

e-Petitioning in Kingston and Bristol

Evaluation of e-Petitioning in the Local e-Democracy National Project

Angus Whyte, Alistair Renton, Ann Macintosh

International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University

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1. Executive Summary

The e-petitioning project was part of the "Information, communication and citizenship" strand (work package 2.3) of the Local e-Democracy National Project, involving English local authorities and funded by the UK Government (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister). It aimed to explore e-petitioning as a way for citizens to raise their own concerns within the formal processes of the local authority.

E-petitioning was implemented and piloted by two local authorities, *Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames* who led the project, and *Bristol City Council*, in the year to March 2005. Our evaluation was carried out under another part of the Local e-Democracy National Project, work package 4.3. It used a combination of interviews, field tests and e-petition results to develop an understanding of how citizens and stakeholders perceive e-petitioning. Analysis of these also aimed to feedback tangible lessons to local authorities and their partners on how to use e-petitioning more effectively.

The evaluation found much had been accomplished in both Councils. Over the one year project lifetime staff were recruited, the supplier contracted, e-petitioner implemented, working practices and processes examined and the tool launched to be used by the public. E-petitioner was used by hundreds of citizens in each Council area, and showed early signs of impacting on decision-making. Specifically we used 'democratic criteria', detailed in *Annex A*, to assess the projects' as follows below. Further strengths and weaknesses are given in the *Conclusions*.

Representation

Citizens, officers and Members who took part in the evaluation were almost unanimously in favour of e-petitioning. It has enjoyed strong support from Councillors in both Kingston and Bristol, particularly Kingston, and from the departments who are directly involved in the day-to-day servicing of representative government.

There was support for the view that e-petitioning enhances the Councillor's role by making it more visible, and by offering greater convenience and choice to citizens who wish to raise concerns through the formal processes of their Council.

Engagement

There was some evidence that e-petitioning reinforces 'civic mindedness' as it has so far largely been used by people who believe that community action can influence decision-making but have not previously taken such action themselves. Citizens who took part in field tests felt that a higher proportion of e-petition 'signatures' are likely to be from those genuinely concerned about the topic raised. Conversely many felt that e-petitioning is less effective than paper for gathering signatures on highly localised issues, which are best addressed by adopting the traditional door-to-door and street methods of campaigning that are associated with paper petitioning. E-petitions were raised on issues affecting a range of geographic and cultural communities, and drew attention to wider democratic processes including policy consultation and the planning process.

Transparency

The e-petitioning pilot has increased transparency in part by formalising the process for handling petitions for the first time. The publication of the site and its associated guidelines on petitioning makes both the process and the petition outcomes more visible. The added

visibility applies to paper as well as e-petitions, since paper petitions that are presented at Council meetings are also listed on the e-petitioner page. E-petitions include a 'progress' page, to be updated by the responsible officers with information on the petition's outcome after consideration by the relevant committee or department. All participants considered this a key advantage of the system.

Conflict and consensus

The e-petitioner system incorporates an online forum where visitors to the site can exchange comments about the issues raised, with the principal petitioner and others. This facility is regarded as highly important by Councillors. Improvements are needed to its 'signposting', since our field tests showed the feature was not apparent to users.

Political equality

It was evident that e-petitioning has improved inclusiveness for some; since e-petitions have been raised and signed by people who told us they would not otherwise have done so. There was some evidence that Black and Minority Ethnic groups are represented among e-petition signatories in proportion to the local population, although it is too early to be conclusive. Some Councillors, officers and citizens pointed to the inequality of access to computers, with the occasional concern that e-petitioning represents little more than another channel for those already actively engaged to raise their voice.

Community control

This last criterion is in principle e-petitioners main strength. The issues raised through e-petitioning are unarguably issues that are important to citizens, and are evidently addressed through local authority decision-making. For principal petitioners and citizens the success of the system depends on the Councils publishing details of the petitions progress, for the whole community to see, as much as on individual's concerns being addressed.

Few e-petitions have progressed to a final Council response in either Kingston or Bristol and it is too early to draw conclusions on the impact on decision-making. However there is a potential for e-petitioning to improve responsiveness in two ways. Firstly officers may hear about issues that concern their work some weeks or months in advance, since e-petitions are published when they are raised rather than when they are finally submitted for consideration. Secondly, the ease and speed with which e-petitions can be raised potentially offers citizens an advantage over paper, since some procedures limit the time citizens have to respond. This includes the Planning and Licensing Application procedures where objections are weighted according to where the objector resides.

One potential risk of e-petitioning on this criterion is that different perceptions of the systems role may make it a victim of its own success. Despite their positive view of the system it was regarded by many of the citizens we spoke to as a 'last resort' for righting wrongs, rather than as a first step in civic engagement. This raises the interesting possibility that any increase in the number of petitions received could be seen both as a success in terms of Councils' citizen engagement strategies, and a failing by those citizens who would regard a list of petitions as a litany of complaints. Avoiding this risk is again probably a matter of ensuring that the system demonstrates a track record for redressing complaints and addressing concerns.

There is a strong case for further evaluation. The present study was carried out over a very short period, and the e-petitioning tool was itself only piloted for six months. We recommend further evaluation, particularly to guide ongoing monitoring and evaluation by Councils themselves. This should include methods to analyse the take-up, identify the value of online dialogue and monitor the impact on decision-making.

2. Introduction

The e-petitioning project that we report on here was part of the “Information, communication and citizenship” strand (work package 2.3) of the Local e-Democracy National Project, involving English local authorities and funded by the UK Government (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister). According to the Project Initiation Document¹ this strand is: -

“...concerned with improving the democratic information and means of communication available to citizens. It will explore ways in which information and consultation can be made more relevant to individual concerns, and ways in which citizens can be enabled to raise their own concerns within the formal processes of the local authority.” (p.40)

In this section we introduce the aims of the e-petitioning project and of our evaluation of it, and outline the contents of the report.

E-petitioning was implemented and piloted by two local authorities, *Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames* who led the project, and *Bristol City Council*, in the year to March 2005. Our evaluation was carried out under another part of the Local e-Democracy National Project, work package 4.3. This work package had various elements to it, matching the range of e-democracy projects funded by the National Project. They included: -

- Projects aimed at young people.
- Projects emphasising the ‘ground-up’ development of e-democracy by citizens and communities.
- ‘Top-down’ projects initiated by local authorities and national government.

The e-petitioning project was considered one of the ‘top-down’ projects. The aims of the evaluation were to reach conclusions about the benefits and effectiveness of e-petitioning both in its own right and in comparison to the traditional form of petitioning.

In common with the other projects evaluated², this report is primarily based on the experience of the Council leading the project, which for e-petitioning was Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames. We do however include relevant material to point out the similarities and differences in Bristol.

Both Kingston and Bristol saw the project’s emphasis as being on strengthening an *existing* practice. The practice of petitioning is centuries old. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines it as “a written instrument directed to some individual, official, legislative body, or court in order to redress a grievance or to request the granting of a favour”³. Petitioning is long established in English law as a means for parliament to assert rights against the crown. In Kingston, as in other local authorities, any citizen with an interest in the Borough has traditionally had a right to raise a petition at a public meeting of the Council, whether personally or through their elected representative.

The development of an *online* channel for petitioning in the National Project stemmed from the experience of the Scottish Parliament, which formally launched its e-petitioning system in

¹ National Project on Local e-Democracy Project Initiation Document version 3.0 January 2004

² For further details see *eDemocracy from the Top Down: An Evaluation of eDemocracy Activities Initiated by Councils and Government*, available at: <http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk>

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, Available at: <http://www.britannica.com>

February 2004 after a 4 year pilot. The e-petitioning tool was developed by the International Teledemocracy Centre (ITC) at Napier University to support the newly instituted Parliament's aim of enhancing participation in democratic decision-making⁴.

For the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and Bristol City Councils the rationale was similar, to broaden access to the process by providing a new channel to complement paper. The tool would provide similar functions to that of the Scottish Parliament, allowing visitors to a website to raise a petition, to read petitions underway and sign them if they wished; to read background information provided by the person raising a petition ('principal petitioner'); and to exchange comments about the petition in a discussion forum.

The ITC were therefore contracted to work alongside the Councils' e-democracy project managers to localise the e-petitioner tool and embed it in their processes for handling petitions, while ensuring it remained sufficiently generic to be easily adapted to the needs of other Councils. In Kingston this work was coordinated through the IT Department, and in Bristol through the Corporate Consultation team.

As well as deploying the system and developing procedures to handle e-petitions, the Councils' role included promoting the tool internally (to council officers / councillors) and externally (to members of the public).

2.1. Main constraints on the evaluation

The e-petitioning project lasted one year, during which project staff were recruited, the supplier contracted, the applications implemented, working practices and processes examined and the e-petitioning tool launched to be used by the public. It was available to the public for the latter 6 months of the one year project. The evaluation was very time-limited, running from December 2004 to March 2005 in parallel with evaluation of three other projects in the Local e-Democracy National Project initiative. This meant it did not have as wide involvement of key individuals and groups as we would have liked.

We should also point out our involvement as suppliers for the e-petitioning project. The authors were not however directly involved in the development of the software and we are confident that the report demonstrates our impartiality in reporting the 'lessons learned'.

2.2. Report Structure

The report has the following sections:-

The Evaluation Framework

This describes the evaluation methods and criteria, and the people involved.

e-Petitioning in Context

This section sets the scene for the councils becoming involved in e-petitioning. The focus here is on the experiences and understandings of the project managers, in terms of the rationale for e-petitioning, and other methods of citizen engagement used. We then go on to describe the e-petitioning tool and outline the processes developed to use it in the pilot. This section again takes a managerial view. That is the tools and processes are depicted according to the project managers' views of how they would support engagement when put into operation. This is based on analysis of interviews and project documentation.

⁴ Macintosh et.al. 2002

Experiences of e-Petitioning

This section describes experiences of the tools and process according to the views of stakeholders (Members, service managers) and users (citizens and internal users). The focus is on themes drawn from interview summaries, online questionnaires and field test observations. We also summarise the results, i.e. the public's response to the project in terms of e-petitions raised with the Council, and the Council's response so far.

Conclusions

This chapter section reflects on the evaluation results and provides conclusions on what difference the project has made, using the 'democratic criteria' described next in the evaluation framework.

3. The Evaluation Framework

3.1. Main evaluation questions

The evaluation targeted citizens using (and others not using) e-petitioning, and Councillors and officers responsible for it. As well as having this variety of participants, the evaluation called for multiple methods. The data and the analysis were mainly qualitative, although we sought additional quantitative evidence in the shape of questionnaire responses and usage data. The reasons for using multiple methods were:-

- To gather evidence of what people do with the e-petitioner tool, as well as what they say they do (or intend to do).
- To strengthen the validity of the conclusions by 'triangulating' the methods used to address each of our evaluation questions, i.e. by using multiple approaches to gather data.

If we start from the premise that the project should support and preferably enhance democracy in some way, what aspects of the project should we consider? The evaluation's 'expert evaluation group' outlined five main elements of the evaluation, comprising⁵:-

- I. Relevant actors and their roles and expectations in the adoption and implementation of e-participation projects.
- II. The contextual bases of e-participation projects
- III. The methods and processes of e-participation
- IV. The outcomes of e-participation
- V. Comparison between offline and online methods of participation

Using these elements we can identify the following *main evaluation questions* : -

- a) How do the actors involved understand e-petitioning to benefit the relations between Councils, elected representatives, public, partners and Central Government, and what in their view are the disadvantages?
- b) How do the politicians, officials and citizens involved in e-petitioning characterise its 'added value'; what methods and processes contribute that value, and what differences are there from paper petitioning?

⁵ Coleman, Macintosh & Mansur "Evaluating e-Democracy in English and Welsh Local Authorities", Oct. 2004

- c) What methods have already been used to find out politicians', officials' and citizens' perspectives on the initiative? What outcomes do the participating councils report so far?
- d) What trade-offs have the technologists involved considered in the design of the software and processes, and what further changes should be considered?
- e) What are the needs for guidance on appropriate ongoing evaluation methods?

3.2. The criteria used

The evaluation needed *criteria* to assess these points. These are listed below and described in more detail in Annex A. We used three main sources.

- A. *Overall criteria for enhancing democracy*: The Local e-Democracy National Project has agreed criteria to assess whether projects enhance democracy, which we used in drawing our conclusions. They were:-
 - A.1 Representation
 - A.2 Engagement
 - A.3 Transparency
 - A.4 Conflict and consensus
 - A.5 Political equality
 - A.6 Community control

- B. *Key dimensions of e-democracy initiatives*: We used the following 'key dimensions' of e-democracy initiatives (Macintosh, 2004) to structure discussions with stakeholders and the public:-
 - B.1 Type of engagement
 - B.2 Stage in decision-making
 - B.3 Actors
 - B.4 Technologies used
 - B.5 Rules of engagement
 - B.6 Duration & sustainability
 - B.7 Accessibility
 - B.8 Resources and Promotion
 - B.9 Evaluation and Outcomes
 - B.10 Critical success factors

- C. *Criteria for assessing e-democracy tools*: The e-petitioner tool can also be judged by the emerging standards of good practice for public websites, from which we derived a list of e-democracy tool quality criteria. They encompass aspects of usability, usefulness, and social and technical acceptability (Nielsen, 1993), many of which also appear in the Quality Framework for UK Government Websites⁶. We used the criteria

⁶ Quality Framework for UK Government Websites: available at:
<http://e-government.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/Resources/WebGuidelines/fs/en>

below to identify themes from field tests with citizens who had had the opportunity to use e-petitioner.

Social acceptability

C.1 Trust and security

C.2 Relevance and legitimacy

Usefulness

C.3 Accessibility

C.4 Appeal

C.5 Content clarity

C.6 Responsiveness

Usability

C.7 Navigation and organisation

C.8 Efficiency and flexibility

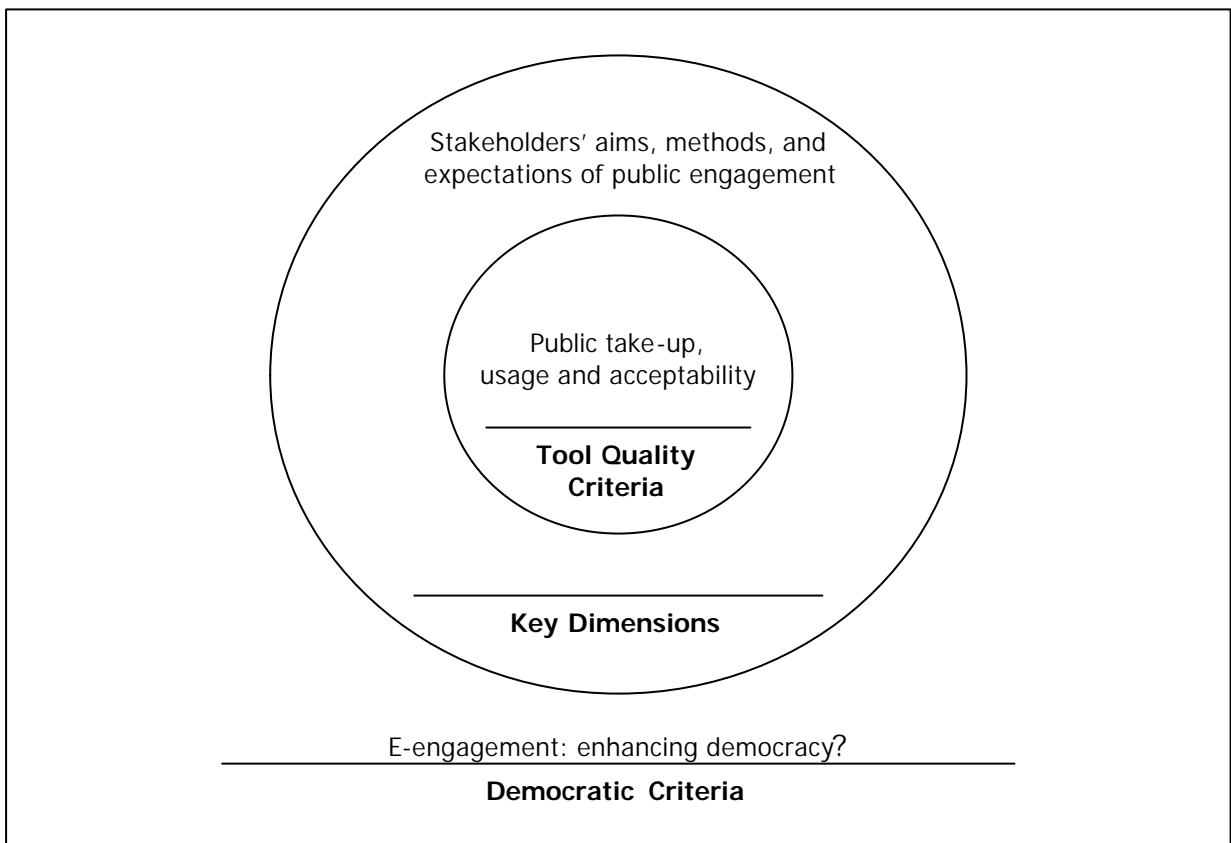
C.9 Error recovery

We used the 'key dimensions' and 'quality criteria' to generate further more specific evaluation questions. There is an important difference between them however. The key dimensions are *not* evaluation criteria. Although each dimension can be related to good practice guidelines, there is no widely accepted set of evaluation criteria for e-petitioning or e-engagement more generally. For example "stage in decision-making" does not *prescribe* a suitable stage for e-engagement- but suggests that the timing of e-engagement in relation to policy development is likely to have a bearing on decision-makers' views of the initiative's successes and failures.

The descriptive rather than prescriptive character of these dimensions reflects their role, which was to generate concrete questions to which participants could respond with their understanding of the project's aims, the methods adopted and their relation to current practice, and expectations of the outcomes, strengths and weaknesses.

Figure 1 brings together the various dimensions and criteria to give an overview of the approach, and introduce the methods described in the next section.

Figure 1 Criteria and sources for e-democracy evaluation



3.3. Methods and participants

In this section we identify the methods we used to gather data. First we identify various categories of people we sought to include:-

- (a) Citizens who have used the e-petitioning tool as a 'principle petitioner', i.e. someone who raises a petition, or simply to read or sign an e-petition.
- (b) Citizens who have *not* used e-petitioning.
- (c) Councillors involved in the petitioning process.
- (d) E-petition 'owners': managers with responsibility for aspects of the petitioning process, for example service managers who respond to petitions.
- (e) Project managers/ technologists employed by the Councils involved.
- (f) 'Internal' users: moderators or administrators.

In Annex A we elaborate on who among the above categories was involved in responding to each of the research questions, and using which methods.

The evaluation called for a combination of research methods for a variety of reasons. Firstly, as we have argued elsewhere (Whyte and Macintosh, 2003) e-democracy evaluation encompasses questions that span social and technical disciplines, and evidence of what people *do* with the available tools, as well as what they say they do (or intend to do)⁷.

Given the limited time available for data collection and analysis we needed to maximise its validity by 'triangulating' – using a variety of methods to address each of our evaluation questions. The sources of data used are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Data sources used

	Bristol City	R.B. Kingston
Semi-structured interviews	✓	✓
Field tests of e-petitioner	✓	✓
Online questionnaire	✓	✓
Internal documentation	✓	✓
Online discussion/ petition data	✓	✓
Web server log files	✓	-

Our aim was to use at least three sources with each of the participating councils. Notes follow below on how each of the methods applied.

The Annexes to the report also give examples of the materials used.

Semi-structured Interviews

The 'key dimensions' were used to draw up the detailed evaluation questions described in Annex A. Interviews were carried out face-to-face during visits to the Kingston and Bristol. Some additional interviews were carried out by telephone where individuals could not be available in person. The discussions were audio-recorded and notes taken during them to allow selective transcription and speed up the analysis. Analysis involved reviewing notes and transcripts to identify salient points, then relating these to the 'key dimensions' and the two sets of criteria (democracy and tool quality) listed earlier.

Table 2. Interview target groups

	Kingston	Bristol
Citizens: users and non-users	7	12
Councillors involved in e-petitioning	2	1
E-petitioning process 'owners'	2	2
Project managers & 'technologists'	2	2
Internal users, administrators	2	1*

Note *: Some individuals are shown twice where roles overlap.

⁷ Our approach draws on methodologies that consider research as collaborative learning with participants - about what they are seeking to accomplish, how they accomplish it, how 'success' should be recognised and what conditions favour it. (Checkland and Scholes, 1999; Suchman and Trigg, 1991; Pawson and Tilley, 1994).

Field tests of e-petitioning

These had two parts and were conducted both individually and with groups of citizens. The first part consisted of a brief usability test and the second a semi-structured discussion.

The *usability testing* involved observing members of the public using e-petitioner. The testing was not of the citizens themselves but of the assumptions made about their expectations and behaviour.

Usability testing is often carried out under controlled laboratory conditions and using an experimental framework (see Nielsen, 1993 for an overview). Often however there are practical reasons for testing in the field, for example where project schedules require it and where the expected users vary widely (Rowley, 1994). There are also methodological reasons for favouring a flexible 'semi-structured' approach, i.e. our aim was to explore the acceptability of the tools and the nature of usability problems that arise in 'real' conditions. We were not aiming to measure task efficiency or correlate particular user groups with particular usability problems and tasks under more controlled 'laboratory' conditions.

Testing followed the typical path of providing a representative group of test participants with a set of realistic tasks, and observing them to identify any difficulties they encounter when trying to carry them out. We described three tasks that we considered basic to effective use, of e-petitioning: finding out how to set up an e-petition, signing one, or leaving a comment in a discussion forum linked to the e-petition. Participants were asked to read and follow instructions for the task, comment on any aspect they liked and seek help if required. Comments were noted and the test sessions video recorded to aid analysis of any problems described.

The testing was followed by discussion with the participants about their experience using the tools and how they expected e-petition results to impact on decision-making. The comments made during the 'hands-on' testing and the discussions were also recorded, and analysed using the same set of criteria and dimensions as for interviews.

The field tests were carried out in Bristol (9 participants in group test, and 2 individually) and Kingston-upon-Thames (6 individuals). Further details of the materials used and discussion questions are given in Annex D.

Online questionnaires: sampling and recruitment

Visitors to the e-petitioner site who choose to add their name to a petition are presented with an 'exit' questionnaire. This allows users' comments and perceptions of the acceptability of the site to be monitored. However this questionnaire only reaches people who have actually signed an e-petition, excluding those who have read one but not signed, or who have not used the site at all.

We also therefore wanted to use an *online survey* to explore how typical the e-petition signers were of the general population, and to get wider views on questions we expected to affect tool acceptance. This was set up and publicised on the e-petitioning web site and via the Councils' regular e-mail newsletters, but unfortunately the response was too limited to provide usable results and so we have not included it in the report. In any case the e-petitioner tool was not available to the public for long enough for us to assume that randomly selected local people would or could respond to questions about it, or to use sample weighted to be representative in terms of age, gender, internet use, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status.

Project documentation

Project documentation was an important source of information on the expectations of project managers and those officers and Members directly involved in agreeing the project's scope and content. Materials that had been used to publicise the project and brief the officers given responsibility for administering e-petitions were also consulted for that purpose.

E-petition results

The e-petitioner tool itself provides evidence of the breadth and depth of its use, which could be measured in terms of:-

- Responses to questionnaires
- Comments posted to discussion fora
- E-petitions raised
- Names added to petitions ('signatures')

Although easily quantifiable, the significance of these measures of take-up depends to a large extent on the expectations of the project managers, which we report where applicable.

Web server log files

Web metrics are measures of user activity on a website. As the Quality Guidelines for UK Government Websites acknowledge, web metrics can support the analysis of take-up and usage patterns, providing evidence of the relative appeal of specific parts of a site and indications of potential problems. Commonly used metrics used in this study were:-

- Numbers of visits to the e-petitioner home pages
- Numbers of page requests
- Numbers of unique visitors

The use of web metrics for government websites is less well developed than for commerce. For e-commerce purposes users' behaviour can be tied to whether or not they complete an online purchase. By contrast e-democracy websites have a more complex relation between user behaviour, its outcomes, and the value that is placed on both by citizens and stakeholders.

We wanted nevertheless to apply one of the more widely used e-commerce metrics to test its value. This is the 'browse-to-buy ratio' or 'browse-to-act ratio', which measures the appeal of an item by dividing the number of actions taken by the number of visits to the item (Grant, 2003). This measure can in principle be applied to e-democracy sites that are meant to enable e-participation, since this typically involves citizens accessing a web site and choosing or not to perform an action (contribute to a forum, sign a petition, complete a questionnaire).

4. e-Petitioning in Context

4.1. The e-engagement context in Kingston

The e-petitioning project was one of three Local e-Democracy National Project initiatives in Kingston. E-Democracy Project Manager Holly Robertson explains: -

Kingston has made available a range of projects, such as e-petitioner, the work with BBC iCan and online surgeries for young people. E-petitioning and the online surgeries are working with existing services – existing democratic processes - and strengthening those. Then we are also using technology to strengthen access for particular groups, particularly the online surgeries project for young people. And then iCan is more community driven being information and networking based”.

The online initiatives are intended to complement Kingston’s existing procedures for involving the public in its decision-making. In 2002 Kingston moved to an Executive and Scrutiny decision-making structure, along with most other English Local Authorities following the Local Government Act 2000. The Executive is appointed by the full Council and its decisions are subject to scrutiny by a number of Overview Panels.

Less typically, Kingston has a system of Neighbourhood Committees who can make decisions for their Neighbourhood and also scrutinise the Executive's decisions where they affect Neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood Committees are also subject to scrutiny by the Overview Panels. As part of the ‘modernisation’ process the Council also put in place a ‘call-in’ mechanism. The Overview Panels have the power to ‘call-in’ a decision which has been made by the Executive or a Neighbourhood Committee but has yet to be implemented. This ‘call-in’ power allows the Overview Panel to consider whether a decision is appropriate and recommend that it be reconsidered.

From the date of the Minutes being published, there are five working days in which any decision may be called-in, if requested by three (or more) Councillors, the Chair of an Overview Panel, the Chair of a Neighbourhood Committee affected by a proposal, or *by 100 local people who may raise a petition*. So although citizens have traditionally had the right to present a petition at a Council meeting through their Councillor, petitions raised through the ‘call-in’ mechanism in Kingston have significantly added weight.

Kingston also has consultation processes, including those that apply under the statutory provisions of Planning, Budgeting and Licensing. These are complemented by a Citizen’s Panel of 1000 residents who are regarded as a ‘sounding board’ for the Council.

4.2. Bristol’s e-engagement context

The e-petitioner project in Bristol is managed by the Corporate Consultation team’s e-democracy project manager Carol Hayward and team manager Stephen Hilton. Hilton recalls “Kingston were looking for another Authority, and it caught my interest. There is a petition system in place so it was quite easy to put it online. Conceptually, it is easy to put across to people. Bringing it online means that it gets online virtues, for instance the ‘discussion’ and ‘tell a friend’ features. Also for traditional forms of petition it is possible that people never know the outcome of the petition they signed, whereas e-petitions have the strength of being able to display the results.”

The project has also been enthusiastically supported by the council's Head of Legal Services, Stephen McNamara, who says "It can provide another way for people to raise matters with the Council if they want to...it's a matter of extending choice.... I see two main benefits- one practical and the other a possible benefit. The practical benefit is it shows that we are doing it, that Bristol City Council has this system that perhaps other Councils do not have and is using it to meet the targets, as part of the thrust from central government towards using online systems to involve citizens. The possible benefit is to have more and more people engaging with the Council, and to avoid the criticisms that we would get from very articulate groups if we did not do it.... I'd expect developments like this to become more and more important over the next few years."

4.3. Main e-petitioner functions for citizen users

The site was hosted by the developer ITC, but presented as an integral part of the main Royal Borough of Kingston site, with links from the home page and the site's "quick links" menu, as well as in the pages dedicated to Democratic Processes (www.kingston.gov.uk/petitions). The e-petitioner tool presents the following functions, each corresponding to a page or section of the e-petitioner site:-

About e-petitions: This is intended to guide prospective e-petitioners on the procedures needed to raise an e-petition and how these relate to the wider petitioning process.

List of e-petitions: This is a table listing e-petitions, followed by paper petitions, and for each one a descriptive 'subject' or title for the petition, the 'principal petitioner' who raised it, the closing date beyond which names can no longer be added, and its status (detailed later in this section).

Conditions of Use: This page describes the 'rules of engagement', in terms of the kinds of comments that may be removed from the discussion forum attached to each petition ("offensive and disruptive" ones), and the kinds of promotional activity that are discouraged (i.e. spamming).

Petitions Guidance: This page describes the petitioning process using a 'frequently asked question' format covering the basic of raising a petition and the Council's role in acting on it. The page is part of the main Council site, and includes a *privacy statement*.

Viewing and signing an e-petition

By selecting a hyperlink from a petition listed in the table on the List Petitions page, a visitor to the site can view a further set of options for that petition. The menu changes to provide functions to read and (optionally) 'sign' the petition, view the names and neighbourhood/ward of those who have signed, or join an online discussion. There is an option to view the progress of a petition, in terms of the Council's official response once it has been considered by the committee or officials it has been sent to. Users may also forward the petition to an acquaintance by email with a 'tell a friend' facility.

Visitors to the e-petitioner site who choose to add their name to a petition are presented with an 'exit' questionnaire. This allows users' comments and perceptions of the acceptability of the site to be monitored. The results of this questionnaire are given later in this section.

The Figures 2 and 3 below show the "List Petitions" and "Read/Sign Petition" pages respectively. Figure 3 shows the latter with the screen scrolled down to the "progress page".

Figure 2 E-petitioner page listing current e-petitions

The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "e-Petitions: List e-Petitions - Mozilla Firefox". The page header includes the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames logo and the date "15 March 2005". A navigation menu contains links for Home, Neighbourhoods, News, Bill Payments, Job Vacancies, Site Map, and Contact Us. A sidebar on the left lists "A-Z of Council Services" and "Quick Links" under "Council and Democracy". The main content area is titled "Royal Borough of Kingston e-Petitions" and features a navigation bar with "About e-Petitions", "List of e-Petitions", "Conditions of Use", and "Petition Guidance". Below this, a heading reads "To view a petition click on a subject below". A table lists two petitions:

Subject:	Principal Petitioner:	Closing Date:	Status:
General			
Paving and trees at Kew Court, Richmond Road, Kingston	Councillor Penny Shelton	07 April 2005	Collecting Signatures
Extension of Consultation on Creating Capacity within Kingston Special Schools	Mary Macan on behalf of MAPS (Parents/carers of children with special needs/disabilities)	18 February 2005	To Be Submitted

Figure 3 E-petitioner page showing progress of an e-petition

The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "e-Petitions: View/Sign Petition - Mozilla Firefox". The page displays the progress of an e-petition. A box shows "Number of signatures: 41" with a link to "View all of the signatures". Below this is a section titled "Petition Progress" containing the following text:

The Save our Post Offices e-petition was presented at the Executive council meeting on Tuesday 19 October, Guildhall, Kingston Upon Thames. The e-petition was included within the meeting agenda in Appendix A (Post Office Closures, Kingston and Surbiton constituency) - paragraph 12, and the number of signatures was reported at the meeting.

Further information will be posted here when available.

At the bottom of the page, there are links for "about e-petitions", "list e-petitions", "view/sign petition", "background information", "discussion", "view signatures", "petition progress", and "tell a friend". An RSS icon is also present.

The e-petitioner tool also comprises a set of administration functions that in Kingston were used by Democratic Services officers and in Bristol by the Corporate Consultation team. The functions are accessible only to authenticated users. They include functions to create and edit e-petitions and also to moderate the online discussion and view 'exit questionnaire' responses.

4.4. Developing the e-petition process

The e-petitioning project changed the petitioning process, formalising it to a greater degree in both Councils. As we noted earlier, petitions are an established mechanism for citizens to raise concerns within the formal decision-making process. So what was new?

Kingston's e-petitioning process

Developing the e-petitioning process entailed a need to publish guidelines for the first time, and to put in place a mechanism for managing new e-petitions ie contacting the principle petitioner and the key council officers responsible for the matter raised, as well as updating the site and publishing the Council's formal response to each petition. The addition of a new 'channel' for petitioning and the associated need to guide website visitors on how they might use it, a need evident from good practice in website usability, established the case for publishing Guidelines on petitioning in general (drawing on the precedent of the Scottish Parliament which has similar guidelines).

The revisions to the petitioning process brought a sharper distinction between those petitions that warrant consideration by Council committees and those submitted by members of the public directly to service departments (such as Housing). Current plans are to limit the process to the former. As project manager Holly Robertson explains these petitions "are obviously deemed important enough for people to go and present them – I think its more important to get that process right before trying to tackle a much larger process."

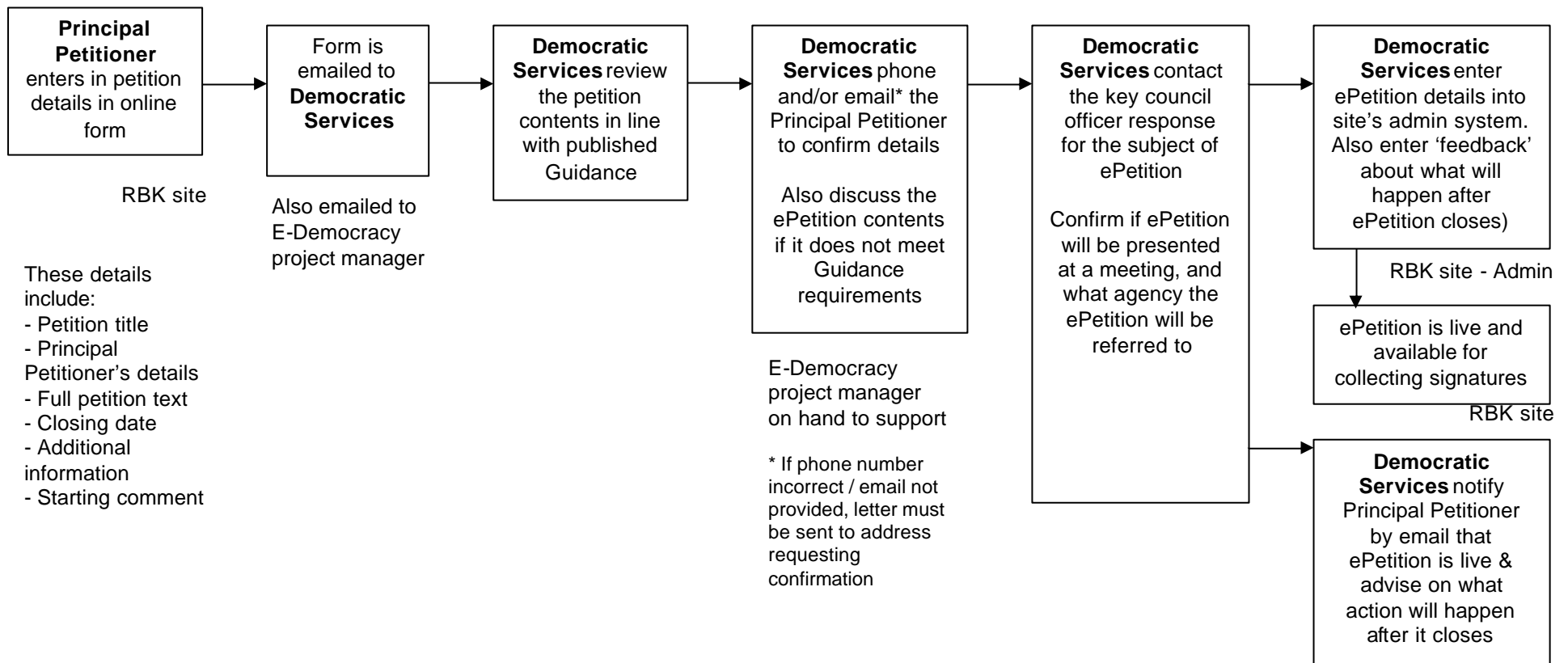
From the launch of the pilot in September 2004 until early in 2005 the process was managed by her in conjunction with the Head of Democratic Services, who checks each e-petition received is inline with the published Guidance. With the release of the 'admin' tools in December 2004 the staff of Democratic Services became more actively involved in the process. As well as entering the petition details into the system, their role is to:-

1. Liase with the 'principal petitioner', the person who has raised the petition
2. Contact the key council officer responsible for the subject of the e-petition
3. Confirm which committee meeting the e-petition will be presented at, and what agency the e-petition will be referred to.
4. Monitor and moderate the discussion forum linked to each e-petition, to ensure that comments abide by the Conditions of Use.
5. When the e-petition reaches its closing date, prepare a "brief" to decision-makers on the e-petition and the support gained for it online.
6. If the e-petition is being presented at a meeting, send a copy of the report to the Principal Petitioner and remind them that they can attend the meeting. Or if the e-petition is referred directly to an officer, send the contact details of the officer
7. Update the "progress" page giving feedback on any decisions taken about the e-petition.

The process is illustrated in Figures 4, 5 and 6 below.

Figure 4. Initiating an ePetition in Kingston

Target timeframe for publishing petition: 3 days



NOTES:

- People can run paper petitions and ePetitions on the same topic at the same time.
- Multiple petitions on the same topic are discouraged. If ePetitions are submitted on the same topic at the same time, a joint petition should be suggested. If it is a campaign issue that the council supports (eg Post Offices), the council could support the ePetition.

Figure 5 Maintaining an ePetition in Kingston

An ePetition will need to be maintained if:

- An extension to the closing date is requested by the Principal Petitioner
- Additional information relating is requested to be posted by the Principal Petitioner
- Referral ('feedback') details have changed for the ePetition
- Inappropriate comments need to be removed from the discussion forum

Democratic services will use the site's administration area to:

- extend the closing date of a ePetition (through Edit Petitions)
- add/change information to the ePetition's 'background information' field (through Edit Petitions)
- add/change information to the ePetition's 'feedback' field (through Edit Petitions)
- delete inappropriate comments (through Discussion)

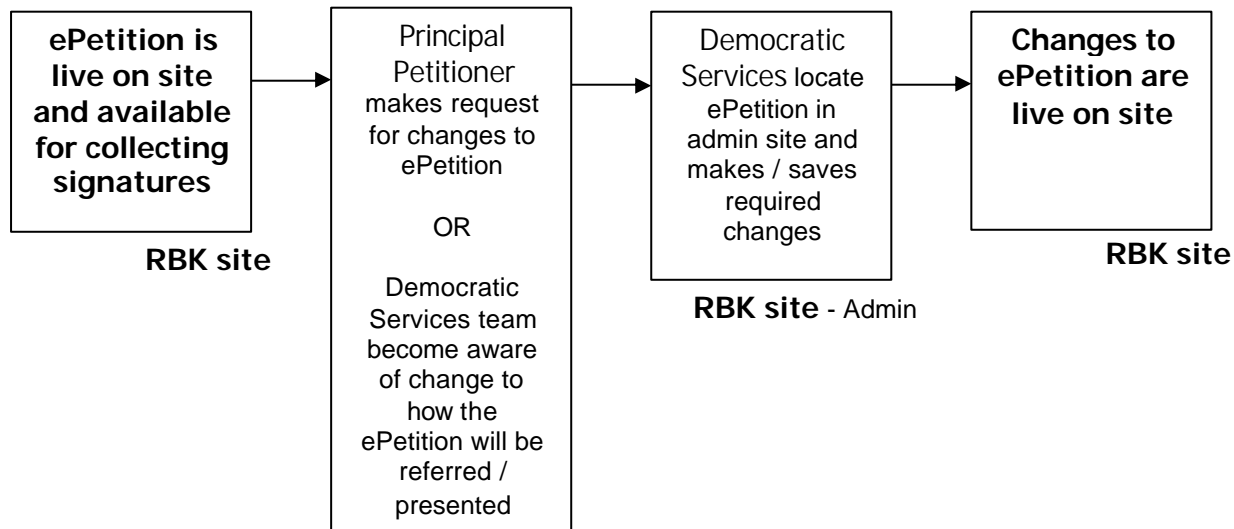
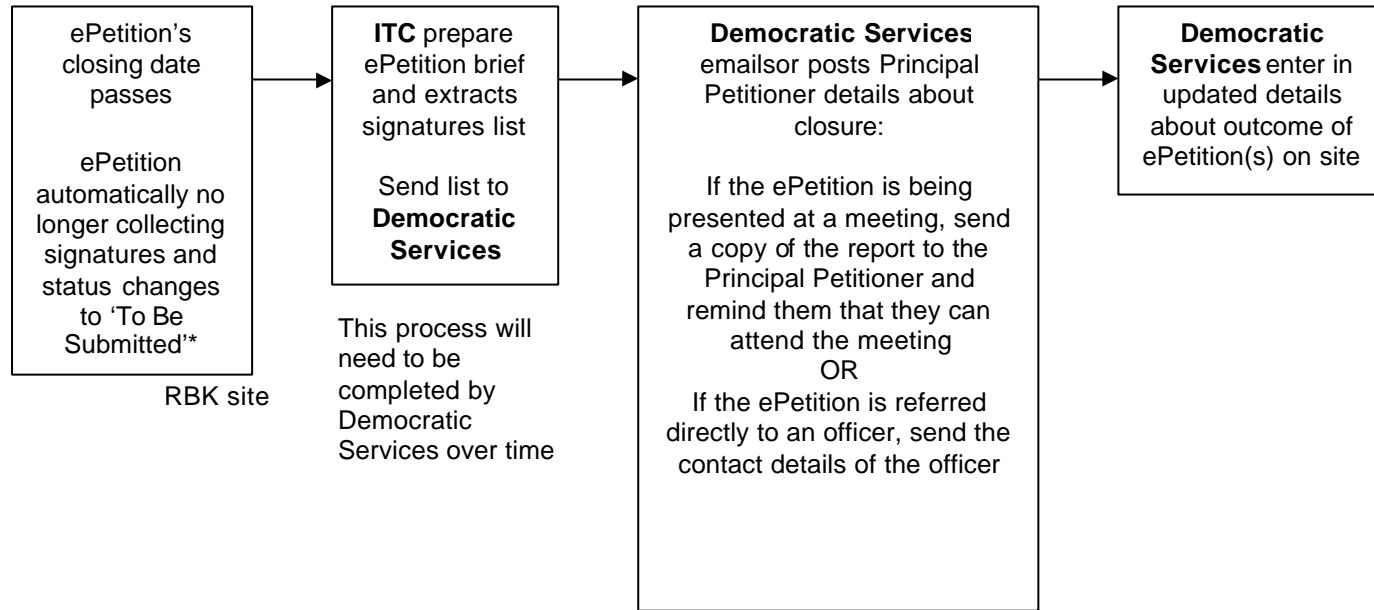


Figure 6. Closure of an ePetition in Kingston



Bristol's e-petitioning process

In most of its detail the process in Bristol follows the pattern established in Kingston. There are some important differences however. E-petitioning has been managed by the Corporate Consultation Team, rather than the Cabinet Support Team who perform similar duties to Kingston's Democratic Services. Corporate Consultation deployed e-petitioning on the basis that a successful pilot may be handed over to Cabinet Support.

The process of initiating an e-petition is similar, and the eDemocracy Project Manager has been responsible for liaising with principle petitioners and routing the e-petition to an appropriate office. In addition, the relevant Councillors have been notified in Bristol.

When necessary e-petitions have been referred to the Legal Services department to ensure they comply with the published Guidance, which (like Kingston) was formulated as a response to the e-petitioning project. Head of Legal Services Stephen McNamara explains "The role of Legal Services is to act as a filter, for example if a petition uses racist language or is defamatory. It's not really an advisory role as far as the petitioners are concerned, though we do advise on more general issues- for example we have just been discussing what should happen during election time because petitions can be political and it affects what the Council can do constitutionally, but we decided that petitions should not be considered part of that – it is the Council facilitating a public process."

4.5. Briefing decision-makers on the results

The written formalisation of petition procedures extends to the presentation of e-petitions to Council Members at committee meetings. Petitions may be presented at a meeting on paper complete with the accompanying names, and recorded in the minutes. Normally however they are not considered by Members until a subsequent meeting when they are presented as an agenda item rather than in their entirety.

The need for a Briefing report detailing an e-petition and the support gained for it during its time collecting signatures on the website, stems in part from the day-to-day formalities of committee meetings and their servicing (i.e. paper documents rather than web pages are circulated to individuals who refer to them during meetings). The format of the report was proposed by ITC, drawing on their experience in producing similar reports to the Public Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament.

An example of the *Brief* is reproduced below in Figure 7. (The address of the principal petitioner has been omitted for the purpose of this report).

Figure 7 Example of e-petition brief to decision-makers

E-petition Brief for Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames Council

Date Prepared: 18th February 2005

E-petition summary details

Title: Extension of Consultation on Creating Capacity within Kingston Special Schools

Petitioners: The e-petition was raised by: Mary Macan on behalf of MAPS (Parents/carers of children with special needs/disabilities), Carers' Support Worker, Kingston Carers Network, Kingston

Dates e-petition opened and closed: The e-petition was raised on 2nd February 2005 and was closed for signatures on 18th February 2005, after running for a period of 16 days.

Statistical overview of signatures: A total of 41 signatories signed this e-petition; all of whom were within the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames area. The distribution of the petitioners by area was:

Kingston Town Neighbourhood	7
Surbiton Neighbourhood	18
Maldens and Coombe Neighbourhood	9
South of the Borough Neighbourhood	5
OTHER - Kingston	2

Validity of signatures: 41 names were entered into the e-petition database, and none of these names had to be removed from the list of signatures.

Full e-petition text

1) Many parents of children with special educational needs who are, will, or could be affected by the proposals have not been informed about the consultation process or invited to take part.

2) Inadequate notice for the consultation meetings at Bedelsford, Dysart and St. Philips (e.g. parents at Bedelsford were given less than one weeks notice).

3) Too short a time period allowed for responding to the consultation document.

We request that a fuller consultation be carried out with all parents of special needs children in the borough including those on the disabilities and SEN registers, and that the consultation period is extended.

Additional information provided by those raising the e-petition

The Royal Borough of Kingston is reviewing its provision for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and is carrying out a consultation with key stakeholders. The proposals laid down in the document will have far reaching consequences for many SEN children and young people in and out of the borough. We are concerned that there is inadequate consultation of parents with Special Educational Needs pupils. For a copy of the consultation document, visit www.kingston.gov.uk/education/creating_capacity_within_kingston_special_schools.htm

Synopsis of comments to the site

This section normally provides an analysis of the comments entered into the integrated discussion forum during the collection of signatures. However for this petition only one comment was posted, and is given in full here:

Mary Macan 02/02/2005 10:17 The proposals laid down in "Creating Capacity Within Kingston Special Schools" will have far reaching consequences for many children with special educational needs. We believe that that everyone concerned with, or interested in, special educational needs should be able to participate in the consultation, and to be able to do so within a reasonable time frame.

4.6. Implementing and promoting e-petitioner

The e-petitioner site is, as we have said, a 'localised' version of a system already operational on the website of the Scottish Parliament (and also hosted by ITC). This was not however simply a matter of the page layout or the descriptive text and instructions. The main effort lay in meeting the need for the administration functions, in meeting accessibility requirements, and in providing a more modular architecture suited to the need for the software to be tailored to the varying needs of local authorities.

The Scottish Parliament e-petitioner system is maintained by ITC as a 'managed service', an arrangement that could not meet the needs of the National Project tools to be sustainable beyond the life of the project. Kingston and Bristol required facilities for their own officers to administer their respective systems. These facilities needed to be usable by officers without any necessity for them to have skills in web page maintenance. Implementation was made more complex by the conflicting demands of localising the software to the (occasionally differing) needs of Kingston and Bristol Councils, and ensuring that it remained sufficiently generic to be easily adapted to other authorities at the end of the National Project.

The public site was launched in mid-September 2004, with the administrative facilities following in mid-December. *Accessibility* was among the main requirements of Kingston and Bristol. Prior to its launch, the automated accessibility checker "Bobby" (<http://bobby.watchfire.com>) was used to check e-petitioner for compliance with international web accessibility standards.

To *promote* the site, Kingston commissioned leaflets and posters bearing a quote from novelist Gunther Grass "*The job of a citizen is to keep his mouth open*". These were distributed around public libraries and other council sites. The e-petitioner publicity was also used in BBC iCan networking events. Bristol's promotion of e-petitions similarly included leaflets, and advertising in local newspapers and freesheets. The project also received national and local press coverage in both Kingston and Bristol. Councillors in each authority were informed about the service through e-mails and presentations.

5. Experiences of e-Petitioning

This section summarises interviews, field tests and online questionnaire responses that describe the experiences and expectations of the various actors in e-petitioning. These include the Councillors and service managers involved in e-petitioning, the system's administrators, and citizens.

Citizen's experiences and perspectives are discussed first, beginning with principal petitioners, then the responses of other citizens on the usability, usefulness and acceptability of the tool and key dimensions of the petitioning process.

5.1. Principal petitioners

Two principal petitioners were interviewed for the evaluation, one from Kingston and the other from Bristol. One petition concerned a school crossing and the other a planned telecoms mast. Neither of these petitions was associated with any existing organised group, rather the petitioners were individual citizens with concerns they wanted to raise through the petitioning process⁸.

We summarise what these e-petitioners had to say regarding:-

- Background to the e-petition
- Reasons for favouring e-petitioning over paper
- Publicising the e-petition
- Involvement of Councillors
- Clarity of the guidelines
- Responsiveness of the Council
- Expectations of petition impact

Background to the petition

Kingston resident Maria Samuels decided to start her petition after receiving information from a telecom company that they were applying for permission to erect a mobile phone mast in her neighbourhood. Her first inclination had been to get more information from the planning department, but on searching the website she could not find any contact names. However, she did find the e-petition system, and received help from e-democracy project manager Holly Robertson on setting it up.

Bristol school pupil Rosie Harding wanted to draw attention to the dangers of a road crossing, after she had been hit by a car on her way home from school. Her mother Mary had supported the petition and was interviewed by us "Petitions are covered in various subjects in school, so she had been thinking about a petition when e-petitions launched, and thought that they would be a good way of doing it... It was not difficult to set up, Rosie is thirteen and set it up herself."

⁸ The names used here are pseudonyms.

Reasons for favouring e-petitioning over paper

Both e-petitioners saw the advantage as simplicity and convenience compared with petitioning on paper. For Maria Samuels the possibility to petition the Council online made the difference between doing it and not doing it: "If you are in full-time work, and if you have a small child, e-petitioning makes it easier to get involved in the local community. It gives a voice to those in such a position, who would otherwise be silent on local politics".

Similarly for Harding "my daughter possibly would not have done it otherwise. It was purely because she thought that e-petitioning would be an easy way to go about it." This initial enthusiasm was however tempered by the effort needed to *publicise* the petition

Publicising e-petitions

In both cases the e-petitioners quickly appreciated the necessity to draw attention to their petitions. "It is a good tool, but it needs advertisement" says Samuels who initially relied on word of mouth among friends, but went on to produce a leaflet and distribute it locally. This appeared to generate further interest in signing her petition.

In the Hardings' experience the demands of publicising an e-petition had made them ambivalent about its benefits:

"That is one of the disappointing aspects of e-petitions. With a paper petition, it is easier to get signatures by asking people to read the petition and let them decide whether they would like to sign or not. With an e-petition, you have the problem of directing them to a website in order to sign. This can lead to people simply forgetting about it. For instance, my sister's children go or are about to go to the school; I asked her frequently to sign the e-petition, but she did not get around to it. If it had been a paper petition, they all would have signed. So you lose some of the immediacy of the petition by doing it online."

This was despite efforts to publicise the location of the petition on the e-petitioner site:-

"The web address was included on a school newsletter, but there is a tendency for parents to read only those bits that are relevant to their children and then put it to one side. You would have to be extremely interested in order to go back to it to find the web address. Then, the address is long and complicated and not immediately obvious – it would help to have a simpler web address. The fact that a paper petition can support e-petitions should be made more obvious. If there were a facility to print-off petition forms that could be used as a paper petition it would make it easier for people to collect signatures."

The system's capability to "tell a friend" was used but was limited to known e-mail acquaintances:

"We used it to tell my family and people with children at the school, and Rosie used it to ask her school friends. The people we contacted in that way did sign. This is another contrast with paper petitions, where you approach people you don't know but think will sign; with e-petitions you only have access to those you know really well."

There were also some comments on the Councils' efforts to publicise the e-petitioner system. Samuels and Harding had both become aware of the system through these efforts; Samuels through promotion on Kingston's home page, Harding through a feature in the Bristol Evening Post. According to Samuels "E-petition needs to have its profile raised, though this will possibly increase the number of eccentric petitions that get submitted." In her view e-petitions should be a channel used "As a last resort... otherwise there will be too many e-petitions on the system resulting in a drain on the council's resources and a diminishing of the

importance of petitions if used too freely. They should be on issues that concern a large number of the local population.”

Involvement of Councillors

Neither of the e-petitioners had had any contact with their local Councillor regarding their petition. Their expectations of the benefits of this were modest. Kingston's Maria Samuels had “no strong feelings” but felt that “Individuals and council should work together. Councillors should be automatically notified when someone in their neighbourhood raises a petition. It would be good if councillors became involved in the discussion section”.

Bristol e-petitioner Mary Harding had lower expectations, framed by a perception that there was little to be gained from contacting Bristol Councillors. “One of the problems of Bristol City Council running e-petitions is that people are generally so negative about them. People do not consider approaching the council as being a good first port of call – rather more as a last resort”.

The e-petitioner system makes it easier in principle for a citizen to raise a petition and have it presented without having any direct contact with Councillors at all. If it is good for local democracy for Councillors and their constituents to discuss their petitions there is a need for effective protocols for such discussions to take place. Where a Council or its Members have acquired a poor reputation, deserved or not, this may be perpetuated in the absence of a proactive follow-up by Councillors.

Clarity of the guidelines

Both e-petitioners were satisfied that the guidance given setting up an e-petition was easy to follow, but would have appreciated more specific guidance on what they could expect by way of a response from service departments. There was also lack of clarity over the significance or otherwise of the number of signatures raised and what bearing this would have on the Councils' response.

Kingston's e-petitioner was unaware of the role of Democratic Services in responding to petitions, intending instead to pursue the matter with the Planning department. She was uncertain about their role and believed there was a need for clearer guidance on how departments would respond.

Responsiveness of the Council

In Kingston, the help Maria Samuels received in setting up her e-petition was overshadowed by uncertainty over what would happen after its submission to the Council for consideration. Her petition was on a subject covered by a planning application, but she was unaware of its relationship to planning procedures or its likely impact on the outcome (at this point she had had no contact with planning officers).

“It would be helpful if there were some follow-up for those signing (via e-mail) so that they know where the petition is going and how it is doing. This would create the impression that petitioning works, and would thereby encourage people to use the system. Presently, there is a perception the petition disappears into the ether.”

Bristol's Mary Harding thought principal petitioners should be given clearer guidance on when and how the petition would be presented.

“This is possibly where it all falls down. After the closing date had passed, the next step was to present the petition, but it all seemed a bit vague...we still haven't got around to making that decision. It is just left there lying. It needs effective advice upon what to do after the petition has closed.

The e-petitioning process requires clarity on whether the onus lies on the principle petitioners to 'push' their petition through the system or on the Council to proactively guide them through the next steps.

Expectations of petition impact

Both Kingston's Maria Samuels and Bristol's Mary Harding had modest hopes for their petitions. “It is difficult to say how effective it is before learning what impact it has had on the planning application. It has attracted fifty signatures, but will that be sufficient?” asks Samuels, and Harding says: -

“I would expect the council to consider it, and advise upon the result of the outcome. I'm not particularly hopeful...but at least they could advise us on the outcome of the petition's presentation... The more ways that people can access the council the better, but it won't mean anything if the council don't publish any results; it just bolsters their negative image. Unless people can see what the outcome of their actions is, then I don't think they will be particularly confident in it.”

5.2. Citizens of Kingston and Bristol

Citizens' perspectives were obtained from field tests and interviews in both Kingston and Bristol, and from 'exit questionnaires' completed by people after signing an online petition. Conversely, the field test participants had mostly *not* used e-petitioner.

We begin by considering how *representative* the participants were (and of what), before summarising their views in terms of:-

- Accessibility issues
- Clarity of the guidance and instruction
- E-petitioner usability
- Trust and security issues
- Relevance of e-petitioning and expectations of outcomes

Field test and questionnaire participation

Citizens participated in field tests and in an 'exit questionnaire' that was made available on the site for internal (i.e. work package 2) evaluation. We have included demographic details of the exit questionnaire respondents so that these can be compared with those of the local populations (Kingston-upon-Thames 148,000; Bristol 381,000)

There were 6 *field test* participants in Kingston and 12 in Bristol. This is not of course sufficient to be representative of the local populations, but these tests aimed to explore the nature of the issues citizens found relevant rather than to quantify them in statistically generalisable terms. Characteristics of the field test participants were as shown in table 3 below: -

Table 3 Field test participants

	Kingston	Bristol
Age		
16-29	0	2
30-44	2	4
45-59	1	5
60-74	3	0
75+	0	1
Gender		
Male	2	9
Female	4	3
Disability		
Yes	0	4
No	6	8
Ethnic origin		
White	6	11
BME	0	1

Also important is the level of experience that the participants had of the Internet, and of petitioning and other forms of civic engagement:-

Kingston

- 5 of the 6 said they used the Internet more than once a week, the other about once a week.
- None had signed an e-petition, and two had signed a paper petition "once or twice" previously.
- None had held responsibilities in a local organisation, such as being a committee member, raising funds, organising events or doing clerical work.

Bristol

- 10 of the 12 said they used the Internet more than once a week, the other 2 about once a week.
- 1 had signed an e-petition, 7 had never signed a paper petition, 4 "once or twice" and 1 "many times previously."
- 6 had held responsibilities in a local organisation, such as being a committee member, raising funds, organising events or doing clerical work.

The differences between the two sites reflects the way the participants were recruited. In Kingston, tests were carried out in a public library with library users who were approached as they exited the library. The Bristol tests were carried out with a pre- invited group drawn mostly from the Council's database of volunteer website testers, two of whom also happened to be registered users of the online consultation site *Ask Bristol* and one a member of the Citizens Panel. One person was recruited from those the e-petition signers who had indicated they would be willing to be contacted.

The *exit questionnaire* was completed by 478 of the 890 e-petition signers in Bristol and 100 of 173 signers in Kingston. These results are therefore likely to be representative of those people who visited the site and signed an e-petition. The results will not of course include any site users who visited but found e-petitioner uninteresting, or who found it too difficult to use, since they will not have signed an e-petition. These results are therefore likely to under-report usability issues.

Table 5 Demographic characteristics of e-petition signers⁹

	Kingston (%)		Bristol (%)	
	e-petition	Local population	e-petition	Local population
Age				
Under 25	9	23 (16-29)	13	23 (16-29)
25-50	66	23 (30-44)	63	23 (30-44)
Over 50	25	35 (45+)	24	35 (45+)
Gender				
Male	48	50	62	49
Female	52	50	38	51
Disability				
Yes	9	17	4	19
No	89	83	94	81
Ethnic origin				
White	86	85	86	92
BME	7	15	6	8

The age divisions used in the exit questionnaire are unfortunately not consistent with those used in ONS survey returns, but allow a crude comparison to be drawn. It is clear from the responses that people who signed e-petitions during the pilot period were relatively more likely to be aged 25-50, and less likely to be disabled. In Bristol they were slightly more likely to be male. The response rate from members of Black or Minority Ethnic groups appears to be proportionate to the local population, although it is difficult to be conclusive since 7% of the respondents in both sites declined to answer questions on ethnicity.

The limited life of the pilot makes any comparison of e-petitioners with the population as a whole rather difficult. The characteristics of e-petition signers are likely to reflect the nature of the petitions. But given the relatively small number of these raised in the pilot period we cannot assume they are representative of local concerns.

Relevance of e-petitioning and expected impact

The e-petitioner system's appeal in the more general sense is likely to depend on whether citizens find the petitioning process a relevant way to raise their concerns. We therefore asked the field test participants about their experiences and expectations. The views expressed about e-petitioner were almost all positive, while expectations of the petitioning process having a positive outcome ranged from mildly hopeful to highly sceptical.

All field testers replied to questions about their *expectations* by referring to the ability to see results published in the Progress page – not just as a means to follow up the progress of

⁹ The sources of local population figures are: -

Age, gender: Office of National Statistics Population estimates 2002. The figures shown are an average of those for Bristol City and Kingston-upon-Thames (which only differ by a few percentage points).

Ethnicity: Office of National Statistics from census returns.

Disability Rights Commission *DRC Disability Briefing: February 2003* (Table 8 EMPLOYMENT RATES BY GOVERNMENT OFFICE REGION estimates from the most recent Labour Force Survey (Summer 2002 - Great Britain).

petitions they supported but as a 'guide to what might happen'. This suggests that the credibility of the system will depend on the clarity of the outcomes and the effectiveness of tracking and publishing these outcomes.

Expectations of the petitioning process were inevitably bound up with local politics and views regarding the competence of the Councils. We found that expectations were lower among the Bristol field testers, where there was a consensus that the Council did not 'get things done' quickly enough.

Outcomes aside, field testers saw the benefits of e-petitioner in terms of *convenience*. The majority of participants applied this to raising petitions and signing them. For some the added convenience extended to the discussion facility:-

"If comments are easily available online you've got a clear record of what people are thinking or saying. The usual system is to get a leaflet through the door saying I'm worried about X, can you come to a meeting about X. And If I can't be bothered going to the meeting I'm not going to find out about it, but at least if I've got it here [on e-petitioner] I can find out about it in my own time and at my own convenience, and maybe engage in some discussion about it without leaving my house.. because I might have a vague interest in it but I'd think oh God I can't be bothered at this time of night because it's not that important to me this issue. But having it online that's very convenient isn't it?"

The information included in e-petitioner about the issues raised and about the principal petitioner was seen as an advantage over paper by some participants. However the e-petitions available during the evaluation provided limited examples of this, prompting two of the Bristol participants to comment that face-to-face discussion was an easier way to become interested in and informed about the petition issue.

Participants typically saw the beneficiaries as 'the computer literate' and disabled people 'who cannot get out and about'.

In keeping with the experiences of principal petitioners, field testers saw *publicity* as the main drawback compared with paper and in-person campaigning. They expected to hear about petitions through door-to-door or street campaigning. As one Kingston participant commented:-

"...distributing a petition by hand is a lot more likely to get more signatures. Because you can actually see it.. and the urgency. They tell you it's happening now and it is urgent to sign it whereas on the Internet maybe people will not go to check it every day".

Accessibility issues

Accessibility testing was carried out using the "Bobby" automated test against the Web Accessibility Initiative "AA" standard. However disabilities do not conform to standards and so no such testing can guarantee that everyone will find a site accessible. We were interested therefore in whether disabled users experienced difficulties.

The exit questionnaire showed that disabled people were less likely to be among those responding than would be expected if e-petitioner signers were representative of the local population. This may indicate accessibility problems, although few were actually mentioned-either in the questionnaire respondents or by the field test participants with disabilities. The need for the design to maximise accessibility was mentioned by one exit-questionnaire

respondent. One more specific comments was made by a Bristol field-test participant who said there was insufficient contrast between text and the page background.

Clarity of the guidance and instructions

All field testers were asked whether the petitions guidance and the e-petition instructions, were clear enough. The testers mostly experienced no major problems understanding them, but three issues were highlighted:-

- Meaning of the e-petitions status.
- Unfamiliarity of the location options
- Too formal language in the *petitions guidance*

Taking these in turn: -

Meaning of the e-petition status: The List Petitions page shows the current status of each e-petition. Field testers were often observed to misinterpret what the status meant. *The petition guidance* defines the various statuses, however the definitions are not apparent unless a user refers to that page. There should be clearer linking of the two.

Unfamiliarity of location options: When signing an e-petition people are asked to state their 'location' by selecting from a drop-down list on the Read/Sign page. The options were not thought by Bristol participants to sufficiently reflect locations that people would know or recognise (in Bristol council ward names are used, and in Kingston neighbourhoods). It was also noticeable in Kingston field tests that users frequently hesitated before selecting a neighbourhood. Similarly all testers entered "Surrey" in the optional County field, although Kingston is no longer part of this county in political terms. It seems likely that, as one participant said; many users will simply select the first option on this list. If accuracy is highly valued here it would be preferable to omit the field and automatically match addresses or postcodes against known data relating these to (e.g.) wards.

In Bristol the *petitions guidance* was felt by some field testers and questionnaire respondents to be too formal and lacking in 'plain English'. Several participants suggested revising the headings to make it clearer what questions they were aiming to answer.

Usability issues

The main usability issue arising from the field tests and the exit questionnaire was the *discuss petition* function, which was not readily recognisable. This was the only serious issue *within* e-petitioner (i.e. the only one where the participants could not complete a task without assistance). Minor issues were found with the List Petition and Progress pages. However *finding* e-petitioner was also a serious problem on the Bristol City Council site.

The *discuss petition* function is a main menu option, appearing at the top of the View Petition page. However only one of the field testers recognised that 'discuss petition' was a facility to comment on the petition shown on the page and read other people's comments. Unless a user recognises this function immediately they are unlikely to do so at all since to read the petition text means scrolling down the page, when the main menu becomes hidden from view.

Position of e-petitioner in relation to other e-engagement sites: Most field testers had severe difficulty finding e-petitioner in the Bristol City Council site. Some also commented that there

should be a link from the 'Ask Bristol' e-consultation site to e-petitioner. This has now been addressed and a link put in place.

Order of petitions: Several Bristol field testers commented that it would be useful to be able to sort the List Petitions page in alphabetical order, or by issue or location.

Progress page: Some users appeared disoriented when following links to "check the progress page", as this is not in fact a page but a section at the foot of the View Petition page.

Trust and security issues

No major concerns were voiced about security of the data entered or trust in its proper handling, although one participant said that paper petitions felt 'more private' than e-petitions.

The encouragement given to children to sign e-petitions should be considered in light of the possibility that under-13 year olds are being prompted to divulge contact details online. We recommend that children are *only* encouraged to do so under adult supervision, and with the context and purpose fully explained, such as in a school or community group setting.

Schools should be given specific guidelines on e-petitioning. As Cllr Ian McDonald pointed out there is a risk of e-government sites being 'spoofed' (fake sites set up to mimic the original) which in this case might involve e-petitioner sites being set up to gather contact details for nefarious purposes.

5.3. Councillors' involvement and expectations

Councillors support for and involvement in e-petitioning was clear in both Kingston upon Thames and Bristol. In Kingston, Councillors were 'principal petitioner' of 3 of 6 e-petitions in the 6 month pilot period, and presented (on behalf of residents) 4 of the 9 paper petitions presented at meetings raised in the same period. Similarly in Bristol, Councillors put their name to 3 of the 9 e-petitions and 17 of 22 paper petitions.

However the nature of this support is not quite as clear as these figures suggest. According to the officers concerned many petitions that Councillors present at meetings, and are recorded as having been submitted by them, were not *initiated* by them. Rather the Councillors present them on behalf of the individuals who raise them.

The views of Councillors were sought to explore the nature of their support for petitioning and views on e-petitioning. On the recommendation of the project managers we interviewed Kingston Councillors Ian McDonald (Liberal Democrat) and Kevin Davis (Conservative), and in Bristol Councillor Sue O'Donnell (Liberal Democrat). The themes summarised below are drawn from both pilots, although we identify differences between Bristol and Kingston in the text.

Why Councillors support petitions

Councillors occupy a dual role. As Kingston Cllr Ian McDonald reminded us they may be considered both as representatives of the Council (Executive or Scrutiny) to the people, and as representatives of the people to the Council. The Councillors we interviewed regarded supporting their constituents' petitions as an important element of the latter role.

For Cllr McDonald the Councillor's role in petitioning is also as an actively engaged *citizen*.

"In general, often those who raise petitions are those already involved in politics or who have a concern for the local community and some may become recruited into politics that way. Eventually, you find that in any given ward, those who go around collecting petitions, or serving the community, are often involved in one of the political parties...From a community partnership perspective, if I had an issue with some particular group (e.g. disabled, elderly, youth) should I leave it to them to organise petitions? Often they will come to us with an issue they want us to adopt and so petitions may be precluded by communities working together..."

Petitions are often raised in the name of a Councillor, when approached by a constituent aiming to raise public support for their position on a local issue. Supporting a petition is for Councillors a means to demonstrate that they are 'in touch' with local concerns. A petition is a means of representing local interests, joining the Councillors role as firstly an advocate of the people to the Council and secondly of the Council's executive (or scrutiny) to the people. This 'balancing act' extends to the final decisions taken on a petition issue. Cllr McDonald again:-

"A petition has to be more than a list of names; it is an indicator to those in government that an issue has to be looked at and legislation has to be examined. The number of signatures does not necessarily indicate the strength of feeling in an area. Quite often people will sign a petition if it is thrust under their noses, sign it and forget about it, and even sign it again later. Conversely, you could have a petition with just five names, served by a small group, which could have more far-reaching consequences. A petition is a way of grabbing your attention, but the number of signatures should not necessarily make that petition more valid than another one. On the council, we reckon that ten signatures are sufficient to indicate a valid case – we may even look into the issue before the petition is presented. You do get situations where, after considerable consultation a large majority of the population support a particular policy, a small group raises a petition to fight this policy, no matter how many signatures they get from that group, it should not affect the going-ahead of the policy that is in the interests of the majority. The petition might cause you to re-jig the policy slightly to compensate that group, but not abandon it."

The *discuss petition* online forum was seen as a vital part of the tool by Councillors, and one that should be complemented by face-to-face discussion between petitioners and public, preferably including their Councillor. For Cllr Kevin Davis the online opportunities were more limited; "The petition only carries a narrow definition of the issue, and you get a clearer understanding of why people would sign through talking with them – which is lost with an e-petition. Conducting a paper petition gets to a wider range of people's issues."

It is tempting to think of a petition as simply a container for "an issue", or perhaps a position on an issue, with the contents sealed when the petition is raised, and names then added before delivery to the local authority for processing. Framing e-petitions in this way would underestimate the extent to which a petition is used by its advocates to elaborate and *re-present issues that the petition raises*. That is, by relating the text to other concerns raised *through discussion* with potential supporters and enemies, the 'principal petitioner' or Councillor may gain an understanding of why the petition is important to others, and potentially make a better case for it.

Benefits of paper and e-petitions

Effective publicity and discussion were seen as strengths of paper, and *convenience* the main strength of e-petitions. Paper was considered preferable for the more localised petitions. Cllr McDonald: "E-petitioning in many respects is not appropriate at that level. Petitions are

quicker to organise and set up, just a bit of paper going from door to door. The other types of petition we get are those affecting a larger area, for example when there are changes to a bus route". Wider issues affecting the whole borough and those that are wider still are where e-petitions "come into their own".

The Councillors emphasised the need for the online and offline methods to be used to complement each other. Cllr Davis suggested that principal petitioners should be automatically offered a printable version of their e-petition from a template (a point also suggested by one of the principal petitioners). This twin-track approach was also needed because of limitations on access. Bristol Cllr Sue O'Donnell summarised this point "One of the roles of the councillor is to provide help, and mine is an ethnically diverse ward and there are certain groups and organisations – ethnic and religious – that find it difficult to get accurate, adequate representation. And as they get access to technology, this presents a chance to give them that representation – it is much more inclusive."

Overall expectations

The potential of e-petitioning was seen by Councillors in terms of their Councils *widening access*, and beginning *an ongoing dialogue* with citizens who have signed petitions and given consent to be kept informed. Cllr Davis drew parallels with the planning process, where objectors to proposals are kept informed of decisions, and stressed the opportunity for interaction with councillors. Councillors also stressed the need for complementary approaches, and that petitioning should not replace proactive action by the Council to learn about local issues.

Cllr McDonald also highlighted potential technical pitfalls: "Petition titles have key words that are picked up by people's 'Spam' detectors. So no-one will receive petitions about 'Sex shops', or a drug-related issue (e.g. pharmacy opening hours), as the Spam detector would filter these out. There is also a problem with mimicking the e-petitioner source, and most councillors and MPs have had their e-mails hijacked. These sources then get added to the list of people's barred contacts, so any petition information sent to them would be banned."

5.4. Democratic & Legal Services: Managers and Administrators

The petitioning process is monitored in Kingston by the Head of Democratic Services and in Bristol by the Head of Legal Services. Both were interviewed for the evaluation and saw added value in e-petitioning from *convenience* to citizens and the potential to be *more responsive* to issues they raise. They also highlighted risks that should be monitored.

Kingston's Andrew Bessant: "It is an exciting thing to do, and to be at the forefront of these things. But it requires adjustment and reviewing as you go - you cannot expect to get it right first time". E-petitioner may enhance responsiveness because of the *greater visibility* of petitions within the Council: "You can see from the web site that a petition is raising an issue that you hadn't realised was a problem; one reaction might be to wait for the petition to be submitted, but it might be that you want to tackle the issue straightaway."

Both heads of departments' monitoring role is to act as a *filter*, judging when a petition is inappropriately worded for the council to respond to, for example if it is racist or defamatory.

It was thought possible that e-petitioning could result in a potentially *greater volume* of work managing petitions which, if dramatic, might test the departments' capacity to respond

effectively. For Kingston's petitioning administrators it was too soon to be able to predict the impact on their work, but they thought it likely that recent licensing legislation could stimulate more petitions as would the forthcoming local and general elections.

5.5. Service departments' involvement and expectations

We approached officers in service departments on the recommendation of the project managers. These were departments with a history of handling paper petitions; Housing in Kingston, and Planning and Environmental Services in both Kingston and Bristol.

In each case the e-petitioner project was viewed as a positive development in terms of *convenience*, provided that paper continued to be an alternative. For Housing, the majority of petitions were mostly on issues affecting a limited number of households, and handled as correspondence. For council tenants *access* was a key issue since they were thought unlikely to be willing or able to afford it, especially to Council sites. The more plausible scenario was to make access available in housing offices.

Officers from Planning and Environmental Services were supportive of e-petitioning but concerned over *lack of integration* with the existing processes- both for handling petitions and for consulting on planning applications. This risked inconsistency in the response, since officers handling e-petitions centrally were unlikely to be familiar with the planning process or aware of which departmental officers to route the petitions to. This could affect the outcomes given the time limits laid down for objections. The *location and scope* of e-petitions and their signatures was an important factor- the analysis of signatures by neighbourhood would be necessary and sometimes even by street. There was also a *potential for abuse*, since pressure groups could seek signatures from outside the neighbourhood. Other abuses such as multiple signatures also affected paper.

5.6. Results and Outcomes

The pilot period brought 7 e-petitions to Kingston and 9 paper petitions were presented to the Council in the same period (to 17 March 2005). In Bristol there were 9 e-petitions and 22 on paper. The total number of e-petition signatures was 173 in Kingston and 890 in Bristol. We have not described the outcomes, i.e. the Council's response to the petitions because of the short duration of the pilot periods.

The larger take-up in Bristol is worth commenting on, especially as there were strenuous efforts to promote the site, if anything more so in Kingston. The reasons may lie in the nature of the e-petitions and the number of people affected, and in the socio-economic differences between Kingston and Bristol. Bristol has more than double the population of the London Borough. Also while Kingston has a relatively affluent population, Bristol has more areas of deprivation and a recent history of economic change. It seems likely that such socio-economic factors affect the take-up of e-petitioning, given that it is a channel for individuals and communities to redress complaints.

What site visitors did

The visits to e-petitioner recorded in the site's log files indicate whether those people who accessed the site found the e-petitions *appealing enough* to sign. Web server log data for

Bristol provides the overall level of site visits and page requests and allows us to measure the 'browse-to-act' ratio for various parts of the site. This shows that:-

- There were 4269 visits to Bristol e-petitioner in the 4 months from mid November 2004 to mid March 2005, resulting in 12,351 page requests.
- There were 4427 requests to the View Petition page, and 1387 to the List Petitions page. This indicates that most visitors followed direct links to specific e-petitions from other websites publicising them, rather than by browsing the list of e-petitions and following the links to them. Since there were more requests to view a petition than there were visits (which by definition involve consecutive page requests from the same internet address), many people who did this then left the site without signing the petition.
- The 'sign petition' function was used 756 times in this period, giving a browse-to-act ratio of 4427/756 or 5.8, i.e. on average an e-petition was viewed almost 6 times for each time it was signed. Note that this includes people viewing an e-petition more than once before signing it, as well as those who viewed but did not sign.
- The 'discuss petition' page was viewed 759 times, i.e. as many times as e-petitions were signed. The 'view comment' function was used 736 times. As most of the e-petitions had only one comment, added by the principal petitioner when setting up the e-petition, this may mean that almost all of those who used 'discuss petition' got as far as viewing that comment. However the 'send comment' function was used only 23 times, giving a browse-to-act ratio of 736/23 or 32. This may suggest a need to make this section of the site more appealing.

The level of traffic to the e-petitioner site seems reasonable for a pilot, but the ratio of visits to subsequent 'signatures' or online discussion activity suggests that more could be done to make the site visually appealing or that these functions are not usable enough. This is particularly so because we would expect visitors to be predisposed to support the e-petitions if they are following links placed in support of them on external sites.

The ratio of e-petition page requests to signatures may be useful if applied to *individuale-* petitions. It may be a better measure of the extent of active support than signatures alone, since it would take account of people who have read the petition but chosen *not* to sign it, as well as those who have.

Web metrics for Kingston were unfortunately not available because of an error in the log files.

6. Conclusions

We began with 5 main evaluation questions the first two of which were: -

- How do the actors involved understand e-petitioning to benefit the relations between Councils, elected representatives, public, partners and Central Government, and what in their view are the disadvantages?
- How do the politicians, officials and citizens involved in e-petitioning characterise its 'added value'; what methods and processes contribute that value, and what differences are there from paper petitioning?

These can be summed up in the shorter question "Has the project enhanced local democracy?" and answered in terms of the 'democratic criteria' given earlier. These form the basis for the conclusions below. The final three evaluation questions are considered afterwards.

6.1. How e-petitioning enhanced local democracy

Representation

e-Democracy should be used to support, complement or enhance the activities and understanding of representative government, and should not undermine the value of representative democracy.

Citizens, officers and Members who took part in the evaluation were almost unanimously in favour of e-petitioning. It has enjoyed strong support from Councillors in both Kingston and Bristol, particularly Kingston, and from the departments who are directly involved in the day-to-day servicing of representative government.

There was support for the view that e-petitioning enhances the Councillor's role by making it more visible, and by offering greater convenience and choice to citizens who wish to raise concerns through the formal processes of their Council. Citizens can set up e-petitions by completing an online form or by email. They are then managed by officers with identified responsibilities for this task. In Kingston these are officers serving committees that consider petitions, and who normally receive paper petitions after they have been presented at an Executive or Neighbourhood committee meeting.

This raises a *potential* drawback, in that for e-petitions the first point of contact between citizen and Council may be more likely to be a 'neutral' officer than a Councillor. Councillors may be better positioned to offer advice on the issue and the likely effectiveness of petitioning. This potential gap is addressed in Bristol by automatically notifying the relevant Councillor when a constituent raises an online petition, and this would be a worthwhile addition to Kingston's procedure.

Engagement

Projects need to support local identity and help individuals understand and link in to the wider democratic processes that are part of their community.

There was some evidence that e-petitioning reinforces 'civic mindedness' as it has so far largely been used by people who believe that community action can influence decision-making but have not previously taken such action themselves. Citizens who took part in field tests felt

that a higher proportion of e-petition 'signatures' are likely to be from those genuinely concerned about the topic raised. Conversely many felt that e-petitioning is less effective than paper for gathering signatures on highly localised issues, which are best addressed by adopting the traditional door-to-door and street methods of campaigning that are associated with paper petitioning.

E-petitions were raised on issues affecting a range of geographic and cultural communities, and drew attention to wider democratic processes including policy consultation and the planning process. E-petitions were raised on very localised issues, typical examples being road crossings and telecoms masts, as well as those more clearly applicable across the borough such as Post Office closures, and others focused on the needs of ethnic minorities, for example Halal food stall certification (in Bristol). However citizens thought it more likely that they would be made aware of a petition that interested them through being approached in person than from visiting the e-petitions page on a Council website. Some thought it essential for e-petitioning to provide an alert feature, so they could be notified by email when an e-petition was raised matching a topic they had 'signed up' to.

Transparency

Projects need to make decision-making processes more transparent.

The e-petitioning pilot has increased transparency in part by formalising the process for handling petitions for the first time. The publication of the site and its associated guidelines on petitioning makes both the process and the petition outcomes more visible. The added visibility applies to paper as well as e-petitions, since paper petitions that are presented at Council meetings are also listed on the e-petitioner page.

E-petitions include a 'progress' page, to be updated by the responsible officers with information on the petition's outcome after consideration by the relevant committee or department. All participants considered this a key advantage of the system.

Work is ongoing to integrate e-petitioning with procedures for tracking the outcomes, and to provide timely information to petitioners on any relevant constraints imposed by the committee cycle or the planning process. In both Kingston and Bristol we observed some risks from inconsistent handling of paper and e-petitions, which should be addressed as procedures for tracking petitions are developed further. Some petitions raise issues that service departments may resolve without reference to the committee process. In such cases it is especially important that e-petitions are routed to the relevant members and officers, and integrated with well established departmental practices for handling paper petitions. It would be helpful to include in the guidelines some reference to service departments active in petitioning, particularly in the Planning process.

Conflict and consensus

Projects need to recognise that divergence of opinion may be an inevitable outcome of enhanced democratic engagement. Wherever possible, tools should incorporate an expectation of such divergence and provide opportunities for negotiation, mediation and consensus building.

The e-petitioner system incorporates an online forum where visitors to the site can exchange comments about the issues raised, with the principal petitioner and others. This facility is regarded as highly important by Councillors. Improvements are needed to its 'signposting', since our field tests showed the feature was not apparent to users.

In comparison with the traditional method e-petitioning seems likely to offer more constrained opportunities to debate the issue concerned, because of the constraints of the medium and difficulties targeting those most interested or affected, but a freer debate to those willing and able to make the effort. The opportunities are maximised by combining e-petitioning (preferably with online alerts) with paper and in-person campaigning.

Political equality

This criterion requires e-democracy to improve the inclusiveness of policy-making or, at the minimum, not to further disadvantage those who already are in some way excluded or less powerful in the political process.

It was evident that e-petitioning has improved inclusiveness for some; since e-petitions have been raised and signed by people who told us they would not otherwise have done so. There was some evidence that Black and Minority Ethnic groups are represented among e-petition signatories in proportion to the local population, although it is too early to be conclusive. Some Councillors, officers and citizens pointed to the inequality of access to computers, with the occasional concern that e-petitioning represents little more than another channel for those already actively engaged to raise their voice.

There were some concerns about the formality of the guidance published by Kingston and Bristol about the petitioning process, and there is a need for simpler clearer language both in that guidance and on the site itself. The guidance would also be improved by highlighting the Councils' translation and interpretation services. In the longer term some participants felt e-petitioner should offer translation of the guidance and on-screen dialogue into minority languages.

Community control

Democracy is about citizens collectively controlling those who take decisions on their behalf. The tools of e-democracy therefore must ensure that citizen engagement is closely linked to decision-making processes and that those who take decisions are responsive to the communities which they serve.

This last criterion is in principle e-petitioners main strength. The issues raised through e-petitioning are unarguably issues that are important to citizens, and are evidently addressed through local authority decision-making. For principal petitioners and citizens the success of the system depends on the Councils publishing details of the petitions progress, for the whole community to see, as much as on individual's concerns being addressed.

Few e-petitions have progressed to a final Council response in either Kingston or Bristol and it is too early to draw conclusions on the impact on decision-making. This reflects the timescales for decision-making and the recent 'handover' of the system to the officers responsible. Progress details will no doubt be added in due course. However we recommend a formally defined time limit for the authority to respond to petitions that have been received, even if this response is merely to give the date of the committee at which it will be considered. The date of each update should also be included in the progress page.

There is a potential for e-petitioning to improve responsiveness in two ways. Firstly officers may hear about issues that concern their work some weeks or months in advance, since e-petitions are published when they are raised rather than when they are finally submitted for consideration. Secondly, the ease and speed with which e-petitions can be raised potentially offers citizens an advantage over paper, since some procedures limit the time citizens have to

respond. This includes the Planning and Licensing Application procedures where objections are weighted according to where the objector resides.

One potential risk of e-petitioning on this criterion is that different perceptions of the systems role may make it a victim of its own success. Despite their positive view of the system it was regarded by many of the citizens we spoke to as a 'last resort' for righting wrongs, rather than as a first step in civic engagement. This raises the interesting possibility that any increase in the number of petitions received could be seen both as a success in terms of Councils' citizen engagement strategies, and a failing by those citizens who would regard a list of petitions as a litany of complaints. Avoiding this risk is again probably a matter of ensuring that the system demonstrates a track record for redressing complaints and addressing concerns.

6.2. Following up the evaluation

Our questions included:-

- What methods have already been used to find out politicians', officials' and citizens' perspectives on the initiative? What outcomes do the participating councils report so far?
- What trade-offs have the technologists involved in the initiative considered in the design of the software and processes, and what further changes should be considered?
- What are the needs for guidance on appropriate ongoing evaluation methods?

These questions have only been touched upon owing to the very limited time allowed for the evaluation, and the lack of any *prior* evaluation having been carried out. The pilots were not long enough to consider any relation between the breadth of e-petition subjects or the public response in relation to paper petitions. Given a longer period of public availability, it will become more feasible and desirable to look at how typical e-petition signers are of the general population, and to what extent people who were not previously involved in local Council decision making are becoming 'e-engaged'.

The e-petitioner project raises interesting questions that will become more important as and when other local authorities adopt the tool, for example which features are the 'core' ones demanded by all authorities and which meet more local needs.

Ongoing evaluation will be needed of the *quality of the responses* from citizens and Councils to each other. The tools were each intended to promote informed online discussion, and there is a growing body of work that establishes and applies criteria for assessing the deliberative quality of online debate. We have previously applied such criteria to analyse the extent to which debate is informed by consultation materials linked to a forum (Whyte and Macintosh 2000, Smith and Macintosh, 2001), and wanted to gauge the potential for this analysis in the pilots.

As well as serving academic purposes content analysis of this kind can serve the engagement process, if the criteria used characterise what stakeholders are looking for in the results to helping their decision-making. The pilots we report on here unfortunately were too short lived to generate the level of response that would justify such analysis, but in each case the officers involved considered it a necessary next step.

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Annex A: Detailed Evaluation Framework

This Annex expands on the framework in the Introduction to the report. It gives more detail of: -

- Criteria used to draw conclusions on the impact on democracy
- The ‘key dimensions’ of e-engagement
- The e-democracy ‘tool quality’ criteria
- Detailed evaluation questions and the methods and participants addressing them.

Democratic criteria

The Local eDemocracy National Project defined at the outset the criteria summarised below in Table A1.

Table A1 Democratic criteria

Criteria	Description
A.1 Representation	e-Democracy should be used to support, complement or enhance the activities and understanding of representative government, and should not undermine the value of representative democracy.
A.2 Engagement	Projects need to support local identity and help individuals understand and link in to the wider democratic processes that are part of their community.
A.3 Transparency	Projects need to make decision-making processes more transparent.
A.4 Conflict and consensus	Projects need to recognise that divergence of opinion may be an inevitable outcome of enhanced democratic engagement. Wherever possible, tools should incorporate an expectation of such divergence and provide opportunities for negotiation, mediation and consensus building.
A.5 Political equality	This criterion requires e-democracy to improve the inclusiveness of policy-making or, at the minimum, not to further disadvantage those who already are in some way excluded or less powerful in the political process.
A.6 Community control	Democracy is about citizens collectively controlling those who take decisions on their behalf. The tools of e-democracy therefore must ensure that citizen engagement is closely linked to decision-making processes and that those who take decisions are responsive to the communities which they serve.

(Source: Project Initiation Document, National Project on Local e-Democracy v3.0)

As these criteria define what the workstream 2 projects should do to support and enhance democracy they underpin the evaluation, and were used to assess the results and draw conclusions.

Key dimensions of e-democracy initiatives

To relate the main evaluation issues to the specific projects and develop the framework further we used a set of ‘*key dimensions*’ as shown in Table A2. These are aspects of public engagement that we have previously used to characterise e-democracy initiatives (Macintosh,

2004). The table summarises aspects we envisaged would concern Council members, officers managing democratic processes, and others with a direct stake in the projects' outcome.

Table A2. Key Dimensions of E-Democracy Initiatives (from Macintosh, 2004)

Dimension	Description
B.1 Type of engagement	e-enabling, consulting or empowering: to what level of policy detail, and with how much weight given to citizens' responses.
B.2 Stage in decision-making	When citizens are engaged in relation to the policy life cycle: agenda setting; option analysis, draft policy, implementation, monitoring.
B.3 Actors	Who is engaged and by whom, who are the stakeholders, who develops and manages the process.
B.4 Technologies used	How participants are engaged and with what devices and interaction mechanisms. e.g chat, discussion forum, survey, etc
B.5 Rules of engagement	What participants can do online, and what personal information is collected.
B.6 Duration & sustainability	The period of time made available to participants, and any relation to any other engagement initiatives
B.7 Accessibility	Measures to ensure that resources can realistically be accessed, and assessment of take-up: how many participated and from where.
B.8 Resources and Promotion	Resources required both in terms of staffing and financial, also the promotional mechanisms used.
B.9 Evaluation and Outcomes	The approach taken to assessing the results, and how the results influence the outcomes
B.10 Critical success factors	Any other political, legal, cultural, economic, technological circumstances contributing to the results.

While most of the definitions above are self-explanatory the first (B.1) demands elaboration of what is meant by "enabling, consulting or empowering": -

- *E-enabling* is about supporting those who would not typically access the internet and take advantage of the large amount of information available. The objectives we are concerned with are how technology can be used to reach the wider audience by providing a range of technologies to cater for the diverse technical and communicative skills of citizens. The technology also needs to provide relevant information in a format that is both more accessible and more understandable. These two aspects of accessibility and understandability of information are addressed by e-enabling.
- The second level is the use of technology to engage with citizens: *consulting* a wider audience to enable deeper contributions and support deliberative debate on policy issues. The use of the term 'to engage' in this context refers to the top-down consultation of citizens by government or parliament.
- The third level is the use of technology to empower citizens: *e-participation* is concerned with supporting active participation and facilitating bottom-up ideas to influence the political agenda. From the bottom-up perspective, citizens are emerging as producers rather than just consumers of policy. Here there is recognition that there is a need to allow citizens to influence and participate in policy formulation.

(Source: Macintosh, 2004)

E-Democracy Tool Quality Criteria

We also considered aspects of the tools produced and/or deployed in the projects that were likely to concern the technologists and officers responsible for developing and maintaining the tools and supplying their content.

The Table A3 below shows evaluation criteria drawn from established sources for judging the quality of public websites. They encompass aspects of usability, usefulness, and social and technical acceptability (Nielsen, 1993), many of which also appear in the Quality Framework for UK Government Websites¹⁰. The criteria are hierarchical, with social acceptability at the top level, comprising trust and security, relevance and legitimacy, and usefulness. Usability is also subsumed within 'usefulness', although the layout of Table 2.3 simplifies these relationships.

Table A3. E-Democracy Tool Quality Criteria

Criteria	Description
Social acceptability	
C.1 Trust and security	Is the information presented accurate, complete and reliable, and is the information users have provided handled in a secure manner?
C.2 Relevance and legitimacy	Are the intended users satisfied that the tool meets a purpose relevant to their own and their community's needs, and are the content and surrounding processes relevant to that purpose?
Usefulness	
C.3 Accessibility	Is the level of compliance with Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) content guidelines sufficient to meet the needs of users with disabilities?
C.4 Appeal	Is the take-up in line with expectations, and do the intended users like it enough to want to use it?
C.5 Content clarity	Can users understand what the content means in relation to their task or situation?
C.6 Responsiveness	Does the tool and/or process answer the user's questions quickly and effectively?
Usability	
C.7 Navigation and organisation	Do the intended users have sufficient and consistent information about their current position within the site organisation, the path they have taken, and the options available to them?
C.8 Efficiency and flexibility	Can the intended users perform tasks in an acceptable time, and are there appropriate short-cuts for doing repetitive or familiar tasks?
C.9 Error recovery	Can the intended users 'undo' their previous action, and are they guided effectively on the correct procedure so they can continue the task without distraction or hesitation?

Notes on definitions

C.1 *Trust and security*: includes user confidence in the steps taken as well as any specialist or stakeholder assessment of data handling procedures and their compliance with relevant legislation or guidelines.

¹⁰ Quality Framework for UK Government Websites: available at:
<http://e-government.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/Resources/WebGuidelines/fs/en>

- C.2 *Relevance and legitimacy*: the focus here is on whether the e-democracy tool and service is seen as meeting a relevant and legitimate purpose, rather than on its effectiveness or efficiency in answering questions (for which see B.6 'responsiveness').
- C.3 *Accessibility*: This term is also used in table 2.2 to refer to *the measures taken* to provide access and ensure that the intended users can realistically make use of the tool and resources it provides (Poland, 2001). In this table however 'accessibility' is associated more specifically with the Web Accessibility Initiative guidelines, i.e. the results of measures taken to comply with them, and the acceptability of these to disabled users. The other senses of 'accessibility' are represented here by 'appeal', and 'content clarity'. See also Quality Framework for UK Government Websites p.11 'Predictor 3: Content'.
- C.4 *Appeal*. This encompasses the number of users, the extent of their use of a site, and their willingness to return to the site, as measured by web metrics or satisfaction ratings.
- C.5 *Content clarity*: corresponds with Quality Framework for UK Government Websites p.10-11 'Predictor 3'
- C.6 *Responsiveness*: corresponds with Quality Framework for UK Government Websites p.10-11 'Predictor 5'
- C.7 *Navigation and organisation*: corresponds with Quality Framework for UK Government Websites p.10-11 'Predictor 2'
- C.8 *Efficiency and flexibility*: corresponds with Quality Framework for UK Government Websites p.10-11 'Predictor 1: download delay' and 'Predictor 4: Interactivity'.
- C.9 *Error recovery*: not specifically covered by the Quality Framework for UK Government Websites, but a standard element of most usability guidelines (e.g. Nielsen, J. 1994. Heuristic evaluation. In Nielsen, J., and Mack, R.L. Eds., *Usability Inspection Methods*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY.)

Bringing the dimensions together

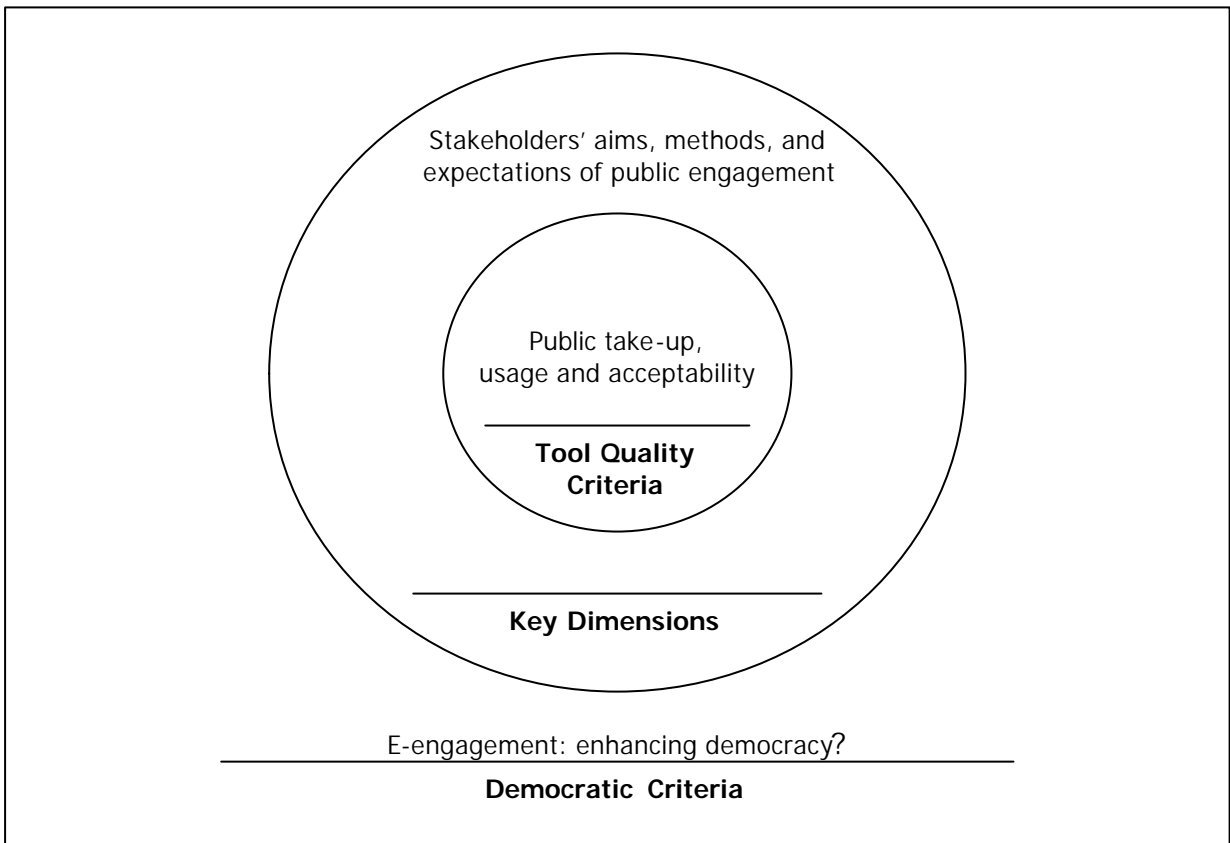
The 'key dimensions' and 'quality criteria' were used to generate further more specific evaluation questions. E-democracy evaluation is concerned with both social and technical aspects of e-democracy initiatives (Whyte and Macintosh, 2003), but it would be misleading to view these aspects as separate. What is considered 'technical' may vary depending on actors' roles, and the different aspects reflect our expectations of those actors' varying concerns.

There is an important difference between the tables. The Table A2 dimensions are *not* evaluation criteria. Although each dimension can be related to good practice guidelines, there is no widely accepted set of evaluation criteria for e-petitioning or other forms of e-engagement. For example "stage in decision-making" does not *prescribe* a suitable stage for e-engagement- but suggests that the timing of e-engagement in relation to policy development is likely to have a bearing on decision-makers' views of the initiative's successes and failures.

The descriptive rather than prescriptive character of these dimensions reflects the table's role, which was to generate concrete questions to which participants could respond with their understanding of the project's aims, the methods adopted and their relation to current practice, and expectations of the outcomes, strengths and weaknesses.

Figure A1 brings together the various dimensions and criteria to give an overview of the approach, and introduce the methods described in the next section.

Figure A1 Criteria and sources for e-democracy evaluation



7.1. Detailed Evaluation Questions

In this section we elaborate on the questions that were used to structure discussions with the participants. These questions were derived from the 'key dimensions' given earlier in this chapter, and were then used to generate concrete questions for interview topic guides. Other methods used to address each question are shown in Table A4 below.

Key: The table refers to the methods and key groups of participants already mentioned:-

1. Interviews; analysis of field notes and transcripts.
 2. Field tests of e-petitioner; analysis of field notes and transcripts.
 3. Online questionnaire; descriptive statistics of responses to questions.
 4. Project documentation of requirements etc.
 5. Petition signatures and results of online discussion; descriptive statistics.
 6. Web server log files; descriptive statistics of page requests etc.
- (a) Citizens who have used e-petitioner.
 - (b) Citizens who have *not* used the tools.
 - (c) Councillors involved in the engagement process.
 - (d) Engagement 'owners': managers responsible for aspects of the petition process.
 - (e) Project managers/ technologists.

(f) 'Internal' users: petition administrators.

Table A4 Detailed evaluation questions and how they were addressed

Dimension/ Questions	Methods	Sources
Type of engagement		
1. How does the project relate to the Council's e-Democracy and participation agenda, and how should it benefit relations with the public, elected representatives (executive and opposition), partners and national government? Have views changed in light of the outcomes apparent so far? If so, how?	1	all
2. What are actors' views of the weight given to e-petition results in the Council's decision-making, and how do their perceptions differ from those of officials & representatives who 'own' the engagement process?	1	all
Stage in decision-making		
3. Where do actors think the petitioning process fits into service delivery and/or more general policy making (as 'monitoring', 'agenda setting' etc.)? How does this vary according to the issue or topic?	1	all
4. What important differences, if any, are there between the issues raised in online and paper petitioning?	1, 2, 3, 5	all
Actors		
5. Who are the relevant actors (politicians, officials, technologists, citizens as individuals and groups), and why are they involved? i.e. who does the work, who controls it, who are the actual or potential beneficiaries, who may be adversely affected, who is otherwise involved?	1, 3, 5	all
6. What important differences, if any, are there between the roles of the administrator in online and paper petitioning?	2	(d), (e), (f)
Technologies used		
7. How is e-petitioner <i>used</i> ?	1, 2, 3, 5, 6	all
8. How <i>useful</i> are the e-petitioning tools to their intended users.	all	(a), (b), (f)
Rules of engagement		
9. What is the <i>impact on public engagement</i> of the project and what implications does that have for the engagement process?	all	all
10. How do actors view the <i>privacy implications</i> of e-petitioning and what measures have/should be taken to address these (considering DP & FOI)?	1, 2, 3	all
Duration & sustainability		
11. How does the project impact on <i>other public engagement activities</i> , especially when they also have an online element?	1, 2, 4, 5	all

Table A4 (Continued)

<i>Dimension/ Questions</i>	<i>Methods</i>	<i>Sources</i>
Accessibility		
12. What measures have been taken to provide appropriate <i>accessibility</i> levels (in terms of the Web Accessibility Initiative)?	1, 2, 4	all
13. What is the relative <i>appeal</i> to citizen-users of the main e-petition functions provided?	1, 2, 3, 5, 6	(a), (b)
14. <i>Whose voice is represented</i> in the results? E.g. are there demographic differences between online/offline participants, and for what reasons are online/offline preferred? <i>Why</i> do some citizens not use either?	all	all
15. Is supporting (online) information on the users' and administrators' / moderators' roles and tasks considered <i>easy to understand</i> by target users?	1, 2	(a), (b), (f)
Resources and Promotion		
16. What important differences, if any, are there between the publicity methods considered appropriate, compared with paper petitioning? Does this differ according to whether issues are seen as affecting particular localities or wider interests?	1, 2, 5	(a), (b), (c), (d), (e)
17. What are the ramifications of the project for the representative roles of Councillors and their communications with the public and with officials?	1, 2, 4	all
Evaluation and Outcomes		
18. What approaches have been used to understand the system and process requirements, and the value attributed to the e-petitioning by citizens & stakeholders? With what outcomes? What <i>specific</i> benefits or barriers, are report?	1, 4	(d), (e)
19. What guidelines on methods for routine evaluation are needed?	1	(d), (e)
Critical success factors		
20. How have those involved in developing e-petitioning balanced anticipated pros and cons of software features, and how has the balance between local and general features been affected by the size/scale of the Council's concerned?	1	(d), (e)
21. What part did the intended users or other beneficiaries play in the development of the system and related processes?	1, 4	(d), (f)
22. What further changes to system and/or process should be considered as a result of the evaluation?	all	all

Annex B: Sample Interview Topic Guide

Your involvement in the e-petitioning project and general expectations.

1. What has been your role generally, e.g. in formulating the guidance for petitioners?
2. What are your expectations of how e-petitioning will help citizens to raise concerns?
3. Who do you expect e-petitioning to appeal to (i.e. citizens)? Do you have any expectations that it will involve a broader range of people than the traditional petitioning process?

Your expectations about the impact of e-petitions on the petitioning process & on other ways that citizens can raise concerns

4. How is Legal Services involved in entering new e-petitions into the system and how do you expect that to change? Will Cllr support team be taking this on more, as with paper petitions?
5. Is the role of council officers to
 - Check and filter petitions?
 - Advise petitioners on the best way to word their petition?
 - Advise on more appropriate ways to raise their concerns?
6. Do you expect e-petitioning to become *more* or *less* resource-intensive on a day-to-day basis than paper petitioning? How?
 - Discussion forum?
 - Calls from petitioners?
7. Do you see any benefits in terms of the effectiveness of the process, or the ability of the Council to be responsive to citizens?
8. Is there any benefit to Legal Services or the Council more widely from: -
 - Having more 'advance notice' of petitions?
 - A common point-of-reference for current petitions and the Council's response?
9. What about pitfalls and risks?
 - With Corporate Consultation as first point of contact to discuss text of e-petition- is the usual role of Councillors being shifted to council officers?
 - With Corporate Consultation as first point of contact for e-petitions, are there risks that petitions will be treated differently from paper petitions received via Cllr Support or via a department such as Environment, Transport, Leisure? E.g. if a 'principle petitioner' does not mention that their petition relates to a planning application will Corporate Consultation know that it does?
10. Progress tracking: Currently you can follow the progress in terms of changes in the 'status' of the petition ('submitted' closed' etc.) and a description of any outcomes.
 - Are there barriers to updating this that you would expect to arise?

Evaluation and Outcomes

11. Are there any paper or e-petitions that strike you as having had a clear impact on Council debates and decisions? If so which?
12. What factors are most important to you, when you think about what makes the petitioning process go smoothly?
 - Are any of these factors appropriate as criteria that would help to monitor the effectiveness of e-petitioning? Which would be appropriate in your view?

Implementation

13. Are you happy with the extent of your involvement in the project so far?
14. How do you expect the project to evolve?

Annex D: Field test Protocols and Results Sample

This Annex comprises:-

- Consent form used in Bristol
- Test scenarios
- Questions to prompt field testers' comments
- Discussion questions for field testers
- Results sample of a field test of e-petitioner.

7.2. Consent Form

Evaluating the Bristol City Council's "e-Democracy" Services

The Council has recently launched a range of new Internet services that are intended to help people have a say in the Council's decisions. They include: -

Ask Bristol: this site contains a range of consultations that could include surveys, discussion groups as well as live question and answer sessions. Anyone can take part if they register with the site.

ePetitions: a new online petitioning service, to help people tell the council about issues that concern them. Anybody who lives in Bristol can start or join an e-petition, or use the traditional paper method. They are also open to people who work, study or shop in Bristol.

Now these services are being evaluated to explore whether they are helping people to have a say on decisions the council makes. Researchers from Napier University, under the supervision of Professor Ann Macintosh, are carrying out this work with local people and council staff.

If you take part you will be asked to try out e-petitions or Ask Bristol This is to check whether you find them straightforward enough to use. Then we will ask about your experiences with 'getting involved' in Council matters, and your views on whether these sites help people to do this. We would like to record your views on tape so that we have an accurate record.

We will also ask a few questions about you, to make sure we are involving a wide enough range of people in the study. Your personal details will not be linked to your earlier answers by name.

I understand that if I give my consent to being involved I can at any time choose not to take part any further.

The views I express to the researcher are my own and should not be assumed to represent the views of anyone else. If my views are quoted in any research publications I will not be identified by name.

No contact details will be recorded. My name will not be used for any purpose except to show that I have given my informed consent to take part.

I consent to my views and actions being recorded.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Name & postcode: _____

7.3. Test scenarios

Evaluating the "e-Petitioning" Service

PLEASE TRY ONE OF THE FOLLOWING

1. You have heard there was recently a petition to the Council about improving a crossing on Ashton Road in Southville **Can you find this out from the e-petitioner pages? How many people made comments about the petition on the website?**
2. You are interested in raising a petition about the traffic in the streets around your home. **Can you find information about how to start a petition online?**
3. You have had an email from a friend who has started an e-petition about parking in the town centre. The email has a link to the "epetitioner" page on the Council website. **Can you find this petition, read the information about it, and add your name to it? How would you take part in an online discussion about this petition?**

please use one of these names and addresses : -

Gemma Underwood, 43a Lyme Rd, Ashley, Bristol BS2 6TY

Ajay Rijhwani, 346 Anderton Rise, Avonmouth, Bristol BS1 765

Mark McGregor, 77 Nye Way, Clifton, Bristol BS3 7GH

Sonia Wojjka, 4/23 Upper Down St, Cotham, BS2 7TY

Abdul Ibrahim, 58 Howslow Loan, Filwood, Bristol BS1 9AF

Kylie O'Donnell, 49 Asper Lodge, Hartcliffe, Bristol BS1 6DF

John Quigley, 8c Snowdon Rise, Knowle, Bristol BS1 6DF

Rita Patel, 33 Grace Avenue, Redland, Bristol BS3 3FG

Sam Wong, 9 Greenway Park, Southville, Bristol BS1 2JK

Jasmina Ashraf, 77 Albion Way, Windmill Hill, Bristol BS1 5DC

Harry Lime, 18a Shrub St, Clifton, Bristol BS1 4KL

Janice Oliver, 2 Clark Rd, Southville, BS2 3TY

7.4. Questions to prompt field testers' comments

Please make any comments you like and let us know what you think – especially if you find anything difficult!

Some questions to help you make comments

- How clearly can you see things?
- How easily can you find your way around?
- How clear are instructions on what to do?
- Can you do what you want without too much effort?
- How helpful is the site when you make a mistake?
- How quickly and effectively does the site answer your questions?
- How easy is it to understand what the petition or consultation is saying?
- How confident are you the information *presented* is accurate, complete, and reliable?
- How confident are you the information *you give* is handled securely?
- How satisfied are you with *what* the site does?
- How satisfied are you with *how well* the site does what it is meant to?

7.5. Discussion questions

1. Do you often get involved in trying to change what the Council does about issues affecting you personally or your neighbourhood? If so, in what kinds of ways? (suggest some if necessary e.g. signing a petition, going to a local meeting, contacting a Councillor or someone in the Council)
2. Can you see yourself putting your name to a petition on the Council website? If not why not?
3. What kinds of things do you think will affect whether people use a paper or e-petition? And you personally?
 - Do you think you would put your name to an e-petition on a public computer somewhere like this (public library) or do you feel this is something only for people with access to the Internet at home?
 - How do you/would you feel about your name being online?
4. If you have supported a petition to the Council,
 - Do you know what happened to it? {if yes}
 - a. Do you think the Council gave it enough weight when they made their decision?
 - b. What else did they take into account that you know of?
 - How did you find out about it in the first place?
 - Were you already aware of what the Council had previously done about this issue before you put your name to the petition?
 - What do you feel are the best ways to keep track of what happens next? Do the petition pages make any difference?
5. How much effort should people be prepared to put into finding out what steps the Council has already taken about an issue, before raising a petition? What about before signing it?
 - Does the website make this any easier? How should it?
6. When the Council considers the results of a petition (online or not), should the number of names matter?
 - Should they take into account how representative the people are? If so, does that justify them asking for details of people's age, which neighbourhood they live in?
 - Do you expect that e-petitions will change the kinds of people who put their names to a petition? If so, how?
7. What do you think the Councillors' role should be in the petitioning process?
 - Are there any differences where e-petitions are concerned, e.g. should Councillors get involved in online discussion?
8. If you were concerned about a local issue, would you normally tell friends or neighbours about a petition to the Council about it?
 - Would it make any difference if it was an online petition? If so, how?
9. Do you think the Council's arrangements for petitions/ e-petitions will make it more accessible and accountable to the people of Kingston upon Thames?
10. What does the word "e-democracy" mean to you? Are there other ways the Council should be using the Internet to give people more of a say? (if so, what)

7.6. Results sample of a field test of e-petitioner

Note: The notation in brackets refers to the criteria listed in the introduction to the report.

P1 (Participant One) – Task 3

Selects link for first petition in list- approx 2 minutes to display petition [C8, 3]
Remarks on slow response time. However, says it is clear what to do.

Asked to make a comment

(Ignored the 'discuss' link. Returned to the 'sign' page.
Scrolls down, mouse hovering around petition text "okay so I've done that bit already"
Scrolls down to bottom of page, then back up, mouse hovers over 'discuss petition' than to 'tell a friend'
"No can't see it, it's not there" [C7, 3]
Prompted to click on 'discuss petition'.
Reads comment displayed, asks "do you want me to add a comment" types comment and clicks to send.
"ok that's pretty straightforward" [C7, +]

Would you use the system?

Only on subjects of personal interest. Gives you more of a chance to contribute to council issues. (Has signed paper petitions in the past). [C2, +], [A4, +]

Expectations?

In due course, it would be good to see the results of the petitions published on the website. [A3+]

Benefits?

The council would probably be able to gather responses from a wider audience, and it also allows people the opportunity to say how they feel. [A3, +]

The 'comment' facility?

Better if it were possible to add comments from the 'read/sign' page; it would be nice to be able to comment even though not signing the petition, especially if you had critical comments to make about the petition. [C5, -]

Use of online systems for engagement?

Not really. Online activity not generally for petitions, but a good idea though – just to have a quick look to see if anything is of personal interest.

Would it be better if there was a system for drawing your attention to a petition?

Probably an e-mail from a friend. E-mail alerts for similar subjects, or alerts for all subjects so that the user can use their discretion whether or not to follow them up. The ability to add a comment will make people feel that they have access to their local authority.