
An interactive site for electronic communication between the population and public administration institutions: E-consultations

1 Introduction

Latvia has chosen implementation of the one-stop agency principle as one of the driving forces for reforms in public administration and for increasing effectiveness, meaning organising work of public administration institutions in a way that allows the residents to receive services at a single location, without having to go to the person in charge in each of the institutions.

In order to ensure an effective management of knowledge (information) that the public administration institutions require to prepare replies to questions and submissions from the general public, and to grant access for the people to previously provided replies, improve exchange of information between institutions in preparing replies and potentially support the functioning of the one-stop agency, an environment will be created where it will be possible to find the stored questions from the general public and the replies provided by the institutions, interlinked with the context of services provided by the institutions and the regulatory context.

Questions and replies containing information that can be publicised will be available for reading on the Web – in the unified Web portal for national and local government services managed by the State Regional Development Agency: www.latvija.lv (henceforth – the Portal), thus reducing the need for the population to contact institutions repeatedly with the same questions; and it also will serve as a basis for the public administration institutions and staff of the one-stop agency for the list of frequently asked questions or the knowledge base.

2 Volume of submissions and questions from the population, electronic applications

Processing of submissions from the population creates a significant work load for the public administration institutions. The total volume of documents received from the population in direct administration institutions exceeds 100 thousand documents annually (data from the survey of state and local administration institutions “On document circulation processes and document management systems” conducted by the project consultants SIA “AA Projekts” under the framework of the State Regional Development Agency’s project “Creation of integration environment for public administration document management systems” co-financed from the European Regional Development Fund, July 2009).

In June 2010 the State Regional Development Agency in their project “Creation of integration environment for public administration document management systems”, co-financed from the European Regional Development Fund, carried out a survey of the population and public administration institutions regarding their experience in mutual communication (henceforth – the Survey). The Survey showed that the majority of respondents – 70% of state institutions and 66% local governments – confirmed receiving submissions and questions from the population not only in conventional paper format but also electronically (Figure 1).

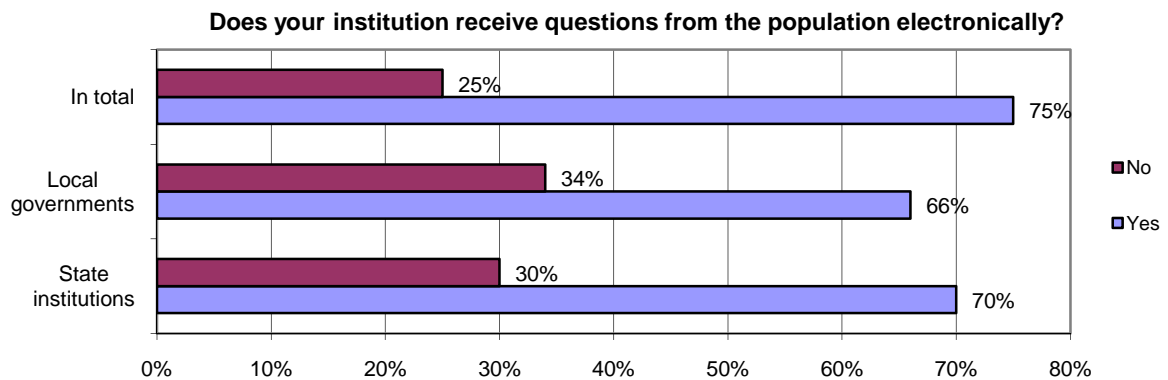


Figure 1. *Does your institution receive questions from the population electronically?*

Analysing replies from the population presented a trend that almost every other respondent has been communicating with state institutions or a local government electronically (Figure 2). This shows that at least half of the respondents surveyed have recognised the electronic communication with public administration institutions as being convenient.

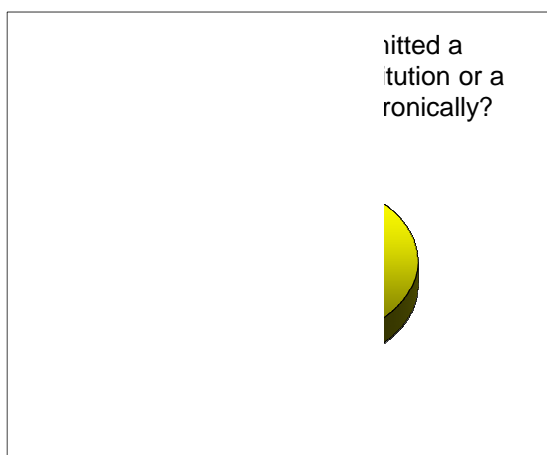


Figure 2. *Have you ever submitted a question for a state institution or a local government electronically?*

From the point of view of the population, they can look for information on public administration services on the Web sites of institutions or other Internet resources.

As the number of Web sites of institutions is large (there are 118 local governments in Latvia and according to the information available in the data basis of direct administration institutions <http://tpi.mk.gov.lv/ui/> there were 241 institution registered as on 22/03/2010), people might find it difficult to make sense in such volume of information and find the answers needed. When the exact location of information is not known, people most often use Internet search engines like *google, bing, yahoo*, etc., while the search hits might be unrelated and not match the context of situations in people's lives. The processing of written submissions in public administration institutions is an administratively burdensome process (way of handing in the submission or question, way of providing the reply, time) and the population usually chooses a different way of communication with the institutions, unless a specific request for information is required (e.g., a statement, an explanation of an administrative act, etc.).

The views expressed in the survey confirm (Figures 3 and 4) that the population and the staff of the public administration institutions support creation of a publicly accessible free-of-charge Web site where:

- a. People could ask questions and hand in submissions to state institutions and local governments, as well as search through and examine questions asked by others and replies provided by the institutions;
- b. Collection, storage and updating of all questions from the population and all replies from the institutions would be technically ensured for the needs of the institutions.

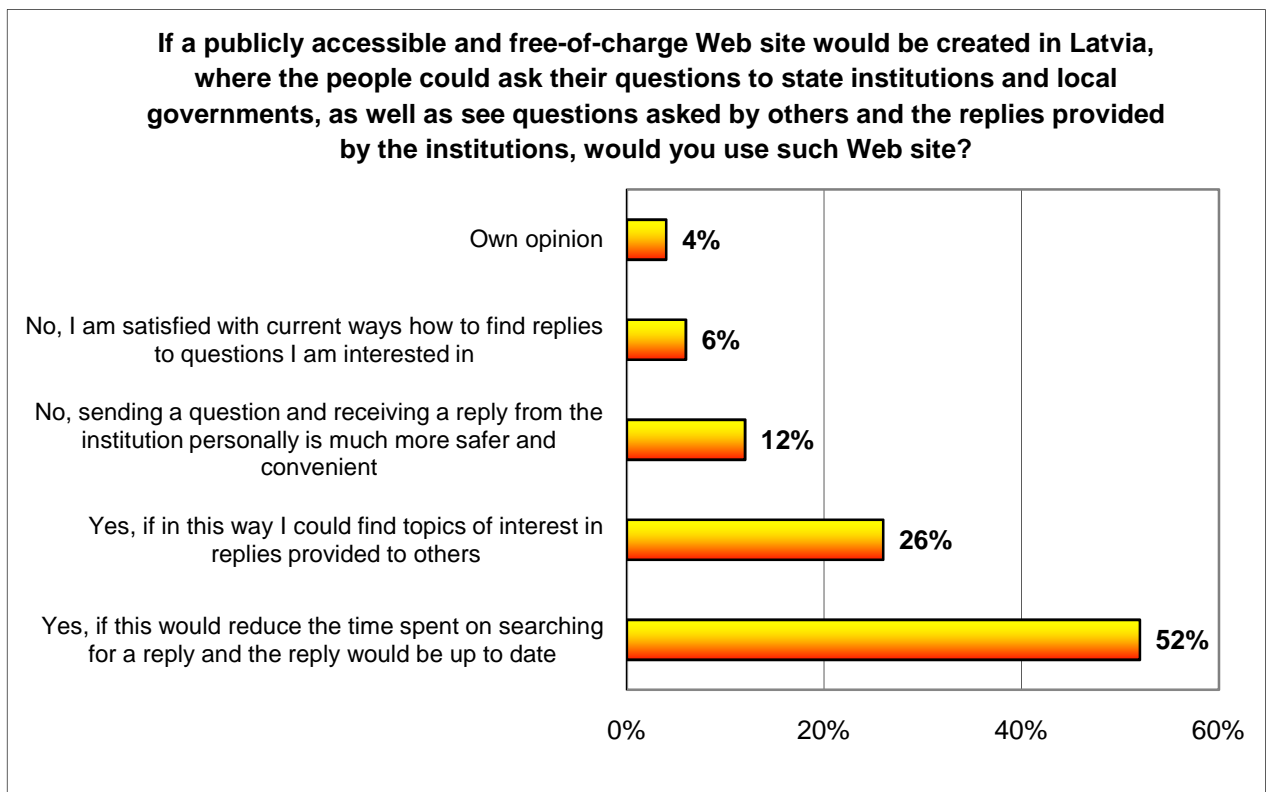


Figure 3. Population. *If a publicly accessible and free-of-charge Web site would be created in Latvia, where the people could ask their questions to state institutions and local governments, as well as see questions asked by others and the replies provided by the institutions, would you use such Web site?*

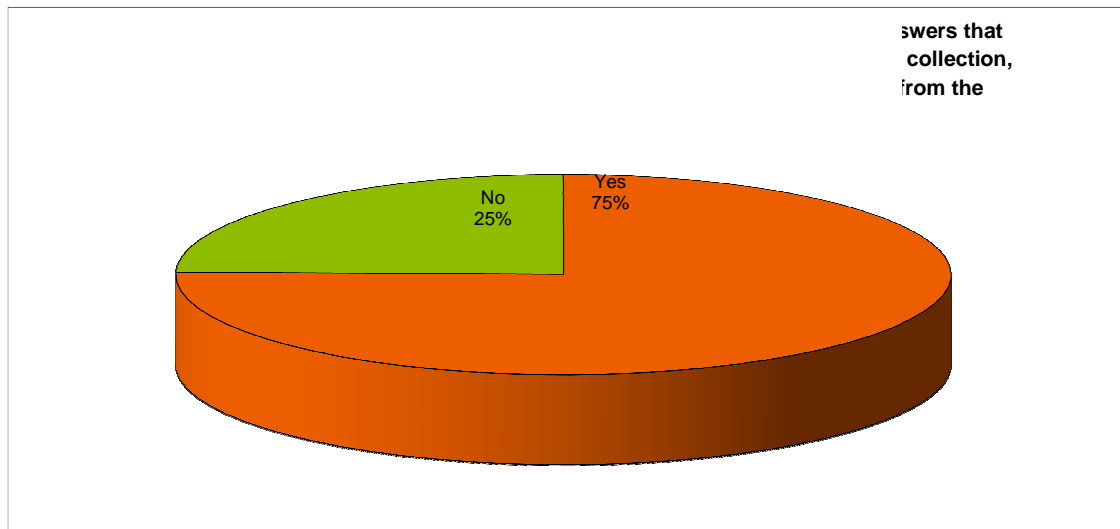


Figure 4. Public administration institutions. *Does your institution support creation of a unified system for questions and answers that would be publicly accessible and free of charge, which would technically ensure collection, storage and updating of all questions asked by the population and all replies from the institutions?*

Although the Survey shows that for a rather significant part of the population surveyed it seems better to send personally their questions and receive replies from the public administration institutions, it is possible that with widening of range of e-services offered and making the state institutions and local governments more accessible for the general public, the number of people unsure and in doubt would decrease. A very large part of institutions – 75% is interested in introducing e-consultations solution. Upon closer examination of the replies from the 25% of institutions and local governments not supporting the introduction of the said solution a conclusion can be drawn that mostly these are institutions that already have an internal procedure in place for providing replies and have appropriate or customised technical solutions in place as well.

3 Features and benefits of the e-consultations solution

Upon conducting the aforementioned Survey a conclusion was made that a solution is required which would allow to systematically store and manage the replies provided by the institutions to the questions and submissions from the general public, and to ensure the availability for all parties involved, as well as provide for availability of this information on the Internet, at one single contact point.

The e-consultations solution will have the following features:

- 1) Storage of questions and sorting by topics or life situations;
- 2) Linkage of replies with regulatory framework context (integration with the Register of regulatory references), in which these replies were provided in order to avoid use of such replies that are outdated due to amendments to regulatory acts;
- 3) Search in questions and replies by keywords, selected topics (life situations) and provided access for all parties involved (staff of institutions and one-stop agency, general public), subject to requirements of data protection regarding natural persons;
- 4) Management of frequently asked questions and replies (preparing of replies and publishing on-line, based on typical questions asked by the population);
- 5) Integration with the Portal, providing a single access point for the population to submit their questions and searching for replies;
- 6) Identification and authentication of persons through Portal features;
- 7) Integration with the record-keeping systems of the institutions, using the document integration environment to be created, so that the institutions could automatically receive and electronically register the questions for processing in their document circulation environment and to submit the prepared replies to a person's "workspace" in the Portal;
- 8) Integration with Web sites of the institutions, thus providing links to features implemented in the Portal or automatic republication of information on Web sites of the institutions;
- 9) A site for employee of the institution, using the "workspace" of the employee in the Portal, in order to provide administration possibilities of the solution on the institution's side, as well as access to the e-consultations solution for those institutions that do not have their own record-keeping system;
- 10) Displaying status for a submission and a reply in the "workspace" of a person in the Portal, so that people can track the step-y-step process of preparing replies at an institution, and sending messages to a person's e-mail address indicated in his/her "workspace" in the Portal regarding changes in the status of preparing a reply;
- 11) Handing in submissions on any service of a public administration institution published in the Portal.

Benefits to be provided by the e-consultations solution:

- For the population:
 - a) Creating a single, convenient and efficient channel of communication between the population and public administration institutions,
 - b) Information related to public administration that is easier and faster to be found,
 - c) People are involved in public administration processes, can express their opinion to the institutions more conveniently, get the overall picture of functions of the institutions and look up questions asked by other people,

- d) Reduced time for information exchange (handing in submissions and questions and receiving replies),
- e) Reliable data sources.
- For the public administration institutions:
 - a) Reduced workload of institution's staff – general public can find information themselves or standard questions can be answered by the staff of the one-stop agency,
 - b) Less time needed to prepare replies – staff has organised information available on previously asked questions and replies thereto,
 - c) Reduced flow of documents in paper format,
 - d) Reduced costs and increased work efficiency.
- For the public in general:
 - a) More efficient functioning of public administration,
 - b) Higher level of trust by the public.

As currently there is no such solution available in Latvia that would ensure provision of similar functions, development of a new information system is needed for implementation of these functions. It is possible to create the e-consultations solution by using the functionality already provided by the Portal, hub of state information systems and which will be provided by the document integration environment to be created.

3.1 Questions and replies available to the population in the e-consultations solution

The people will be able to search and browse questions and replies, as well as frequently asked questions and replies in the Portal.

People will be able to search by:

- Topic,
- Related regulatory acts (if possible – down to articles of a regulatory act), if necessary, by indicating specific wording of a regulatory act,
- Institution,
- Search keyword,
- Text (one or more words, phrases) contained in a reply,
- Text (one or more words, phrases) contained in a question,
- Classifier of public service (phrase in the name of a public service),
- Date range,
- Status.

The following questions and replies will be available for the population:

- Questions they asked and replies to them (for authenticated users),
- Questions and replies not containing personal information and permitted by the person who submitted it to be published (for any user),

- Frequently asked questions and replies (for any user).

When a reply is displayed, related regulatory acts should also be indicated as links to the Web portal of regulatory acts. By clicking on this link the respective regulatory act would be displayed.

3.2 E-consultations solution and FAQs

The staff of the institution would regularly have to analyse the questions asked and update the list of frequently asked questions (FAQ) and replies.

For each question and reply the following information would be indicated in the e-consultations environment in the Portal:

- Topic,
- Responsible institution,
- Related regulatory acts (if possible – specific articles),
- Search keywords.

As time goes by the topicality of questions asked might change. It should be possible for the institution and the administrator of the e-consultations solution to see statistics on how often people have viewed each question. In order to ensure an interactive communication between the population and the institutions it will be ensured that people can grade the replies received from institutions, thus providing a feedback for the institution on the quality and usefulness of the reply prepared.

4 Approach to implementation of e-consultation solution

It is planned to use in the e-consultations solution a technical solution that is currently in development – the document integration environment (environment for circulation of e-documents providing a unified and secure exchange among the document management or record-keeping systems of various state institutions and local governments. The development is carried out under the project of the State Regional Development Agency “Creation of integration environment for public administration document management systems”, co-financed from the European Regional Development Fund), intended for efficient exchange of information among the institutions in electronic environment, as well as for improving the possibilities provided by the Portal for the population to communicate with the institutions. It will be possible to integrate the e-consultations in the Web sites of the institutions, thus ensuring, for example, efficient republication of FAQs without the need for additional changes to the Web sites of the institutions.

Initially the e-consultations solution will be implemented as a pilot project and for the implementation thereof the State Regional Development Agency has attracted 12 cooperation partners, among them ministries, state institutions and local

governments. Right from the start the general public will also be the users of the e-consultations, they will have access to the solution via the Portal. Following the implementation of the pilot project, the developed solution will be assessed and a decision will have to be made whether the e-consultations would have to be used by all public administration institutions, and in the future, also by the staff of the one-stop agency.

5 Future outlook – provision of functioning of the one-stop agency

The goal of the one-stop agency is to provide the people with a convenient way of receiving services by improving accessibility of public administration services and providing consultations.

Implementing the principle of the one-stop agency will ensure cooperation of public administration institutions in line with the principle of good governance, as a result of which the general public will be able to receive the required information and services at a single location. Currently a policy planning document (*agenda*) is being drafted nationally in order to implement the principle of one-stop agency in all local governments – in each and every administrative centre of a city, town or local municipality, ensuring availability of municipal and state-level public services at a single location. The agenda for implementation of the one-stop agency principle stipulates development of access channels to state and municipal-level services, providing services also in the electronic environment, thus increasing their availability and decoupling the possibility to receive services from a specific geographic location and time, and following the equal opportunities principle for all residents of Latvia.

The e-consultations solution to be set up will be a universal tool for ensuring the functioning of the one-stop agency. With the e-consultations solution in place the staff of the one-stop agency will be able to assist in person the population to find replies that are topical and are based on the regulatory acts, as well as assist in handing in submissions to institutions electronically by using the classification of topics, services and life situations offered by the solution. The staff of the one stop agency will have to be able to browse questions sent in by the public and reply to them instead of the institution or forward them for reply to a different institution, if the person sending it had made a mistake.

The Portal, into which the e-consultations tool will be integrated, was created back in 2006 and serves as a single contact point for information on state and municipal-level public services and for access thereto. Currently there is a catalogue of public services in the Portal that contains detailed information on all state and municipal-level public services, the possibilities, pre-conditions and channels to receive them. Up-to-date description of services is required to provide information on public services in person at the one-stop agency contact points (e.g., so that the staff of the one-stop agency would be able to identify a service that will meet the needs of a

person, to obtain information on how to receive such service and what the conditions are), and to be able to advise people.

The State Regional Development Agency plans to improve and develop the catalogue of public services, so that in line with the Directive 2006/123/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on services in the internal market, Latvia would be able to provide its residents with a single access point to most up-to-date, detailed and accurate information.

According to the National Development Plan (2007-2013), which identified the key **value in Latvia – people**, the State Regional Development Agency within its competence carries out and coordinates activities with other public administration institutions in order to more efficiently ease the everyday life of people and provide for more convenient accessibility to services.