



SOWIT

Report on Consultation with Civil Society Organisations in Fingal County

Consultation Date: September 6th 2011

Fingal County Council

Swords

Co. Dublin

Ireland

Date of report: 11th October 2011



TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
The University of Dublin



UCC

Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland

Introduction

1.1 Background to SOWIT

SOWIT (Social Web for Inclusive and Transparent democracy) is an applied research project that aims to increase citizen participation in local government using social media. It is currently in development. When complete SOWIT will enable citizens to:

- Network and discuss on political issues by connecting with other citizens, forming groups, sharing information and building political skills
- Engage in public deliberation with councillors and citizens to help inform and develop local policy
- Experience deeper involvement in the council's decision making processes as the Council discusses the issues raised by citizens at monthly meetings and feeds back directly through SOWIT.

The SOWIT project is run by political science, social media and computer science researchers in Trinity College, UCC and the Irish public sector: Vanessa Liston PhD (TCD), Mark O'Toole MBA (Kilkenny County Council), Clodagh Harris PhD (UCC). Full details of the SOWIT project, conference papers, consultation reports and the team are available on the website: <http://www.sowit.eu>. This site also hosts a forum for continued discussion and knowledge sharing during the SOWIT development process.

SOWIT is being designed and developed in consultation and partnership with elected representatives, local authorities, civil society organisations, citizens and other stakeholders. The civil society organisation consultation that took place in Fingal County Council on September 8th was the first of these consultations.

1.2 Impact of Consultation

The consultation event had a number of positive impacts on the SOWIT design and development process. First, participants were positive about the SOWIT project and endorsed its development and aims. They felt it addressed their needs and could enable their organisations to better fulfil their missions. Second, participants provided highly useful critique and feedback on the SOWIT model which has resulted in the team putting particular emphasis on the following elements to strengthen citizen engagement and the feedback cycle:

- ✓ Provide clear information on how Council works
- ✓ Enable clear and responsive communication lines on Council services (beyond policy)
- ✓ Establish processes to guarantee the transparency and quality of the SOWIT code to ensure SOWIT's political legitimacy
- ✓ Emphasise design for inclusion, so that those with weak information technology (IT) skills can use the system
- ✓ Ensure that the system does not require high bandwidth and is therefore accessible to all internet users.
- ✓ Integrate the need for continuing face-to-face contact between Council and citizens.

The following report will detail the consultation event and provide the context from which these impacts were achieved.

1.3 Report Structure

This report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 outlines the background to the consultation process including the terms of reference, the invitation process and attendance.
- Section 3 details the feedback provided by participants during the break-out sessions including feedback on the SOWIT concept walk-through where screenshots were demonstrated.
- The conclusion in section 4 summarises the impact and outlines the next steps.

1.4 Thanks

We are very grateful to all of the participants for their time and expertise. We would also like to express our thanks to Fingal County Council for hosting and supporting the event. We would like to particularly thank Dominic Byrne for his facilitation and support of the SOWIT project.

2 SOWIT Consultation

2.1 Introduction

Broad participation by citizens in the design of the SOWIT participation and deliberation tool is essential to ensuring that: SOWIT addresses core needs and; enables all citizens to get involved according to their respective abilities and constraints. Regular citizen feedback will enable correction in the design process as well as the chance to identify challenges in uptake and include new knowledge and ideas of citizens. For this reason, the SOWIT team plans a number of consultation events in the design phase. This is the first event in that series and was conducted with representatives from civil society organisations in Fingal County, Dublin.

2.2 Publicising the Consultation

2.2.1 Email lists

An invitation (see Appendix A) was posted to 314 civil society organisations on the Fingal County Council database. This included Community Councils, Residents Associations, Integration Groups, Disability Groups, Active Age Groups and Heritage Groups. Participants were invited to register by phone, e-mail or through the SOWIT website. The invitation was also circulated on the UCD Centre for Equality studies mailing list which is hosted by the Higher Education Authority.

2.2.2 Websites

The event was also publicised on the SOWIT twitter account and the twitter accounts and websites of the research team.

Website	URL
SOWIT Home page	http://www.sowit.eu

SOWIT Facebook page	http://www.facebook.com/pages/Sowit/105649839540700
Personal web pages	http://www.vanessaliston.com http://www.rialtas.net
Twitter accounts	http://www.twitter.com/charris http://www.twitter.com/convex021 http://www.twitter.com/listonv http://www.twitter.com/sowit_eu

2.3 Attendance

24 people had registered prior to the event, 14 attended. A list of the organisations that received invitations in the post and those that attended the event can be found in Appendix B.

2.4 Terms of Reference

The consultation aimed to gather information from citizen discussions on their:

- ✓ Experience of participation with Fingal County Council
- ✓ The extent to which their organization networks with other groups and motivations for doing so
- ✓ Feedback on the SOWIT concept

2.5 Structure of the consultation event

The event began with a brief presentation that introduced the participants to the SOWIT project and the research team. This was followed by a short question and answer session. A survey to capture participants' experiences of participation with Fingal Council, size of organisations' networks and computer and Internet use, was circulated to all (full survey can be found in appendix C).

The participants were then divided into two break-out groups of 7 to discuss their organisations':

- Experiences of local government consultation

- Experiences of inter-group dialogue and networking

The first of the morning break-out sessions concentrated on experiences of local government consultation and focused on the following questions:

1. How often does your organisation engage with the local council and with councillors?
2. How and why does your organisation participate with the local council and councillors?
3. How satisfied are you with the effectiveness of current methods of participation/consultation with your council?

The second morning break out session focused on inter-group dialogue and asked:

1. Does your organisation collaborate with other groups or networks for any reason? If yes, why? If not, why not?
2. What is your experience of these collaborations?

The break-out sessions took an inclusive participatory approach where each of the participants was asked to share their views and experiences. They were facilitated by two members of the research team.

In the afternoon, the team presented screen-shots of the proposed SOWIT process. This was followed by an open discussion session with the full research team and representatives from Fingal County Council. During this session, all participants raised questions, issues or expressed their views on the prototype.

3 Findings

3.1 Session 1: Experiences of Local Government Consultation

Question 1: How often does your organisation engage with the local council and with councillors?

Regarding frequency of engagement with their local council, it was reported that:

- Some groups had daily contact through their work on Strategic Policy Committees (SPC)
- Others had collaborated with the council for events such as the 'Fun Day'
- One group never had engaged with the council

Question 2: How and why does your organisation engage with the local council and councillors?

Of those groups present on the day, two had made policy submissions. Another spoke of his organisations use of photographs to pass on specific and detailed information to the council. For the most part the participants focused on the reasons why their organisations did not engage more with their local council.

3.1.1 Reasons organisations did not engage with Council

- **Opaque system:** Many participants explained that they found the system opaque saying that it was not clear who in the council should be contacted about a certain issue or problem.
- **Poor level of responsiveness:** Others found it difficult to get an official response to a query or problem. One participant explained that she ended up 'chasing' a man driving a local council van to get information having had no success with councillors and officials. Others spoke of 'grabbing' councillors at

the doorstep at election time to get answers to questions and flag up problems.

- Other reasons given for not participating more included the following remarks:
 - 'People are busy'
 - Organisations feel they are 'small and not heard'
 - 'Council speak' makes it difficult to understand policy documents and policy processes (some stated that they had never read a policy document)
 - A sense that the Council is not responsive and that it 'does what it wants anyway'
 - Some felt that they had no need to engage with the local council
 - Small organisations advise or inform larger advocacy groups and thus their experience is indirectly fed to the policy process

However, a number of the participants agreed that when the 'right person' was located in the council a satisfactory job had been done.

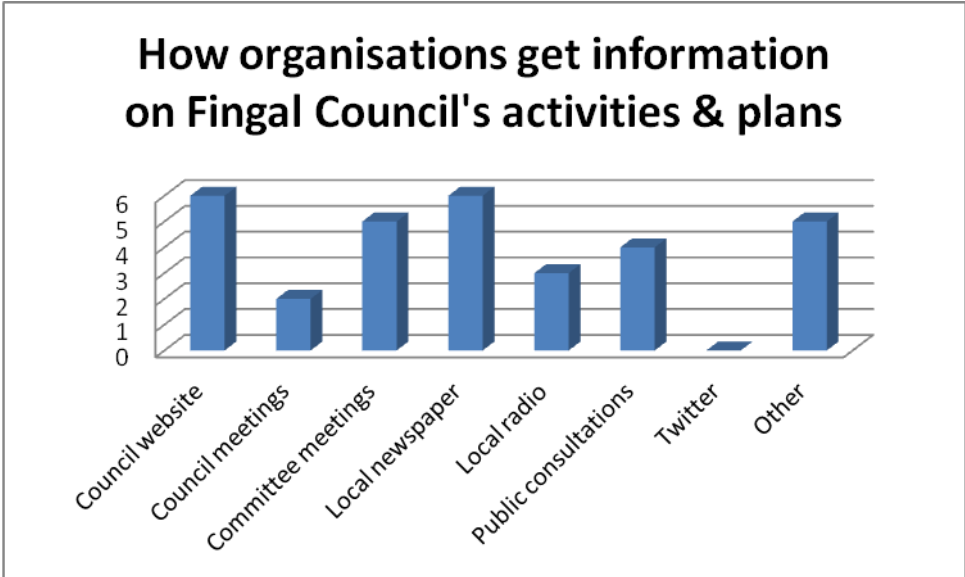
3.1.2 Suggestions for improvement

- ***Return to Council Chambers:*** Some participants spoke about a former practice of making a submission to Fingal Council and being invited to council chambers to meet councillors and give a presentation. Two organisations in particular had very positive experiences of this process, mentioning that it required groups and individuals to be well prepared and that the Councillors would then refer the matter on to responsible division/section in the council. They called for a return to this system of consultation and participation.
- ***Provide clearer information & better communication:*** The participants called for clearer information on local government processes and policy making, improved communication on what was happening in their community, more transparency and more support for new groups trying to find way to link in with the local council (for example, Skerries has a welcome pack listing all the organisations working in the area, similarly Balbriggan).

Findings from the survey showed that participants used many methods for accessing information on Fingal County Council's activities and plans (figure 3.1) but most

participants either had occasional or frequent difficulty accessing or understanding Council reports and planning consultation processes (figure 3.2).

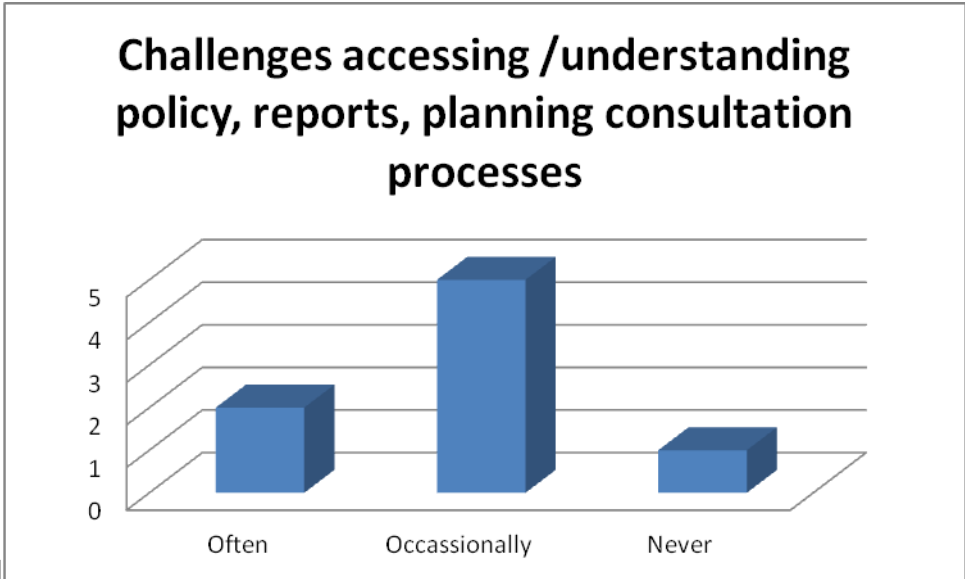
Figure 3.1: How organisations acquire information on Council activities



* Other includes

- Local politicians' newsletters
- Meetings with Councillors
- Personal contact
- Library services
- Networking (phone calls, emails)

Figure 3.2: Challenges engaging with Fingal County Council



Challenges in engaging with Fingal County Council were described in the survey as:

- Time constraints on the part of organisations
- Not clear how particular processes work
- Lack of clarity of reports and ideas
- Up to date information was not always available
- Specific map boundaries were not correct

Question 3: How satisfied are you with the effectiveness of current methods of participation/consultation with your council?

In general participants had both positive and negative experiences of working with Fingal County Council.

Positive experiences

The positive experiences referred to included: the Casino issue in Malahide, the provision of salt in the winter, the 2010 'fun day', the excellent library services and the nature treks. Some organisations spoke of their good experiences of public consultation e.g. the Fingal sports complex and praised the council staff for the ensuing report. Another highlighted the value of a visit to the council in introducing the organisation to how the council works while others mentioned that the website was a useful source of information.

Negative experiences

Participants' negative experiences included:

- Poor response rates from councillors and officials
- Difficulties understanding the system. Participants argued that this has been exacerbated by the current restructuring of Fingal County Council leaving citizens uncertain of which division or person to contact.

In addition, specific issues such as grass cutting, the construction of the new Council building on a public park and the disbandment of the community council received negative comments.

Number of questions on SPCs agenda: It was also stated that there was a need for more opportunities to raise questions in the Strategic Policy Committees as the current system of adding two questions to the agenda for meetings that take place every three to four months was not enough.

Reform & equality: Finally, some general issues were raised regarding the need for local government reform as well as the need for greater equality in staffing across councils as some are were struggling with fewer resources than others.

3.2 Session 2: Inter group dialogue and networking

Question 1: Does your organisation collaborate with other groups or networks for any reason (if so why, if not why not)?

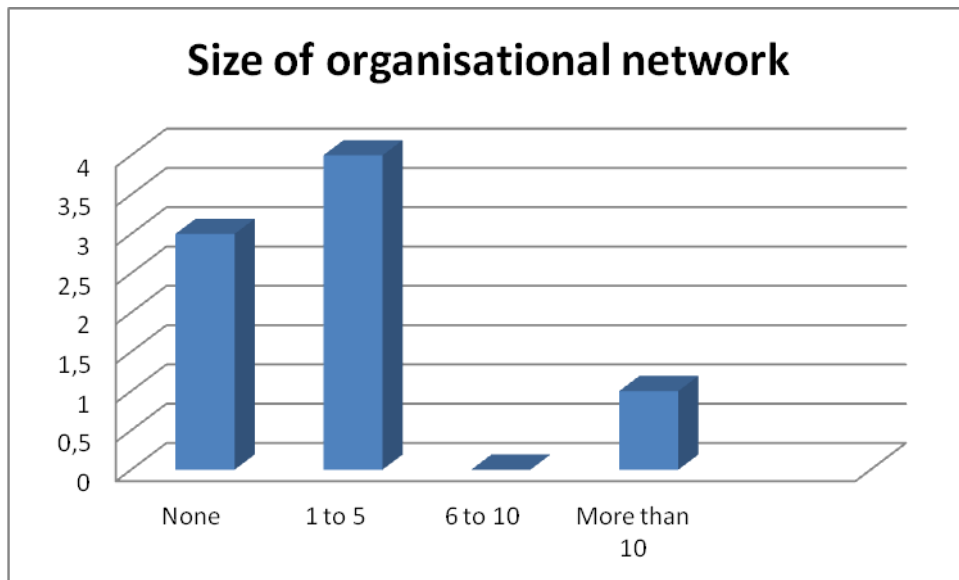
In general, the organisations that participated in the event tended to make linkages and collaborate with organisations with similar goals to themselves. For example, the senior citizens parliament collaborates with age action and other similar groups. Small groups with deep knowledge of specific communities tended to inform and provide consultancy services to larger groups that engage with the policy process.

Others engaged with groups that were very different to their own. Resident Associations engage in some collaboration with local groups like the parish council, tidy towns committees and neighbourhood watch committees. One residents' association mentioned lobbying with the community council (which has legal and other expertise) on issues like closing 'Head shops'.

One of the participant organisations had collaboration and communication as its remit while another does not collaborate at all. On average, among participants, networking is driven by the direct needs of the organisation. Exploratory networking for new opportunities or knowledge is generally not pursued.

Information provided by the participants in the survey shows that the majority of organisations network with 1-5 organisations in pursuit of their organisational mission.

Figure 3.2: Organisational Networking



Reasons given for organizational networking:

- Common purpose or goal
- Inclusion and co-operation
- For service referral
- Training
- Achieve organizational goals e.g. Housing
- Shared interests
- Gathering information

Question 2: What is your experience of these collaborations?

When asked about their views on working with groups very different to themselves, participants felt that organisations tend to think only in terms of their own groups. However, some participants agreed that collaborating with similar groups resulted in more knowledge sharing and the avoidance of duplication.

Issues that arose in the discussions of inter-organisational collaboration included a:

- Fear of change
- Recognition that collaboration could lead to a possibly threatening situation *vis-a-vis* funding, particularly for groups with subscriptions. This was also mentioned with regard to competition for government funding.
- Realisation that collaborative funding processes can be time consuming and take from the organisation's core business
- Concern with the idea of 'what you share, you give away'
- Fear of approaching other groups that are 'causing a problem'

3.3 Session 3: Feedback on the SOWIT prototype and visuals

The afternoon session consisted of a question and answer session following a visual presentation of the SOWIT concept using sample screen-shots.

The participants raised the following issues and questions:

- ✓ Protecting the SOWIT process from manipulation.
How would the team ensure that the scoring system and output of SOWIT would not be manipulated, and that citizens could be confident that the system had integrity? A discussion ensued and the SOWIT team explained that the code would be fully open for expert review. There would also be the possibility of an expert audit process. Further details on this process will be posted on the SOWIT website during development.
- ✓ Possible exclusion of people with poor Information Technology (IT) literacy
Concerns were raised that because SOWIT is a technical initiative it could create more exclusion than inclusion, particularly of those already external to the system or those with few IT skills.
Outcomes of this discussion included:
 - a) SOWIT will be designed for mobile access so those without a computer could access the system.
 - b) Voice enabled participation will be investigated
 - c) Library services can be requested to provide training on the SOWIT system as noted by Fingal County Council.

- ✓ Privacy matters. Will members of the site be allowed to post anonymous or must their user identity (user id) be shown at all times? This question will be researched further by the team.

- ✓ Infrastructural costs. Participants pointed to problems with downloading .pdf files and inquired whether users would have to purchase higher bandwidth in order to use SOWIT? This was acknowledged as an issue and SOWIT will be designed for low bandwidth.

Other questions were raised regarding the archiving of information; the discussion of policy issues outside the remit of local government and the possibility of the site becoming a vehicle for so-called 'cranks'. The SOWIT team explained that the site was inclusive for all members of society for exchange of ideas and information though not extending beyond legal boundaries (hate speech etc.). Information would be archived with the consent of users on registration. However, users can delete their profile and activity history at any time.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Overview

During the SOWIT consultation event participants:

- ✓ Expressed support for the SOWIT project and believed it responded to needs on both a personal and organisational level
- ✓ Were highly engaged through the event
- ✓ Provided feedback that raised important issues, which are now prioritised in the design process of SOWIT. Specifically, the team aims to ensure that

SOWIT:

- Provides clear and simple information on how the work of the Council
- Prioritises clear and responsive communication lines
- Establishes rigorous processes for ensuring the transparency and quality of the SOWIT code to ensure political legitimacy of the process.
- Enables inclusion of those residents that are; excluded by the political and social system; and those who are have weak IT skills.
- Is designed for low bandwidth.
- Integrates the need for citizen/Council face-to-face contact

4.2 Evaluation

At the end of the day's proceedings the participants were asked to evaluate the event and the processes used. All expressed satisfaction with the consultation and felt that their voice had been heard. Other feedback received on the forms included comments such as *'Good Luck'*, *'Good Concept'* *'Very stimulating discussion'* and *'I enjoyed the openness of the forum'*.

4.3 Next Steps in the SOWIT process

The information gathered at this event is directly input to the design of the SOWIT project. The SOWIT process will continue its series of consultations with councillors, local officials, stakeholders and citizens. The team is also mindful that a number of groups were unable to attend on the day due to prior commitments. These groups will be invited to attend other consultations in the coming months to ensure their views and experiences are captured.

Following consultations, the design of SOWIT will be finalised. The team will then begin development of the SOWIT functionality, which we aim to complete within two years. Within this timeframe sections of functionality will be incrementally delivered. The first phase aims to deliver the public sphere which will include the facility to create a political profile, network with other citizens, post submissions to a public dashboard for discussion, communicate directly with Councillors and Council, and receive a monthly feedback report. The second phase will deliver the deliberation sphere functionality in the second year.

A roadmap of the SOWIT development process will be published on the website in the coming weeks. Participants in SOWIT events and individuals that register on the SOWIT website will receive a copy of the roadmap via email. Further information, publications and updates on SOWIT will be posted regularly on the SOWIT website www.sowit.eu and on the SOWIT Twitter and Facebook accounts.



http://twitter.com/sowit_eu



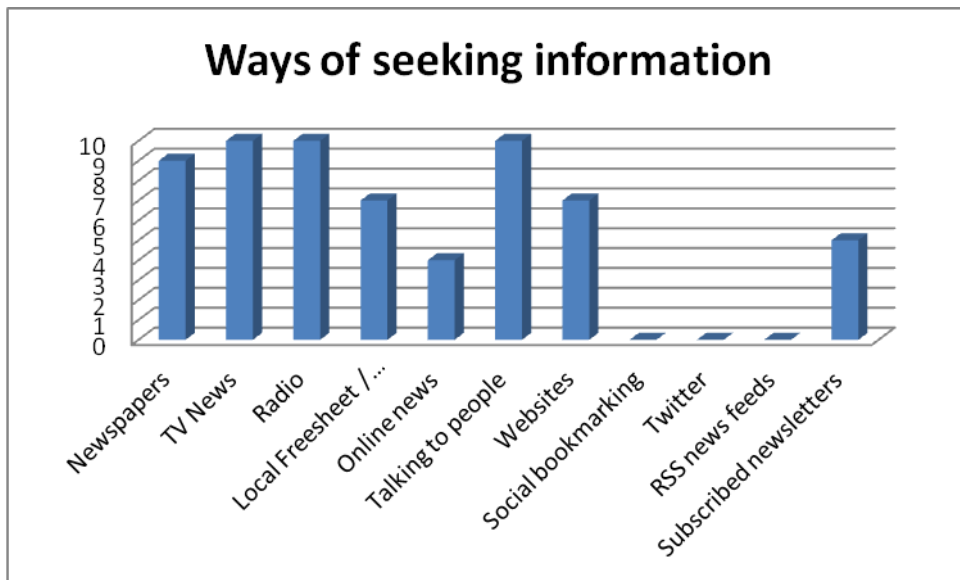
<http://on.fb.me/sowit>

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Survey results on IT use

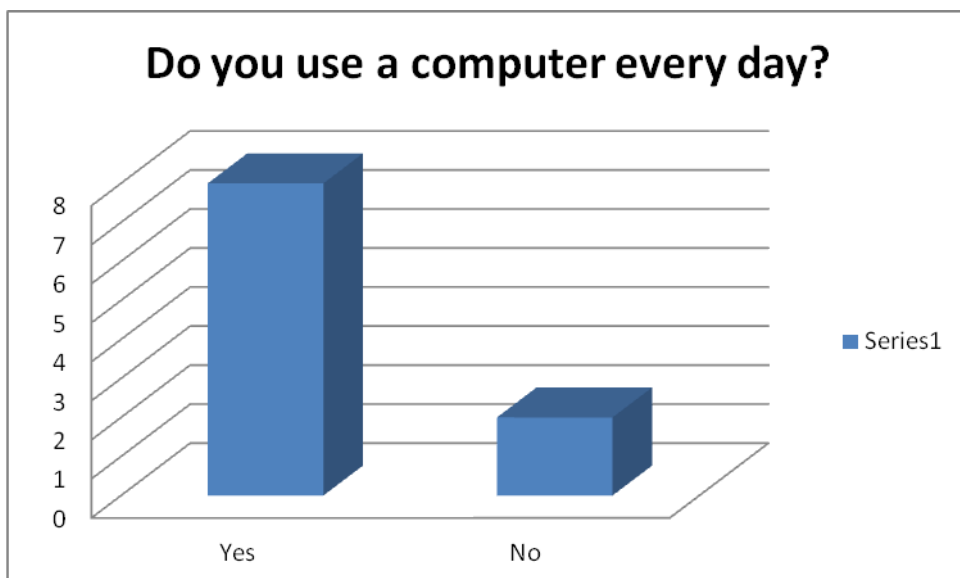
Following are select results from the survey completed by respondents at the beginning of the consultation event.

Q.1 Thinking about your day-to-day life, how do you personally seek information relating to your interests and work?

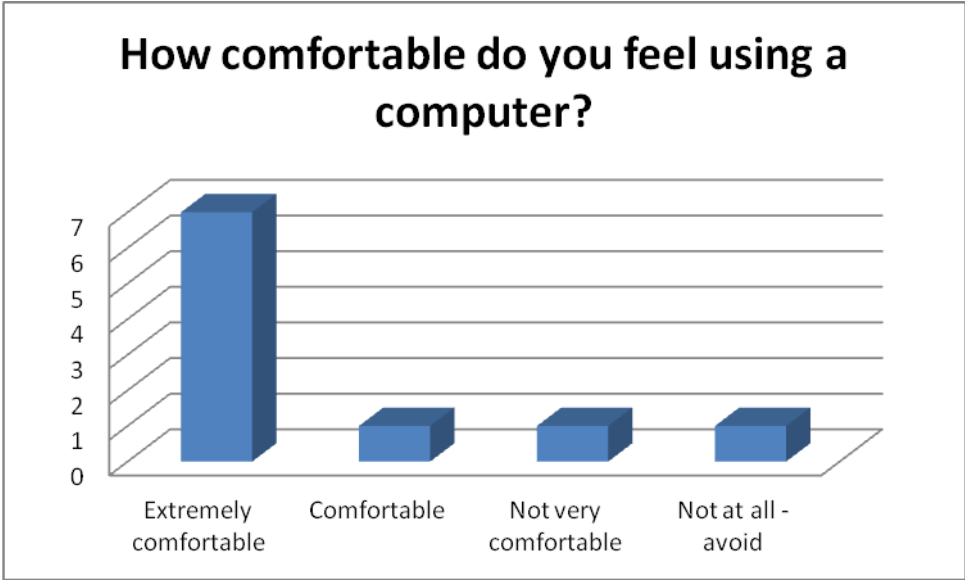


Online news sources are more frequent than online sources among respondents.

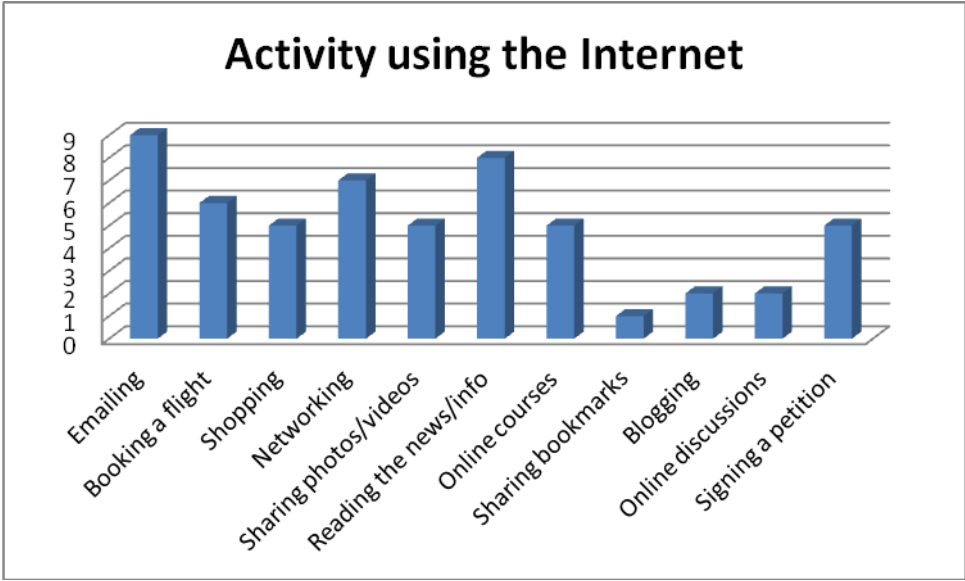
Q.7 Daily computer use



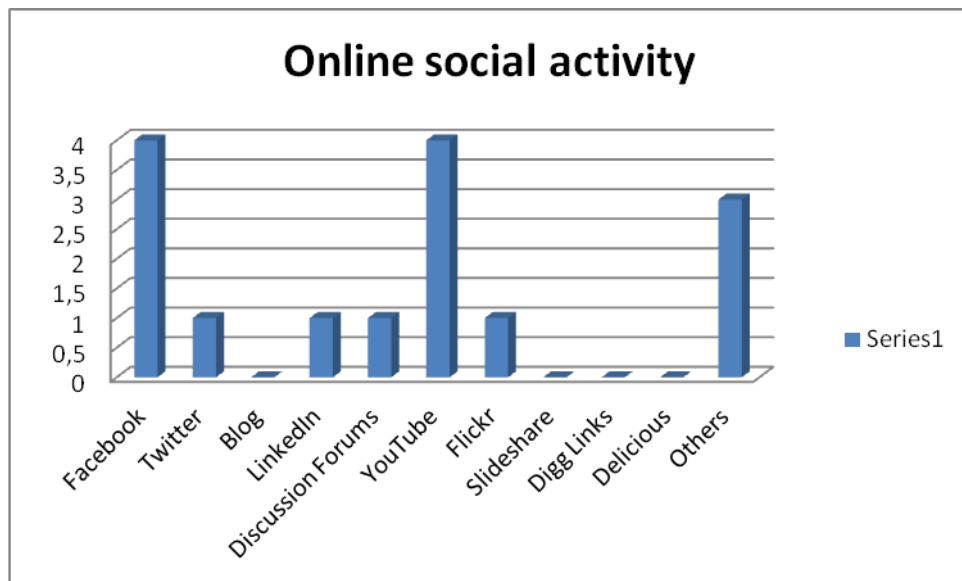
Q.8 How comfortable do you feel using a computer? Please indicate on a scale of 0-10 where 0 means 'not comfortable and avoid use where possible' and 10 means 'extremely comfortable' (Responses were re-categorised into a four point scale from extremely comfortable to avoid)



Q.9 Thinking about the way you use the internet, have you ever tried any of the following?



Q.10 Do you have an online presence i.e. a webpage, Facebook account, Twitter account etc?



APPENDIX B: Invitation to SOWIT consultation



TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
The University of Dublin



UCC
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland

Invitation to Civil society consultation on e-deliberation

We would like to kindly invite you to participate in a civil society consultation on e-deliberation and policy making in local government which will take place in the:

Council Chamber of Fingal County Council

Main Street, Swords, Co. Dublin

Tuesday, September 6th 2011.

9.30am to 3.00pm

The event will focus on 1) sharing your views on participation with local government to date and 2) on how you perceive the potential for online participation and deliberation to improve local democracy. We will also present a prototype design of an e-deliberative website (SOWIT) on which we would welcome your comments and suggestions.

SOWIT (Social Web for Inclusive and Transparent democracy) is an independent project that has been initiated by researchers and social media developers in UCC, TCD and Kilkenny County Council. SOWIT will be designed and developed in partnership with Fingal County Council; and in collaboration with civil society organisations, citizens and councillors. It is a pioneering development in citizen participation in Ireland that aims to enable citizens and civil society organisations to have a direct voice in local Council, in a way that is transparent and that supports participatory, deliberative and inclusive democracy. Further information on the project can be found at www.sowit.eu.

Lunch and refreshments will be provided on the day. If you wish to attend this event, please contact Clodagh Harris before 4.00pm Friday September 2nd at either 021 4903472 or <mailto:clodagh.harris@ucc.ie> at info@sowit.eu to secure a place. Alternatively, you can register on-line at http://www.sowit.eu/event_reservation . If you have any special needs please let us know. We look forward to meeting you.

APPENDIX C: Groups Invited & Groups that attended

Invitations were sent to the following:

- 209 Residents Associations & Community Councils
- 35 Active Age Groups
- 20 Disability Groups
- 15 Third Nationals Groups
- 14 Tidy Towns Groups
- 13 Heritage Groups
- 8 Integration Groups

The groups that attended included:

- Skerries Community Association
- U3A Sutton Baldoyle
- Millview Residents Association
- Clann Fingal Probis Club
- Sword Tidy Town Committee
- African Women in Balbriggan Group
- Fingal Community & Voluntary Forum
- Healthy Food for All
- Red Square Residents' Association
- Sofia Housing Donabate
- Lusk Active Retirement Association
- Association of Ogun State Indigenes Ireland (AOSI Ireland)

APPENDIX D: CSO Consultation Survey 2011

As part of the consultation process, we would be very grateful if you could complete this questionnaire on your information, networking and technology use. All answers will be treated as STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. The identity of the respondents will not be revealed and the information given will be used only for research purposes.

SECTION 1: GENERAL INFORMATION

As information is a key requirement for SOWIT participation and deliberation we would like to inquire about your current sources of information (personally) and those of your organisation.

Q.1 Thinking about your day-to-day life, how do you personally seek information relating to your interests and work? *(Please tick all that apply in order of preference)*

	Personally	Work
Printed newspapers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
TV news	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Radio	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local freesheet/local newspaper	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Online newspapers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Talking to people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Particular websites	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social bookmarking (e.g. Delicious)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Twitter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
RSS news feeds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Subscribed newsletters/alerts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q.2 Thinking about interacting with Fingal Council, how does your organisation get information on their activities, decisions and plans *(Please tick all that apply in order of importance)*

Council website	<input type="checkbox"/>
Council meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>
Committee meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local freesheet/newspaper	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local Radio	<input type="checkbox"/>
Public consultations	<input type="checkbox"/>
Twitter	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

If Other, please give details

Q.3 How much time does your organisation spend accessing this information?

Every day More than once a week One day a fortnight One day a month Less than once a month

- Reading the news/reports/information
- Online learning courses
- Sharing bookmarks
- Writing a blog
- Engaging in online discussions
- Signing an online petition (e.g. Greenpeace, Avaaz.org)

Q.10 Do you have an online presence i.e. a webpage, Facebook account, Twitter account etc?
 Yes GO TO Q11 No

Q.11 **If YES, which do you have and how often do you use them?**

- | | |
|---|---|
| Website..... <input type="checkbox"/> | YouTube..... <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Facebook /Google+ <input type="checkbox"/> | Flickr..... <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Twitter <input type="checkbox"/> | Slideshare..... <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Blog <input type="checkbox"/> | Digg Links..... <input type="checkbox"/> |
| LinkedIn <input type="checkbox"/> | Delicious Bookmarks..... <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Discussion Forums..... <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Other Online groups/Networking <input type="checkbox"/> | |

SECTION 4: GENERAL

For research purposes we wish to gather some personal data from you. This will be kept confidential

Q.12 What age are you?

Q.13 Are you male or female? Male Female

Q.14 For how many years have you worked in your organisation? _____

SECTION 5: SURVEY QUESTION

We would appreciate your feedback on this survey.

Q.15 Did you find this survey

Easy to complete Difficult to complete ... No opinion....

Please feel free to comment on the survey here

.....

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME