

e-Methods for public engagement

Helping local authorities to communicate with citizens





The Local e-Democracy National Project has been set up with £4m of funding from the ODPM to help Local Authorities exploit the potential of new technologies for democratic renewal. The project is one of 22 National Projects, funded with £80m from the ODPM, which aim to bring together councils, central government, the private sector and others to define and deliver projects and national Local e-Government solutions.

www.e-democracy.gov.uk

Foreword

This report is to help local authorities identify appropriate e-methods for engaging with citizens. The report is directed at councillors and officials in local government, and the methods are discussed from their perspective.

However, this is not the only perspective and it is equally important to evaluate methods in terms of their value to citizens, both as individuals and specific socio-demographic groups within the population.

Bristol City Council is pleased to have commissioned this e-methods guide as part of its role as evaluation lead for the Local e-Democracy National Project.

Soon after Bristol took on this lead evaluation role, it became apparent to us that the many different ways of defining, grouping and talking about 'e-tools' were adding to a general sense of confusion amongst authorities about how to proceed with e-democracy. It also became apparent that in order to define a credible single picture of these tools we needed to address the different contexts in which local authorities will choose to implement e-democracy.

The following guide is the product of debate and discussion between leading academic thinkers and writers on e-democracy. The aim of the guide is not to 'tell authorities how to do it' but to provide a framework to help authorities develop thinking and planning about the approach that best fits their particular environment and purpose.

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Forward

<http://www...>

Contents

1 Introduction	4
2 Key dimensions	6
2.1 Type of engagement	6
2.2 Stage in decision-making	6
2.3 Actors	8
2.4 Target audience	8
2.5 Rules of engagement	8
2.6 Accessibility and usability	9
2.7 Duration	9
2.8 Technology issues	9
2.9 Implications for evaluation	9
2.10 Types of Tools	10
2.11 Specific Tools	10
3 The e-methods guide – matching tools to key dimensions	16
3.1 Webcasts	17
3.2 FAQ	18
3.3 Blogs	19
3.4 Quick Polls	20
3.5 Surveys	21
3.6 Chat Rooms	22
3.7 Decision-making games	23
3.8 Discussion Forums	24
3.9 e-Panels	25
3.10 e-Petitions	26
3.11 e-Deliberative polling	27
3.12 Virtual Communities	28
3.13 Alert Mechanisms – email alerts and RSS Feeds	29
4 The e-Method Landscape	31
4.1 Resource Implication Matrix	32
4.2 The Tool	33
4.2.1 The Questions	33
4.2.2 The Self Assessment e-Methods Landscape	35

4

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to help local authorities identify appropriate e-methods for engaging with citizens. The reasons for this are well known:

- There is a widespread sense that the public has disengaged from formal political processes, such as voting, joining parties and following political news. This disengagement reflects a crisis of public trust in governments and in citizens' belief in their own capacity to influence public affairs.
- There is a widespread belief that the internet and other digital technologies can be used to broaden and deepen the democratic process, making it more transparent, inclusive and accessible.

In this guide we seek to identify and define appropriate methods for engaging with citizens, as opposed to appropriate tools for engaging citizens. What difference is there between these two objectives? Is it a merely semantic distinction? We think not.

Methods vs tools

We speak of methods rather than tools because we want to dispel the myth that technological hardware or software can solve the problems of democracy. Technologies are cultural products and only work or fail within political, economic and organisational contexts; e-tools suggests that there are technical applications that can reshape or transcend these contexts. E-methods recognises that e-engagement entails a range of practices, techniques and technologies which do not comprise inherent 'solutions', but must be integrated into a broader adaptation of government-citizen relationship-building. In evaluating e-engagement processes, the aim should not be to devise a 'toolkit', but to become sensitive to workable combinations of political, economic, organisational and technological methods of engagement.

Engaging citizens vs engaging with citizens

The distinction between engaging citizens and engaging with citizens is equally important. The energy and momentum for democracy tends to come from below. Democracy is not a gift by governments to citizens. E-engagement projects will not work if they are conceived as methods of recruiting the public to a government-owned agenda. E-engagement should not be evaluated in terms of how successfully councils win the attention of citizens, rather, how successful are e-engagement methods in enabling citizens to win the attention of their elected representatives and officials. The principle of e-engagement is collaborative, based upon engaging with people, rather than using them or talking at them.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) three-stage model and e-engagement

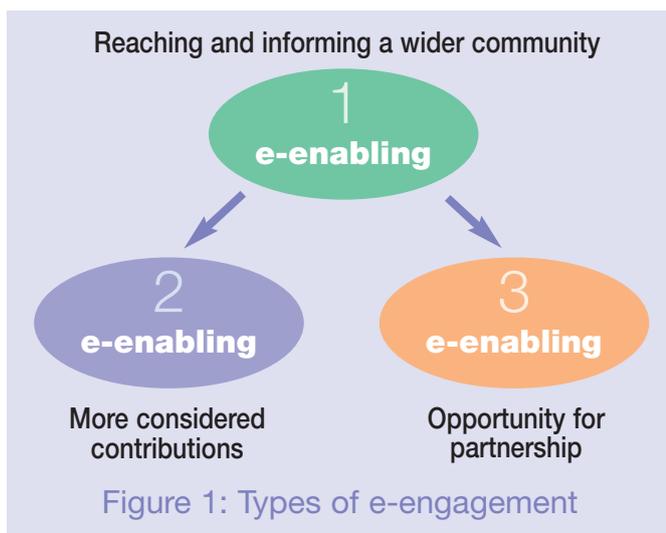
In considering how governments can strengthen their relationships with citizens, the OECD (2001)¹ has proposed a very useful three-stage model:

1. **Information:** a one-way relation in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens. It covers both 'passive' access to information upon demand by citizens and 'active' measures by government to disseminate information to citizens. Examples include: access to public records, official gazettes, and government web sites.
2. **Consultation:** a two-way relation in which citizens provide feedback to government. It is based on the prior definition by government of the issue on which citizens' views are being sought and requires the provision of information. Examples include: public opinion surveys and comments on draft legislation.

¹ OECD (2001) *Engaging Citizens in Policy making: Information, Consultation, and the Public Participation*, Paris: OECD

3. **Active participation:** a relation based on partnership with government, in which citizens actively engage in the decision and policy-making processes. It acknowledges a role for citizens in proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue - although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formation rests with government. Examples include: community groups involved in local decision-making, and public petitions.

By e-methods we mean the use of ICTs to support this model through online information provision (e-enabling), e-consultation, and e-participation (see Figure 1). Effective information provision is seen as a prerequisite for both e-consultation and e-participation.



A second OECD report² states that the primary objectives of e-engagement are:

- to reach a wider audience to enable broader contributions
- to support engagement through a range of technologies to cater for the diverse technical and communicative skills of citizens
- to provide relevant information in a format that is both more accessible and understandable to the target audience to enable more informed contributions

- to engage with a wider audience to enable deeper contributions and support deliberative debate.

These underlying objectives for e-engagement form the basis for analysing various tools in this e-methods guide.

The objective of this report is to suggest appropriate methods for appropriate contexts. Because the report is directed at councillors and officials in local government, we discuss these methods from their perspective. But it should be clearly understood that this is not the only perspective and it is equally important to evaluate methods in terms of their value to citizens, both as individuals and specific socio-demographic groups within the population.

The e-methods approach we have taken for characterising e-engagement has been developed by the authors, and others, through research and consultancy projects. It addresses the need to characterise current practice after reviewing existing cases³, and to consider e-engagement methods and associated tools⁴. Therefore, in Section 2 we first consider the key dimensions needed for characterisation and then in Section 3 consider the various genres of tools. Section 4 allows us to bring together these two aspects and suggest appropriate methods for appropriate contexts – providing an e-methods guide. In Section 5 we provide an e-methods landscape in which to view the various tools in context. Finally, in Section 6, we present a self-assessment e-engagement tool that local authorities can use to describe what citizen e-engagement they are undertaking and where there are ‘gaps’ in their e-engagement agenda.

³ Macintosh, A. Characterizing E-Participation in Policy-Making. Proceedings of the Thirty Seventh Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-37), Big island, Hawaii. 2004

⁴ Coleman, S. and Gotze, J. Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation. London: Hansard Society, 2001, available at <http://bowlingtogether.net/bowlingtogether.pdf>; Whyte, A., Smith, E., Alberts, I., Macintosh, A. Continuing the Dialogue on Radioactive Waste Management: Engaging Young Scotland Innovatively. Scottish Executive Central Research Unit, 2004

² OECD (2004) Promises and Problems of E-Democracy: Challenges of online citizen engagement. Paris: OECD



2 Key dimensions

Tools should be selected only after reviewing an initiative's objective(s), the actors involved, the political purpose and the resources available. Our high level key dimensions are intended to support local authorities and community groups in selecting the most appropriate approach for engagement. They are based around nine dimensions that position the e-engagement in specific contexts.

2.1 Type of engagement

This key dimension considers to what level, or how far, the e-engagement method is to be used to engage with citizens. It is concerned with e-enabling, e-consulting or e-participation: to what level of policy detail, and how much influence do the participants' responses have in the overall decision making.

2.2 Stage in decision-making

The e-engagement method employed depends to a certain extent on whether the engagement concerns service delivery or policy scrutiny. It may also depend on where in the policy or service delivery lifecycle the engagement exercise is to take place.

With regard to policy-making, citizens will be better able to influence policy content through engagement earlier in the process. E-engagement exercises that are close to the draft policy stage are likely to place higher demands on citizens' ability to understand technical and legalistic statements. For that reason the resources invested in clarifying the background information and making it suitable for the target audience will be higher.

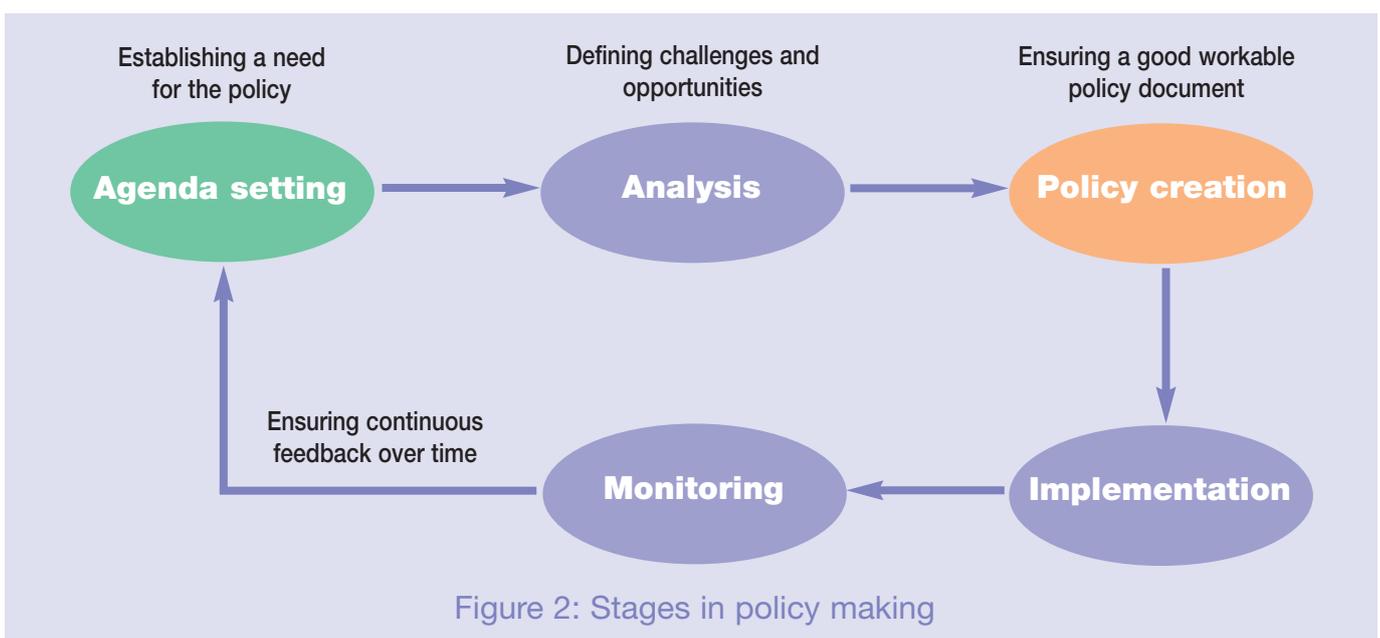
One can consider policy making to comprise five high level stages (see Figure 2). These are:

- 1. Agenda setting:** establishing the need for a policy or a change in policy, then defining the problem to be addressed.
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2. **Analysis:** defining the challenges and opportunities associated with an agenda item in order to produce a draft policy document. This can include: gathering evidence and knowledge from a range of sources including citizens and civil society organizations; understanding the context, including the political context for the agenda item; developing a range of options.
3. **Formulating the policy:** ensuring a good workable policy document. This involves a variety of mechanisms, which can include: formal consultation; risk analysis; undertaking pilot studies; designing the implementation plan.
4. **Implementing the policy:** this can involve the development of legislation, regulation, guidance, and a delivery plan.
5. **Monitoring the policy:** this can involve evaluation and review of the policy in action, research evidence and views of users. Here there is the possibility to loop back to stage one.

Similarly, with regard to defining and delivering services, one can consider four high level stages:

1. **Need for a service:** researching which new services are required and by whom. This will support the development of a business case for the service and help determine how to prioritise issues.
2. **Design of service:** understanding the detailed requirements of the service users and ensuring that it will be workable. This will support the specification of the service and facilitate any necessary procurement.
3. **Implementation of service:** developing and providing the service through various channels.
4. **Monitoring of service:** collecting feedback and suggestions on the specific service. Here there is the possibility to loop back to stage one.



2.3 Actors

This considers who is designing and conducting the e-engagement. Possible stakeholders in offline engagement initiatives will include decision-makers, champions and various experts of the particular policy/service, such as government ministers, elected members, government officials responsible for implementing policy/service, policy analysts, and service developers. In any e-engagement this grouping is increased in order to support the socio-technical nature of e-engagement. There is a need to consider whether these are internal or external to government and the precise skills and capabilities that they will need. This will help determine whether the application technology is an in-house development, collaborative development with external agencies or a commercially available off-the-shelf system.

The available actors and the associated costs of implementing an e-engagement exercise (promotion, analysis, feedback and evaluation) are important factors in determining the precise e-engagement method. At least initially, new e-methods will take more resources and therefore might cost more; therefore, the added value has to be judged in terms of level and quality of the resulting engagement. The return on investment will only take effect once these new e-methods are fully embedded in the engagement processes of the organisation.

2.4 Target audience

The characteristics of the target audience, their type and size, and their access to technology are important considerations when selecting the appropriate e-engagement method. For example, are you engaging with a geographical community of interest or a subject-based community of interest, and what are their demographics and likely communicative and technical skills?

2.5 Rules of engagement

There is a need for clear e-engagement guidelines. Specifically one needs to consider data protection, registration, moderation and, if young people are involved, child safety.

Data Protection regulations require that personal data recorded should be restricted to that necessary for the initiative's purpose. Any e-engagement should clearly state a privacy policy to ensure that all stakeholders understand how any personal information they enter will be used and who will have access to it. It is normal practice for responses to consultations to be attributed by name (or organisation). The data protection requirements are less stringent if data does not identify individuals with their views. Sample guidelines on this are available from the OECD privacy policy generator <http://cs3-hq.oecd.org/scripts/pwv3/pwhome.htm>.

For discussion forum-based engagement initiatives it is important to have a clear statement of what can and cannot be typed as comments into the forum. A Conditions of Use statement may require legal advice, but the outcomes must be clearly visible and understandable by all. There will also be a need for discussion moderation

Online discussion forums can be pre-moderated or post-moderated:

- **Pre-moderated:** this means all responses are vetted before they appear online to ensure they meet conditions of use. The risk is that participants are discouraged from contributing since they do not see their contribution immediately. The value is the greater degree of control over what is disclosed in online discussion.
- **Post-moderated:** this means that all responses contributed by participants are vetted within a defined period (eg. 24

hours). The risk is that participants may use abusive language that may be read by others before the message is removed. The value is that they can immediately see that their contribution has been included in the online dialogue.

For further information on moderation see: *“E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online”* by Gilly Salmon.

Under child safety guidelines, young people with public internet access should have been advised not to give any contact details in discussion forums. Some examples of child safety websites are: www.thinkuknow.co.uk and www.childnet-int.org

2.6 Accessibility and usability

Before beginning an online engagement exercise, one should consider the constraints of the technical design. The Web Accessibility Initiative Content Accessibility Guidelines (www.w3.org/wai) provide lists of checkpoints or recommendations that content developers should follow to ensure accessibility, and these have three priority levels. At the time of writing this guide UK government policy is for all UK government sites to meet “priority 1” checkpoints. In designing e-engagement exercises there is a need to take account of the technical skills and locality of the target audience.

2.7 Duration

Most consultation guidelines acknowledge that the length of a consultation period is very important and this applies to e-engagement. There is a need to consider when the target audience will have access to the e-engagement system and for how long. If the e-engagement addresses a complex issue there may be a requirement to allow

participants to return to the engagement and start where they left off, providing them with tools so they can easily see how they have responded up to that date. The extent to which this can be achieved is dependent on the level of registration/log-in process.

2.8 Technology issues

The availability of the necessary software and hardware is a key issue. The majority of the e-methods should be capable of running on both PCs and Apple Macs.

User interfaces should be provided via industry-standard web browsers - MS Internet Explorer or Netscape. However, there is a need to decide which older versions of these will be supported. Minimum screen resolutions also need to be decided. Macromedia Shockwave Flash, Adobe PDF or other proprietary technologies may be required, in which case user instructions on how to download these will be needed. Finally, the bandwidth the intended audience has access to should be considered. In areas where broadband is not yet available, the duration users will have to stay online to participate in the e-engagement exercise should be considered.

2.9 Implications for evaluation

To some extent at least, the influence of e-engagement needs to be judged in comparison to the impact and success of existing offline engagement methods. With e-engagement there are additional needs to consider:

- **Technical evaluation:** to what extent did ICT design affect the engagement outcomes?
- **Social evaluation:** to what extent did the social practices and capabilities of those consulted affect the outcomes?

This section of the guide does not look in depth at various evaluation methods but rather suggests some techniques that could be used to evaluate the application technology on an on-going basis once a full evaluation has been undertaken.

TOOLS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

2.10 Types of tools

We consider here 13 types of tools used in e-democracy. To different degrees their functionality allows users to: access factual information provided by a stakeholder; formulate opinions based on the views of others; contribute their own opinion either privately or publicly to a specific stakeholder; and initiate their own issue and become a stakeholder for that issue. The tools, therefore, range from e-enabling through the sharing of information to e-participation.

We decided to scope our guide so it was informative without being too theoretical and covered the majority of e-democracy methods currently in use. We have considered tools and methods that directly support citizen participation in policy-making rather than merely those that support group discussion. To have done the latter, our list would have been too long and would have lacked focus. For example, we have not included email listservs, even though they have been used for some time to support groups of interested users to exchange ideas and information.

We have also not included tools and methods that have had a relatively long standing place in customer relationship management. Therefore, we have omitted some popular feedback mechanisms familiar to local government. These include, for example, online feedback forms such as complaint or compliment forms sent to customer service managers.

We have not discussed different digital channels for the provision of tools but focussed on the use of web-based tools. We have specifically not included SMS text messaging which can be used as a means to attract short comments on themes/issues.

2.11 Specific tools

A description of each of the e-democracy tools is provided below.

1. Webcasts: real time recordings of meetings transmitted over the internet.

These are similar to TV transmissions but do not require the necessary TV broadcasting channel. They allow people to watch and listen in real time to events such as committee debates. There is the possibility for interaction such as enabling viewers to submit questions to a meeting by email or to comment on proceedings, but they are often non-interactive.

Webcasts can be archived to allow people to view them at a later time. Such archived webcasts can be indexed into stages with 'bookmarks' to allow users to navigate them more easily.

2. Frequently asked questions (FAQ): this is a 'tree' of questions and answers that can be searched using keywords or by inputting a question or statement in 'natural language'. The 'tree' can be explored or searched to find answers that are closest to the user's questions.

FAQs provide a way to present factual information that can be grouped under questions and answers. A secondary navigation system can be provided to navigate through logical sub-groups in long lists of FAQs. They are typically developed through viewing various log reports of previously asked questions on a specific

subject. FAQs on their own are usually not sufficient to communicate the relevance of a complex issue.

3. Blogs: frequently modified webpages that look like a diary as dated entries are listed in reverse chronological order.

Software required to run a blog is available free of charge on the internet. Such weblogging systems can either be downloaded and hosted in-house or hosted externally. Some of the free, third party weblog sites carry adverts. The software is relatively easy to use and requires no specialist knowledge of web languages to operate.

Blogs written by, and focusing on the experiences of, for example, councillors, government officials, and community groups can help others appreciate different perspectives. They can provide personalised accounts of how lives are affected by specific policy or lack of it. Often others can add comments, but the page is focused on the author's point of view. Authors (bloggers) need to update their blogs on a regular basis, sometimes daily; therefore a strong commitment is needed from them. Without this commitment readers will not continue to return to the weblog.

4. Quick polls: web-based instant survey.

Typically, they allow participants to select one answer from a list of alternatives in response to a simple statement or question. For example, participants may be asked whether they 'agree' or 'disagree' with a statement, rate their level of satisfaction with a service or select a top-priority issue. Once an answer has been submitted, current poll results are usually displayed along with relevant numbers or percentages.

Typically no personal or demographic information is collected. Therefore, unless users' Internet Protocol (IP) addresses are logged it can be difficult to stop participants responding more than once. Quick polls are generally employed as light-weight, fun e- tools, rather than contributing to any weighty policy debate.

Free Quick Poll software is available over the internet, although this may display adverts. The results of previous quick polls can be archived and accessed by users at a later date.

5. Surveys: web-based, self-administered questionnaires

Here the website shows a list of questions that users answer online. They can be used to research views, attitudes and experiences of participants either through a sampled approach or through an open invitation to respond.

They are commonly implemented around a number of close-ended questions, typically with ordered response categories, and some open-ended questions. As such a survey is a structured approach to eliciting responses to a range of pre-identified options, which together with any responses to open-ended questions, are generally not disclosed to other participants except as statistical totals.

Website surveys can be designed to allow elaborate skip patterns through questions, pop-up instructions per question, drop down boxes providing an extensive list of alternative answers, and even alternative designs and plans to choose from. Some online survey software includes additional features for participants, such as a 'progress bar' showing participants how far they have travelled through the survey and a facility 'to stop and save' so they can complete it at a later time.

Although the costs of the initial survey tool may be high, it has the potential to be adapted and distributed to a large number of people to research a large number of issues.

Advantages of surveys are that they collect quantifiable data that is easy to analyse and understand, and requires minimum staff time and skill. Survey responses can be automatically transferred to a database so that further analysis and reporting can be carried out. However, closed questions do not allow participants to fully express or expand upon their views and participants might not feel able to have their true say, nor see each other's views. Unfortunately, open-ended responses are hard to code systematically.

For further information on the tailored design of surveys see for example: *“Mail and Internet Surveys -The Tailored Design Method”* by Don Dillman.

6. Chat rooms: a virtual space where a chat session takes place in real time.

This is the real-time communication between two or more computer users; once a chat has been initiated, any user can type in information and the entered text appears on the other user's screen.

The chat room appeals because it allows users to freely interact with one another. This online discussion where participants post messages to others in this shared 'chat space', normally lasts an hour at most. Each participant can normally see others' responses and these often overlap, an important difference from a discussion forum that offers a more structured approach to discussion as input is typically organised by 'threads'. This critical difference needs to be considered if the resulting discussion needs detailed analysis. Although chat rooms have typically been text based they increasingly offer the option of employing video and audio streams.

In an engagement context chat rooms provide the opportunity for live question-answer panels between experts or government personnel and participants and also the opportunity for peer-to-peer interaction within communities. As such they may help participants to appreciate other perspectives. Typically participants, who have tended to be young people, are given the opportunity to chat to those with decision-making power at pre-arranged times. This can be viewed as a fun element, yet also increase transparency in decision-making as questions and opinions can be directly corresponded. Chat is time-specific and limited. But arranging times to suit all parties, and ensuring people are aware it is happening, can be difficult to manage.

Chat rooms sometimes have a 'moderator' to facilitate interaction with the panel and to control any disruptive behaviour. There is always a need for a moderator to allow young people who are under 16 to take part safely.

7. Decision-making games: these allow users to view and interact with animations that describe, illustrate or simulate relevant aspects of an issue. There is usually some competitive aspect such as a quiz. The content, level of difficulty and types of interfaces are dependent on the target audience.

The overall design of the game is important; it has to be visually attractive and entertaining whilst being realistic and informative. Information can be provided through a question and answer type game similar to a FAQ. The user can be presented with a graphical representation of a place or situation and various options that, when selected, change the representation in some way to simulate the effect of real-life decision-making.

Decision-making games are typically designed for individuals rather than groups of

players and as such any responses to quizzes/questionnaires that form part of the game are not shared with others but can be transmitted to the 'game owner'. However, there are some multi-user games where the players/participants adopt roles and characters that are represented online as cartoon like figures. Participants exchange messages following rules to select a course of action that represent a decision-making process involving some element of co-operation or competition.

The game format is likely to be appealing to those who already access computer-based games, particularly young people creating the need for a safe system of access using usernames and passwords.

8. Discussion forum/board: a website for an online discussion group where users, usually with common interests, can exchange open messages. It typically shows a list of topics people are concerned about. Users can pick a topic and see a 'thread' of messages and replies then post their own message.

Discussion forums are distinguished from chat rooms as the interaction is typically structured around the threads and they extend normally over a period of days or weeks rather than hours.

The discussion forum is well suited to following similar threads of online discussion when used for e-engagement, so supporting the exchange of points of view. All users can typically read all comments; however, in certain instances, users have to be registered in order to post and reply to comments. Careful design is required to ensure users can easily navigate through the different threads.

Specific e-engagement discussion fora:

- Issue-based fora, ie organised around policy issues that have been formulated by policy-makers, interest groups or 'experts', and presented as the heading of one or more discussion threads. Responses are sought to gauge opinion or solicit ideas. Position statements, links to topic-related websites, and other background information are often absent.
- Policy-based fora, ie organised around themes/issues that relate directly to a draft policy, and where discussion threads are intended to solicit responses from those affected. Participants might be encouraged to submit alternative ideas and suggestions but the format implies that what is being sought is an indication of how far the participants agree (or not) with the proposals, and why.

The main advantages are that discussion fora have the potential to support interaction, thought, deliberation, debate and allow for a full discussion. They are, therefore, potentially useful for the development of complex policy. However, staff time and skills are required to moderate, support and facilitate such discussions, as well as the discourse analysis skills to analyse contributions and produce reports.

9. e-Panels: represent a recruited set, as opposed to a self-selected set, of participants who have agreed to give their views on a variety of issues using ICTs at specific intervals over a period of time.

Online questionnaires may be used and in such cases there is no interaction between participants and they do not see the responses from the other panel members. However, e-panels can be organised to support intensive engagement by providing

‘e-enabling’ background information, and by directly supporting engagement by allowing participants to contribute online using any combination of the above e-tools. These other e-tools can be used to supplement and broaden the contributions, eg. discussion forums are now being used, allowing discussion between members. All the issues and constraints discussed above for these e-tools apply similarly in this context.

To recruit and sustain a representative audience familiar with the use of technology needs may require incentives such as book tokens or shop vouchers.

10. e-Petitioning: a web-based system that hosts online petitions and allows others to sign up to them by adding their name and address online.

The names and addresses need to be checked but as e-petitions are informing the council about an issue, as opposed to presenting an issue that will become legally binding, the level of checking does not need to be the same as for e-voting.

Additional features can enhance the quality of e-petitions and the transparency of the e-petitioning process. For example, the quality of e-petitions can be enhanced by the system allowing additional background information about the rationale for the e-petition to be added and viewed by users. An integrated discussion forum can also be incorporated to allow users to voice their support or concerns for the e-petition.

The format of e-petitions and the way they are submitted and subsequently processed by local government varies between authorities. However, in all cases there is a need to ensure that processes are in place to accept, consider and provide progress reports on the issues raised by the petitions.

11. e-Deliberative polling: combines online deliberation in small group discussions with random sampling to facilitate public engagement on specific issues. A variety of the above tools, namely surveys and discussion fora, are used to support such e-deliberative polling.

Traditional offline engagement techniques for policy development suffer from the criticism that the public may be uninformed of key issues addressed. The concept of deliberative engagement attempts to address this problem by preceding the gathering of public views by a process of deliberation. Although the potential for e-deliberative polling has been recognised by, amongst others, The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), it has yet to be widely applied in a local government context.

12. Virtual communities: online space in which users with a shared interest can gather to communicate and build relationships.

There is typically a website organised specifically to support an issue, a range of connected issues or a geographical area. Such a website typically provides e-enabling background information, and directly supports engagement by allowing users to contribute online using a combination of the above tools.

13. Alert services: one-way communication alerts to inform people of a news item or an event, such as, for example, a new consultation.

Email Alerts: this is where a website provides the facility for users to register to receive emails when something new appears on the site. In some instances the users are provided with just a registration system, in other cases they are given the opportunity to profile the

type of information they are interested in receiving. The website owner then has the responsibility for sending the relevant emails. There should be facilities where users can unsubscribe and also change their profiles.

RSS Feeds: a mechanism for being kept up to date of changes on websites. For example, when a new entry is added to a website the RSS feed will typically save its title, a short abstract and link to the full content. A user can subscribe to the Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed so that when a new entry is added they will be informed automatically. This saves the users from having to manually check their favourite websites for updates. In order to subscribe to an RSS feed the user needs access to an RSS reader, which manages the feeds and constantly checks for updates. RSS readers are available free of charge over the internet.



3 The e-methods guide – matching tools to key dimensions

In this section we summarise the properties of each tool in relation to the nine key dimensions of e-engagement.

It is impossible to be prescriptive in e-methods as each tool can be designed to be used in a variety of ways. Given the scope of our report we are only able to present some of the most typical descriptions and uses here.

Finally, any e-engagement exercise on a complex issue will require a combination of methods.

3.1 Webcasts

Level of engagement	e-enabling - allowing people to watch and listen in real time to events such as meetings/debates of community groups or council committees. There is the possibility for some interaction, but they are usually non-interactive.
Stage in decision-making	Typically viewing debates on agenda setting and analysis of policy and on the need and design of a new service.
Actors	The provider needs highly-skilled technical personnel, but this could be outsourced. Also need the ICT infrastructure. Implies significant initial investment. The on-going resource implications are moderate to high.
Target audience	The viewers need an appropriate internet real-time player. The technical competency required by the user is moderate and mainly concerns the initial access to the real-time player.
Rules of engagement	Generally none, unless interaction is offered.
Accessibility	Generally no significant issues, unless interaction is offered. Although the ease of use of any real-time player should be considered.
Duration	Debates should be broadcast on a regular basis. Webcasts are typically viewed in real-time and can last over an hour. They can also be archived to allow people to view them at a later time. Need to consider duration of webcasts as users may have to pay for their internet connection.
Technology issues	Should have a link to where viewers can download an appropriate media player. Bandwidth which the target audience has access to needs to be considered. In areas where broadband is not yet available, consideration should be given to how long participants will have to stay online and the associated costs or inconvenience of tying up their telephone line. Archived webcasts should be indexed to allow viewers to navigate them more easily
Implications for evaluation	Requires evaluation over time and is likely to be dependent on the issue being broadcast.
Examples:	www.lga.ukcouncil.net and www.holyrood.tv/committee.asp

3.2 FAQ

Level of engagement	e-enabling - presenting factual information grouped under question and answer (Q/A) pairs. They are not sufficient to communicate the relevance of a complex issue on their own.
Stage in decision-making	Policy: agenda setting, analysis stage, formation and monitoring. Service: need, design and monitoring. Can be used to highlight challenges and opportunities.
Actors	Typically developed through viewing various log reports of previous questions asked on a specific subject. Can be time consuming to set up initially and needs maintaining as new questions and new answers arise over time and old Q/A pairs become redundant. Depending on the stability of the subject area the resource implications range from low to moderate. The technical skills required to set up and maintain the FAQ depend on the specific tool used but should be low.
Target audience	Suitable for all audiences. They are a fairly familiar online service. Technical competency required by user is low.
Rules of engagement	Generally none.
Accessibility	Need to consider how many Q/A pairs are needed to explain the issue and what level of detail is required. Should include a facility for users to notify FAQ owner if the answer to their question cannot be found.
Duration	Should be available as long as policy and service is under discussion and use.
Technology issues	Many FAQs only allow scrolling through a hierarchy of Q/A pairs. If there is a long list of pairs need to consider search mechanisms to support access to the FAQ – either keyword or natural language. A secondary navigation system can be provided to navigate through logical sub-groups in long lists of FAQs.
Implications for evaluation	Short exit questionnaire asking if answer was found, how easily and if level of detail in the answer was sufficient.
Useful information at:	www.faqs.org/faqs
Examples of a site:	www.parliament.uk/faq/faq.cfm

3.3 Blogs

Level of engagement	e-enabling - by presenting a story-telling environment and focusing on experiences of individuals they can help participants appreciate other perspectives and help form their own opinion.
Stage in decision-making	Policy: agenda setting, analysis and monitoring stages. Service: need, design monitoring of a service. In both cases blogs can provide personalised accounts of how lives can be or have been affected by specific policy/service or lack of it.
Actors	The software is relatively easy to set up and use and requires no specialist knowledge of web languages to operate. However, they require dedication from the blog owners to publish their entries on a regular basis - sometimes daily. Without this commitment users (readers) will not continue to return to the blog for information. Therefore the resource implication for the blog owner is moderate to high, but the technical competency is relatively low.
Target audience	Suitable for all audiences. There is a growing familiarity of, and appeal for, the blog 'diary' format. As users are generally just viewing the blog, required technical competency is low to moderate.
Rules of engagement	Where others can add comments there will be a need for moderation of posted comments.
Accessibility	Web accessibility guidelines should be followed. The familiarity of a diary format may help users navigate the site.
Duration	For as long as necessary, but see point on commitment to regular publishing above.
Technology issues	There are a number of weblog systems that can be used rather than having to build one's own. Blogging software is available free of charge on the internet and can be hosted internally or externally. Some of these third party weblog sites carry adverts.
Implications for evaluation	A feedback questionnaire could be placed on the weblog home page asking whether the user found the information they were looking for, how often they visited the blog, etc.
Examples of political blogs:	www.richardallan.org.uk www.readmyday.co.uk/blogs/maryreid.php
Example of a third-party online site:	www.blogger.com

3.4 Quick Polls

Level of engagement	e-consulting - participants are asked whether they 'agree' or 'disagree' with a statement, rate their level of satisfaction with a service or select a top-priority issue. However, this is a light-weight e-method, providing fun rather than contributing to any weighty policy debate.
Stage in decision-making	Policy: agenda setting and monitoring stages. Service: need and monitoring stages.
Actors	Requires personnel to develop the questions and possible responses. A cheap and straightforward mechanism. Resource implications are low and the level of technical competency should be similarly low, but this depends on the actual software.
Target audience	Typically no personal or demographic information is collected, therefore participants can be unknown. Most people are familiar with questionnaires therefore technical competency is low.
Rules of engagement	There is usually no way to stop participants responding more than once. A user's answers are generally not disclosed to others except as statistical totals, which are displayed on completion.
Accessibility	Web accessibility guidelines should be followed.
Duration	Usually conducted over a relatively short timescale and often replaced by a new quick poll.
Technology issues	Free quick poll software is available over the internet, although this may display adverts. The results of previous quick polls can be archived and accessed by users at a later date.
Implications for evaluation	Through analysis of the answers received.
Examples of a third-party online tool:	www.scripts.com/perl-scripts/poll-and-voting-scripts

3.5 Surveys

Level of engagement	e-consulting - a structured approach to eliciting responses to a range of pre-identified options. There may be a need to consider how to provide additional background information to ensure informed responses.
Stage in decision-making	Policy: agenda setting, analysis and monitoring stages. Service: need, design, monitoring of a service.
Actors	Requires personnel with skills in designing and analysing surveys. The list of questions and possible answers needs careful consideration so as not to lead to bias. The results usually require statistical analysis. Otherwise a relatively cheap and straightforward mechanism. The resource implications are moderate and the technical competency is high to moderate.
Target audience	Useful in engaging large numbers of participants. A representative sample is usually required, therefore may need to ask demographic questions as well as the subject questions. Most people are familiar with questionnaires, therefore the level of technical competency required is low.
Rules of engagement	A user's answers are generally not disclosed to others except as statistical totals.
Accessibility	Web accessibility guidelines need to be followed.
Duration	Usually conducted over a relatively short timescale.
Technology issues	Length of time participants need to stay online to answer all the questions needs to be considered. Need to ensure any 'pull down' menus giving pre-defined options are clearly visible on all browsers and screen resolutions.
Implications for evaluation	Through analysis of the answers received and the total number of responses.
Examples of a third-party online tool for developing questionnaires:	www.surveymonkey.com www.snapsurveys.com/software/softwareprof.shtml

3.6 Chat Rooms

Level of engagement	e-enabling - provides the opportunity for live question-answer panels between experts or government personnel and users. Also provides the opportunity for peer-to-peer interaction within communities. Can help users appreciate other perspectives and form their own opinion.
Stage in decision-making	Policy: agenda setting and analysis stages. Service: need and design of a service. In both cases they may help participants to appreciate other perspectives.
Actors	It can be difficult to schedule a live question-answer panel involving experts and government personnel. Unless there is a record kept of the chat session analysing the interaction it can be problematic. The resource implications are relatively high. The technical competency is moderate to high.
Target audience	It appeals because it is associated with real-time interaction, allowing users to freely interact with one another. Technical competency required by the user is moderate.
Rules of engagement	Moderation is required to allow young people (under 16s) to take part safely and to control any disruptive behaviour.
Accessibility	Design and accessibility issues need to focus on how to follow the chat sessions and participate in them.
Duration	Sustainability can be a problem. Where groups have attempted to run a series of scheduled chats some have encountered problems in getting everyone together at the required time. Therefore, many 'engagement' chats have tended to be one-off events.
Technology issues	Need to consider the bandwidth needed for effective access by the target audience and the time length of any chat session.
Implications for evaluation	They can be difficult to evaluate. Many evaluations only focus on whether the participants enjoyed the exercise and were satisfied with the responses from the expert panel.
Reference on child safety and issues:	www.chatdanger.com Despite their appeal to young people, chat tools require acceptance by educational authorities, given the norm of discouraging their use in school or community education contexts. The chat tool also must be designed and supervised/moderated to ensure safe use by young people.

3.7 Decision-making game

Level of engagement	e-enabling and e-consulting - players are informed of issues and asked to respond through a competition or quiz. Any responses can be transmitted to the 'game owner' who has initiated the engagement exercise.
Stage in decision-making	Policy: agenda setting and analysis stages. Service: need and design of a service. In both cases they may help participants to appreciate other perspectives.
Actors	Similar to survey questionnaires for the development of content, but games can require considerable resources to develop the system therefore the expected lifetime of the engagement exercise needs to be considered. Resource implications are high. The technical competency required is also high.
Target audience	There needs to be some motivation to play a game. Their look and feel can convey an element of adventure or competitiveness and therefore a game format is likely to be appealing to those who already access computer-based games. Therefore the technical competency required by the user will be low to moderate.
Rules of engagement	For quiz type games any responses that form part of the game are not usually shared with others. Where games are designed to be multi-user explicit rules will be required.
Accessibility	Web accessibility guidelines need to be followed, which may be more difficult given that games generally have to be visually attractive and entertaining.
Duration	Because of the associated high costs in developing a game, they should be available for a reasonable length of time and the content should be able to be changed for different issues.
Technology issues	Games usually require high bandwidth access and a PC with good graphics and high screen resolution. There are a variety of game types. Players are used to, and expect, good interaction and graphics.
Implications for evaluation	Analysis of usage statistics and exit questionnaires.
Examples and issues	<p>simcity.ea.com designed to let players build and manage a city where activities range from deciding on the position of power plants to governance.</p> <p>www.youngtransnet.org.uk designed to let children and young people consider sustainable transport issues.</p> <p>www.demgames.org designed as part of the Local e-Democracy National Project.</p> <p>Games can be a fun way to take part. However, despite their appeal to young people, game tools may require acceptance by educational authorities, given the norm of discouraging their use in school education contexts.</p>

3.8 Discussion Forums

Level of engagement	e-consulting and e-participation – depending on the type and content of the forum, comments can be sought in order to gauge opinion or solicit ideas.
Stage in decision-making	Policy: agenda setting, analysis and formation stages. Service: need and design of a service. Issue-based and policy-based fora allow participants to follow similar threads of online discussion, supporting the exchange of points of view. They have the potential to support interaction, thought, deliberation, debate and allow for a full discussion, therefore are potentially useful for the development of complex policy.
Actors	Careful design of the forum is required to allow users to navigate easily through the different threads, read comments and post replies. Moderation will be required. The analysis of large-scale discussions can be difficult. Resource implications are moderate to high. The level of technical competency is moderate to high.
Target audience	Suitable for most audiences, however, it takes time for participants to get used to the discussion forum format and understand how to navigate around the threads. Technical competency is moderate to high.
Rules of engagement	A clear 'conditions of use' statement is required which can be followed by both moderators and participants.
Accessibility	If registration is required care should be taken not to make the process too onerous and time consuming. Design and accessibility issues need to focus on how to follow the discussion threads and post comments and replies easily.
Duration	When used for consultations, each forum should last between 4 to 12 weeks to allow as many people as possible to take part and also to re-visit the forum and reply to others.
Technology issues	In policy-based forums, if participants are allowed to re-visit the forum, it is helpful if they can 'view' their contributions so far and continue where they left off.
Implications for evaluation	Exit questionnaires.
Examples	www.tellparliament.net

3.9 E-Panel

Level of engagement	e-consulting and e-participation - comments are sought in order to gauge opinion and solicit ideas.
Stage in decision-making	Policy: agenda setting, analysis and formation stages. Service: need and design of a service.
Actors	Where questionnaires are included, personnel with skills in designing and analysing these are required – similar to surveys. Where discussion fora are included the previous comments apply. Resource implications and technical competency are moderate to high.
Target audience	A representative audience familiar with the use of technology needs to be recruited and sustained. This may require incentives such as book tokens or shop vouchers being offered. Technical competency is moderate.
Rules of engagement	Typically, members do not see the responses from other members. However sometimes a discussion forum is included in which case the issues regarding fora listed previously need to be taken into account.
Accessibility	If registration is required care should be taken not to make the process too onerous and time consuming. Other comments as for discussion fora and surveys apply.
Duration	The panel should be used regularly and be ready to address issues over a long period of time.
Technology issues	As for discussion fora and opinion polling, but in this case the audience is recruited.
Implications for evaluation	The panel can be issued with evaluation questionnaires.
See for example:	www.askbristol.com

3.10 e-Petitions

Level of engagement	e-participating – as a means for users to initiate debate on specific issues. Allows users to sign up in support of the issue. If incorporated with a discussion forum allows users to explain why they support it, suggest amendments to the petition text and say why they do not support it.
Stage in decision-making	All stages are applicable, but particularly the agenda setting for policy and the identification of new services.
Actors	Personnel with moderate IT skills need to be able to upload and manage the petitions. Moderator may be required for discussion forum. A named point of contact must be identified to receive petitions and check their legality. Resource implications moderate. Technical competency moderate to high.
Target audience	Suitable for all audiences as public petitions are fairly familiar. Technical competency required is moderate.
Rules of engagement	Needs names and addresses to be checked and if discussion forum is incorporated this will need moderation. Data protection and privacy issues are applicable as users are providing their names and addresses.
Accessibility	Web accessibility guidelines need to be followed.
Duration	An e-petition system should form a stable part of the e-democracy website facilities. Each e-petition should be available for however long the principal petitioner wishes to make it available within reasonable limits.
Technology issues	Once system is developed should be able to be used for e-petitions on different issues.
Implications for evaluation	Analysis of usage statistics and exit questionnaires.
See for example the Parliament websites:	epetitions.scottish.parliament.uk/list_petitions.asp and www.parliament.qld.gov.au/petitions
And local government websites	www.bristol-city.gov.uk/epetitions and e-petitions.kingston.gov.uk/

3.11 e-Deliberative polling

Level of engagement	e-consulting – providing informed deliberative debate on specified issues.
Stage in decision-making	All aspects of policy and service definition where in-depth, informed debate is required by a recruited representative sample.
Actors	This is resource intensive and requires personnel who are skilled in social research methods. Resource implications are high. Technical competency required is high.
Target audience	Similar to e-panels. A representative audience familiar with the use of technology needs to be recruited and sustained. This may require incentives such as book tokens or shop vouchers. Because of the range of tools that could be used the technical competency required is high.
Rules of engagement	Moderation and facilitation is required. Clear rules of engagement are required.
Accessibility	If registration is required care should be taken not to make the process too onerous and time consuming. Other comments as for discussion fora and surveys apply.
Duration	The target audience must be willing to commit a number of days to undertake the exercise.
Technology issues	As a range of tools can be used many of the points made for the other tools listed here can apply.
Implications for evaluation	The e-deliberation members can be issued with evaluation questionnaires. These questionnaires can be circulated at the beginning of the process and after deliberation has taken place. The results can be analysed to demonstrate the effect of the deliberation process.
References:	<p>Fishkin's work at cdd.stanford.edu/</p> <p>Also, a US funded research project exploring large-scale online deliberative polls see the Picola Project at communityconnections.heinz.cmu.edu/picola/index.html</p>

3.12 Virtual Communities

Level of engagement	e-participating – as a means for users to initiate debate on specific issues.
Stage in decision-making	All stages are applicable but particularly the agenda setting for new policy, the identification of new services and the monitoring stage where the need for a major change in policy/service has been highlighted.
Actors	Needs a champion to facilitate and co-ordinate the activities of the virtual community. A variety of the above tools can be used to support virtual communities. Resource implications and technical competency are high to moderate.
Target audience	This could be a geographical community or an issue-based community. Technical competency skills required are moderate to high depending on the level of involvement by the user and the types of tools on the web site.
Rules of engagement	If registration is required care should be taken not to make the process too onerous and time consuming. Other comments as for the above tools apply.
Accessibility	Trust, trustworthiness and community-building aspects should all be addressed in designing the application.
Duration	Typically needs to be sustained over a long period of time.
Technology issues	As a range of tools can be used many of the points made for the other tools listed here can apply.
Implications for evaluation	Need to ensure involvement of the community and other stakeholders in assessing the effectiveness.
For suggestions on how to develop and run a virtual community see:	www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/

3.13 Alert Mechanisms – email alerts and RSS Feeds

Level of engagement	e-enabling - informing people of a news item or an event, such as a new consultation.
Stage in decision-making	Relevant to all stages where the public need to be informed about government actions.
Actors	The provider needs to put in place various alert mechanisms that will suit different audiences. They need to decide on content and, depending on which mechanism, arrange for distribution. Resource implications are low. The technical competency moderate to high.
Target audience	Suitable for most audiences. However, they will need to sign up or subscribe to the alert mechanism. Technical competency low.
Rules of engagement	Generally none, but if registration is required this should be kept as simple as possible.
Accessibility	If registration is required this should be kept as simple as possible. Web accessibility guidelines should be followed.
Duration	Alerts are sent out when something new happens or something changes.
Technology issues	For email alerts, users must be able to unsubscribe and manage their profiles. For RSS feed, users require access to an RSS reader.
Implications for evaluation	Number of users subscribing.
Example of a site that allows you to RSS subscribe to you favourites websites:	www.bloglines.com
Example of a site using email alerts:	www.parliament.uk
Example of a site using RSS feed:	www.bristol-city.gov.uk/epetitions



4 The e-Method Landscape

In the table below we highlight the typical context and use for the various tools, however it is not exhaustive.

The concept of an e-methods landscape is used in the next section to help local authorities appreciate the current status of their e-participation agenda and where further development needs to take place.

Type of e-Engagement / Stage in policy-making cycle	e-Enabling	e-Consultation	e-Participation
Agenda-setting	Webcasts; FAQ; Blogs; Alerts; Decision-making Game	Quick Poll; Survey; Chat Room; Decision-making Game; Discussion Forum; e-Panel; e-Deliberative Polling	Discussion Forum; e-Panel; e-Petition; Virtual Community
Analysis	Webcasts; FAQ; Blogs; Alerts; Decision-making Game	Survey; Chat Room; Decision-making Game; Discussion Forum; e-Panel; e-Deliberative Polling	Discussion Forum; e-Panel; e-Petition; Virtual Community
Formation	FAQ; Alerts	Discussion Forum; e-Panel; e-Deliberative Polling	Discussion Forum; e-Panel; e-Petition; Virtual Community
Implementation	Alerts	e-Deliberative Polling;	e-Petition; Virtual Community
Monitoring	FAQ; Blogs	Quick Poll; Survey; e-Deliberative Polling;	Discussion Forum; e-Petition; Virtual Community

4.1 Resource Implication Matrix

The Resource Implication Matrix is designed to give a broad indication of the resource implication of employing a particular solution, and the technical competency required of an authority to roll out and support that solution, and of users to make use of the system.

	Resource Implication	Technical competency required by authority	Technical competency required by user
Webcast	Moderate/ High	High	Moderate
FAQ	Low	Low	Low
Blog	Moderate/ High	Low/ Moderate	Low/ Moderate
Quickpoll	Low	Low	Low
Online Survey	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Chat Room	High	Moderate/ High	Moderate
Decision Making Game	High	High	Low/ Moderate
Discussion Forum	Moderate/ High	Moderate/ High	Moderate/ High
e-Panel	Moderate/ High	Moderate/ High	Moderate
e-Petition	Moderate	Moderate/ High	Moderate
e-Deliberative Polling	High	High	High
Virtual Community	Moderate/ High	Moderate/ High	Moderate/ High
Alert Mechanisms - email alerts and RSS feeds	Low	Moderate/ High	Low

A Self Assessment e-Engagement Tool

In this section we present a straightforward approach for assessing how far local authorities have progressed in providing e-engagement initiatives to support engagement with citizens in policy-making. The wider issues raised by public consultation (for example, the changing relations between parliament, government, citizens and civil society organisations) are beyond the scope of this document.

The tool allows local authorities to:

- describe clearly, in a standardised manner, what citizen engagement they are doing and with what e-methods;
- better appreciate 'gaps' in their e-engagement agenda.

By conducting self-assessment, local authorities will be able to develop a more comprehensive and sustainable e-engagement strategy.

4.2 The Tool

The tool is available at:

<http://itc.napier.ac.uk/SAtool/default.asp>. It is a prototype web-based tool that has still to be tested in a large range of contexts, because of this, we have made it freely available but would appreciate feedback on its use.

To allow readers to understand the self-assessment process supported by the tool, the following paper-based description is provided. The tool involves answering the questions below which results in the development of the e-methods landscape.

4.2.1 The Questions:

1. What e-methods do you use for e-enabling?

Pick 1 or more from:

do not do e-enabling

alerts

webcast

FAQ

blog

decision-making game

other (please specify)

1a. At what stage in the policy-making process do you use X (where X is the tool selected above)?

Pick 1 or more from:

- agenda setting
- analysis
- policy formation
- implementation
- monitoring

Question 1a is repeated for each tool selected in Question 1.

2. What e-methods do you use for e-consultation?

Pick 1 or more from:

- do not do e-consultation
- decision-making game
- quick poll
- survey
- chat
- discussion forum
- e-panel
- e-deliberative polling
- other (please specify)

2a. At what stage in the policy-making process do you use X?

Pick 1 or more from:

- agenda setting
- analysis
- policy formation
- implementation
- monitoring

Question 2a is repeated for each answer to 2.

3. What e-methods do you use for e-participation?

Pick 1 or more from:

- do not do e-participation
- discussion forum
- e-panel
- e-deliberative polling
- virtual community
- e-petition
- other (please specify)

3a. At what stage in the policy-making process do you use X?

Pick 1 or more from:

- agenda setting
- analysis
- policy formation
- implementation
- monitoring

Question 3a is repeated for each answer to 3.

4.2.2 The Self Assessment e-Methods Landscape

The e-methods Landscape for:

Completed by:

Date:

Type of e-Engagement / Stage in policy-making cycle	e-Enabling	e-Consultation	e-Participation
Agenda-setting			
Analysis			
Formation			
Implementation			
Monitoring			

