. A few had home computers that were primarily used by their children or husbands.
- Indian men used little of this new technology. Only two had used digital cameras and few had access to computers except at the community centres they visited, where one or two were learning to use them. A few had computers at home but, once again, these were used by the children.
- Like the general public, respondents in the minority ethnic groups were often concerned about the security of these new technologies

“To do internet banking is unsafe. That is a valid point. There are other ways of banking that is unsafe as well. They can get hold of your money.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“People can get details about you at a touch of a button. They know everything about your life.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

9.5 e-Democracy

- A small number of respondents spontaneously mentioned the potential for new technology to make participation easier.
- Some were aware that the Government was keen to increase ways in which people could vote.
- When presented with the concept of e-democracy most people felt that it was a good idea and generally responded positively. Most felt, however, that it would have little impact on them personally, instead seeing it as aimed at younger generations and those already confident in using technology.
- The overall response was quite consistent across all groups. The groups with the least experience and ability to participate generally seemed to be

responding at a theoretical level and felt most removed from the concept. The inability to use the technology or have access to it remained a significant barrier for many.

- After discussing the proposals, the groups thought that e-democracy would:
 - demonstrate the Government’s commitment to reach more people and get more people involved

“I think it is an indication of the Government’s wish for participation in government and decision making. I think it is positive.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)
 - make it easier and more convenient to participate (for those who had the means)

“Especially for younger people....a lot of them do have access to technology.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Because ...if it’s raining or snow and all, they don’t want to walk to polling.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

“It makes it easier but the cost of technology.” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)
 - offer a choice that included methods that people were already familiar with
 - and as a result, encourage people to participate who do not do so at present

“Especially for young people. It might be a way to get greater participation than before. A lot of them do have access to new technology.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“It’s a lot easier and they’ll get a few more votes.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)
- As in the general public groups, the consensus was that the proposals would ultimately have limited impact on the likelihood of their participating because they addressed their underlying disillusionment to only a very limited extent

*“It doesn’t necessarily mean the Government would listen.”
(Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)*

“If the Government didn’t spend as much money on making it convenient and actually spent the money on things we feel strongly about. To educate us is what we want and I think the Government has got to stop looking at convenience and actually listen, that is not the issue really.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- For the Bangladeshi and Pakistani respondents in particular, the barriers of language, culture, age and ability / willingness to use new technology were still present

*“We’re illiterate, language problems, too old to learn.”
(Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)*

- While Indian men claimed they would participate in e-democracy, their lack of access to and interest in new technology suggests that this may reflect their desire to be positive and up-beat rather than any real intention to try it out.
- The African men, however, appeared to be the most genuine in giving e-democracy a try. As noted previously, respondents in this group were the most likely to have used technology and a few of them had suggested that one of the factors discouraging them from participating was a lack of convenience.

9.6 e-Participation

9.6.1 General Impressions

- The groups expressed some interest in using some of these methods although lack of access to the technology remained a significant issue. Once again, many felt that e-participation was not really aimed at ‘people like me’.
- Like the general public, respondents’ main concerns were security and whether the results would make any difference to policy.
- *Online Government Forums* and *e-mail/Text Messaging* were considered to be the easiest to understand and were, again, the most popular options.

9.6.2 *Online Government Forums*

- This method had echoes for some of items on television that invited viewers to participate in debates, or to contact MPs or other people in positions of power who had been interviewed.
- The main advantage was once again, the ability to raise an issue directly with someone who could make a difference

“A good idea. Direct with the people in power, you can get policies explained.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Key concerns included:
 - the difficulty in verifying the identity of the person on the other end
- “You can’t guarantee the person you are talking to is that MP.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)*
- time pressures on the participating MP (or similar), including whether that person would ever have time to answer your specific question.

9.6.3 *Text / e-Mail Messages*

- Some respondents were already familiar with these facilities and found them easy to use

“e-mail. It is the one that is most accessible.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Respondents believed however, that a number of questions would need to be addressed if the system was to work efficiently:
 - how could you send a contribution (particularly a text message) that was meaningful enough to get the message across, and concise enough to be sent and read efficiently?

*“You can only send 16 letters or simple, short messages.”
(Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)*

- would the person respond?
- would the system become overloaded?

*“If all the country is sending messages to the MPs, they don’t
have the time.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)*

*“I think it might be difficult. I think it is a valid point but I think it
will be difficult. Imagine having to send text messages to
thousands of people asking you different things.” (Black African,
C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)*

9.6.4 *Citizen-led Discussion Groups*

- These groups thought that *Citizen-led Discussion Groups* were a reasonably good idea and came across as a little more positive about the concept than the general public groups had been.
- Respondents, however, saw significant drawbacks to the concept, with the perception still common that it would inevitably be just an ineffective sounding board. In addition:
 - respondents were not used to taking part in political discussions and found the idea of doing so intimidating
 - their reluctance and inability to use computer technology meant that they would be nervous about participating.

9.6.5 *Bulletin Boards*

- Apart from a very small number of African respondents, few had any real concept of what *Bulletin Boards* were, confusing them with noticeboards and not really understanding the relevance of these to computers

*“Bulletin, magazine.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged,
Man)*

*“You get it in newspapers.” (Pakistani, C2DE, Pre-Family,
Unengaged, Woman)*

- Once the concept was explained, respondents were still nonplussed. Like the general public, respondents thought that this could easily degenerate into a ‘talking shop’ with no real purpose in which only those people with strong views participated.

9.7 e-Voting

9.7.1 General Impressions

- The proposed new methods for voting were easier to understand than those for participation, largely because they involved a broader range of technology. Most respondents had access to at least two of the methods presented.
- Response to the principle of e-voting was quite positive. Some claimed to have already heard of initiatives along these lines although they were surprised by the inclusion of *Touch Tone Phones* and *Digital TV*.
- As with the general public, the key benefits were perceived to be:
 - ease of use, straightforward to use because of familiarity with some of the technology
 - convenience: can vote from home, less time consuming
 - choice: what suits you.
- Security, confidentiality and reliability remained significant concerns, if perhaps less prominent than in the general public groups. The specific issues were again:
 - whether people could vote more than once

*“One thing, for example, if there’s only one person living in the house, if he goes to pressing the button four times himself?”
(Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)*
 - how would the ‘Government’ know whether the person who cast the vote was actually the one registered to do so (e.g. could someone else vote using your phone ID?)

- whether others would be able to find out how you voted

“Once you give your mobile number you get a name straightaway and an address.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Participants also wanted to ensure that voting in this manner would be free or as low-cost as possible.

9.7.2 *Likelihood of Using Methods*

- Some respondents across all groups claimed that they would be willing to try out one or more of the new methods. Those who faced considerable demands on their time (e.g. because they worked shifts or had been ill) were especially likely to be interested

“They are more convenient.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

“Those who are unable to walk can do this.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

“Some people are working the late hours in the factories and they can’t go to vote.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

- Many of the Asian women, however, attributed their non-voting not to an inability to get to the polling booth but to their partner’s reluctance to allow them to exercise their voting rights

“I can get to the polling station, it’s so near, that’s not the problem.” (Bangladeshi, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Although overall responses to the e-voting methods were positive, many of those who occasionally voted thought that they would probably stick to using pen and paper at the polling station. As in the general public groups, this method was trusted and familiar, and did not require great knowledge or skills

“I feel that it’s my business. I go in there, what I’m doing, do it, done, out. On the phone, it’s going to be hassle.” (Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- Some found the physicality of putting the ballot in the box reassuring

*“Who knows that your vote is going to get there? At least they can turn round with a piece of paper and look through all them.”
(Black Caribbean, C2DE, Family, Unengaged, Woman)*

- In line with their greater experience with new technology, Caribbean women and African men were the most willing to give one of the new methods a try. Some said that they would vote this way because it would be more convenient and a few seemed to be interested because it would be a novelty. Once again, there were respondents who never or hardly ever voted who thought that they might try one of the new methods ‘just to see what it was like’.
- The most accessible methods were *Touch Tone Phones*, *Digital TV* and *Text Messaging* (all respondents had easy access to at least one of these technologies), with *Touch Tone Phones* being the most popular.

9.7.3 *Touch Tone Phones*

- The popularity of this option was based, as before, on familiarity with the phone and its range of uses, the fact that it is easy to understand, and quick and convenient to use

“Even I have a touch tone phone at home.” (Indian, C2DE, Post-family, Unengaged, Man)

*“Going on the net takes you ages. On the phone, half a minute.”
(Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)*

9.7.4 *Digital TV*

- This again, was a fairly familiar technology so that respondents felt it would not be especially difficult for them to learn how to use it for voting. A number of Asian respondents already had digital TV and, although they did not necessarily understand its capabilities, they felt that they could rely on their children to provide assistance.

9.7.5 *Computer Kiosks*

- As in the general public groups, these were seen as something that would be easy to use but elicited little excitement. It was something that respondents felt they might think about using, but it would not be their first choice

“Sometimes if I go to the shopping centre and I see a touch screen computer. I don’t need to log on. All I have to do is bam, bam and it is done. That could be a way of getting your voice heard.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- Respondents again had difficulty discerning what the major benefits of introducing this technology would be and language difficulties were raised as an issue to be considered.

9.7.6 *Internet Voting*

- Voting over the internet was only relevant to those already comfortable with or able to use the technology. As mentioned earlier, several respondents in the minority ethnic groups spontaneously nominated this as being one of the methods that the government was considering introducing in order to increase participation. It was, in effect, the ‘stereotype’ of e-voting but, as only a few used the internet on a regular basis, voting in this manner had limited appeal.

9.7.7 *Text Messaging*

- This appealed to some of the African men and some of the Caribbean women, with a number claiming that they could see themselves voting in this manner. It seems that *Text Messaging* was slightly more popular amongst these two groups than it had been amongst the general public.

“I would personally go for the text message.” (Black African, C2DE, Pre-Family, Unengaged, Man)

10 Disadvantaged Groups

10.1 Introduction

- In this section, we report on the experiences and views of those people who, for a variety of reasons, may be expected currently to have difficulties participating in the democratic process. These include people who:
 - have some form of physical impairment which makes them less mobile
 - have some form of visual impairment
 - have a hearing impairment
 - have learning difficulties
 - have some form of mental health issue
 - are homeless.
- It is important to note that these groups are by no means homogeneous, nor are they discrete. For example, among the participants in the group of those with a physical impairment, there were those with learning difficulties and two women who were blind. Similarly, among those with learning difficulties, there were those with physical impairments which restricted their mobility and among the homeless, there was reference to some past mental health issues.

10.2 Current Level of Engagement and Participation in the Democratic Process

- A similar range of level of engagement was found among these groups to that in the mainstream groups, i.e. a mix of the engaged, disinterested and disaffected. While those with learning difficulties also showed these varying levels of engagement, it is perhaps not surprising to find that some of these respondents seemed to have only a slim grasp of the political scene.

- By virtue of the recruitment process via charities and established groups, many of the participants were interested in the issues that confront people in their situation and some had contributed their views as part of a process of consultation within the charity, either at headquarters or regional level or as part of a national forum. For example, in the groups of those with learning difficulties, there were three or four people who sat on a 'partnership board' which was set up to meet the requirement to consult set out in the Government White Paper on 'Valuing People'. Among the group of homeless people, several had attended a national conference for the charity where issues were discussed and decisions made about those which needed to be fed into the political machinery. A bi-monthly forum for deaf people was attended by one of the participants and several people across the groups served on Access Committees for their local authority

"He has organised a forum which meets every two months and it's always full. Maybe 200 – 300 people talking about different topics linked with mental health or what can be done for deaf people... It's brilliant and speakers come to that and then questions and answers from the audience to the speaker."
(Hearing Impaired Woman)

- The hearing representative of a national organisation for the deaf pointed out that deaf people in general, and especially those living outside of the large cities, often feel very isolated and unable to have any kind of 'voice'. They may rely on 'deaf clubs' for their social life and otherwise feel great barriers between themselves and the hearing public.
- Many identified the advantage to be gained by joining with others in similar circumstances when expressing one's views on a shared issue. In this way, one gained confidence and could present a stronger case

"I suppose that the only way I can see forward, is for us all to link up a bit more. And I mean, it is not good enough for me to speak around with my friends, and so I tried to link up in some way with all the other people in my area, and I think that is very necessary." (Visually Impaired Man)

"That is why we have forums, so that we can actually have some form of voice, as a voluntary group, which has links with the

government, that is the only voice we can use as our own form of democratic way.” (Homeless Man)

- There was also evidence of creating a higher profile by taking group action to get one’s views across. A couple of homeless people had taken part in a ‘sleep out’ outside Westminster Cathedral to this end and one of the deaf women had joined a march to the House of Commons to protest about the education of deaf children. She had waited to see her MP for two hours but to no avail.
- As in the mainstream discussions, engagement through these modes of participation did not necessarily translate into voting in elections. In every group, there was a small number who felt that they should exercise their right to vote, as well as those who were either totally disinterested in voting or had become disaffected.
- The most overtly disaffected were in the group of homeless people and amongst those with hearing impairment. One young man who was deaf had written to his MP about the availability of sub-titles on TV and had never received a proper reply. He was dismissive of Government attempts to get young people to vote in the last general election by text messaging them and promising longer pub opening hours if the Government was re-elected

“I think it is really cheap. A cheap trick. And that’s why it’s rubbish really.” (Hearing Impaired Man)

- Another deaf person described her disillusionment with politicians and their willingness / ability to take action on deaf issues

“I remember ‘Breaking Down Barriers’ and Ken Livingstone was there on the panel; and there were about 200 deaf people in the audience asking questions ...I feel that a lot of politicians collect the comments and say ‘yes, I’ll do this, I’ll do that’. But it’s bullshit! And I think that’s what makes people lose their beliefs, so you just kind of withdraw.” (Hearing Impaired Woman)

- In the homeless group, there was criticism of the person who had been given the portfolio for homeless issues and had apparently achieved nothing, or worse, prospects for the homeless had deteriorated further.

- Most importantly, there were those who would like to be able to participate in the democratic process to a greater degree but, for various reasons, had been unable to do so. These barriers are described in more detail in 11.4 below.

10.3 Issues of Importance to Disadvantaged Groups

- Among these groups, the personal issues that often related to people's circumstances assumed greater priority than more general issues that were shared with the rest of the population. Here are some that respondents had protested about in the past or were currently concerned about.

Visually impaired	loss of DLA access to work opportunities auditory signals on road crossings support for children with special needs in mainstream schools obstructions in the street eg, meters, bin bags
Hearing impaired	more sub-titles on TV right for deaf children to be educated in mainstream education lack of interpreters e.g. at hospitals the threat to the Disability Living Allowance and requirement for periodic reassessment threat to free travel in London (a positive outcome so far)
Physically impaired	access to local buildings access to transport; taxis, dial-a-ride, especially with a wheelchair or guide dog impact of Disability Discrimination Act on access
People with learning difficulties	housing transport getting people to understand about LD
People with mental health issues	local transport general moral decline shown in poorer standards of behaviour / crime
Homeless people	lack of acknowledgement of real number of homeless including families emphasis on office building in London vs residential need for conversion of empty properties allocation of property and position of homeless people on waiting lists laws that aim to tackle the issue of homelessness but just exacerbate the situation eg. £500 fine in Westminster rules governing CAT (Contact and Assessment Team) workers and their effectiveness lack of job opportunities

- However, broader issues were in evidence including the state of the NHS, the inequalities in society, the adoption of the Euro, the third runway at Heathrow and environmental issues generally, and the potential war in Iraq.

10.4 Barriers to Participation

- We have clustered the barriers into five main groups; registering to vote, physical access, access to information, perceived lack of representation and psychological barriers. These apply, in different ways, across the different audiences.

10.4.1 Registering to Vote

- The first step in being able to exercise one's right to vote is to register on the Electoral Roll and while this was not discussed in great detail, it quickly became evident that this was an issue for some respondents.
- This might be because of the difficulty of reading and filling in the form for those with a visual impairment. They might have to call upon the help of a neighbour or friend to complete the form with the loss of privacy that this entailed

*“Well, to be honest, I think I would just read it, and not fill it in. If it was online or something, then maybe, but I don't know, I think it is something about filling in stuff like that. I don't know.”
(Visually Impaired Man)*

“I find it difficult, they send you those tiny forms, and ask you to register to vote, and you can't see what you are filling out, and so you just don't bother. If they can't put it in a format that you can use, then why should you make the effort?” (Visually Impaired Woman)

- Some respondents were simply not aware of the need to register, either because they thought that someone had registered them already (e.g. in a hostel for the homeless) or because they were simply unaware of registration as part of the process. The homeless woman quoted below had no idea that she needed to register until she was told at the polling station when she went along to vote. The second quote is from a man in a similar situation who had

been told that he could not vote because he did not have a permanent address

“Because it is difficult you know, like after they come out (of hospital), they have to learn about the voting system and sometimes you really don’t have a clue. Just go in and say, ‘look, you have to go through this process before you are voting’, it should be brought to light. And everyone should be helped.” (Homeless Woman)

“I asked them if I had the right to vote and they said, ‘no, you haven’t, because you haven’t got a permanent place. You can’t vote until you have a permanent address which is in your name.” (Homeless Man)

- The lack of any form of identification (often the case with those on the street or those trying to protect their squatters’ rights) was also seen as a potential barrier

“If someone did come to someone who is living on the streets, ‘got any identification?’, most people don’t have any identification anyway, so how are you going to be able to vote, if you cannot prove yourself?” (Homeless Man)

“Yes, I mean to go out there, it is your world, and you know, you don’t want people invading your space and I was like that when I was on the street. I never used my real name so people didn’t know who I was. And I didn’t want people to know who I was. That is my space and I chose to keep it like that.” (Homeless Man)

- There was an understanding by some of the homeless people who were now in more settled circumstances that they would be liable to a fine if they did not register to vote. This had caused considerable umbrage and resistance to conforming

“I got a letter from Tower Hamlets the other day because I sent back the form with nothing on. And they sent the letter back saying, ‘if you don’t register to vote, you will be fined’, and I think that is wrong. This is supposed to be a democratic country where you have got a free role to choose whether you want to vote or not, and if you haven’t got that right, then...”

“...I am not being pressured to vote for anyone. I never have and I never will do.” (Homeless Men)

- In the groups with people with learning difficulties, there seemed to be little awareness of the need to register in order to be able to vote. The worker from the Service User Empowerment Project felt that too often carers assumed that the person with learning difficulties was either not interested in voting or incapable of deciding about voting and therefore denied them the opportunity to do so.

10.4.2 *Physical Access*

Getting to the Polling Station

- Those with some form of physical disability face the greatest problems in getting to the polling station and have to rely on friends, relatives or party representatives to give them a ride. The availability of these can be uncertain and they may be called upon as a last resort

“I would have to rely on somebody giving me a lift to get to the polling station. Once I get to the polling station, I can walk in there and get to where they actually vote but I need somebody to give me a lift to get there. When the candidates come round, they usually ask you if you want a lift.” (Man with Physical Disability)

“Because I’ve been going a bit late, someone has actually come and knocked on my door and said, ‘are you going to vote? We’ll take you in the car, you haven’t voted and it’s getting late.’ Now that, I don’t like, because it’s intrusive” (Woman with Mental Health Issues)

- Those who were blind would often be accompanied by sighted partners or friends who might also help with completing the ballot paper.
- Interestingly, only two individuals across all six groups talked of using a postal vote and while others were aware of this, their preference was to go to the station if they could

“I think from my point of view and most people’s point of view, it’s the lack of the transport I think really and the lack of being able to get to where you are going to go. I mean, Roger has said postal voting is fine but that doesn’t enable you to actually go to the actual polling station, does it?...”

...Yeah, but you don’t have to go, do you?...

...It is more personal if you go to a polling station.” (Men with Physically Disabled Men)

- Among the respondents with learning difficulties, there was a concern about getting to the polling station, just as there was with travelling around generally. All felt they would need support to get there and to show them what to do

“I think we should all go together because anything could happen...”

...So you are worried about safety and travelling. Is that what you are getting at?...

...Yes, we could get attacked like that.” (Woman with Learning Difficulties)

Getting into the Polling Station and Using the Booths

- Once at the polling station, stairs have to be negotiated and doors are often narrow and heavy. The polling booths are also too narrow and the writing surface too high for those in a wheelchair

“I vote by post but if I was to go there, I would probably have to take my own pencil for a start because it wouldn't come down into my lap. I have never understood why they chain the pencil.” (Man with Physical Disability)

Access to Decision Makers

- While current avenues to making one's views known to people in positions of responsibility may apparently be available to all, there are often barriers that intervene. The same issues of identifying where to go and how to get there apply as much to participation as to voting at a polling station. While a few of the more empowered respondents with learning difficulties might like to talk to their MP, it is not easy for them to do so for these reasons.
- One example given by the homeless respondents was the surgeries run specifically for homeless people and publicised in 'glossy flyers'. The assumption was that attendance at these could result in a fine because they were held in the Borough of Westminster. While this was reported as the principal deterrent, there seemed to be a secondary reason based on a

preference for decision makers to come to them rather than having to visit the decision makers individually

“Well I mean, at the end of the day, we are supposed to be going to her, but do we have to be in the Westminster Borough if she does the surgery in the Westminster borough, which means none of us are allowed to be there because we get fined £500! So this is where it gets really confusing. They say one thing, and do another.” (Homeless Man)

- Indeed, as we have described above, a lack of confidence in expressing their views was common to several groups as was the resulting preference for acting as a group.

10.4.3 *Access to Information*

- It became clear in conducting this research that to enable people to understand and take part in the democratic process, it is vital that they have the information telling them about the channels (elections, surgeries, meetings etc.) that are open to them and how to use these. This can be apparently as basic as the need to register to vote and directions to the polling station but unless people are given this information in a form that they can use, then they are effectively disenfranchised.
- There was also a strong feeling that they need to be informed about the issues in which they are interested and the policies of different parties and candidates.
- The issue of access to information took two forms; firstly, being able to have it in a format that enables people to take it in and secondly, being able to understand and appreciate what is being ‘read’ or listened to because the language and style of expression are appropriate to the audience.

Physical Format of the Information

- Taking this first type of access, those with a visual impairment varied in their ability to ‘read’ information. While some could read very large type or braille and/or made use of adaptations to their computer (see 11.5), others who had lost their sight more recently and were less equipped with possible aids, were

more reliant on other people for their information. This might be family members or those canvassing at election time. Local talking newspapers were another source but they did not always include coverage of candidates' policies

"It is literacy, effectively a lot of vision impaired people are illiterate because we can't read at will. Compared with the average sighted person...But you know, there is this thing which is effectively a literacy problem, and so, the more information that is freely available, the more that we can participate in society." (Visually Impaired Man)

Language and Style

- With respect to this second type of access, information that is in a form that is easy to take in and understand, this is not an issue that is particular to people with some form of impairment. There was much criticism in these groups however of the adversarial style of politics that militates against productive discussion and a style of reporting in the (often biased) press that does not clarify the issues for the reader

"I mean, that can even put people off voting if you see people really having a go at one another. They are like children, you know, they can't just sit down and discuss it reasonably. And I just think it, that's the thing really, we don't really understand, I don't suppose we should understand everything because we are not doing that job. But you know, I think that sometimes the press get hold of things or things are written in a certain way and it all just gets too confusing for some people." (Man with Mental Health Issues)

- It is a problem that is more acute however, for those with impairments which mean that they have acquired communication and language skills in different ways. For example, for those whose first language is BSL, the sentence structure and range of vocabulary are so very different from everyday speech that a straight translation is not possible. The problem is compounded by the often abstract language and jargon used by politicians

"My first language is BSL and 'real information' is in English . If people came to the door and they used BSL and you know, the information was written in a way for BSL users to understand..."

But you know, they come with a lot of information which is a lot to read and it is not simple.” (Hearing Impaired Man)

“I need the information through sign language so that I can take in the information because sometimes the words, I just don’t understand them. So to read is difficult.” (Hearing Impaired Woman)

- The sheer amount of information that is provided in newspapers, leaflets etc. can be daunting for those who use BSL or those with learning difficulties who cannot read or who cannot do so well.
- Although subtitles in party political broadcasts can be of value, it was not always thought to be the answer and there was a call by deaf people to incorporate BSL into political programming

“They do have subtitles yes, but sometimes you miss that or you have to be staring at the television all the time to wait for that to come up. Hearing people say that they have heard something on the radio and they know something has happened and they have other ways of accessing information. For deaf people, there is only television and also newspapers. But it is difficult to read newspapers. There is too much information.” (Hearing Impaired Man)

- While some of those with learning difficulties who had voted in the past were aware of some of the means by which they could find out about candidates, such as leaflets, they tended to dismiss them as irrelevant to them

“I find them rubbish.”

“My mum usually throws them away.”

“I can’t read them.” (People with Learning Difficulties)

- They felt that they derived far more from simple information; a few easy to understand words combined with pictures and icons. Large posters were suggested

“They should make big posters with big words on them, like ‘Vote for This Person’.” (Man with Learning Difficulties)

- The problems with politicians identified by many people in the mainstream groups with respect to their inability to be honest and straightforward, was

magnified for certain disability groups who had problems understanding the complex language

“The suit can be a barrier and the language is very high with lots of jargon. I think they are trying to be very clever. And the interviewer asks a politician a direct question and then they try and avoid the question and they are like waffle, waffle, waffle, but they don’t answer the direct questions, they never do that.” (Hearing Impaired Woman)

10.4.4 Perceived Lack of Representation

- One of the factors underlying disillusionment with the political process was a feeling for these groups that those in government did not really appreciate the issues facing them and therefore did not give them priority

“If there was a party who was talking about deaf issues or decided that deaf issues were important, then I would maybe decide to vote.” (Hearing Impaired Man)

“The information isn’t aimed at people like us. It is aimed at, you know, health or education.” (Hearing Impaired Man)

- Both the homeless and those with a hearing impairment expressed a desire to see an MP who had been homeless or who was deaf

“You know, as a deaf person, all through my life there has been barriers. And there are still barriers there. I think it would be great if we had a deaf person in the Government. You know, then we could challenge it from the inside. But it shouldn’t be like that, they should listen to the public.” (Hearing Impaired Woman)

10.4.5 Psychological Barriers

- A small number of respondents across various groups referred to feeling somewhat intimidated by the array of people at the polling station and the procedure that had to be followed

“But sometimes if I’m very nervous and I’m feeling, if say I’m depressed and I’m feeling neurotic, I could go to the polling station and I think with some people, especially people who are shy or unwell or perhaps suffer from mental health problems, the actual office that you walk in, there is sort of a lot of official

people that I think can be somehow intimidating.” (Woman with Mental Health Issues)

- For those who are homeless and living on the street, there may be mental health issues and a lack of interest in mainstream society. For these reasons, and perhaps due to intoxication in some form, they may have little awareness of an election and no interest in participating. If they are aware, they may believe they have no right to vote or, given their transient lifestyle, no means of finding out how to

“Because I was always travelling, you know. That was my life. I never stayed in one place too long, I was always all over the place, and...whenever it come to voting, no one said, you know, so I didn't bother.” (Homeless Man)

10.5 Use of New Technology

- While the small sample of people in each of the six audiences covered by this section cannot be said to be representative of their wider constituency, the use of technology within any group was reasonably consistent. This was certainly the case where the technology was used to help in adapting to an impairment. Indeed, some of the greatest use of new technology was found amongst those with a visual impairment. We have summed up the levels of use and types of technology used in the table on the next page.
- Some of the people in these groups were very confident with new technology as shown by this exchange between two blind individuals. The second had set up his laptop and screen reader himself despite having no sight

“I think some people are really very good at learning things and picking things up, and I guess it is something to do with having the confidence to try things out. And there is a lot of people in the world who haven't got that confidence and they don't feel very encouraged to try anything...

...I thought to myself, I have bought the thing, I might as well find out how it works, find out what you can do with it.” (Visually Impaired Men)

<p>Visually impaired</p>	<p>Majority of the group with some vision used a PC/laptop with a screen magnification programme. CCTV can be used for general reading but this is very expensive and so mainly accessed at work / training centres.</p> <p>Those with no vision used a screen reader and 'Jaws' software which reads out the text on the screen including e-mails. This can also be used to read website pages although it accesses these at a different level to the displayed page and therefore what is read out can be unhelpful.</p> <p>An OCR scanner might also be used to scan items such as letters and read them out via speech software but this could not be used on handwritten material and it can miss bits out.</p> <p>Several had mobile phones which they used without adaptations. Some could send text messages but would need someone to read any incoming messages for them and this was disliked because of the loss of privacy There was some discussion of methods being developed to help blind people to read text messages but these were not yet thought to be of a size to be portable.</p> <p>Digital TV, like TV in general, was found boring by several; there was no incentive to invest in this technology despite promises of it making special provision for different groups. Access to the internet via digital TV had not materialised and they could not use a screen reader with the technology.</p>
<p>Hearing impaired</p>	<p>These respondents were all competent computer users but they were young and in work.</p> <p>Teletext was liked because it provides up to date information in a concise and simple form (unlike some newspapers).</p>
<p>Physically impaired</p>	<p>One member of this group, confined to a wheelchair, was an active PC user but mainly for shopping and banking; two other people, one of whom was and blind and another with cerebral palsy, were taking computer courses. Others were not interested in using computers although, in one case, a man had used one in his work before retiring.</p> <p>Little evidence of mobile phone usage.</p>
<p>People with learning difficulties</p>	<p>A small number in two groups said they were able to use a telephone and two said they used a mobile including text messaging. But for the majority, reading / writing ability was minimal and a few had problems with number recognition.</p> <p>About half in each group had used a computer at the day centre or college but if there was a computer at home, they tended to be barred from using it.</p>
<p>People with mental health issues</p>	<p>Use of PCs at work currently or in past by two people; little evidence of mobile phones.</p> <p>Some strong resistance to technology and its ability to affect the way people relate to each other negatively.</p>
<p>Homeless people</p>	<p>All in the group were receiving computer training and were very positive. More generally, some may have access to computers thro' training centres; access in hostels is limited and libraries vary, with some charging. Some may have mobile phones (possibly stolen).</p>

- Amongst those who do not need to use the technology to help them in their daily lives, a generation gap was evident to some degree, with those who were retired or nearing retirement feeling that it was too late for them to acquire the relevant skills

*“I feel I have been left behind with computers, no doubt with my age. I have had a chance to go to either night school classes and all the rest of it, but I just think to myself I’ve managed up until now without them, which is rather negative I know.”
(Woman with Mental Health Issues)*

- However, as in the mainstream groups, some of the younger respondents who used computers in their work, did so reluctantly and preferred not to use them outside of it.
- In the group with people with mental health issues, some concern was expressed that while technology had its benefits, it could also have negative effects on, for example, children whose ability to communicate is undermined

“This is my basic worry about them, is that they are perhaps taking over from people and that is creating a communication breakdown and I think that is creating a lot of negativity in children not using language properly. And it worries me that we are now becoming part of a machine is governing us and we are not in control.” (Woman with Mental Health Issues)

- The use of menu driven directions before reaching call centres was identified as an example of where the human interface has been lost and standard of personal service has fallen

“And these telephones, one of the worse things of all, you phone, whether it’s a query or something, you have a voice, if you want so and so, so and so, press one and if you want so and so press two, if you want so and so press three and then it goes back to one and I think what do I do, I don’t want any of those. I think they are awful things, I hate them.” (Woman with Mental Health Issues)

- For some of those with learning difficulties, the need for a human interface was very clear. When asked how they wanted to find out about the new methods of voting / participation, it was the face to face communication methods that came up time and time again.

- While not necessarily representative of all homeless people, this group pointed out that some people in their situation have access to a computer and the charity with which they were involved are encouraging the homeless to have an e-mail address that moves around with them. While some may not wish to reveal their identity in order to register to vote, the suggestion was made that it might be feasible to use their e-mail address which they register with some trusted intermediary such as hostel staff or a CAT worker.

10.6 Response to e-democracy

- The overall response to the idea of trying to make the democratic process more accessible to a wider range of people was mainly positive although the same range from lukewarm welcome to cynicism that was found in the mainstream groups was evident here too

“There is a potential for benefits to come out of things like the internet and so on. And it is good that government and so on is expressing a wish to become more connected with society at large. It is very, very important for that to happen. I don’t know if any society has ever really cracked it. But you know, the more people that feel more part of the society, the more people that can organise their lives to more advantage, the more people that can feel happier, the better. And it has got a lot to do with being able to get to information, and get decent information, you know, reliable information. And people would be a lot happier, more positive.” (Visually Impaired Man)

“If you are thrusting ideals that have got no relevance to, let’s say, for instance, certain people who are homeless, and the government are introducing laws which do not marry up with the situation they are in, i.e. there is people out there who want to reform, yes, and where they haven’t got the means or the necessity to do this, they feel disillusioned. And to actually maybe have some electronic easy way of voting, they are going to think, ‘well, what is the point to that, why is the constitutionalised (sic) politicians, ie. Labour, Conservative, Democrats, the ones in the mainstream’? I mean things like that, why should we vote for those kinds of, you know, when they haven’t really got anything that is substantial?” (Homeless Man)

- The main response was, as elsewhere, that it was preferable to have more options for ways of voting or putting one's views across so that you could use them if you wanted to.
- Some groups, such as the physically disabled and visually impaired, could identify real potential improvements in access; other groups, such as those with a hearing impairment and learning difficulties, were more qualified in their response. For them, changes to the 'hardware' of the interface with government would need to be accompanied by changes in the 'software' i.e. the content and style of the information that is exchanged.
- There was some concern that the new options would not be available to all because they could not easily access the new technology or did not want to, but this was mainly found among the respondents with mental health issues who admitted to having reservations about the use of technology

"The older people, a lot of the older people won't have a chance to have their say, because my age and so on didn't grow up with computers. Youngsters now are growing up with them and you know, when they are my age, they will know computers inside out and everything will be very different." (Woman with Mental Health Issues)

- The question of the security of the systems involved was raised but not as often as in the mainstream groups; this related to the security of the information logged through the system and reliability in terms of counting votes / passing on views. On the latter point, there is clearly a need to provide users with reassurance i.e. feedback that their input has been received.

10.7 e-Participation

- While it was generally viewed as a good thing to have new ways of participating, much scepticism was voiced as to whether it would make a difference; would politicians be prepared to give up the time to listen to members of the public (least of all minority groups)? Would they then be prepared to take their views into account? Would they be prepared to take the risk of having their decisions challenged by members of the public?

“Call me cynical, but I don’t think they are swayed by anything. I think they have a fixed idea and they have got to do that for four or five years and stick with it. I think they do. They have these open forums where you can go and talk to them but I am sure that they don’t change their policies.” (Physically Disabled Man)

“I don’t think it (participating online) would be important for them. They want to talk about health or education or social services or something. I don’t think my issues and concerns are important. It is a minority issue. They are more interested in general things. I don’t think they would take my case seriously. I think it would be overlooked.” (Hearing Impaired Man)

- Some groups who face more difficulty in communicating, such as the deaf and those with learning difficulties, would prefer to have more opportunities to talk to politicians directly but with the relevant support in place too. This might include BSL, Makaton (a form of sign language used in combination with speech mainly for people with learning difficulties) and Palantype (the words of speakers projected on to a screen)

“I think sitting around in a group having a chat rather than being on a computer and you are reading things and things are flashing up. I kind of want to see the face of the MP or whoever it is. I want to be able to see the face. And the computer is like, there is words. You don’t know who it is.” (Hearing Impaired Man)

- People with learning difficulties face particular problems in using a computer as envisaged in these options because they call for high levels of literacy. Adaptations would be needed such as someone signing what is written using Makaton.
- On the other hand, for homeless people who can access the technology (eg. in libraries), all the methods represent a potential step forward as they move around

“You could go anywhere in the country and you can participate.” (Homeless Woman)

10.7.1 *Citizen-led Discussion Group and Online Government Forum*

- As with the other groups, the preference was for the online government forum because it enables people to have access to the decision maker him/herself. In this way, one could be assured that, for that time at least, they were listening to the views of the public

“I think that one, having the government ministers online, is very good, because that is setting up, it’s really communicating, isn’t it and I think that’s very good and the idea of having discussions.” (Man with Mental Health Issues)

- Both options raise some difficulties however for the visually and hearing impaired, and those with learning difficulties. The visually impaired would find them difficult to use because screen readers do not work well with chatrooms.
- For people with a hearing impairment, problems were identified with being able to keep up with the flow of the discussion and to understand the language used

“But on the other hand, on the participation one, I don’t think that would be really helpful. I mean there are some people that have a high level of language, English words, and I don’t understand those, so you know, you are not sure what the meaning of that is. So you kind of think that you don’t want to be involved with that.” (Hearing Impaired Man)

- However, when the idea of discussions exclusively for deaf people was floated, this was rejected; if possible, they should be able to join in the main discussion. Ideally, BSL would be provided in some way to sign what has been written although respondents could not immediately see how.

10.7.2 *Internet Bulletin Board*

- The *bulletin board* offers advantages to some of these respondents over the live discussions. Whereas it might be difficult to keep up and contribute to an ongoing discussion in real time, the *bulletin board* allows people to look over other peoples’ views at their own pace and to think about how they want to put their own viewpoint

“I would quite like to be involved in a discussion. Whether you could choose then whether you want to be involved in the discussion, or whether you want to go online and just give your views. I think both of these would be useful.” (Hearing Impaired Woman)

10.8 e-Voting

- While some respondents wanted easier and more assured access to their polling station as a way of improving access to democracy, many others acknowledged that voting from the familiar surroundings of their own home or at a convenient venue overcame many of the problems they faced with voting

“If you are really not on top form and you walk there by yourself and you see lots of people and they say, you know, they seem to be watching you and in a way, I suppose that’s why perhaps to have a vote by computer in some instances would be good.” (Woman with Mental Health Issues)

“The man knocked and I did go and actually, I didn’t like that and I think if you were able to do it from home you would be doing it when you want to do it, you are not doing it because they say you have got to be there at a certain time and it gives it a much more... it’s a much more comfortable thing to do.” (Woman with Mental Health Issues)

- It was also recognised that the option of not being tied to one place for voting would make it easier for people who are working and for those who are not settled in a particular area.
- However, to enable more of the homeless to take advantage of this benefit, the issue remained of needing to give one’s identity in order to register to vote. The suggestion was made that a swipe card which had been validated at a hostel and which identified the user, could be used on a one-off basis for voting (rather than an identity card that one always had to carry)

“You have a code, you sign up for the code, you go bosh, you are in there, with either a swipe card or a code, and then you know, there are ways of doing it, you know what I mean, have something and then take it away from them, so their identification, or privacy has not been invaded.” (Homeless Man)

- Another question that was raised was would people be more or less likely to make mistakes when voting by these new methods and what would the implications be? Would it be possible, to ‘undo’ and re-enter one’s vote?

10.8.1 *Touch Tone Telephones*

- The response to this option was generally positive because it gave access to the new home-based methods in a form that was familiar and more widely accessible than a computer. While many of the visually impaired had access to computers, this was not always at home. They would also appreciate the option to register to vote by telephone

“Much more convenient. Every blind person has got access to a home telephone virtually. Personally, if that was available, the telephone is much easier, just pick up the receiver, press X, Y...rather than, you know, go into the computer, log on, log off, go through this, go through that. At least half an hour before you get to where you want to be. It takes about 20 minutes to log on anyway.” (Visually Impaired Woman)

“Telephone is something that is much easier and I have a feeling that everybody can access it because I don’t think that every blind person has a computer. I mean just to pick up the phone and dial a button, you know, and that is my vote.” (Visually Impaired Man)

- This would not be an option for people with a hearing impairment as they cannot hear the instructions. At present, the adaptation sometimes used by the deaf to make phone calls, ‘Type Talk’, which routes calls via an operator from text into speech and back again, does not produce the necessary tones. It cannot be used currently, for example, for telephone banking.
- While many of those across the groups had used a touch tone phone at some point to buy cinema tickets or something similar, it was not a medium that was well liked and many found it time consuming and frustrating. It would therefore be important to keep interaction on the phone as simple and smooth as possible. A very small number in the groups of those with learning difficulties said they had used a phone in this way and several had problems using a phone at all

“And another thing, you’ve got to learn how to use a telephone properly, how to do numbers.” (Man with Learning Difficulties)

- It was pointed out that, while this method might be fairly straightforward to use in a general election, it could prove more difficult if more than one candidate had to be selected (as in a council election) or if it was a referendum and the choices needed to be explained.
- The importance of providing a freephone number was stressed and for the same reason, there was some objection to voting by mobile phone since even a freephone number is charged for.

10.8.2 *Text Messaging*

- This method did not receive enormous support, in part because ownership levels of mobile phones across the groups were not high. While the visually impaired are able to send text messages, it was felt that they would need greater reassurance that their vote had been accepted. Those with a hearing impairment are often enthusiastic text messengers and this option could appeal to some.

10.8.3 *Internet*

- This option for voting was well received in a number of the groups but particularly amongst those with a visual impairment, those who were deaf and the homeless. There was less enthusiasm among the physically disabled and those with mental health issues but this was possibly as a result of the low levels of current usage and access. Those with learning difficulties were not averse to using a computer to vote but felt that they would need support to do so. Even if access to the internet was not home-based, some felt they would be able to use it at work, at college, or possibly, at an internet café

“I think I would prefer the internet like I use at work and you know when I am at work I could send it and finish it and it would be done. Otherwise you are thinking about ‘you have to go and vote’ and then come back to work or go after work.” (Hearing Impaired Man)

“I would choose the internet and do it from home.” (Hearing Impaired Woman)

- It was pointed out that, for the visually impaired, the website would need to be text based so that screen readers are more likely to be able to read it and to do so easily. Graphic devices such as logos can be unwanted distractions

“Yes, the less graphics the better. If you are dealing with people that can’t see anyway, what do we want graphics for?...”

...I think that the more simplicity makes the site safer as well in that, it seems to me, that sites that are more fancy, they might be said to be accessible. But there is the greater possibility that when you click on something there, it won’t happen. So, to my mind, simplicity makes it more likely that it will work 100%.” (Visually Impaired Respondents)

“The main thing for me, is to encourage all these organisations and things in society to have sites which are more accessible to us, so that it is not a hassle to read them, and you know, even if we access them, it is really terrible when you get lots of numbers and things shouted at you...we are hearing the technical specification on those things, whereas really, what is on the screen is something a bit different you see, because our screen readers look at the alternative text.” (Visually Impaired Man)

- This respondent emphasised the importance of being very explicit about where and when to click for which candidate. At present, the screen reader is likely to simply read ‘Here’, ‘Here’, ‘Here’ as it moves across the screen so that it would be very difficult to vote

“The links should self explain. The link might say, ‘Click here to vote for so and so’...The next link, ‘Click here to vote’ or just a person’s name...follow that analogy, rather than having ‘Here, here’...you know.” (Visually Impaired Man)

- The advantage to be gained for visually impaired people from registering to vote online, rather than by form filling was again brought up.

10.8.4 Digital TV

- This method is unsuitable for visually impaired people because they cannot use a screen reader with it. However, it would enable the hearing impaired to vote because they could follow the written instructions provided.

- One respondent in the physically impaired group felt that digital TV was very slow; others could see that one could get information on candidates or policies from the TV before casting one's vote.

10.8.5 *Computer Kiosk*

- The accessibility and convenience of this method was appreciated by some respondents across the groups

*"I think it would be a good idea because you could do shopping and voting at the same time. It depends on time always."
(Hearing Impaired Man)*

- In its present form, it would not be accessible to those with a visual impairment because they could not locate the points to touch on the screen and could easily put in the wrong data because the screen is so sensitive. They felt that to make use of a kiosk, they would either need help or there would need to be a proper keyboard.

11 e-Democracy: Useful Pointers

11.1 Introduction

- In this section, we bring together the points that have arisen from the research that may be useful to bear in mind in developing ideas for e-democracy. Many are to do with communication and others relate to the operation of the system. We offer these as a starting point based on the limited scope of this research, rather than an exhaustive analysis of what is necessary.

11.2 Operational Principles

- It is clear that, in order to be successful with people like the respondents in these groups, the main concerns relating to the e-democracy proposals, namely **exclusion** and **security**, would need to be addressed. Any e-participation and e-voting methods would therefore have to take the following principles into account:

- the availability of both low-tech as well as high-tech options, preferably focussed on technology that most people are already familiar with (e.g. telephones). Consideration should perhaps be given to using the telephone for participation, perhaps by leaving messages on voicemail

“I’d be half and half about that, but I don’t think it’s fair where only the people with computers can join in. I think that they are trying to spread democracy but only to a certain number of people. So that’s not democratic.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- modes of operation that are relatively simple to understand / easy to learn / straightforward to use. This would include the need to offer the facility to ‘undo’ an input if a mistake is made and to provide clear feedback that entries have been received

“Make it simple, especially for the elderly who are a group that are disenfranchised at the moment and the free touch tone phone, fine.” (Birmingham, ABC1, Post-Family, Unengaged, Man)

- the availability of modes of participation that are more structured (e.g. questionnaires) so as to encourage users who might reject taking part in a more open debate on an issue

“I mean, doing things like having questionnaires or doing polls on the telly with the remote control or something, I think that would be quite fun and I think people would want to do it. I would want to do it.” (Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)
 - clearly specified systems for protecting confidentiality
 - free or as low-cost as possible.
- It is clear from the research among the disadvantaged groups that to enable many people to take advantage of the benefits that the new methods could bring, a high level of support may be necessary. This applied not only to those who currently do not use computers but also to those who were reasonably familiar with the technology who would need to be introduced to what is on offer.
 - Some of these respondents spent some of their time on a regular basis in centres where they found support for their needs and trusted the staff. These venues would seem to offer ideal sites for computer kiosks and / or access to computers more generally. Staff would however need to be given training in the new systems and in appropriate ways of encouraging usage by their service users. Guidelines may also need to be given as to the level of interaction that is advisable / permissible during the voting process.

11.3 Communication of e-democracy

11.3.1 General Pointers

- In terms of promoting e-democracy, there is some potential to create a sense of excitement and novelty. It could be promoted as offering new and easier ways to participate

“I think it might open it up to a lot more people. I know specifically with young people, whereas the novelty, the first time they are going to go off to vote, when it is a novelty, and

perhaps by the second and third time and thinking, 'do I or don't I?' you know. Whereas if it was based around the computer, I am pretty sure that they would all be logging in and placing their votes." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

"I mean, look at the programme, Pop Idol...and this, that and the other now, look how many votes got through in quarter of an hour or an hour, whatever." (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- Any campaign would have to promote a broader range of channels than simply computers and the internet, with care needed to ensure that the public know that comparatively conventional methods (including existing methods) would be available

"As long as we are not told that is the only way to do it. We have got to have an alternative, yes. So we must have that choice, and enough places to make access easier." (Southampton, C2D, Post-Family, Unengaged, Woman)

- To this end, using the term 'e-democracy' (or e-voting and e-participation) might be counter-productive because of its immediate connotations

"Well, what is very interesting about it is, that in my opinion, okay, we are a bit wary of it. Okay, we're 60 down to about 50 odd here, is that we are all of the age where 'e' makes us nervous, I think." (North Wales, C2D, Post-Family, Engaged, Man)

- It will be important to make explicit the links between contributions to the systems and outcomes. This might be in terms of policy decisions (for e-participation) and election results (e-voting).
- There is also likely to be benefit in promoting the fact that e-voting methods such as computer kiosks and telephones would allow people to vote from a wider range of locations, as these only rarely came up unprompted.
- As respondents often relied on 'guides' to help them use new technology, there is potential to use early adopters and other experts as pioneers for the system. The logic here is that hesitant users and non-users may see others using e-democracy systems, and be encouraged to find out more about participating themselves. The 'guides' may also take the form of the children

in families and consideration might be given to informing secondary school students about the range of methods for participation as part of the Citizenship curriculum.

- Addressing concerns about confidentiality is likely to be problematic, as these are largely based on existing assumptions and prejudices. While it would be essential to clearly specify the systems in place to protect participants' confidentiality, it seems likely that many people would still feel uneasy. The only way around this may well be the passage of time and increased familiarity with the internet and computers

*“And I don't think I would want to go on the internet because I think they are going to come round and bite you in the arse or something in the future. I don't think it's secure.”
(Southampton, C2D, Family, Engaged, Man)*

- While this may be outside the scope of government responsibilities, there is clearly an opportunity to encourage use of the new technology (particularly digital TV, the internet and even mobile phones) as a source of information on party policies and candidates. In order to confront some of the criticisms underpinning the disillusionment felt by respondents, this would ideally be independently produced and written in plain English.

11.3.2 *Communication to Disadvantaged Groups*

- In order to inform people with disability issues about the new methods of voting and participation, it will be vital that this is done in a range of formats that match their needs. In St. Albans, where new methods of voting were made available at the local elections of 2002, it was felt that the promotion of these had been very low-key.
- It will be important to tell people, not only that the new methods are available, but also what they need to do in order to be able to use them. It was suggested, for example, that it will be critical to explain about the importance of the PIN number and how to obtain one.
- Numerous suggestions were made for the channels that might be used to reach different groups in addition to mainstream radio, TV and poster

advertising. These might be used to direct people to other media such as the website. Publications mentioned were the magazines produced by the societies like the RNID and RNIB, and facilities such as 'Talking Newspapers'. Information could also be posted on the relevant disability organisation website.

- Dissemination of information could be carried out using subscriber lists (e-mail or conventional mail) or via Social Services.
- For the visually impaired, information will be needed in large print, braille and on cassette / disk. Those with a hearing impairment would welcome its inclusion in Channel 4's teletext programming. If information was provided about the new methods on TV, then this should be accompanied by sub-titles or, preferably, BSL.
- The homeless require information, not in a particular form, but in the places that they frequent such as hostels and day / training centres and libraries. Distribution by CAT workers might also be relevant.
- Those with literacy / communication problems who could come from almost any group, need information in a form that is simple and straightforward. For the most disadvantaged in this respect, those with learning difficulties, it will be vital that this is developed with their particular needs in mind ie. using few simple words, icons / pictures and Makaton where appropriate.