local e-Democracy
National Project

'From the Top Down'

An Evaluation of e-Democracy Activities Initiated by Councils and Government

ITC

BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL

Foreword

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

Outside of this role Bristol has considerable experience of implementing council led approaches to e-consultation and e-democracy. This evaluation report looks at the ways in which councils can most effectively use new technologies to engage with their citizens.

The relationship between local authorities and citizens has traditionally been driven from the top down, with councils making decisions about what information to share with the public, and what issues to consult citizens on.

It is widely believed that by employing some of the new communication technologies that are becoming increasingly widespread citizens can have a far greater say in political decisions making.

The potential of these new technologies is exciting, and the idea that they might revitalise democracy is seductive. However we must recognise that there is more to this process than simply providing a range of electronic tools. E-engagement entails a range of practices, techniques and technologies which do not comprise inherent 'solutions', but must be integrated into a broader adaptation of government-citizen relationship-building.

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1 Executive Summary

This report evaluates a selection of projects in Workstream 2 of the Local e-Democracy National Project *"Strengthening existing democratic practices"*. The report focuses on projects led by the local authorities in Bristol, Kingston upon Thames, Swindon and Wolverhampton. These were:

- Bristol's use of online forums to complement Citizens Panels in its *Ask Bristol* website.

- Kingston upon Thames' pilot of an **e-petitioning** system in conjunction with Bristol.

- Swindon's trial of a "Micro Democracy" concept targeting questionnaires at specific sections of the public.

- Wolverhampton's coordination through partner organisations of online dialogue with citizens through the Wolverhampton Partnership site.

The main aim of the research was to develop an understanding of how citizens and stakeholders perceive e-democracy and to feedback tangible lessons to local authorities and their partners on how to use the tools of e-democracy more effectively.

The evaluation found much had been accomplished in the 4 projects we focused on. Over their one year lifetime project staff were recruited, suppliers contracted, applications implemented, working practices and processes examined and e-democracy tools launched to be used by the public. In three of the four projects the e-democracy tools had been used by hundreds of citizens, and showed early signs of impacting on decision-making. Specifically we used "democratic criteria" to assess the projects' strengths and weaknesses as follows:

1.1 Representation

The major strength of *Ask Bristol* was the development of existing liaison between the consultation team and service departments, in some cases with their direct participation in online discussion. The e-petitioner project had strong support from councillors, although the outcomes of e-petitions remain uncertain and there were weaknesses in the integration with other engagement processes. The *Micro Democracy* project reported keen interest from councillors. The *Wolverhampton Partnership* project rests on a strong consultation infrastructure, although active support from partners appeared focused on collaborative working between staff. That provides a strong basis for sustainable e-consultation, although current support for it appeared limited from partners and councillors.

1.2 Engagement

In all cases strong efforts were made to encourage public response on issues of local relevance. The early evidence has been that this is forthcoming but only when the issues are general enough to affect a broad cross-section of citizens.

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1.3 Transparency

The *e-petitioner* project was strongest on this point since it is establishing a process for publishing decision outcomes. There is potential in each project to enhance transparency, but it would have been preferable for them to first establish what citizens would need or expect in terms of enhanced transparency. This is necessary because "enhancing transparency" may be taken to mean either providing detailed information or hiding it in the name of simplicity. The projects each had published policies on privacy and acceptable use, with the exception of *Micro Democracy* which we had strong concerns about.

1.4 Conflict and consensus

Each of the projects provides an online forum and opportunities for divergence of opinion on the issues raised and the method for raising them, with the exception of the *Micro Democracy* project. The preparation for effective moderation of such discussions was a strong feature of *Ask Bristol* and the *Wolverhampton Partnership* projects. In Bristol e-petitions are moderated by the same team as *Ask Bristol* discussions, and the software supports the moderation task. However Kingston's preparations for moderation were not extensive and should any controversial e-petitions stimulate heated online discussion there is risk officers concerned may be unprepared to deal with any consequences.

1.5 Political equality

The projects each show strong potential for greater inclusiveness. The web traffic and responses to the engagement suggested the ground had been laid for strong and sustainable take-up. There was evidence that the tools were already being actively used by hundreds of citizens in each of the local authority areas. There was also evidence, albeit very limited, that these were mostly not previously "engaged" in contributing to local authority decision making. In demographic terms there were disabled and minority ethnic users almost in proportion to local populations, although they were also more likely to be male and middle-aged. The *Micro Democracy* project also had strong potential given its integration of online and offline channels, although its take-up cannot be assessed yet.

1.6 Community control

Citizens had modest expectations that their views would have some impact on decision-making and strong expectations that the councils should in any case publish a response to their input. The evidence that citizens were satisfied with the arrangements was limited but mostly positive for *e-petitioner* and *Ask Bristol.* The *Wolverhampton Partnership* showed strong potential in terms of liaison with existing community groups, although unfortunately we could not directly assess citizen support in the time available. *Micro Democracy* placed much emphasis on responsiveness, though again citizens' views on that were unavailable.

The research involved citizens and stakeholders – councillors, project managers and officers involved in using the e-democracy tools and managing the democratic process. Various methods were used to record and analyse their views and the usage of e-democracy tools:

- Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders on "key dimensions" of the e-democracy projects.

- Field tests of the e-democracy tools with members of the public, using public access computers in public libraries.

- Online discussion and usage statistics gathered by the e-democracy tools and by the web servers they were run on.

- Online questionnaires.

- Project documentation.

There is a strong case for further evaluation. The present study was carried out over a very short period, the e-democracy tools were themselves only piloted for a few months, and the projects had mostly been unable to undertake planned evaluation. E-democracy projects are inevitably subject to unexpected change in the political environment and this unfortunately delayed the *"Micro Democracy"* led by Swindon Borough Council. We recommend further evaluation of projects that are continued, particularly to guide ongoing monitoring and evaluation by councils themselves. This should include methods to identify the value of online dialogue and monitor the impact on decision-making.

2 Introduction

2.1 Aims of the evaluation

This report is of work undertaken in *"Workstream 4: Public and Stakeholder Opinion and e-Democracy"*, one of five main workstreams of the Local e-Democracy National Project. The aims of Workstream 4 were:

- To develop an understanding of how citizens and stakeholders perceive e-democracy and to feedback tangible lessons to local authorities and their partners on how to use the tools of e-democracy more effectively.

- To provide an overarching evaluation of e-democracy tools that are in use or under development in England, focusing especially but not exclusively on the outputs of the National Project.

(Source: National Project on Local e-Democracy Workstream Four Project Initiation Document: version 1.7 October 2004, p.8)

The report is on one of three strands of Workstream 4 contributing to the aims above, each of these strands being part of Workpackage 4.3 "overarching evaluation". The other two strands focus on projects aimed at young people, and projects emphasising "ground-up" development of e-democracy by citizens and communities.

Our aims in this strand of this evaluation were to focus specifically on public and stakeholder experiences of the Workstream 2 e-democracy activities initiated by English Local Authorities and the Government, and reach conclusions about the benefits and effectiveness of these approaches both in their own right and in comparison to more traditional forms of democratic engagement.

This introductory chapter sets out:

- The scope of the evaluation in terms of the general approach taken and local authorities involved.

- An evaluation framework comprising the main evaluation questions and criteria.

- Methods used and the participants sought.

- Detailed questions and the methods used to address them.

2.2 Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation concerns Workstream 2 of the National Project *"Strengthening existing democratic practices"*. The report considers a broadly representative slice of these "top-down" initiatives, and draws on a snapshot of views and experiences taken in the final stages of selected projects comprising Workstream 2.

We selected the **lead authority** in each of four projects spanning Workpackages 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 as shown below in Table 2.1[1], as we believed these would be best positioned to communicate what had been learned within the work package they were leading. The projects commenced in March-April 2004, and our evaluation began in December to look at the final months of the projects, ending on March 31 2005.

[1] Workstream 2.1 (Supporting the work of councillors) was examined by the expert evaluation team (workstream 4.1) and was therefore excluded from the present study.

Table 2.1 Workstream 2 initiatives selected for evaluation

Work-package	Project Focus	Lead authority
2.2a	Panels, forums and citizen engagement	Bristol City Council
2.3a	Information, communication and citizenship: "e-petitioning"	Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames
2.3b	Information, communication and citizenship: "Micro Democracy"	Swindon Borough Council
2.4a	Democratising cross-cutting issues and partnerships	Wolverhampton City Council

Each of these projects also involved at least one other local authority or public sector partner. Each also included an element of evaluation coordinated by the lead partner. In the current study we did not seek to duplicate that work. Rather we wanted to find out what the lead authority had learned from the pilot, including evaluation carried out within it, and identify any gaps that could be filled through the authorities' ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

Main constraints on the evaluation

The projects in table 1 lasted one year, during which project staff were recruited, suppliers contracted, applications implemented, working practices and processes examined and e-democracy tools launched to be used by the public. While much was accomplished by these projects, the e-democracy tools were typically only available to the public for around 3–6 months. In most cases the projects did not carry out the "internal" evaluation they had planned before the workstream 4 evaluation reported here got underway. This evaluation was severely time-limited and this led to uneven coverage of the four pilots, and a lack of involvement of key individuals and groups.

In one case in particular, Swindon, procurement issues delayed the project start until August 2004. Further delays were caused by a change in the political leadership of Swindon Borough Council and subsequent budget cuts. We have included the pilot in this report, although it was not possible to consider the views of citizens or direct evidence of benefits or effectiveness. We strongly recommend further external evaluation of this project if it continues.

We should also point out our involvement as suppliers for the e-petitioning project, and the disproportionate level of detail given to the project in this report. This reflects the greater access the authors had as evaluators to the key stakeholders involved. The authors were not directly involved in the development of the software and we are confident that the report demonstrates our impartiality in reporting the "lessons learned".

Each of the projects had envisaged an element of **internal** evaluation, ie coordinated by the lead authority for the workpackage across other local authorities participating in it. Our evaluation was intended to build on the above work by considering how the results addressed our over-arching questions, and working collaboratively with the lead authorities to gather additional evidence where necessary.

There was extensive internal evaluation of the **e-panels and forums** (Workpackage 2.2), led by Bristol, which was undertaken in parallel with the current study. This raised issues of duplication and "evaluation fatigue" among participants. We therefore agreed to Bristol's request not to re-interview individuals who had already been interviewed by RBA Research. We are grateful to RBA Research for making available summaries of interviews carried out in Wolverhampton, where the project on "democratising cross-cutting issues and partnerships" (workpackage 2.4a) overlapped considerably with Wolverhampton's contribution to the e-panels project (2.2a). Unfortunately however the time constraints mean that they were unable to make similar results available from interviews with Members and officers involved in Bristol's e-panel project.

2.3 An evaluation framework

The main evaluation questions

The evaluation targeted citizens using (and others not using) the e-democracy tools deployed in the projects, and councillors and officers responsible for e-democracy development and for the processes it was intended to support. Some views of technologists involved from the local authorities or their technology providers were also sought.

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 available tools, 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, ie by using multiple approaches to gather data.

If we start from the premise that the projects evaluated should support and preferably enhance democracy in some way, what aspects of those projects should we consider? The Workstream 4 expert evaluation group outlined five main elements of the evaluation, comprising[2]:

1 Relevant actors and their roles and expectations in the adoption and implementation of e-participation projects.

2 The contextual bases of e-participation projects

3 The methods and processes of e-participation

4 The outcomes of e-participation

5 Comparison between offline and online methods of participation

[2] Coleman, Macintosh & Lalljee "Evaluating e-Democracy in English and Welsh Local Authorities", Oct. 2004

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

Q1 How do the actors involved understand the initiative to benefit the relations between councils, elected representatives, public, partners and Central Government, and what in their view are the disadvantages?

Q2 How do the politicians, officials and citizens involved in using tools developed in the initiative characterise their "added value"; what methods and processes contribute that value, and what differences are there between them and other public engagement approaches used?

Q3 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?

Q4 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?

Q5 What are the needs for guidance on appropriate ongoing evaluation methods?

The evaluation needed **criteria** to assess whether the projects enhance democracy and to consider the main elements and questions above. We used three main sources.

A Overall criteria for enhancing democracy: The National Project has agreed criteria to assess whether that overall aim has been met. We used them in drawing our conclusions on each project.

A1   Representation

A2   Engagement

A3   Transparency

A4   Conflict and consensus

A5   Political equality

A6   Community control

B Key dimensions of e-democracy initiatives: To understand how stakeholders and the public were involved in and perceived the individual projects, we used the following "key dimensions" of e-democracy initiatives (Macintosh, 2004) to structure discussions with them.

B1   Type of engagement

B2   Stage in decision-making

B3   Actors

B4   Technologies used

B5   Rules of engagement

B6   Duration and sustainability

B7   Accessibility

B8   Resources and Promotion

B9   Evaluation and Outcomes

B10 Critical success factors

C Criteria for assessing e-democracy tools: The "e" tools that have been produced and deployed in the project may 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 Websites[3]. We used the criteria below to identify themes from field tests with citizens who had had the opportunity to use the e-democracy tools.

Social acceptability

C1   Trust and security

C2   Relevance and legitimacy

Usefulness

C3   Accessibility

C4   Appeal

C5   Content clarity

C6   Responsiveness

Usability

C7   Navigation and organisation

C8   Efficiency and flexibility

C9   Error recovery

A more detailed version of this framework appears in **Annex A** to the report. This includes definitions and descriptions of each of the criteria mentioned above.

[3] Quality Framework for UK Government Websites: available at: http://e-government.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/Resources/ WebGuidelines/fs/enA

Bringing the dimensions together

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

Figure 2.1 Criteria and sources for e-democracy evaluation

Stakeholders' aims, methods and expectations of public engagement

Public take-up, usage and acceptability

Tool Quality Criteria

Key Dimensions

E-engagement: enhancing democracy?

Democratic Criteria
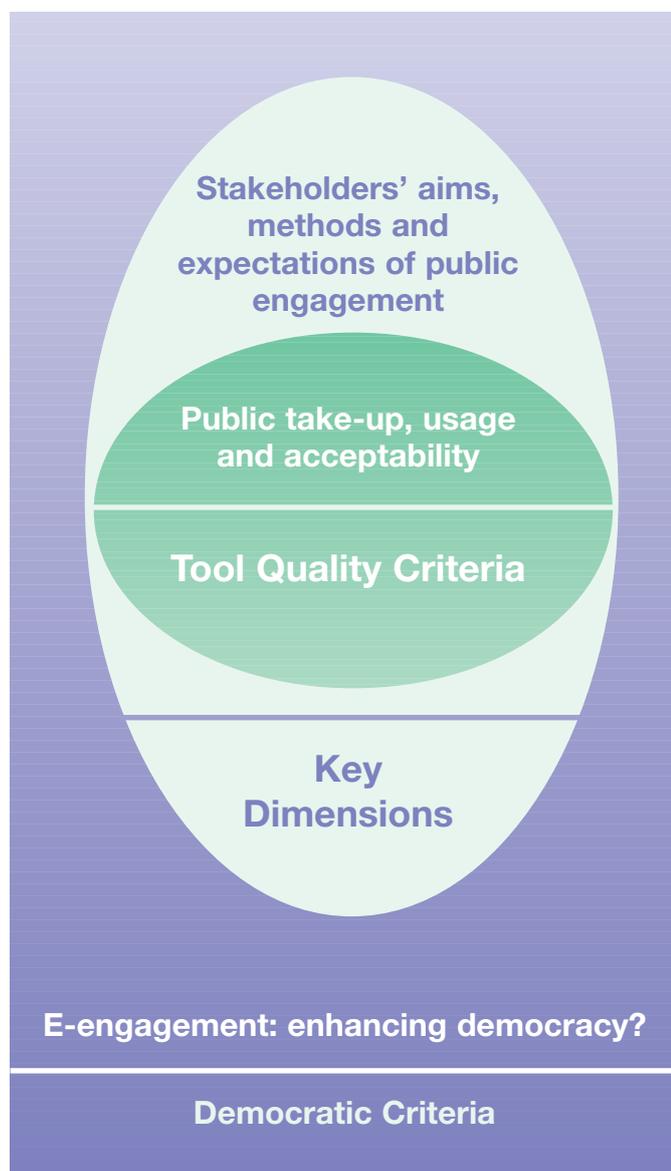
2.4 Methods and participants

The key dimensions in **Figure 2.1** are themes for discussion with stakeholders and members of the public that the projects have involved. In this section we identify the methods we used to gather data. First we identify who we sought to include in the evaluation.

The citizens and stakeholders included in the evaluation were in these categories:

a Citizens who have used the e-democracy tools deployed (or agreed to take part in a pilot).

b Citizens who have **not** used the tools.

c Councillors involved in the engagement process.

d Engagement "owners": managers with responsibility for aspects of the engagement process, for example service managers who commission consultations.

e Project managers/ technologists, whether employed by the council or by suppliers.

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)[4].

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 2.4 below.

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 councils concerned. 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 in the chapter.

Table 2.4 Data sources used

	Bristol City	R.B. Kingston	Swindon Borough	W'hampton City
Semi-structured interviews	✓	✓	✓	✓
Field tests of e-democracy tools	✓	✓	–	–
Online questionnaire	✓	✓	–	–
Internal documentation	✓	✓	–	✓
Online discussion /responses	✓	✓	–	✓
Web server log files	✓	–	–	✓

Table 2.5 Interview target groups

	Bristol City	R.B. Kingston	Swindon Borough	W'hampton City
Citizens: users and non-users	12	7	–	–
Councillors involved in engagement	1	2	1	–
Engagement "owners"	2	2	1	1
Project managers and "technologists"	3	2	2	2
Internal user, administrators	1*	2	1	1

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 in each case.

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

[4] 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-democracy tools

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 interacting with websites produced in the project. 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. For each tool (website) we described three tasks that we considered basic to effective use, for example signing an online petition, or registering to join a discussion forum. 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-democracy 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). Swindon and Wolverhampton were unable to accommodate field tests in their schedules. Further details of the materials used and discussion questions are given in **Annex D**.

Online questionnaires: sampling and recruitment

Online surveying was used to explore how typical users of the tools being piloted were of the general population, and to gauge their views on questions we expected to affect tool acceptance. We return to the questions later.

Everyone served by a local Authority may be assumed to have views relevant to citizen engagement. However for the evaluation it was only feasible to sample those members of the local population who had already shown an interest in the e-democracy tools, or other forms of citizen engagement (such as citizens panels). This was because the e-democracy tools had not been publicly available long enough for us to assume that randomly selected local people would or could respond to questions about them. We began instead with the aim of recruiting a sufficiently high response from citizens interested in e-democracy to be able to select a weighted sample. In this case the sample would have been weighted to be representative in terms of age, gender,

internet use, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status. It was unfortunately not possible to do this, again because of the limited time that the e-democracy tools had been available the respondents were not sufficiently typical of the local population to construct a weighted sample.

Online questionnaire results are given as simple descriptive statistics. They cannot be generalised in statistical terms to the local population, but may indicate the likely profiles of "early adopters" and to what extent they would otherwise have got involved in their Local Authority's decision-making.

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, train officers using the tools, or directly involve citizens in their development were also consulted for that purpose.

Results of online engagement

The e-democracy tools themselves provide evidence of the breadth and depth of their use in the pilots. The breadth of use, or take-up, was measurable in terms of numbers of:

- Registered users

- Responses to questionnaires

- Messages posted to discussion fora

- Petitions raised

- Names added to petitions

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 home page for the tool in question

- 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).

2.5 Chapter Structure

Chapters 3 to 6 of the report portray each of the projects involved in the evaluation using the following structure:

Aims and background

This sets the scene for the project's lead council becoming involved in the National Project. The focus here is on the experiences and understandings of the project managers, in terms of the rationale for choosing a particular e-democracy approach, and the use of other methods of citizen engagement. This section also describes how software tools were selected and the approach taken to implementing them.

The e-engagement tools and process

Here we describe the tools piloted and outline what processes have been developed to pilot their deployment. This section again takes a managerial view. That is the tools and processes are depicted according to the project managers view of how they would support engagement when put into operation. This is based on analysis of interviews and project documentation.

Actors' roles and expectations

This chapter 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, supplemented by results of evaluations carried out within the project concerned, for example of usability and accessibility.

Results and outcomes

Here we summarise the engagement results, ie what was done to engage the public and the breadth and depth of their responses. We also describe the outcomes, ie the council's response to the engagement as far as this could be ascertained given the short duration of the pilot periods.

Conclusions

This chapter section reflects on the evaluation results and, using the "democratic criteria" described earlier provides conclusions on what difference the project has made.

3 Citizen engagement in "Ask Bristol"

3.1 Aims and background

The e-panel project led by Bristol City Council had these broad aims:

- To demonstrate that the democratic potential of citizens' panels can be enhanced through the increased use of e-democracy tools.

- To produce detailed guidance for Local Authorities and case studies demonstrating how e-panel approaches, suitable for a variety of environments and budgets, can be implemented successfully.

- To strengthen links between authorities who are engaged in on-line consultation.

The project also involved St Albans District Council, Wolverhampton City Council, and the Black Country Knowledge Society, and drew on the previous experience of online consultation in London Boroughs. Part of the project involved developing a **training programme** on the moderation and hosting of discussion forums. We have not included this programme in our evaluation, except indirectly in so far as it influenced the consultation approach and process.

The e-engagement context in Bristol

Bristol City Council like many local authorities consults its citizens through a Citizens Panel. Set up in 1998, Bristol's Citizens Panel comprises a demographically representative sample of over 2000 residents who are regularly surveyed, occasionally supplemented by focus group discussion and workshops with a Citizens Jury format. The Panel has become established in the authority as a cost-effective means to gather statistically representative views from citizens.

It is widely regarded in the council as an effective way to:

- Monitor performance of the council as a whole and of individual departments.

- Strengthen and supplement Best Value reviews, the work of scrutiny commissions and of the cabinet and executive members.

- Develop public relations and improve communication.

- Encourage greater understanding of decision making in the council.

- Contribute to democratic renewal and encourage participation.

Council departments are now routinely joined by partner organisations such as the NHS and Police among the bodies commissioning consultations with the Citizens Panel, which is managed by the Corporate Consultation team.

So why change? The rationale for "e-panels" was to build on the success of the Citizen's Panel format. Bristol had experimented with moderated online discussions, i.e. message board forums that operate according to agreed "fair play" rules and with the occasional intervention of an online facilitator to steer the discussion. But this met with some cultural resistance within the council to the idea that citizens should be allowed to dictate website content. So as Corporate Consultation manager Stephen Hilton explains:

"We had the "Citizen's Panel", which had gained the respect of Bristol's citizens, so we transferred this online. The citizen's panel was top-down, with the council determining the issues discussed. We

moved it online to see whether it could be made as a bottom-up method of participation, and to see whether it changed the nature of consultation."

As well as encouraging **"bottom-up" identification of issues**, a key aim of this move was to meet the growing interest among citizens in contributing to the Panel. The need for the panel membership to be controlled so as to reflect demographic characteristics of the local population has led to a long waiting list of people wanting to be consulted. The "e-panel" approach is therefore intended to **widen access** to consultation.

A further aim is to promote **informed discussion** among citizens of the issues that the council or partners want to consult about. Public participation is not universally regarded as necessarily a "good thing" and has met with resistance from professional groups who regard it as an encroachment on their expertise. A perceived weakness of the Citizens Panel approach is its reliance on "misinformed" public opinion. Stephen Hilton again: "…if we allow citizens time to become informed on issues and to discuss them prior to being consulted, we hope to get around this".

Ask Bristol has been developed against a background of work on e-consultations and from the development of the council's consultation strategy in 2001. This highlighted a need for better coordination of consultations. The Corporate Consultation team developed a "Consultation Finder"; initially with the council's web team. This was used across the Authority to publish records of who was being consulting on what. The key decision was to present this in the public domain, having recognised the democratic potential for letting interested parties search

consultations for information on what was done or planned. Placing it in the public domain put pressure on the council to progress this work.

Other Authorities became interested in "Consultation Finder" and the council became known as a leader in this particular field. Online publication of this led to a demand from those consulted to contribute to consultations online. This began with e-mail responses, and then progressed to online forums and surveys, which were taken up by service departments. Stephen Hilton again:

"We're also interested in interactive voting technology – we've conducted quite a few sessions with groups discussing and voting upon issues".

This has been piloted in conference on "options assessment" for public housing, and in a session with young people using new handsets that can also send text messages to appear on a large screen.

E-petitioning, described in section 3 of this chapter, has also been piloted in Bristol and builds on the procedures in place for handling paper petitions.

3.2 The e-engagement tools and process

Main e-panel functions for citizen users

The *Ask Bristol* site integrates various forms of e-engagement, offering any visitor the option to contribute without necessarily joining the "e-panel". *Ask Bristol* is distinguished from the main Bristol City Council site with its own domain (www.askbristol.com) and a different page design. The page shows the current consultation themes and main option which are:

- **"Find out more"** provides a Frequently Asked Questions page, these questions being on the aims of the site and the first steps visitors can take to give their views.

- **"Current issues"** presents those consultations that are ongoing or have recently been concluded as shown in **Figure 3.1** below. It includes a multiple-choice question that visitors can "vote" on as a means of encouraging further participation, eg "What do you think is the best Bristol website?"

- **"Have your say"** first invites visitors to register or log in. The registration form requests name, contact and demographic details plus questions on internet use and personal interests.

- **"More ways to have your say"** provides the Consultation Finder database of other consultations being conducted by the council or partner organisations, plus a link to the e-petitioner site (see chapter 3).

A discussion forum is presented after logging in, and is themed by consultation topic each with a forum which is then subdivided into topics. Other methods trialled have included online "talk to the experts" chat rooms and a simple "deliberative polling" tool called "You Decide".

Each forum/ consultation has an **Introduction** page which is displayed when selecting it from **Current Issues**. This is a short (several paragraph) summary of why the theme has been selected, and may include links to other documents the consultation "owner" thinks relevant to informing the online discussion. For example in the current "Your Vision of Bristol" theme there are links to a summary of the previous discussion on "best and worst things about Bristol", and previous Citizens Panel reports.

Figures 3.2 and **3.3** illustrate the forum pages, showing the top level first followed by a forum in threaded format.

Figure 3.1 Current Issues in Ask Bristol

Figure 3.2 Ask Bristol forum top level
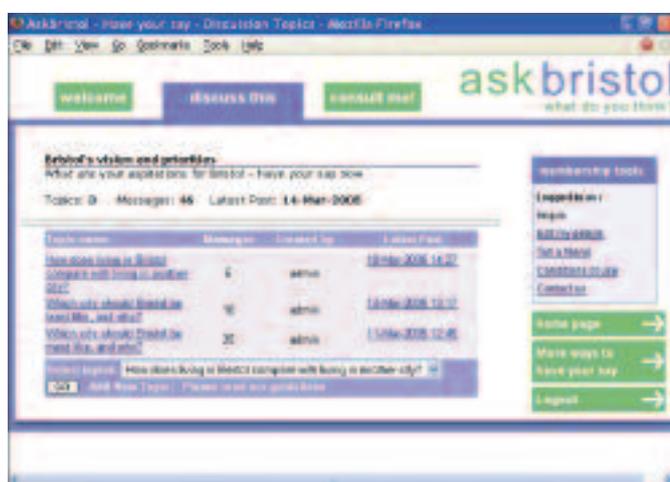
Figure 3.3 Ask Bristol forum with discussion threads
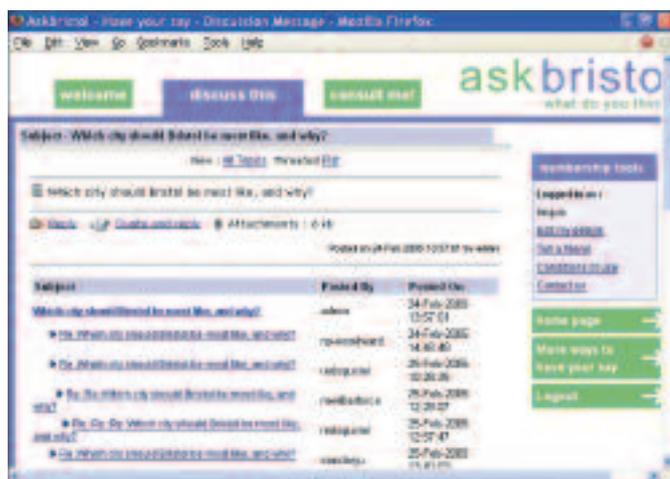
Developing the e-panel engagement process

Work in Bristol to set up the e-panel began in June 2004 with efforts to involve stakeholders in service departments and outside the council, for example the health authority. Project manager Carol Hayward recalls:

"There was a lot of interest in what we were doing … we were able to get a wide range of input from these representatives."

This task was helped by the consultation team's previous work on "Consultation Finder" and the establishment of a council "Consultation Group" with a representative from each department.

Implementing and promoting Ask Bristol

The first steps were to document the software requirements and approach suppliers. The main requirements were listed as:

- Individual profiles for e-panel members.

- Tool for searching panel membership to identify others with similar interests.

- Real time discussions or chat room facility.

- Discussion forums or notice boards for e-panellists.

- E-panel members to be able to suggest subjects for discussion.

- Email alert system for specified subjects of interest.

- Ability to send SMS alerts to mobile phones and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs).

- Means of viewing results of past deliberations.

- On-line completion of questionnaires with auto data capture and on-line reporting.

- File-sharing with ability to make direct amendments to documents.

- Access to videophone/conferencing or video on the internet an optional extra.

Bristol identified four possible suppliers. Three agreed to become involved: the Practical e-Democracy project in London (PeDiL), Community People and iNovem. A fourth identified software provider BMG felt unable to participate in an assessment at this stage. A shortlist of three products was drawn up and each assessed for its costs, usability and accessibility in August 2004. All three software providers were given a copy of their assessments and asked to reply to the points made, highlighting improvements that had already been implemented to their software and plans for future amendments.

The usability assessment was carried out on demonstration versions of the three software packages, by an external consultant and by the Bristol team. The external consultant's evaluation used a "cognitive walkthrough" approach and included an assessment of the text provided in the demonstration version.

The cognitive walkthrough is described in the evaluation report as involving "measuring the amount of thinking the user has to do at every step of the way to completion of a desired goal or task". The methodology was applied by selecting "general day-to-day tasks that are common to most websites and specific community based tasks" and carrying them out. The tasks were:

- Registering as a user.

- Login.

- Accessing the help option.

- Contacting the service provider.

- Retrieving a forgotten password.

- Replying to a new thread on the forum.

- Completing a questionnaire.

The report suggested improvements and examples of best practice for each package, to which each of the suppliers was invited to respond. A further test was carried out of how easy to comprehend the "help" text in each package was, using the Flesch Reading Ease score.

In addition the Bristol team tested usability by asking 42 residents recruited from Bristol, and through the Black Country Knowledge Society, to try one of the packages and complete a questionnaire. The questions addressed:

- How far did the systems meet expectations and bring satisfaction?

- How simple, efficient and quick to use was the software?

- Was the system easy to learn with good, clear help functions and error messages?

- Was the information easy to find, comprehensible, clear and well organised?

- Was the system comfortable to use with a pleasant interface?

All of the applications were considered acceptable on these criteria, albeit with different strengths and weaknesses, and discussions with the other councils participating in the e-panel project led to each selecting a different package. Bristol adopted "eConsult" and engaged its suppliers Community People Ltd to develop the *Ask Bristol* application.

Community People were also commissioned to develop training[5], in conjunction with the Consultation Institute. The training needs were established for the main user groups:

Managers, Facilitators and councillors who were thought likely to have concerns ranging from legal to operational aspects. councillors with direct involvement also needed some insight into the role of the moderator.

Moderators or online facilitators were instructed in the roles of preparation, setting up a debate, and managing it, with the latter focusing on encouraging people to join in, ensuring "fair play" according to documented policy and an escalation procedure in the case of conflict, writing an "editorial steer" for the debate, engaging with members of the public on line, and maintaining records of the results.

Participants and/or Panellists training sought to motivate and encourage members of e-panels and develop their confidence in the use of e-consultation tools.

The consultation team and the relevant service departments seeking public input decided the duration of the online discussion and the materials to be used. Each consultation theme selected for *Ask Bristol* requires a range of background information to be put in place. The first consultations included one on the control of Bristol's growing seagull population. Project manager Carol Hayward:

"I pulled together the information on urban gulls from a report carried out for the pest control team on the local gull population, by talking to the RSPB and by searching the internet for other background information. Cyclists are an issue that people seem keen to discuss as it came top of a recent vote for the next consultation subject, and I have engaged the council's Cycling Team for input."

Ask Bristol was promoted extensively offline through posters, local press advertising, articles in several local newspapers, beermats and bookmarks. Online promotion included links from the council website home page, local website "thisisbristol.com", and direct emails from the council.

The analysis of results is a still-developing part of the process. Hayward says:

"We provide an analysis of the debate by summarising the key points made, and then pass these results to the departments for feedback. We are still working on the procedure but as the analysis is done manually at present it is quite time consuming."

[5] This training provision was the focus of workpackage 2.2b and we have not sought to evaluate the training materials.

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3.3 Experiences and Expectations of Ask Bristol

The evaluation planned to include interviews with councillors involved in the project but unfortunately this was not possible for the reasons given in the Introduction to this report.

Consultation managers

The e-panel development has faced challenges in devising the right **methods** to encourage participation, and choosing appropriate **issues** to seed the online discussion. From their experience of *Ask Bristol* to date, the Corporate Consultation team are confident they are finding the right balance. The other balance to be drawn is between online and offline approaches. Consultation manager Stephen Hilton shared his experiences and expectations on these three themes.

• *Encouraging participation – step-by-step methods*

A major challenge has been to work out the most effective way to combine the various consultation technologies that might be used. Stephen Hilton recalls:

"It took the council a year, maybe longer to get the panel going – but really, we've got something in a relatively short time. There was the difficulty in knowing how to combine several distinct technologies in a logical sequence – know how to use them together rather than separately. By now, we have a feeling about how to use the various off-line methodologies but this has not yet happened with online ones. But we want to provide a range of opportunities for people to engage at different levels. For example, someone does not want to start off by contributing to a discussion, but is happy to take part in a simple poll. This leads to taking part in an 'e-decide' session and thence to 'e-consult'. This pattern appears to be the case. Smaller numbers take part in higher-level activities."

• *Finding appropriate issues to initiate the process*

A range of practical concerns surrounded the choice of issues to get the ball rolling. As in offline consultation, the results would need an owner – a department or other agency sufficiently concerned with the consultation topic to find the results useful, and prepared to accept and approve of gathering public input on it. What made this more sensitive than usual was the openness of this public scrutiny. Unlike the existing panel, anyone could register and express an opinion. Unlike a survey, the results would be expressed in whatever terms citizens chose to use, moderation permitted. Unlike a focus group, the discussion would be there for all to see: Stephen Hilton again:

"We were…uncertain about which issues to use as consultation topics, or who could give approval for launching the consultation. We had plenty of ideas but uncertain about whom would want the results. Also we were cautious about choosing a topic that would get out of hand and thereby jeopardise future consultations, so it took a fair while to choose the issue... the public nature of AskBristol would mean that the entire project could backfire if the particular consultation went awry."

• *Online versus offline: understanding and balancing the differences*

As we have already mentioned the online approach of *Ask Bristol* complements the existing Citizens Panel. It seeks to **widen citizens' access** to consultation, promote

informed discussion of the issues being consulted, and encourage citizens as individuals or civic groups to **identify issues**. Any trade-offs between these aims remains to be seen as the project progresses, as do the relative strengths and weaknesses of offline and online approaches. Two of the likely differences and implications feature strongly in the Corporate Consultation team's expectations.

One implicit difference is in the **representative nature** of the participants – the offline Citizens Panel approach emphasises random statistical sampling of local residents; the online panel emphasises equality of access – introducing statistical bias in terms of the participants demographic characteristics. In the medium term it may be feasible to have online discussions among a demographically representative sample of participants. But equality of access is no guarantee of equality of participation, or that all who take part in an online discussion are equally informed. Moreover, being representative in demographic terms does not necessarily mean that participants are typical in terms of their life experience, or their interest in taking part. As Hilton puts it:

"…we require the panel to be a representative selection – a balanced panel. However, we must recognise that, for instance, the young people we recruit are not typical of all young people – typically, people cannot be bothered to sit on panels – so there will be biases. Yet being representative confers credibility and engenders trust. So we were proactive in getting people to come forward, but were also interested in people to opt in to AskBristol. Is it possible to have a self-selected group that is demographically representative? It will probably take a year to find out how representative it will be. So far, recruitment suggests that it is balanced,

but whether or not they become active or not is another question."

A second major difference lies in the more "bottom up" nature of the issues raised for discussion. The scope and success of this remains an open question. Consultation has conventionally involved the authority identifying the topic. However that decision also partly depends on the nature of the topic and the mechanisms for engaging with the communities affected by it. "In the context of things we do, it is top-down. In terms of "equality" and "tenants" issues it is bottom-up…specific groups drawn from a particular neighbourhood or demographic community, for example. We tackle city-wide issues, so it is a struggle to find bottom-up issues. You have to have people suggest things".

Ask Bristol, by inviting participants to suggest the topics, potentially extends the range of people with a say in what gets discussed and introduces an element of transparency to the choice, which ultimately remains with the consultation managers. What remains to be seen is whether the new way of gathering suggestions, combined with the established practice of selecting topics with the support of stakeholders groups, yields results that can be reliably said to satisfy those concerned.

The outcomes may depend on what the e-panel participants are willing to divulge about themselves, both privately to the Consultation team and publicly to each other. The registration process asks for wide-ranging demographic details, and invites the recruited participants to state their interests in a profile. Again this extends and amplifies a practice that is seen as adding value to the offline Citizens Panel. "councillors often say that they do not know who these citizens' panels are, so we started including biographies of the members of these panels", says Stephen Hilton. Some of these biographies are

featured on the Citizens Panel pages on the council website. *Ask Bristol's* "members profiles" are a mechanism for any registered user to create a similar profile, and allow others to read it if they choose.

• *Developing "online community" aspects*

As mentioned above registered users of *Ask Bristol* can choose to share their profiles with other users. The consultation team anticipate that **citizens** will use this mechanism to share views and experiences. Registered users might be encouraged to develop their biographical sketches, and identifiable groups may be invited to join selected discussions.

This is seen as a way of developing the site as an "online community" in parallel with real-world community activities. For example communication might be facilitated between people who take part in activities such as school board membership, or members of community associations. This would need further consideration of data protection issues, but also of the role of *Ask Bristol* in the community.

• *Involvement of councillors*

This has varied over the lifespan of the Citizens Panel, as Hilton says:

"councillors are not allowed to be members of the panel; rather they are the recipients of the products of that panel. But councillors are involved in the issues that get presented to the panel. There is a case of a citizen's panellist becoming a councillor, so there are links between the two."

The expectation is that councillors will be appreciative of the *Ask Bristol* results "this is giving them something they could not get otherwise".

• *Links to decision-making*

When an *Ask Bristol* discussion is closed a summary of the points raised are reported to the relevant committees, following the pattern established for Citizens Panel reports[6] Decisions by committees or the relevant departments are also published on the council website. A link from any particular consultation report to a specific decision is difficult to establish, given that there may be many other considerations taken into account in reaching the decision. Stephen Hilton noted:

"We're not making decisions by panel, but aiming to inform the major decisions within the council. So always the public opinion is available to the council on matters of importance. However, the council has other things to weigh-in when reaching a decision that is separate from public opinion. The thing is to be able to convey to the public how their views have had an impact. It has to be recognised that 'popular' opinion is not necessarily the best opinion."

Forum managers and moderators

Moderation of *Ask Bristol* has been coordinated by project manager Carol Hayward, although to date moderation has not needed much intervention in the forum discussions:

"Askbristol is managing itself very nicely so there has been very little moderation needed; there is some, involving moving comments around, but it is all low-key and there has not been any abusive posts."

[6] Citizens Panel reports are available at: http://www.bristol-city.gov.uk/Fuguri/ frame.html?A+AMM07100+BG+F+AMM00105+AMM01702

The moderation and administration of the forums needed a variety of tools that the suppliers were developing to meet expectations of how the role, and *Ask Bristol* itself, would further develop. Ongoing issues include:

- *Barring users contravening the Conditions of Use.*

Given the lack of any "abusive" postings to date so far, moderation has not needed decisions to be taken about barring anyone from a forum although the mechanism exists to do so. Another less drastic possibility is to use a "profanity" filter, which automatically sends a message to the offender saying that their language is objectionable.

- *Generating reports on the forum usage*

The *Ask Bristol* tools provide reports on user activity, and moderator activity. These have been little used so far, but the consultation team expect their use of such reports to further develop. For example they expect to compare fora on the number of users, and the numbers who "read" as opposed to those who "write", to provide an indication of the strength of feeling on the topics discussed.

- *Maintaining the relationship with panel members*

As *Ask Bristol* develops, a key task of the Consultation Team's moderators is to seek the ongoing participation of members. When appropriate they reply to specific points raised in the discussion forum. They also send email bulletins to registered members every few weeks.

- *Evaluation Metrics and Analysis*

This was considered an emerging need that has so far not been met because of the resource implications and uncertainty over which of the many possible metrics are

significant. The team are aware of various ways of grading the forum posts, for example on to what extent they are "pro" or "con" a consultation proposal. Also important were the quantitative data on numbers of comments posted and how many times these have been read, and the range of demographic groups involved in consultation. Where there is under-representation, it could indicate a problem that requires further investigation.

Citizens' experiences and expectations

Citizens' views were considered early in the project through the assessment of usability mentioned earlier. For the current evaluation we draw on that assessment and on field tests carried out in Bristol on the piloted version of the software, with 11 participants. *Ask Bristol*'s registered users were also invited to take part in an online survey from mid-January to mid-March, which received 34 usable responses.

We begin by considering the survey sample and results, then summarise the views received from all the above sources on:

- Accessibility issues
- E-panel usability
- Trust and security issues
- Relevance of the e-panel and expectations of outcomes

- *Reaching the disengaged?*

The online survey's 34 responses may not be statistically representative of the 698 registered *Ask Bristol* users or the 141 who logged in during the pilot. But despite the sampling limitations the online survey provided some evidence of who has been most inclined to participate and their views on *Ask Bristol.*

In particular we were interested in whether e-democracy tools attracted the interest of people who were not previously "engaged". A recent study of the extent of civic engagement for the Office of National Statistics, based on results of the General Household Survey (Coulthard et al, 2002) showed that a majority (56%) believed that "by working together, people in their neighbourhood can influence decisions that affect the neighbourhood". For the purposes of the evaluation we can take this question as an indicator of individual **inclination** to civic engagement. However in Coulthard et al's study only a small minority (27%) had taken any action to solve a local problem in the last three years "such as writing to a newspaper or contacting a local councillor, though one in ten people had thought about taking action". (ibid. pp.6).

There is therefore a gap between inclination and action that e-democracy tools such as *Ask Bristol* may be filling. Our survey respondents were **more inclined** towards civic engagement than the national figures would suggest, as 70% agreed that "by working together, people in my neighbourhood can influence decisions that affect our neighbourhood and the city". A large minority 44% had held responsibilities in a local organisation, but a similar number said they had never participated in a consultation by writing to the council or taking part in a public meeting.

Despite their apparent motivation to take part in *Ask Bristol* only a minority (41%) agreed that "what people say on *Ask Bristol* will influence decisions that the council makes on the issues raised". The remainder were presumably either sceptical or had other motivations for taking part which should be explored further. Interestingly this parallel's survey findings of the Citizens Panel, which

recently showed that members 43%–58% of the panel felt their views would "have some influence" (answers varied according to specific consultations)[7].

The online survey respondents were also more likely to be white (97%), male (68%) and aged 45–59 (41%) than the local population. This is broadly in keeping with their representation among self-registered users, who gave demographic information when registering (discussed under Results below) and may indicate a need for more targeted promotion to women, young people and the over 60's.

Of the promotional methods used, a large majority (76%) said they had heard about *Ask Bristol* through online promotion methods, with most of the rest accounted for by word of mouth, and street interviews carried out by a market research company (both 9%). This suggests that most of those registered by the market research company (around half of all those registered) have yet to use the system.

• *Accessibility issues*

The eConsult software did not meet WAI "Level A" compliance when tested in November 2004. However the report indicated that this was due to easily rectified errors in the HTML code, and the suppliers have stated they are committed to achieving compliance.

Accessibility issues were raised by two of our field test participants – both of whom found it difficult to read the text displayed. Neither was aware of how to increase text size, and it would be helpful to enable this by providing it as a menu option.

[7] Bristol City Council "Feedback: Bristol Citizen's Panel Newsletter" Issue 14, March 2005

- ***E-panel usability***

The usability assessment carried out by Bristol when short-listing the software highlighted a number of issues with the navigation and help options which appeared to have been addressed.

Field testers highlighted difficulties in navigation that have also since been addressed, including difficulty finding the site from the main Bristol City Council site. Several testers had serious difficulty with:

- Finding where to suggest new consultation themes and understanding the difference between these and discussion topics within a forum.

- Finding the registration page.

There were also comments on these aspects, although none prevented the users in question from completing their task:

- Lack of a search facility

- The clarity of the text; too much use of the passive voice.

- ***Trust and security issues***

There were no issues highlighted about the use of data or expectations of misuse. However a fairly large minority (21%) of online survey respondents agreed that "compared with other ways of having a say I feel less confident about how a name and address I give on *Ask Bristol* might be used".

- ***Relevance of the e-panel and expectations of outcomes***

The field testers were also asked to comment on their expectations of *Ask Bristol*. These were quite modest, with general support for the view that "It is better that it is there than not". However there was a high level of

cynicism that Bristol City Council were capable of acting on the results, and some concern that *Ask Bristol* was "window dressing"; that the efforts the council was making to engage the public through consultation were not matched by effective decision-making.

There was a consensus that the site needed more specific and regularly updated information on how the council was responding to issues raised. Our testers felt this might improve its appeal to people not already politically motivated.

3.4 Results and Outcomes

Responses to discussion topics

There were 698 registered users by the end of the pilot period, and the pilot brought a total of 495 comments in the 10 week period following its January launch. There were 1017 logins from 141 of the people registered, showing the site was visited repeatedly by some of them.

The most active topic was the first one launched; on the City Centre and its future, to consult on the council's draft city centre strategy between January and February 2005. 57 people took part in that discussion and 257 messages were posted. The other most active topics were *Cyclists: saints and sinners; Improving Ask Bristol;* and *Bristol's vision and priorities.* In some cases a topic may get few responses in the form of comments but more substantial responses to "votes" or "polls". This was the case with the *seagulls* debate, which had 116 people voting for or against the proposed introduction of control measures, even though there were only 22 comments posted in the discussion of them.

It is too early to report any response from the council to the pilot consultations; but the *Ask Bristol* site includes a commitment to publish the outcomes.

Who has registered?

The registration details given by people who have "signed up" to *Ask Bristol* so far help to assess how demographically representative they are of the local population. Of the 698 registered users demographic data is available for approximately half of these. In preparation for the launch a market research company was contracted to recruit users through street interviews, and these represent 307 of those registered. The *Ask Bristol* registration page initially did not ask for demographic data, and data is only available for 60 people who had registered since this was introduced. Table 2.6 below compares the available data against population estimates from the Office of National Statistics and other sources[8].

The age bands used in the *Ask Bristol* registration procedure are consistent with those used for the Citizens Panel but unfortunately differ from those used by the market research company, neither of which are consistent with the Office of National Statistics age bands. The various age bands are shown against the nearest ONS bands.

[8] The sources of local population figures are: -
- Age, gender: Office of National Statistics Population estimates 2003.
- 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).

Table 2.6 Demographics of registered Ask Bristol users

	Self-registered users	Recruited by Market Research Company	Local population estimates
Age			
17 or under	4%	–	8% (15–19)
18–35	37%	–	32% (20–34)
36–50	40%	–	17% (35–44)
51–65	18%	–	25% (45–64)
66 or over	2%	–	17% (65+)
16–20	–	21%	8% (15–19)
21–24	–	14%	12% (20–24)
25–34	–	27%	20% (25–34)
45–54	–	21%	14% (45–54)
55–64	–	11%	11% (55–64)
65+	–	6%	17% (65+)
Gender			
Male	75%	51%	49%
Female	25%	49%	51%
Disability			
Yes	15%	Not available	19%
No	85%	–	81%
Ethnic origin			
White	94%	91%	92%
BME	6%	9%	8%

The figures in **Table 2.6** suggest that:

Age: *Ask Bristol* has gained interest among people of all age groups, mostly those aged in their 40's who are disproportionately represented, and much less so for older people (65+). Young people aged 16–20 were over-represented in those recruited by the market research company. It is not possible to tell from these figures whether young people are self-registering in proportion to the local population.

Gender: those self-registering are overwhelmingly male.

Disability: people who self-identify as disabled[9] are registering almost in proportion to the local population.

Ethnic origin: People of black or minority ethnic origin are registering almost in proportion to the local population.

3.5 Conclusions

Representation

The *Ask Bristol* project has strong connections with the council's consultation mechanisms. councillors are involved as users of consultation results and have been involved in supporting the e-panel's establishment. Online discussions have not to date had their active involvement but this is anticipated, and would demonstrate to e-panel participants that councillors are interested in responding to their views.

Engagement

The variety of engagement mechanisms used (online chats, forums, deliberative polling) and the attention given to presenting these in a coherent sequence is a strength of *Ask Bristol*. Further study is needed to assess whether and how the ongoing engagement of citizens in encouraged by this sequencing.

Transparency

In any consultation process it is difficult to trace a direct link from results to subsequent policy-making or service changes, given that elected representatives take a range of other factors into account. The *Ask Bristol* process is intended to lead to publication of the minutes of relevant meetings by way of feedback to participants. This should provide an acceptable level of transparency, although its acceptability to citizens should be assessed through ongoing monitoring of the outcomes.

Conflict and consensus

As an online forum, *Ask Bristol* provides opportunities for citizens to form a consensus with their fellow participants or dissent from their views and the proposals put forward. Those opportunities are realised through effective facilitation, to actively stimulate and steer the debate, as well as effective moderation of it according to published "conditions of use" and mechanisms for enforcing them. The council's capacity to do this has been underpinned by extensive online training materials.

The scope of the evaluation and the pilot did not allow an assessment of the quality of the discussion. Online forum results are a series of interweaving messages that may or may not be topical, informative, considered, and responsive to each other or the consultation

[9] The registration form uses the definition of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 as follows: "A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial or long-term adverse effect on ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities".

question. In offline consultation events, e.g. a public meeting or focus group discussion, it is not difficult for those present to form an impression about how well informed a discussion is or how controversial it turned out to be, but rarely practical to capture the discussion and analyse it. Online, the discussion is already "captured" and many aspects of it can be analysed. Compared with survey analysis there is very little tool support or advice available to councils, and research is needed on how best to meet the needs for it. Assessing the quality of results was seen as a likely development in the ongoing monitoring of Ask Bristol.

Political equality

There was some evidence that *Ask Bristol* has attracted participation from citizens who are inclined to civic engagement but have not previously been actively engaged. Demographically it appears from the data on those who have already registered that *Ask Bristol* is successfully attracting the interest of disabled people and people of Black or Minority Ethnic origin.

Citizens' panels are conventionally geared to seeking representative responses from survey samples. This often conflicts with the aim of promoting equality of access to engagement processes. Bristol's approach appears to be effectively combining these aims, although any such combination has a potential to exacerbate conflicts between those who favour one approach or the other.

Community control

The project's "online community" aspects, encouraging the registered users to add to a profile of their interests and share these with their peers, may help generate confidence among users that their input is valued. It may also encourage consensus around shared aims that are independent of the council's consultation aims, reflecting the "real world" mechanisms for forming communities of interest. These are aspects for ongoing evaluation as is the aim of enhancing the "bottom-up" generation of consultation topics.

4 e-Petitioning Kingston

4.1 Aims and background

E-petitioning involved two local authorities, Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames who led the project, and Bristol City Council. In this chapter our emphasis is on Kingston's experience although we include relevant material to point out the similarities and differences in Bristol.

The e-petitioning project was part of work package 2.3 *"Information, communication and citizenship"*. According to the Project Initiation Document[10] this 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)

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"[11]. 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 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-making[12].

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).

[10] National Project on Local e-Democracy Project Initiation Document version 3.0 January 2004

[11] Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, Available at: http://www.britannica.com

[12] Macintosh et.al. 2002

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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.

Bristol's support for e-petitioning

Chapter 3 on *Ask Bristol* has already considered the general context for e-engagement by Bristol City Council. Like *Ask Bristol*, the e-petitioner project there 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."

4.2 The e-engagement tools and process

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 it's status (detailed later in this section).

Conditions of Use: This page describes the "rules of engagement", in terms of the kinds 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 (ie 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 4.1** and **4.2** below show the "List Petitions" and "Read/Sign Petition" pages respectively **Figure 4.2** shows the latter with the screen scrolled down to the "progress page".

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.

Figure 4.1 E-petitioner page listing current e-petitions
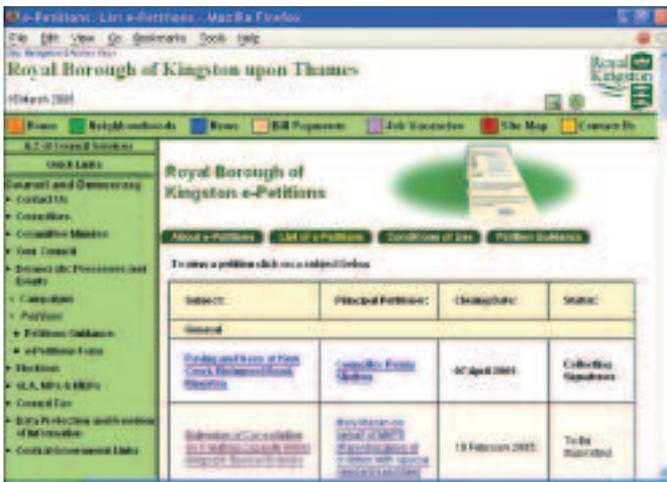
Figure 4.2 E-petitioner page showing progress of an e-petition

Developing the e-petition process in Kingston

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

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 Lias 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 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5** below.

Figure 4.3 Initiating an e-petition in Kingston

Principle Petitioner enters petition details in online form

Target timeframe for publishing petition: 3 days

(RBK site)

······ These details include Petition title
Principal Petitioner's details
Full petition text
Closing date
Additional information
Starting comment.

↓

Form is emailed to **Democratic Services**

······ Also emailed to e-democracy project manager.

↓

Democratic Services review the petition contents in line with published guidance

↓

Democratic Services phone/email* the Principle Petitioner to confirm details.

Also discuss the e-petition contents if it does not meet guidance requirements

······ E-democracy project manager on hand to support.

* If phone number incorrect/ email not provided, a letter must be sent to address requesting confirmation.

↓

Democratic Services contact the key council officer responsible for the subject of the e-petition

Confirm if e-petition will be presented at a meeting and what agency the e-petition will be referred to.

→ **Democratic Services** enter e-petition details into site's admin system.

Also enter "feedback" about what will happen after e-petition closes.

(RBK site – Admin)

↓

↓

Democratic Services notify the **Principle Petitioner** by email that e-petition is live and advise on what action will happen after it closes

e-petition is live and available for collection signatures

(RBK site)

Notes:

• People can run paper petitions and e-petitions on the same topic at the same time.

• Multiple petitions on the same topic are discouraged. If e-petitions 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 e-petition.
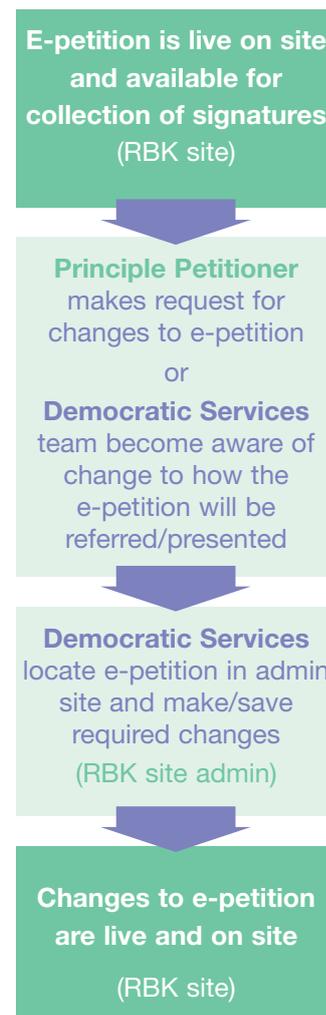
Figure 4.4 Maintaining an e-petition in Kingston

An e-petition 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 e-petition.
• 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 e-petition (through Edit Petitions).
• Add/change information to the e-petition's 'background information' field (through Edit Petitions).
• Add/change information to the e-petition's 'feedback' field (through Edit Petitions).
• Delete inappropriate comments (through Discussion).

E-petition is live on site and available for collection of signatures
(RBK site)

↓

Principle Petitioner makes request for changes to e-petition

or

Democratic Services team become aware of change to how the e-petition will be referred/presented

↓

Democratic Services locate e-petition in admin site and make/save required changes
(RBK site admin)

↓

Changes to e-petition are live and on site
(RBK site)

Figure 4.5 Closure of an e-petition in Kingston

e-petition's closing date passes

e-petition automatically no longer collecting signatures and status changes to "To Be Submitted"

ITC prepare e-petition brief and extract signatures list

Send list to **Democratic Services**

This process will need to be completed by **Democratic Services** over time.

Democratic Services email or post **Principle Petitioner** details of closure:

If 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

Democratic Services enter in updated details about outcome of e-petition(s) on site

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 whose perform similar duties to Kingston's Democratic Services. Corporate Consultation have 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 e-Democracy 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."

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.

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 4.6**. (The address of the principal petitioner has been omitted for the purpose of this report).

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.

4.3 Actors' experiences and expectations

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.

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 process[13].

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."

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

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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 email 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. Samuels asks:

"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?"

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."

4.4 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 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 4.1** below:

Table 4.1 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 *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 4.2 Demographic characteristics of e-petition signers[14]

	Kingston %		Bristol %	
	Local Population	E-petition	Local Population	E-petition
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

[14] 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).

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 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 wards.

Too formal language:

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.

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."

Democratic and 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.

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.

4.5 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 individual e-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.

4.6 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. 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

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

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

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

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

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.

5 "Micro Democracy" in Swindon

5.1 Aims and background

The Micro Democracy project led by Swindon Borough Council is part of Work package 2.3 *"Information, communication and citizenship"*. The project is described in the Project Initiation Document for the National Local e-Democracy Project as aiming to:

- Explore ways in which information and consultation can be made more relevant to individual concerns.

- Pilot and evaluate a highly personalised and localised "micro-democracy" process for informing and consulting citizens, using elements of CRM (Customer Relationship Management) and knowledge management.

The Micro Democracy Project Initiation Document, credited to Swindon Borough Council"s strategic partner Idessa UK Ltd, outlines these more specific aims of the project:

- **More efficient and effective consultation:** in terms of a reduced cost per consultation undertaken and improved response rate.

- **Personal engagement about issues that matter to the individual.** This is described as:

   "Micro democracy looks to help develop the relationship between citizen and authority by focusing on the immediate and local concerns of the citizen. People are used to being treated like individuals by companies and shops. They are beginning to grow used to being treated as individuals by authorities in matters relating to service delivery. Micro democracy looks to extend that to issues of policy and engagement."[15]

[15] Idessa UK Ltd 'Micro Democracy' Project Initiation Document

- **Multi-threaded approach:** The Micro Democracy approach is not anticipated to be used as the sole method of e-engagement but would complement and be integrated with other online and offline approaches.

The project has been led by the council's Electoral Registrations Officer and also involved the Principle Policy and Research Officer, who is the main user of consultations.

The e-engagement context in Swindon

Swindon Borough Council's current consultation methods include the citizens' panel *Swindon People's Voice*, comprising a sample of over 2000 residents of the Borough, which is surveyed several times annually. This is complemented by qualitative consultation using focus groups. Typically a qualitative approach is used first to get public feedback on policy options, followed by quantitative consultation with the Citizens' Panel. Recently the authority has trialled online questionnaires to augment the Citizens' Panel and ad-hoc consultations with the public and internally with staff. These were placed on the council website and intranet (respectively), attracting a self-selected sample in contrast to the controlled sample used for paper-based surveys.

The council aims to consult throughout policy development. Currently the timing of consultation varies; corporately, a consultation is done on an annual basis for constitutional reasons – a strategic review. Service departments also consult as the need arises.

The council recently adopted a Leader/Cabinet structure, and in 2004 initiated a long-term "community strategy" under the aegis of the *Swindon Partnership*. These developments both place an emphasis on increasing community consultation, and members of the Partnership including the Police and Health Authority are already involved in the Citizens Panel.

5.2 The Micro Democracy Concept

"Personalising" Democracy

The Micro Democracy project emerged from work with the council's strategic partners Idessa UK and the Athena Consortium on a number of projects over the last three years, including the May 2003 e-voting pilots. It was conceived by John Ellis, who heads both companies, on the basis of his experiences in e-government implementation with various local authorities and awareness of consultations being duplicated by other local agencies consulting the public "one community at a time".

The project is premised on the idea that "all citizens belong to a wide range of very local, or micro, communities; some by choice and some by nature of where we live and our personal circumstances. These can include school catchment areas, refuse collection routes, bus routes and proximity to local amenities. Many other communities, large and small, exist such as carers, parents with young children and the independent elderly".

On that basis, Micro Democracy extends the principle of personalisation underlying CRM to e-democracy. The tool comprises "a community tracking and management suite that draws on both geospatial and other information in order to map citizens who want to engage into the appropriate communities". This draws on the results of other consultation activities eg:

"…customer satisfaction surveys through policy consultations to statutory notices for planning applications. Micro democracy draws from a military intelligence toolset called CCIRM (Collection Co-ordination and Information Requirements Management) to draw all of these activities into a co-ordinated structure to ensure coherence, avoid repetition and manage costs."

(Project Initiation Document. P2).

Main features of the tool

The tool is not a publicly available website, but a web-based tool that users within the council may use to generate questionnaires. The project distinguishes these "users" from citizens, who are termed "respondents" as in survey methodology. The user (consultation administrator) is provided with a web page similar to an online form. The page also presents the main functions of the tool. These comprise:

- Identifying members of "communities" from other sources.
- Question design.
- Re-using "cases": questions and responses.
- Scheduling the mailing of questions to respondents..
- Mailing the questions: Integration with paper surveying.
- Providing background information on the survey questions.
- Publishing the survey results and a response.

Identifying members of "communities" from other sources

The "multi-threaded" or multi-method basis of the approach is central to the Micro-democracy concept in another sense. The tool depends on integration with data sets from other applications, for example from CRM applications that record communications with individual citizens and from "geocoded" data identifying residential addresses. This can be obtained from the authority's GIS (Geographical Information Systems), and from Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG) data such as the UPRN (Unique Property Reference Number).

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Question design

The tool allows various question formats. These are currently limited to the simplest single and multiple response formats.

Re-using "cases": questions and responses

A "case" in the project terminology is the application of a question to a set of respondents (or "community"). A key assumption here is that questions can readily be re-applied to different sets of respondents. Since the Micro Democracy tool has the capability to search for matching questions, its users can search to find out whether a question they want to ask has already been asked, within a particular period or for respondents with particular characteristics (eg "bus users living in the city centre with no children"). This may save consultation effort since the responses to those questions may be relevant, if the same set of respondents have already been asked the question.

Case review

The tool provides for a review process whereby a "case" or set of questions must be approved by another person designated with this role, before it can be scheduled for mailing to respondents.

Scheduling the mailing of questions to respondents

The tool is designed on the presumption that many "micro" consultations may be being conducted at the same time, possibly on behalf of many users. Rather than mail out sets of questions as soon as they are entered into the system, they can be scheduled to be sent (or produced in the case of paper) at particular times. This allows the council to set up controls so that consultation may be done periodically as required, so that respondents do not see questionnaires appearing with apparently ad-hoc timing.

The scheduling also allows the user to specify the duration of the consultation, ie the time given for the recipients of the questions to respond.

Mailing the questions: Integration with paper surveying

A significant feature of the tool is the ability to conduct surveys by email and paper at the same time. When an individual respondent receives an invitation to take part and a set of questions, this will be by email or on paper depending on their previously stated preference. In either case it is coded with a reference number (email) or barcode (paper). When paper questionnaires are returned, the consultation administrator can scan the barcode to automatically associate the response with the personal data recorded for the individual respondent. The responses are automatically integrated with those received through email responses.

Providing background information on the survey questions

There is no specific provision in the Micro Democracy tool for providing respondents with background information, but this can optionally be included in the message sent to respondents, in the form of a hyperlink to any webpage giving this information.

Publishing the survey results and a response

The Micro Democracy tool compiles results from the responses (ie "56% agreed traffic congestion is a major problem") and provides the user with the option to mail these results to all those who responded. Similarly a message can be compiled and mailed to the respondents to inform them about any decisions related to the consultation survey results. A target of 2–4 weeks has been proposed for publishing an appropriate response.

Implementing Micro Democracy and Recruiting Citizens

The project began work in August 2004, after delays in the procurement process. There have also been other unexpected delays to the project. E-democracy projects are inevitably subject to unexpected change in the political environment and in this case a change in political control in the 2004 local elections resulted in large scale budget changes, which affected the availability of key personnel and resources for the project.

The project delays meant that no evaluation was carried out within the project, and the tool functionality was reduced to the core needed to realise the concept.

Development approach

The project has combined the PRINCE 2 project management methodology[16], and its standard sequence of documented steps to control project resources, with the flexibility of the "Agile" approach to software design[17]. Agile design methods stress the need to have a prototype of the software running as quickly as possible, to allow rapid feedback from the intended users and evolution of the software functions to meet their needs. Collaboration between developers and users or stakeholders is emphasised in the approach, over extensive planning and documentation.

Recruitment

Citizens have been recruited through the annual electoral roll canvas. With this, a letter was mailed to 10% of the households on the electoral roll under the heading "Democracy Starts at Home". The text of this letter is reproduced in **Figure 5.1** below.

[16] More information on PRINCE 2 is available at:
http://www.ogc.gov.uk/prince2

[17] Further information in Agile development is available at:
http://www.agilealliance.org

Figure 5.1 Invitation to participate in Micro Democracy

Dear Householder

Democracy Starts at Home

You pay Council tax and expect us to spend it wisely on your behalf. That needs good decisions. Good decision making needs good advice. The best people to advise on local issues are the people most closely affected. People like you.

We would like to invite you to take part in an exciting new opportunity to have your say on local issues that you care about, for example planning issues, bus routes, refuse collection or local schools. This is the very first time anyone in the UK has been offered such a chance by their local council and we want you to be part of it.

If you, or anyone who lives at your address, would like to be involved please complete the form on the other side of this letter and return it with your electoral registration form. We will then send you a monthly email or letter about only those things that we think are important to you and ask for your input. We will also send you a reply about the questions you answer and what we intend to do about it. We know you are busy so we promise only to ask you about things that we think will be of interest to you.

Remember, you must also return you Electoral Registration form otherwise you and any other members of the your household will not be registered as electors and you will be unable to vote. If you would like any further information about this exciting opportunity, please call 01793 463702 or email elecreg@swindon.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely

Stephen P Taylor
Director of Law and Corporate Governance
August 2004

On the reverse of this letter a form (headed with the warning "If you do not wish to participate please do not complete or return this form") asks the householder to enter the names of anyone who would like to participate, and indicate whether they would like to take part by post, or to provide the participants' email addresses. This brought a response rate of 26%.

The first iteration

Several trial iterations of Micro Democracy surveys/consultations were planned and at the time of our evaluation the first iteration was underway. This was part of a consultation to inform the council's Transport Plan. This case comprised 7 questions, each with a multiple choice/ single response format:

- How far (approximately) do you have to travel to go to work/college?

- How far (approximately) do you have to travel for shopping to purchase food/ household goods.

- What is your regular means of transport to get to work/ college?

- What is your regular means of transport for shopping?

- Do you think that air and noise pollution from transport is a problem in your area?

- Do you think that traffic congestion in your area is: a very big problem/ small problem (etc.)

- Do you think that motorists comply with speed limits in your local area?

The questions were intended to be sent to 1025 people, with 55% in paper format and 45% by email. The response rate to the paper questionnaires was a 70%, with 60% of respondents returning them in the first 5 days.

This is a very high response rate for a survey. Recurrent problems in getting the Micro Democracy tool to work with the council's email server delayed the email distribution until after our visit (4 March) and unfortunately meant the response rate by email could not be established.

5.3 Experiences and Expectations of Micro Democracy

Our interviews involved Swindon's e-government champion Cllr Dale Heenan (by phone), project manager and Electoral Registration Officer Alan Winchcombe, the supplier and instigator of the project John Ellis, and the potential "senior user" Sophie Duncan, Principle Policy and Research Officer. The summary of our discussions focuses on the anticipated benefits and potential risks of the Micro Democracy project, based on the stakeholders' experiences and expectations.

In each case we included the data protection implications of Micro Democracy in our questions, as we saw these as an important facet of the personalisation aspects of the concept.

It was unfortunately not possible to contact citizens unconnected with the project team, or to carry out an online survey of those who had agreed to participate in the Micro Democracy project.

The e-Government Champion's Perspective

Cllr Dale Heenan recently became e-government champion, the Member responsible for the council's e-government developments, and was an enthusiastic supporter of the project although he had no previous experiences of consultation to compare the approach with.

Anticipated benefits and risks

Cllr Heenan expect the project to result in more people getting involved in delivering feedback to the council, and seeing that what they say is acted on. The system would also allow more efficient use of time. This and the approach's preference for keeping questionnaires short would appeal to councillors and the public alike:

"Traditionally, a questionnaire will take an hour of your time with ten to twelve pages of questions. With this you will have ten or fifteen questions and it will take you five minutes at most. So you will get more people involved in it that way."

Support for the council to communicate its response to the citizen's input was a key feature.

"When we looked at the system last, you could have a box at the end of each question in which you could indicate whether or not you wanted to receive feedback on the consultation. Then the next time a questionnaire is delivered to you, it provides the outcome. Gives you a numerical value of who responded, and says this is what we are doing about it. So people can see things are improving rather than there being nothing done about it. It makes the residents the centre of it rather than the council."

Cllr Heenan was keen to seek additional funding for the project, and foresaw it being adopted by other councils. He also reported that it was supported by all councillors, who would be able to consult on issues specific to their ward. Planning applications were a case in point, particularly given the time limits involved. There was, for example, some controversy in his own ward over a planning application:

"… a planning application dispute over a Women's shelter, and people misunderstood the issues surrounding it. So we could send out two communications: one to say what the situation is and what the residents think about it, and one next month to say what has resulted from it. It is a good form of communication in that respect."

The system's integration of paper and electronic communications also had benefits of making it accessible to almost everyone. The email communication was compatible with screen readers used by the visually impaired. Also the review process would allow checks to be carried out to make sure questions avoided jargon.

No specific risks were foreseen, and Cllr Heenan believed that all data protection issues had been ironed out.

The Project Manager and Supplier's Perspectives

Idessa UK's John Ellis, who conceived the Micro Democracy system, remains highly optimistic about its prospects despite the setbacks caused by external delays and diversion of resources. So does Alan Winchcombe who, as project manager and Electoral Registration Officer, has played a key role in deploying the system and securing the participation of residents.

We begin with the project manager's experiences and expectations. Winchcombe outlined his role:

"I'm directly responsible for the electoral process so was involved with the prior e-voting exercise – and micro democracy is a further development from that. So my role has been to push it through within the organisation. I dealt with the leader of the council to get him signed up to it, and he was happy to do so, and I passed it on to

Dale [Heenan]. So I have been liaising and overseeing the relations between Idessa and Sophie's team, the IT department to make sure the whole thing fits together and keep it on target, and with the e-government agenda…. there are online consultation needs for the education, planning and transport departments. They want e-enabled consultation tools urgently to meet their e-government targets…this is a foundation block to build upon to meet other targets in the democratic renewal strategy."

Anticipated benefits

The most important was to re-involve the electorate:

"When doing the e-voting project, we surveyed non-voters on why they did not vote and they said, "what"s the point? We only see and hear from the politicians when they want us to vote for them." So micro democracy provided an easy, quick, cost-effective way of getting people to re-engage in the democratic process. People have told us that if they felt more engaged in the process they would consider voting. Turnout dropped from 44% (1990) to 25% (1995) at its lowest. But we put in a huge amount of work at getting the turnout higher – now at 35% – and this is just another extension to get the electorate signed-up and engaged in the process. We need to make people think that their views are important between elections."

The system still needed extensive testing and monitoring of the public's response. There was also a need to put in place the internal controls: "we don't want people bombarded with questionnaires willy-nilly…we need to keep the questions to a consistent form and quality." This required a system administrator to monitor the use of the system and approve the questions.

"To a certain extent, we will have to do that with the politicians as well. Each political group has a political assistant who will play a role here, getting their group members to feed their questions through them. We have to make sure that the politicians don't use it for political purposes."

One of the unfortunate consequences of the delays caused by the council's annual budget setting was to postpone usability testing.

"We have been desperate to get something delivered within the time scales of the project plan – which we've achieved – so no time for thorough usability testing. The next phase is to make it user friendly and do all the user testing. The project board will use people in-house to check it. We could also use the pilot community – could use another questionnaire to gain their views on the system.

…We are keen to make it as accessible as possible – part of council policy. For testing, we have groups and organisations that we used when we were testing the e-voting systems for accessibility, so we'll consult them again. We have a group of organisations that we contact on these matters. If we have to change it to meet their needs then I'm sure we probably will…. We offer translations of everything we do into 22 foreign languages, all the European Union languages for instance; also Braille, audio, and signing on CDs, translation via phone line. But there is very little call for it. The non-English population of Swindon is relatively small, and more EU non-English speakers than non-EU – also some Japanese due to the Honda car factory. That is not to say we don't have problems, because we do. So we offer these translation facilities and will do so for

micro democracy… we have the option of an audio track on the e-voting system that speaks the details of the ballot paper – this could be done for micro democracy system both for the paper versions and online too."

Achieving the benefits would also depend on the council's responsiveness to citizens' input:

"Our undertaking was not only to show what the responses were, but what was decided to be done about them. This is the key to the success of this project."

The Supplier's Role and Expectations

John Ellis has worked for a number of years with the council as a strategic partner and is Idessa's Head of Operations. In formulating the Micro Democracy concept he drew from his military experience as well as his period as e-champion with other authorities in England and Scotland, writing IEG forms and looking at their strategic direction in terms of e-government.

Ellis realised that CRM (Customer Relations Management) has become essential in commerce – personalisation is seen as a successful way of doing business. If the citizen is to be regarded as a consumer, then it seems logical that CRM should be used in relationships with the citizen. The other influence behind the micro democracy idea came from the realisation that an uncoordinated consultation process can lead to inefficiencies; for instance, the same questions being asked of citizens at different times by different departments. This called for a capability to merge those questions into a prioritised, authorised list of "cases" that would be sent only to those people who were interested and who would have something useful to say.

Such a capability will, Ellis believes, have significant savings and benefits for councils from the elimination of redundant questions and the re-use of questions that have been asked, the responses and the respondents themselves. The key to this is the idea of people belonging to different, overlapping, "micro-communities" for example of bus-route users, or parents with children attending local schools, as well as geographical and politically-bounded communities such as council wards.

Ellis attributes the origins of the Micro Democracy concept to a "military toolset" called CCIRM (Collection, Co-ordination and Information Requirements Management). Having presented the ideas to Alan Winchcombe and others, Swindon agreed the concept was worth taking forward, and Ellis took the proposal to the National e-democracy project board with which he had been involved for some time, and they agreed to support it.

The benefits will, he recognises, be achieved through a longer period than the National Project:

"We will deliver what has been set-out in the objectives, but it as been cut to the bone. The long-term benefits of these projects – e-panels, e-petitions – will come in one to two years rather than sooner, for we are dealing with a paradigm shift in how people engage with their Authority. It cannot be turned on and off like a switch, even with a technologically savvy population like Swindon. It is worth noting that 25% in May 03 voted electronically (Internet or telephone), so there is evidence that people are disposed to use technology. Swindon has a good infrastructure for e-democracy."

A key principle of CRM John Ellis wants to instill in the approach is a focus on the citizen as customer, and on providing the service provider with the tools to be responsive. "From the respondent's point of view, they see the responses from the previous period, so people feel that their response is valued." The customer/citizen focus extends to meeting people's preferences for online or offline channels "not everyone will have, or want to use, Internet access… the system has to suit both in order not to disenfranchise anyone".

The flexibility of the technical team's design approach should allow the Micro Democracy system to rapidly evolve. Inevitably some features had to be postponed because of the external pressures on the availability of Sophie Duncan, Principle Policy and Research Officer, whose role as "senior user" is essential to the project. The immediate future will bring:

"…changes to the layout of the screen information, RNIB/W3C Access guidelines, general prettiness, all of which are laid out in the project plan. And the ability to add free text. This last facility is going to be difficult to incorporate into the paper-based side of the system – could invest in character recognition technology, but this not going to happen – though straight-forward for the website. Time has been an important issue, having lost five months. We're prototyping a pilot on the first iteration. Because of the delay with the procurement process, when Sophie was free in October/November we weren't and when Sophie was at her busiest – for the budget consultation – we were ready with operation testing. Also the slashed budget did not help, we could not bring in long-term evaluation from e-champions and so forth. But we'll make it – the results so far have been extremely promising."

The very high response to the initial paper questionnaire was for Ellis an indication that one of the key aims is realisable; improving consultation efficiency: "Local Authorities can get a better return on their questionnaires, by lowering the costs per result." This saving does not take into account much of the conventional surveying expenses, since some steps are excluded from the Micro Democracy approach:

"Traditional surveys were expensive exercises since they consist of stages: first, identifying the target audience and ensure that it is statistically relevant – ethnically, demographically, economically and so forth. Often a marketing company would be brought in to identify that community. Then building and reviewing the questionnaire, and then distribution. This process would be expected to last between 3–6 months."

In Micro Democracy the first step is normally excluded and the rest are largely automated.

Ellis acknowledges some conventional survey costs may still need to be incurred, if Micro Democracy is used to complement approaches such as the Citizens Panel, which uses a statistically representative sample. A hybrid between the qualitative and quantitative approaches may be necessary, as had been the case in Swindon:

"Sophie [Duncan] comes from a statistical background, and I come from a qualitative one; I was talking about e-democracy and engaging people; but Sophie was saying you couldn't do that for you need a representative sample. Then we realised that these approaches should work in parallel. Micro democracy is a qualitative tool, and a full consultation is a quantitative tool."

Data protection issues had been considered but were not regarded as problematic, either for "schedule 2" (personal data) or "schedule 3" (sensitive personal data on for example political opinions):

"Data protection is not a problem; for schedule 2 the authority is entitled to hold that and if someone answers a question then they are giving the authority explicit permission to hold information on that question; additionally, no-one is forced to take part in this. Their registering and answering is an acknowledgement that they are happy for the authority to have that information. Also the invitation to register makes it explicit that they can opt out of any particular community and even opt out of the project... Furthermore on the reverse of the letter is a place for signature of householder. If you were going to be a purist you would have the signature of each householder. No-one is forced to respond to any question. The only information we hold to begin with is the name and address – and we don't need extra permission under DPA to hold this. All further information is volunteered."

The main challenge for the Micro Democracy approach lay mainly in accepting the changes in practice: for some councils it would mean a step change in how consultation is approached:

"The biggest pitfall is that it is such a paradigm shift in the way people do consultation; understanding that you are a member of several different communities. The questions are filtered through a mechanism and cross-referenced to avoid duplication; all these components together represent a change from the way consultation is traditionally done. There is a danger that local Authorities are divided internally by those capable of making this shift and those who don't. Citizens are indifferent to this change in approach – all they see is a questionnaire that is tailored to them. They're happy, for people tell them what they are doing and ask them about things that matter locally. From the council's point of view, it is the change in approach that is dramatic.

The Principle Policy and Research Officer's Perspective

Sophie Duncan is the council's Principle Policy and Research Officer and was invited to become involved as the officer leading the councils work on public consultation, and as a potential senior user. The major drivers for her were an interest in using more effective online consultation methods in tandem with traditional ones, and the contribution the project would make to meeting central government requirements for online ways of dealing with consultation and complaints.

Before the Micro Democracy project, online surveys to complement the active paper-based Citizen's Panel had been quite successful. To date, online sampling had been completely self-selected and her strategy for improving e-consultation would mean moving to a more controlled random sampling approach. However Micro Democracy is currently seen more as a qualitative approach to complement the quantitative methods used with the Citizens Panel. In principle Micro Democracy works in a similar way, i.e. a targeted and signed-up panel, and could be used with a randomly generated subset of the individuals recruited. The Micro Democracy concept would need further evaluation, and the system would be assessed alongside other available software.

Micro Democracy would need central coordination, in keeping with traditional consultation approaches.

"Part of my job is to assess the need of consultation across the council by service area. There is a need for a central consultation group to co-ordinate current efforts. With Micro Democracy there would be a need to co-ordinate who receives what within sub-communities. Like the Citizen's Panel, we coordinate questions from the service departments and moderate them; this also allows for consistency of approach."

Anticipated benefits

Duncan saw the immediacy of the system as its potential strength, and the more "personalised" nature of the system might encourage response rates. The main difference with Micro Democracy was in the targeting of the respondents:

"The difference lies in that it generates communities of interest on specific issues; Citizen's Panels are generally used for corporate issues. The possible advantage of this system is that it allows targeting of people who might not be covered by the Panel."

Some of the benefits sought for Micro Democracy would need time to be assessed, for example the anticipated time savings from re-using questions and sharing them across departments, since it is unusual for two service departments to ask the same questions. Also the identification of a sub-population group within the larger community can be done geographically with GIS at the moment:"…but if you want to know whether they had children, for instance, we would have to have a dialogue with them to allocate them to a particular community." This would require populating the database to enable the system to identify the relevant sub-community.

Potential risks

Major pitfalls had not been assessed in detail yet as the testing phase had not been completed owing to ongoing technical issues affecting the email distribution. Once these had been resolved and testing completed the Research and Consultation team would present the project board with their evaluation of the concept and software. Detailed appraisal of the potential benefits and risks of the system would need to take place. The resources required to maintain the system would be a particular focus.

On the subject of data protection we asked how the respondents would know that the questions were personalised to them. Duncan pointed out that the first iteration had not focused on personalisation, but it would be important to see how the product evolves and essential to inform participants on how data would be used and why their views were being sought.

The Principle Policy and Research Officer was also aware that some data protection implications might become evident as the system evolved and would need further assessment:

"We are currently aware that we have to inform people how their responses will be used. We would not share personal data. We are also aware that with the small numbers we are using it might be possible to identify people, so we will have to monitor the situation."

Regarding the future development of the system Sophie Duncan said there was still a lot of further developments required from the system that she had been advised would be introduced in the second phase.

5.4 Results and Outcomes

The Micro Democracy system has been used to distribute paper questionnaires to the 55% of a sample of 1025 addresses who had opted to receive them in that form, with a 70% response rate. Email questionnaires to the remaining 45% would follow as soon as technical issues with distribution had been resolved. It is too soon to report any outcomes regarding the council's response to the questionnaire results, or their influence on the Transport Plan.

5.5 Conclusions

Our conclusions are tentative given that there has been insufficient time for the Micro Democracy concept to be fully piloted and limited evidence to evaluate it on. Nevertheless we can identify strengths and weaknesses, in terms of its prospects for enhancing democracy according to the criteria given (in Chapter 1 and Annex A).

We saw particular strengths in terms of the likely impact on representation and political equality. There were both strengths and weaknesses in terms of transparency. The main weaknesses we considered were on the engagement, conflict and consensus, and community control criteria.

Representation

The strengths were the capability to consult online according to specific geographic and social criteria rather simply on a self-selected basis. This has the potential to strengthen the ability of representatives to assess the level of support for proposals among those likely to be most affected, given that the impacts of policy rarely abide by council ward boundaries. The capability was reported to have generated strong interest from councillors and departments.

Political equality

The tight integration of paper and online consultation channels addresses the potential "digital divides" of online consultation approaches. The need for such integration is often asserted but it is unusual to see it met as convincingly. The system also has potential to be highly accessible through further integration with Swindon's in-house translation services, although this potential has yet to be met. The current system does not appear to present any major accessibility issues since it uses email for the public interface and the web interface for internal use is very simple.

Transparency

There were both strengths and weaknesses on this aspect. The strength is the tool's support for publishing a response and the evident commitment to doing this. The weakness is in the transparency of the process for identifying respondents. There was lack of transparency in how respondents are chosen and therefore how their membership of a "community" is made known to them, a point we return to under "community control" below.

Transparency has not yet been established in the procedures for managing the process. We understand this to be due to the diversion of key people from the project for unavoidable reasons. There was a high awareness of the need, but there were no published procedures for assuring privacy, nor any acceptable use policy to prevent political abuse of the system. An acceptable use policy may be challenging to get agreement on, since uses that might be considered manipulative by some would be fair play to others.

In response to a draft of these conclusions, John Ellis asked that we mention his acceptance of this point and commitment to address it in partnership with Swindon.

Engagement

The Micro Democracy system may be a sophisticated approach to survey-based consultation, but in the e-democracy literature (ie Coleman and Gøtze, 2001) survey-based approaches are not considered to have high influence on decision-making. Nor do they facilitate a high level of dialogue, since the responses are to pre-identified questions that participants (respondents) have no say in, and they cannot engage in online discussion of the questions put to them. It may be feasible to include more deliberative features in the system, although there were no plans to do so.

This criterion is also about e-democracy supporting local identity and helping individuals understand and link in to the wider

democratic processes that are part of their community. In that respect Micro Democracy at first appears promising, since the term "micro-democracy" has been used before by political scientists and others to describe the politics of individual relationships and of "grassroots" action. For example according to political scientist Nelly Stromquist, the "micro-democracy" concept "…shifts attention from the means by which the powerful maintain ideological control to the forms by which the powerless produce a new culture" (Stromquist, 2003). One need not agree with that way of expressing the concept of community action to appreciate that Micro Democracy in its current shape has little to do with these previous uses of the term "micro-democracy".

Conflict and consensus

Since the system does not allow peer-to-peer discussion of the questions or responses it has no features to provide opportunities for negotiation, mediation and consensus building. On the other hand, the system provides ample opportunities for producing conflicting responses to questions from different "micro communities". These could easily amplify political conflict between representatives. In principle such conflicts might be addressed by weighing up the "targeted" Micro Democracy responses against other evidence of the depth and breadth of public opinion, for example from wider Citizens Panel surveys on the same questions. Micro Democracy is intended to be used in this "multi-threaded" manner, though it remains to be seen whether any conflicting results can be resolved that way.

Community control

The Micro Democracy approach has an element of accountability, to the extent that the envisaged targets of a response in 2–4 weeks are met and that response is meaningful. The target is a strength of the project, but the implication that such responses from the council would make a clear link between decisions made and survey results does not seem plausible.

The approach uses the term "community" frequently, but to denote a targeted sub-population rather than a social grouping whose members are aware of their own membership. In fact the respondents had not been informed of any aspect of the Micro Democracy approach other than that in the introductory letter shown in Figure 5.1.

The approach may, as claimed, comply with the Data Protection Act requirements (we are not competent to give legal advice). If so it must be based on a very wide interpretation of the principle of informed consent. Many citizens would probably be alarmed at the prospect of the system building up detailed profiles of them, collated from various sources including their previous answers to questions. In its current version the system does not list individual respondents against the data held about them, although it easily could and this may even be necessary for the system to fully meet its objectives. This makes detailed and published safeguards essential in our opinion.

The benefit claimed for Micro Democracy of improving take-up and engagement by providing citizens with relevant questions is open to misunderstanding. The approach has no way of testing the relevance of the questions except in terms of the response rate (as does any survey approach). Whether the questions are relevant or not depends on nothing more or less than an assumption that the targeted sub-population will find them relevant, if the topic coincides with one the authority wants to consult on. Of course that assumption may be well-founded on the knowledge of councillors and officers of local concerns gained from other sources, but the Micro Democracy approach cannot supply the knowledge to ask relevant questions unaided.

In its current incarnation Micro Democracy appears more likely to empower councils than the communities they serve, although each of the criticisms made above could be rectified through further development of the system and the procedures for putting it to use.

6 Democratising Cross-cutting Issues and Partnerships in Wolverhampton

6.1 Aims and background

This project is part of work package 2.4a *"Democratising Cross-cutting Issues and Partnerships"* and involves three local Authorities, Wolverhampton City Council who lead the project, Surrey County Council and Reading Borough Council. Our evaluation for this report is focussed on Wolverhampton's experiences.[18]

The aim of the project is:

> "…to develop best practice on engaging citizens in issues that cut across organisational boundaries, and engaging them with the work of partnerships."[19]

This section focuses on Wolverhampton's experience of the project and their public engagement context. The project is intended to work through the Wolverhampton Partnership. This is a Local Strategic Partnership, bringing together organisations from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors in Wolverhampton.

The council has been instrumental in developing structures to conduct consultation, share information and co-operate on the implementation of policy. To this end, the council and partners have developed a "Consultation and Community Involvement Strategy", that has received the commendation of the "Neighbourhood Renewal Unit", part of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister responsible for the government's neighbourhood renewal strategy.[20]

By participating in the National Project, Wolverhampton aims to enhance transparency through the Wolverhampton Partnership, the city's Local Strategic

Partnership; to make that structure clearer to citizens and respond clearly to what they say when consulted about local issues. This need is more evident as consultations follow themes that cross the boundaries between service departments and involve partners in.

The development of a strong partnership infrastructure has been seen as a priority if the partners were to gain from the benefits of public consultation. To accomplish this, the council in conjunction with partners developed the City-Wide Involvement Network (CWIN), a strategic group of sixteen of the Authority's major partners, including such agencies as the Police, the Primary Care Trust, and representatives from the voluntary sector. The purpose of CWIN is to co-ordinate consultations, share information and collaborate on consultation projects, for instance, the *Community Planning* consultation that contributed to the 2002 publication "Moving On…Wolverhampton's Community Plan 2002 – 2012".[21]

This is complemented by the development of structures within the council itself. Officers are appointed to each Service Group, with the responsibility of managing and carrying out consultation. These officers collectively form the council-wide Public Involvement Network Group (PING), aiming to ensure the consultation activity within the council is co-ordinated and avoids duplication of effort

[18] A separate report from the project will detail the work undertaken in other Councils, and for workpackage 2.4b which concerns data sharing across partnerships for democratic purposes.

[19] Project Brief 2.4a version 0.2.

[20] See http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/default.asp

[21] "Moving On…Wolverhampton's Community Plan" available at: http://www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/government_democracy/council/partnerships/strategic/community_plan.html

through different departments or agencies consulting on similar issues or not communicating results effectively. As an additional level of co-ordination, a number of service groups have combined to form Service Improvement network Groups (SING), with the aim of eliminating duplication of effort by pooling information and sharing views on "best practice".

About three years ago, the council created the post of Consultation Manager, working within the Office of the Chief Executive, specifically to manage and co-ordinate the consultation work within the Authority. At present, this post is vacant, though at the time of writing, there was an expectation that the position would be occupied within a very short space of time.

"*Wolforum*" was Wolverhampton's first brush with online consultation. This was the result of a European-funded research and development project to evaluate technology for handling online consultations, working with, amongst others, Wolverhampton University. The emphasis of this project was predominantly technological, and was not especially concerned with how these techniques could be turned to the benefit of those involved in consultation. The council used "*Wolforum*" for a number of consultations, for instance on the preservation of buildings within the city, but for a number of reasons once the project finished it was left unsupported. However, the conclusion of a scrutiny review was that the facility should be carried forward.

The council has an existing Citizens Panel which it consults regularly and is the basis for the e-panel project led by Bristol City Council (see chapter 2). Although undertaken for workpackage 2.2 this overlaps with

workpackage 2.4 since the mechanism for online consultation – an online forum – is the same.

From the outset of the project the partners took the view that online tools for improved collaboration were a pre-requisite for consultation. In addition, the software behind "*Wolforum*" necessitated a central administration team whereas the idea with the Partnership was to allow the partners to initiate and manage their own consultations.

Wolverhampton's initiative is therefore pursuing web-based facilities for "internal" collaborative working on shared documents, as well as the online consultation facility where partners can place issues before an e-panel. Workpackage 2.4b involves work on data sharing that is outside the scope of this evaluation, but includes a consultation database, to carry the results of consultations conducted across the Partnership, seeking to eliminate redundancy in consultation effort.

The councils consultation capacity includes the provision of a consultation training programme that the partners are being encouraged to use. These courses are provided free to all parties within the Partnership and involve two-day accredited courses in consultation, offered in conjunction with Birmingham University.

In addition, a Workpackage 2 training course in online moderation and hosting provided the Project Manager, Debbie Turner, with a useful starting point from which to develop guidance notes. These included a Consultation Institute workshop held in London for the benefit of partners in the e-panel project who were setting up moderated or hosted online discussions.

Websites exist for individual partners in the Wolverhampton Partnership and the city council. There is also a "Wolverhampton City" site that is run from within the council, but whose main purpose is to promote Wolverhampton as a place in which to live and do business.

6.2 The e-engagement tools and process

The Partnership website and e-panel run on software provided by iNovem, chosen through Bristol City Council's short-listing of tools for the e-panel project. Many elements of the software matched their requirements, especially for collaborative working between the partners. Part of the iNovem package is a tool called "Team Initiative", the collaborative strengths of which meant that the Local Strategic Partnership could have a separate "online community" for each of its subgroups, to share documents, and work together online. Having a single all-embracing package was judged to be preferable to selecting and integrating open source modules as a means of fulfilling their software requirements.

Main Partnership website functions for users

This site has a link from the Wolverhampton City Council site via the e-consultation page.[22] The following gives a brief indication of the functions of the main pages on the site.

The Wolverhampton Partnership Home Page

Provides background information on the Partnership (see **Figure 6.1** below) as well as an introduction to the e-panel with provision to register and log-in to the consultation.

[22] http://www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/government_democracy/ council/contacts/e_consultation/

Figure 6.1 Home page
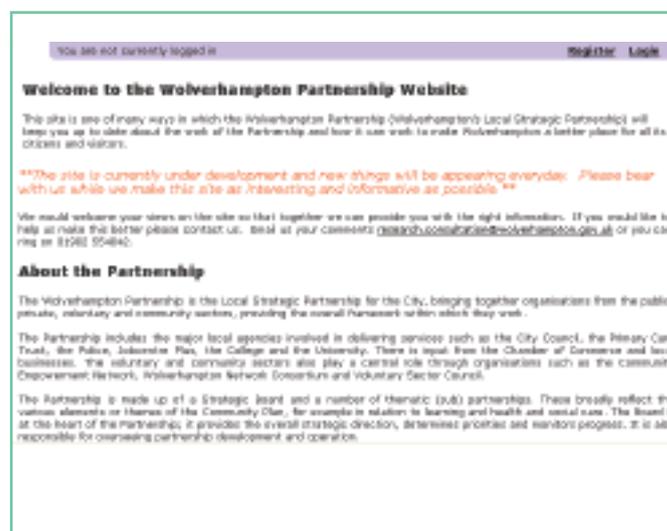
One City Newspaper: No content as yet.

Community Plan: Describes the Community Plan and has PDFs of the Community Plan in both "summary" and "full" report format. There is also a link to the Partnership page of the Wolverhampton Council site.

Theme Groups: Contains a list of the Partnership groups and subgroups:

- **Safer Wolverhampton Partnership:** no content as yet.

- **Green City Group:** no content as yet.

- **Health and Social Care Partnership Board:** contains information about the HSCP Board and provides links to board member details.

- **Economic Competitiveness Board:** contains information about the EC board.

- **Learning Partnership:** contains information about the partnership and has a link to the Learning Partnership website.

- **Strategic Housing Partnership:** no content as yet.

- **Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership:** contains information about the partnership and provides links to CYPSP. Provides links to the "Structure" (provides information about the CYPSP structure) and "Action Plan" (no content)

Dates For Diary: No content as yet.

How to Use This Site: Provides background information, including links to the "Moderation policy" and "Discussion Forum Guidelines" (gives details of the conditions of use).

Get Involved: Provides facility for registering on the e-panel (see **Figure 6.2** below), and a link to background information on the current consultations, e.g. a leaflet outlining proposed changes to city centre available to registered users.

Figure 6.2 – Login and Register page

e-Panel Page: Provides information on how to join the e-panel, and currently has a link to the discussion on *"What is best and worst about Wolverhampton"*. This allows non-members of the e-panel to read comments submitted to the various discussions.

The main pages on the discussion site are as follows:

- **All Discussions:** lists the discussions with information on who started the thread, how many replies, and the date of the first and last message (see **Figure 6.3** below). Discussions can be listed in group or date order. Within the discussion it is possible to navigate backwards and forwards through the comments, as well as navigating to the next or previous discussion (see **Figure 6.4** below).

- **Site Home:** returns to Partnership home page

- **Find Group:** allows for searching on key words in topics.

- **Help:** provides help on such matters as "navigation", for example.

Figure 6.3 The List Discussions page

Figure 6.4 e-Panel page showing navigation
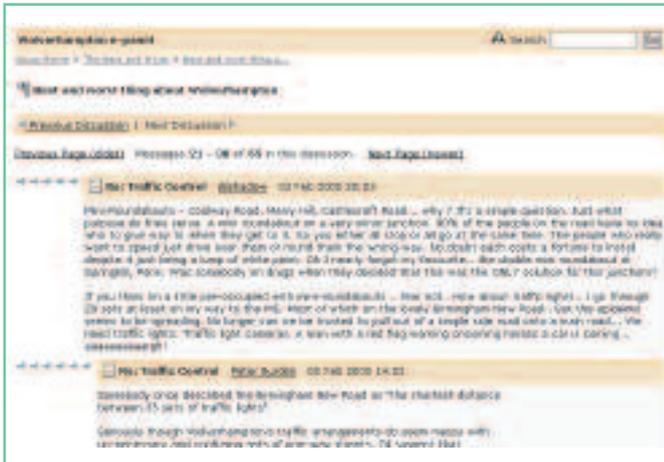
Developing the e-panel engagement process

Project Manager Debbie Turner has coordinated the engagement process and managed the Partnership site. The consultation topics have arisen from various sources and initially have included:

- **Best and Worst of Wolverhampton:** taking a leaf from *Ask Bristol*'s similar topic this was the first discussion to be launched.

- **Accident and Emergency services for the elderly:** The council has six scrutiny panels, five of which look at council services. The sixth is the health scrutiny panel, which looks at wider health services in the city including local NHS services. In particular the panel has recently been looking at access for older people to services including Accident and Emergency. Scrutiny Officer Fiona Sullivan saw potential in the online discussion facility to provide another way for people to express their views in addition to offline methods.

- **Healthy lunchtimes for secondary schools:** This also arose to support the work of the health scrutiny panel by seeking views on whose responsibility it should be to ensure that pupils at secondary schools have a healthy lunch.

- **Proposed changes to the city centre:** The Head of Marketing, Barbara Holt, suggested this discussion after a consultation workshop. The online discussion was publicised via leaflets and an exhibition.

- **Contracts for residential homes:** This was a closed consultation for Social Care, open by invitation only to the 200 managers of residential homes, who were also given the option to respond in writing.

- **Is Wolverhampton becoming a part of Greater Birmingham?** This was taken up in response to a suggestion by a citizen member of the e-panel.

- **Public transport:** this was also initiated by a citizen member of the e-panel.

Where online documents have been available they have been provided as links in the introductory messages. The diversity of avenues is seen as important to establish the system before developing a formal process to initiate consultation topics, which is to be the remit of the Consultation Manager whose post was vacant at the time of our visit.

When consultations close the analysis of the results will be passed to the appropriate committee. If there is a strong indication that the public are against the council's suggestions, then the matter will be referred to the council cabinet. The results are published once decisions have been taken, so whilst there is an expected four to six week minimum period between the close of a

consultation and subsequent decisions, this time will be shorter where the public are in broad agreement with the council's proposals.

Evaluation considerations

The Partnership's online consultation process is expected to lead to efficiency savings through better sharing of knowledge on who is consulting on what. This should be quite straightforward to assess in terms of the number of consultations carried out annually across the partnership, which is expected to fall within a year.

Planned evaluations of the online engagement within Workpackage 2.4 had not been considered feasible, and it was thought that future evaluation should include an assessment of online discussions on the quality of the responses. This may help establish how well-considered are citizen's suggestions for policy-change, as well as giving some indication of the depth to which citizens are engaging with each other.

However it was thought too early to set realistic targets until participation had been brought up to a level consistent with other methods, given the "multi-channel" nature of the consultation process. The most effective measure of participation were thought to be the most straightforward – the numbers of registered users and the proportion of those registered who contribute.

Accessibility

Accessibility testing was coordinated through Bristol City Council. Automated accessibility tests were run on 18th November 2004. The Team Initiative software did not meet the Level A WAI standard but most of the issues were considered relatively easy to rectify. The usability evaluation carried out on e-panel software, described in more detail in the *Ask Bristol* chapter of this report, included iNovem Team Initiative.

Working in partnership with other content providers introduces an added layer of complexity into ensuring the site is accessible. Peter Thomson notes "It is not an easy thing to achieve. The problem is making sure that other people's content complies with the standards."

Studies of how other online consultation sites address usability issues have fed into the development process, and "One Voice" (http://www.1voice.org.uk/), an organisation that represents people with different disabilities, is to be invited to assess the site.

There is an awareness that the content of the site needs to be presented in languages other than English, and the options for accommodating other languages are currently being debated. The impetus has been to get the discussion forum going in order to gauge initial impressions before developing it further. However, there are plans to change the look of the site to make it more appealing, in recognition of the fact that the appearance of the front page influences whether or not users will explore the site further. Presently, there is a high proportion of text on the site, and the Partnership has engaged a journalist to re-design the content in a manner that will attract more users.

6.3 Actors' roles and expectations

In Wolverhampton our participants were the council officers closest to the project; Workstream leader Peter Thomson, Project Manager Debbie Turner and Head of Marketing Barbara Holt. We were also able to draw on results of interviews with Scrutiny Officer Fiona Bottrill and surveys of e-panel members, provided by RBA consulting, but were unable to speak directly to citizens or to councillors or staff from other agencies in the Wolverhampton Partnership.

Project managers' views

Enhancing transparency

For workstream leader Peter Thomson, the online forum has a key role in enhancing the transparency of the Local Strategic Partnership's structure and work. Much of that is little understood and the site can play a vital communication role:

"The roles are not clear between the Partnership, the council or any other agencies that are involved. Neither is the council's role clear, in the sense of the public knowing who provides which services. It's emerged from consultation that what concerns local people are such things as "street crime", "rubbish" and health issues. These are multi-agency Partnership issues. So when the Partnership had to develop a community plan for consultation, they came up with community themes that are similar to every other community plan that you look at – such as the environment and the economy, and they are all cross-cutting themes. If we take consultation seriously, then addressing these issues will involve a number of partners. That may not be what transparency is usually taken to mean, but when someone says they are worried about being mugged, the answer we give is something complicated, and they want something straightforward".

The Partnership's organisation into thematic groups that match the Community Plan consultation themes is seen as a key step to achieving transparency. This has raised interesting dilemmas about the use of branding on the site, to reflect the corporate identity of the Partnership as a whole, or its constituent partners.

"At present we have chosen to stick with the Partnership identity. I'm sure there will be more discussion about that question. If partners or the council have their own specific consultations then it might be misleading if they have the Partnership identity. That is tied up with the transparency issue; understanding what the roles are and how they fit together. It is easy to understand the technology as a resource; it is difficult to know how to manage participants as a resource."

Promotion of the partnership site

From the experience with "Wolforum" the project managers recognised that a great deal of effort is needed to produce a small amount of uptake, so were prepared from the outset for strenuous promotion. So far, there have been a number of avenues taken to raise the profile of the e-panel, including an exhibition, interviews in the media, and press releases. In addition, a number of leaflets have been prepared and distributed, and there is a plan to distribute small incentives, such as mobile phone holders and key rings to encourage the young to take part.

Online promotion is limited to hyperlinks to the Partnership page from other websites. There is recognition that this has not been pursued as far as desirable; for instance, there is a perceived need to establish links between the Partnership, council and City websites to the appropriate consultation pages. For the discussion on "Healthy lunchtimes for secondary schools" the team are hoping to get links placed upon the "Virtual Workspace" initiative for 14–19 year olds across Wolverhampton, Shropshire and Warwick as well as with "celebrity chef" Jamie Oliver's Channel Four website on improving school meals.

Moderating and facilitating

Most of the moderation has been undertaken by project manager Debbie Turner, who also has experience of facilitating focus groups. A major difference has been in the skills needed to intervene; with online discussions the comments are posted one at a time, allowing the moderator time to consider how to respond to the contribution. In a face-to-face focus group the facilitator needs to respond immediately to steer the direction of discussion, but has more to go on – the full range of physical gestures and intonation of voice. Lack of these in online discussion makes it more difficult to read the intentions of contributors, eg whether they were being serious or sarcastic.

A drawback to having the forum open for postings twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, is that the moderators are likely to want to attend postings only during their working day. Evening and weekends may be precisely the time when people most want to go online. This has made decisions over whether to use pre or post moderation difficult. With pre-moderation, any posts submitted outside office hours will remain unchecked until the following day, losing the benefits of immediacy. With post-moderation, unacceptable posts will be visible for a sufficient period to generate responses before being removed.

Data protection

Ensuring the forum complies with the Data Protection Act has not raised major issues, but was felt to be an issue that should be kept under review. For example it was thought that as the system becomes more used by members of the Partnership access to registered members' details should be monitored and there may be a "gatehouse" through which requests for consultations will have to pass to ensure protection of the panel members personal details.

Online vs traditional channels

It is a clearly recognised that e-consultations using the e-panel will serve as a supplement to traditional forms of consultation for the foreseeable future. As the entire consultation apparatus has yet to be put in place it remains to be seen how these may best be integrated. Experiences with this have had limited results. For instance, Social Care Services ran their consultation on new contracts for the managers of residential homes. As Debbie Turner relates:

> "The two hundred managers of residential homes were informed of the online facility, though they were given other options too. Eleven out of the two hundred registered on the site to download the documents concerning the new contracts."

This was considered a promising start, and the managers' reliance on traditional methods was partly put down to the novelty of the online facility, but also due to the existence of established channels of communication between them and Social Services. It was thought probable that managers would favour written responses because of the organisational arrangements in place for responding formally in writing.

Analysing the results and evaluating the process

Analysing results is a challenge compared with survey methods according to Scrutiny Officer Fiona Bottrill, who managed the consultation on Accident and Emergency Services. With an online discussion, the question arises of how to actually analyse that information and make sure there is valid representation of the views of residents.

For Peter Thomson this is a need that will grow along with the usage of the site, and boosting that remains the first priority. Currently, web usage data is being collected but the most important metric is;

"...what proportion of registered users have contributed. It is not especially high. With Wolforum the publicity resulted in a huge increase in people looking but no change in the numbers contributing. But this needs to build up over time; there is a threshold before people take part in a forum, so their confidence needs to grow".

The need for user-centred design and evaluation is also considered important for the future development of the tool. "The software has a pedigree in community building, so we felt that we can trust them for now – give it time to prove itself" says Thomson.

Gaining trust within the Partnership

There was an ongoing need to build trust in the consultation process, with citizens but also with councillors and departments, and external partners. Traditionally there has been an emphasis among some departments on expert knowledge of service provision, and among councillors on "what will play with the public" in terms of policy changes. Addressing this was seen as a question of providing a clear process that partners and citizens know how to use.

The future: online communities for neighbourhoods

In the longer term, Peter Thomson sees the role of the forums becoming online communities for neighbourhoods, which would include the local councillors as participants and in some cases as hosts. Thomson acknowledges this is a long-term process:

"Only a small minority of councillors would contemplate it at the moment, but it is the technology they are uncomfortable with rather than the democratic principle."

Consultation Manager's Views

Two managers of the first of the project's e-consultations gave their views: Head of Marketing Barbara Holt and Scrutiny Officer Fiona Bottrill[23], responsible for the consultations on the *City Centre* and *A&E services for the Elderly* respectively. Both remained optimistic about the potential of e-consultation and although online responses had been disappointing in comparison with the traditional approaches there were valuable lessons learnt.

Scrutiny Officer Fiona Bottrill feels that the e-panel will probably become have an increasingly large part to play in the way the council consults people, although in conjunction with other methods. The A&E services consultation had not had a significant online response, but this was because the target age group of elderly people and carers are less likely to take part in an e-forum. This consultation highlighted the need to make sure that membership of the e-panel is as broad as possible, so that consultation can easily be targeted to a specific group without numbers of participants being an issue.

[23] Interviewed by RBA Consulting.

The consultation also highlighted some important moderation issues. For Bottrill, there was a need for ongoing support for this role, which might become time-consuming. The critical issues were:

- E-panel members may post questions that need replied to and the moderator may need to refer the question to another council department.

- There is a need to have systems in place to manage potentially difficult situations. For example if there's one particularly problematic member, is there an appeals process for that member to complain?

- There is a risk of a forum becoming a political tool, and issues getting slanted.

Barbara Holt, Head of Marketing, also felt the online forum was still in its initial phase and it needed time to build up support for consultations such as the current City Centre one:

"It is a really good idea, especially in the future. These are early days of the Partnership, but there is no broad understanding of what the Partnership is all about. The site needs to be clearer on what the site is all about and what the Partnership is."

Citizens' views

Wolverhampton were unfortunately unable to support field tests of the partnership site in the time between the launch of the site and the evaluation. However some telephone survey results were made available to us by RBA Research, and Project manager Debbie Turner was able to comment on the composition of the e-panel.

In terms of composition, the e-panel is top-heavy with men in their thirties, whereas the traditional Citizen's Panel tends to be elderly, white, affluent and literate people, from certain areas of the city only. There is a perception that the online environment would attract the young as it is regarded in some sense as their technology. Efforts to engage participants from that background have been hampered by delays in supplying the resources necessary for recruitment, such as leaflets and posters.

The "City Centre" discussion afforded an opportunity to obtain demographic details of respondents, but this was passed-up through a wariness of breaching Data Protection regulations. With hindsight, it is now accepted that such details would be useful to the Partnership and the possibility of their being collected in future consultations is being considered. Whilst it is important to know whether these discussions are reaching citizens who would otherwise be without a voice, there are drawbacks to collecting such information; not only are many people reluctant to provide personal details online, but there is also a danger that being presented with forms requesting demographically relevant data might easily deter citizens who would otherwise be prepared to contribute to a discussion.

There is no indication from the comments posted on the discussion pages of how the citizens in Wolverhampton anticipate the Partnership proceeding with their input. However we can gauge some of this from the telephone survey conducted by RBA Consulting for evaluation of the e-panel workpackage. Figures[24] drawn from their telephone survey of 72 e-panellists included residents of Wolverhampton, and indicate that a majority of panellists either tended to agree or strongly agreed that the subjects for consultation were interesting and important (71% and 67% respectively). Yet when asked

[24] These comments are based on evaluation reports on iNovem software conducted in November 2004 for the Bristol e-Panel facility.

if they agreed that the council takes notice of the responses, there is a fairly even split between those who agree/strongly agree and those who disagree/strongly disagree, and a majority who were either neutral or who did not know (17%, 19% and 65% respectively) – see the questions and **Table 6.1** below.

Q1 Through the e-consultation, the council is consulting me about subjects I find interesting.

Q2 Through the e-consultation, the council is consulting me about subjects that really matter.

Q3 The council is taking notice of what the e-consultation is saying.

Table 6.1 – response to telephone survey on e-panels

	Q1	Q2	Q3
Strongly agree	17	15	3
Tend to agree	54	42	14
Neither agree nor disagree	3	14	14
Tend to disagree	10	14	13
Strongly disagree	6	4	6
Don't know	11	11	51
No reply	0	0	0

6.4 Results and Outcomes

The system has only recently been deployed and it would be unrealistic to expect any impact of the consultations on decision outcomes. This does not mean that decision makers have not responded. For example the forum discussion on "Is Wolverhampton becoming part of Greater Birmingham" brought a response from the council leader.

At the time of interviewing, the results of the "City Centre" consultation were yet to be analysed. As mentioned earlier the analysis of the results will be passed to the appropriate committee with a decision likely in several months.

From the first discussion on 13th January 2005 to 16th March 2005, there were six topics attracting 91 posts. A comparison between the number of responses to the discussion on "A&E services for the elderly" (5 replies in 21 days), and "What is the best and worst about Wolverhampton" (31 replies in 21 days) suggests that online discussions are better suited to issues likely to have wide and broad appeal to the local population.

There are further indications that some topics have appeal; people continue to participate in the discussions, especially with "Healthy lunchtimes for secondary schools" and "What is the best and worst about Wolverhampton". Also there are a number of individuals who have taken part in more than one topic and more than once within a topic, suggesting that the forum has retained their interest (from the 91 posts between 13.1.05 – 16.3.05, there were 53 unique users, indicating that 28 posts were from individuals who had posted already).

Web metrics give more information on the appeal of the site. In the period of approximately 8 weeks from the launch of the forum to 17 March there were:

- A total of 41,040 page requests to the site, and 1156 visits by 782 unique visitors. However this includes requests from within Wolverhampton City Council and other members of the Partnership, and to pages that were used for site administration and internal collaborative working.

- The **e-panel** page received 2310 requests, i.e. twice on average in every visit.

- The **registration** page received 902 requests, many more than the number of registered users, suggesting that few people who visit it go on to complete the registration procedure.

- The **login** page received 1306 requests, while the My Groups page displayed after logging in received 733, indicating that the log in procedure was completed approximately. half as many times as the corresponding page was accessed. This might indicate that users had difficulties with the log-in page or that it lacked appeal.

- The discussion shown by default after the **My Groups** page; **The Best and Worst of Wolverhampton** received 530 requests.

- The page used to **reply to a discussion message** received 135 requests, compared with 92 replies that were successfully posted to the site, which might indicate a need to look further at the usability of the reply page or perhaps some hesitancy in taking part.

These figures show that early interest in the site has been established, and highlight some possible issues worth considering as work progresses to enhance the appeal of the site. Also the overall site usage seems high, and this may be in keeping with the emphasis of the partners on sharing information for other uses.

6.5 Conclusions

Representation

The Partnership site appears to have been greeted with enthusiasm by some consultation managers, so far this is limited to those within the council rather than partner organisations. Councillors are reportedly interested in how the facility might serve them and the council leader has participated in one forum.

The emphasis given to online support for collaborative working between partners, as a pre-requisite of effective consultation, is a potential strength of the project but needs further study to evaluate its contribution.

Engagement

The Partnership is built around social "themes" that were identified in the community plan, "Moving on…Wolverhampton's Community Plan 2002–2012 ", and represents a coalition of public, private, voluntary and community organisations. Citizens can engage with the Partnership via information contained on the website, and by becoming members of an e-panel, taking part in discussions. As these facilities have only been available for a short period, it is difficult to assess how successful they have been in engaging the public. In both cases, these facilities are currently being developed to fulfil their role to a greater degree; the public face of the website is to be

made user friendly and the recruitment to the e-panel is to be stepped up.

Problems with the e-panel are recognised, but it is felt to be better to have something rather than nothing. To date, only the discussion on proposals for the City Centre has produced results, but these had yet to be processed at the time of writing. The initial impression suggests that comments upon the City Centre proposals were similar whether submitted by paper or online. Whilst City Centre results were regarded as disappointing within the council, there remains a feeling that the principle is worth pursuing, and that it requires time before a balanced assessment can be made. So far, there is nothing to indicate the reaction of the public to these facilities.

Transparency

All stakeholders interviewed are firmly of the opinion that unless the citizen sees how their contribution influences policy, then they will cease to participate with the Authority. Providing transparency, however, is not something that can be achieved in the short-term as it requires the co-ordination of several key elements – in this case, the Partnership website, the e-panel and the consultation database. The situation is further complicated by the desirability of allowing time for each of these elements to establish themselves prior to the process of their integration.

To date, effort has been focussed upon developing the components to the point at which they can begin to have some impact. Both the Partnership site and the discussion forum have only recently been available to stakeholders to use, and it is hoped that the consultation database will shortly be in commission.

The corollary of the above is that the connections between these components remain ambiguous, with uncertainty being expressed upon such matters as how the various agencies articulate with each other, how the ICT components relate to each other, where responsibilities lie, and how consultation fits in with service delivery.

Whilst these questions lie at the heart of transparency, it would be unfair to expect answers to be available at this point in the project's life. The important thing is that the management have taken these points as setting the agenda for the future development of this project.

Conflict and consensus

The project's capacity and skills in moderating and facilitating the discussion forum appeared to be well developed by the project team. Effort has been made to ensure that appropriate training in consultation techniques is available to those working within the Partnership. Furthermore, initial training in hosting and moderating has been supplemented with the provision of guidance notes. This role has been shared by two people, with others in the Partnership seemingly reluctant to take on such a responsibility. Whilst limiting the numbers hosting entails a consistency of approach to moderation, there is a danger that the expert knowledge within the Partnership is not being utilised to its fullest extent within this context.

Political equality

It is too early in the life of the forum for information to be available on whether it is including individuals or demographic groups previously under-represented. The site currently is acknowledged to need improvements to widen the accessibility of its content.[25] Steps are being taken to simplify the language used. As with the other e-democracy tools considered in this report, more could be done to present the facility in minority ethnic languages or at least provide information on such translation services as are available.

Community control

Because the website is still under development, and because there have been no outcomes from the discussion site, it is impossible to say what impact these tools have with respect to bringing the public, the local authority and its partners closer together. We agree with the project managers that its nature, i.e. online collaboration among partners in order to achieve collaborative e-consultations, makes it very difficult to identify short-term benefits.

Instead, the immediate benefits of this project lie in the experience gained that is now available to other councils interested in organising a partnership structure. The documentation that is available as a result of this project will provide others with a head start, helping them avoid pitfalls, to provide them with ideas that otherwise they might not have considered, and allowing them to make informed choices upon what is likely to work in their particular case. There remains a need to evaluate how the Wolverhampton Partnership site shapes public involvement in the partners' activities.

[25] INovem's eConsult application does comply with WAI Level A. Team Initiative meets most of the Level A criteria and the company have stated that it will be compliant in the near future.

7 Overall Conclusions

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

- How do the actors involved understand the initiative 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 using tools developed in the initiative characterise their "added value"; what methods and processes contribute that value, and what differences are there between them and other public engagement approaches used?

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

7.1 How the projects enhance democracy

Sections 2 to 4 have already considered specific aspects of the projects using the criteria for enhancing democracy. Here we summarise the main strengths and weaknesses of the projects on the same criteria.

Representation

The major strength of *Ask Bristol* was the development of existing liaison between the consultation team and service departments, in some cases with their direct participation in online discussion. The *e-petitioner* project had strong support from councillors, although the outcomes of e-petitions remain uncertain and there were weaknesses in the integration

with other engagement processes. The *Micro Democracy* project reported keen interest from councillors. The *Wolverhampton Partnership* project rests on a strong consultation infrastructure, although active support from partners appeared focused on collaborative working between staff. That provides a strong basis for sustainable e-consultation, although current support for it appeared limited from partners and councillors.

Engagement

In all cases strong efforts were made to encourage public response on issues of local relevance. The early evidence has been that this is forthcoming but only when the issues are general enough to affect a broad cross-section of citizens.

Transparency

The e-petitioner project was strongest on this point since it is establishing a process for publishing decision outcomes. There is potential in each project to enhance transparency, but it would have been preferable for them to first establish what citizens would need or expect in terms of enhanced transparency. This is necessary because "enhancing transparency" may be taken to mean either providing detailed information or hiding it in the name of simplicity. The projects each had published policies on privacy and acceptable use, with the exception of *Micro Democracy* which we had strong concerns about.

Conflict and consensus

Each of the projects provides an online forum and opportunities for divergence of opinion on the issues raised and the method for raising them, with the exception of the *Micro Democracy* project. The preparation for

effective moderation of such discussions was a strong feature of *Ask Bristol* and the *Wolverhampton Partnership* projects. In Bristol e-petitions are moderated by the same team as *Ask Bristol* discussions, and the software supports the moderation task. However Kingston's preparations for moderation were not extensive and should any controversial e-petitions stimulate heated online discussion there is risk officers concerned may be unprepared to deal with any consequences.

Political equality

The projects each show strong potential for greater inclusiveness. The web traffic and responses to the engagement suggested the ground had been laid for strong and sustainable take-up. There was evidence that the tools were already being actively used by hundreds of citizens in each of the local authority areas. There was also evidence, albeit very limited, that these were mostly not previously "engaged" in contributing to local authority decision making. In demographic terms there were disabled and minority ethnic users almost in proportion to local populations, although they were also more likely to be male and middle-aged. The Micro Democracy project also had strong potential given its integration of online and offline channels, although its take-up cannot be assessed yet.

Community control

Citizens had modest expectations that their views would have some impact on decision-making and strong expectations that the councils should in any case publish a response to their input. The evidence that citizens were satisfied with the arrangements was limited but mostly positive for e-petitioner and *Ask Bristol*.

The *Wolverhampton Partnership* showed strong potential in terms of liaison with existing community groups, although unfortunately we could not directly assess citizen support in the time available. *Micro Democracy* placed much emphasis on responsiveness, though again citizens views on that were unavailable.

The projects need sufficient time for awareness to increase and for decision-making to allow responses to be given, before assessing responsiveness more conclusively. However they also need to give the community time to respond. The UK government consultation guidelines specify a 12 week minimum period. They are central rather than local government guidelines, but the three projects supporting online consultation had e-consultations open for much shorter periods, and none had been publicly open for as long as 12 weeks. It was also noticeable that in all cases the participation of stakeholders in the design process was generally restricted to the one or two managers most directly affected, and there was minimal participation of citizens in design. The time pressures on the projects no doubt contributed to this.

7.2 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 in the projects concerned. The limited length of the pilots also provided insufficient responses to consider any relation between their breadth and depth in relation to existing methods.

The report of our evaluation has given more emphasis to e-petitioning than the two other projects included, simply because the authors had less difficulty with access to the people engaged in it. This difficulty was mainly a result of time pressure on participants rather than obstruction.

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 the 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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9 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.

9.1 Democratic criteria

The Local e-Democracy National Project defined at the outset the criteria summarised below in **Table A1**.

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.

Table A1 Democratic criteria

Criteria	Description
A1 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.
A2 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.
A3 Transparency	Projects need to make decision-making processes more transparent.
A4 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.
A5 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.
A6 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)

9.2 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
B1 Type of engagement	e-enabling, consulting or empowering: to what level of policy detail, and with how much weight given to citizens' responses.
B2 Stage in decision-making	When citizens are engaged in relation to the policy life cycle: agenda setting; option analysis, draft policy, implementation, monitoring.
B3 Actors	Who is engaged and by whom, who are the stakeholders, who develops and manages the process.
B4 Technologies used	How participants are engaged and with what devices and interaction mechanisms. e.g chat, discussion forum, survey, etc.
B5 Rules of engagement	What participants can do online, and what personal information is collected.
B6 Duration and sustainability	The period of time made available to participants, and any relation to any other engagement initiatives.
B7 Accessibility	Measures to ensure that resources can realistically be accessed, and assessment of take-up: how many participated and from where.
B8 Resources and Promotion	Resources required both in terms of staffing and financial, also the promotional mechanisms used.
B9 Evaluation and Outcomes	The approach taken to assessing the results, and how the results influence the outcomes.
B10 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 (B1) 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)

9.3 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 Websites.[26] 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".

[26] Quality Framework for UK Government Websites: available at: http://e-government.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/Resources/WebGuidelines/fs/en

Table A3 e-Democracy Tool Quality Criteria

Criteria	Description
Social acceptability	
C1 **Trust and security**	Is the information presented accurate, complete and reliable, and is the information users have provided handled in a secure manner?
C2 **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	
C3 **Accessibility**	Is the level of compliance with Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) content guidelines sufficient to meet the needs of users with disabilities?
C4 **Appeal**	Is the take-up in line with expectations, and do the intended users like it enough to want to use it?
C5 **Content clarity**	Can users understand what the content means in relation to their task or situation?
C6 **Responsiveness**	Does the tool and/or process answer the user's questions quickly and effectively?
Usability	
C7 **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?
C8 **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?
C9 **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

C1 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.

C2 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 B6 "responsiveness").

C3 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 p11 "Predictor 3: Content".

C4 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.

C5 Content clarity: corresponds with Quality Framework for UK Government Websites p10–11 "Predictor 3".

C6 Responsiveness: corresponds with Quality Framework for UK Government Websites p10–11 "Predictor 5".

C7 Navigation and organisation: corresponds with Quality Framework for UK Government Websites p10–11 "Predictor 2".

C8 Efficiency and flexibility: corresponds with Quality Framework for UK Government Websites p10–11 "Predictor 1: download delay" and "Predictor 4: Interactivity".

C9 Error recovery: not specifically covered by the Quality Framework for UK Government Websites, but a standard element of most usability guidelines (eg Nielsen J 1994 Heuristic Evaluation. In Nielsen J and Mack RL Eds, *Usability Inspection Methods,* John Wiley and Sons, New York, NY).
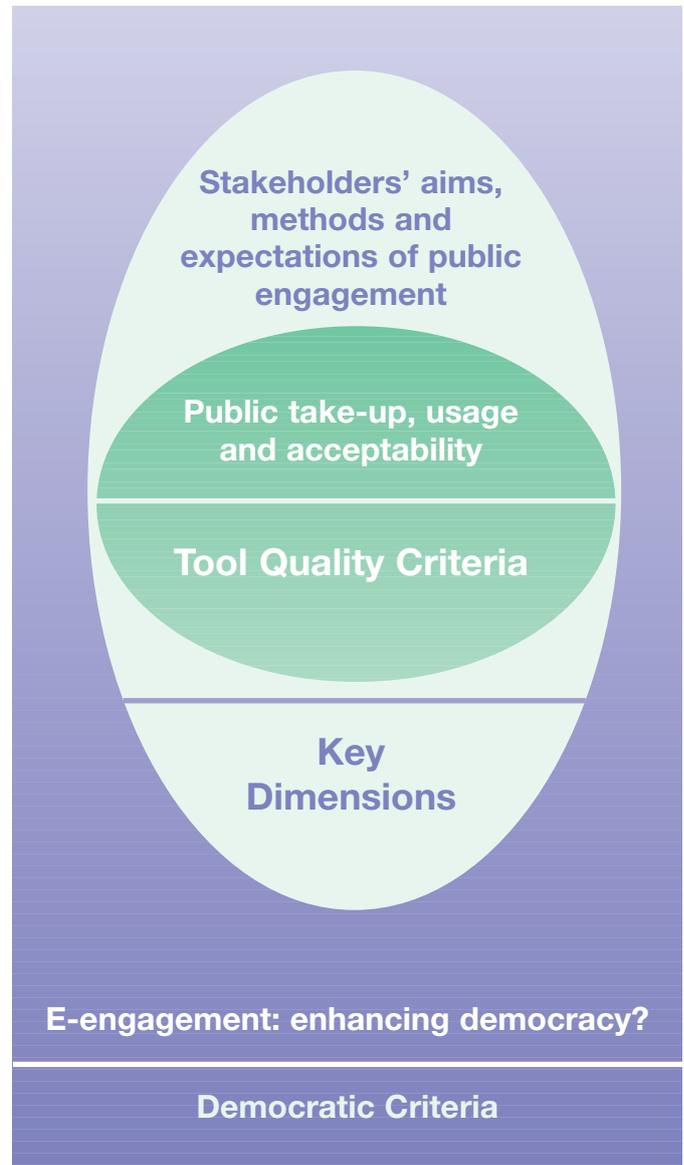
9.4 Bringing the dimensions together

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-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

Stakeholders' aims, methods and expectations of public engagement

Public take-up, usage and acceptability

Tool Quality Criteria

Key Dimensions

E-engagement: enhancing democracy?

Democratic Criteria

9.5 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-democracy tools; analysis of field notes and transcripts,

3 Online questionnaires; descriptive statistics of responses to questions.

4 Project documentation of requirements, user materials, and "internal" evaluations of (e.g.) usability or accessibility.

5 Results of online discussion/responses; descriptive statistics.

6 Web server log files; descriptive statistics of page requests etc.

a) Citizens who have used the e-democracy tools deployed (or agreed to take part in a pilot).

b) Citizens who have not used the tools.

c) Councillors involved in the engagement process.

d) Engagement "owners": managers responsible for aspects of the engagement process.

e) Project managers/ technologists, whether employed by the council or by suppliers.

f) "Internal" users: moderators or 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 engagement results in the council's decision-making, and how do their perceptions differ from those of officials and representatives who "own" the engagement process?	1	all

Table A4 Detailed evaluation questions and how they were addressed

Dimension / Questions	Methods	Sources
Stage in decision-making		
3 Where do actors think the engagement 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 engagement and those using other methods?	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? ie 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 moderator (or facilitator) in online engagement compared with other approaches used?	2	(d) (e) (f)
Technologies used		
7 How are the tools provided used?	1 2 3 5 6	all
8 How useful are the tools to their intended users.	all	(a) (b) (f)
Rules of engagement		
9 What is the impact on public engagement of the project and what implications does that have for the engagement process?	all	all
10 How do actors view the privacy implications of engagement and what measures have/should be taken to address these (considering DP and FOI)?	1 2 3	all
Duration and sustainability		
11 How does the project impact on other public engagement activities, especially when they also have an online element?	1 2 4 5	all
Accessibility		
12 What measures have been taken to provide appropriate accessibility levels (in terms of the Web Accessibility Initiative)?	1 2 4	all
13 What is the relative appeal to citizen-users of the main online functions provided?	1 2 3 5 6	(a) (b)

Dimension / Questions	Methods	Sources
14 Whose voice is represented in the results? ie are there demographic differences between online/offline participants, and for what reasons are online/offline preferred? Why do some citizens not use either?	all	all
15 Is supporting (online) information on the users' and administrators' / moderators' roles and tasks considered easy to understand by target users?	1 2	(a) (b) (f)
Resources and promotion		
16 What important differences, if any, are there between the recruitment and promotion methods considered appropriate, compared with other engagement methods? 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-engagement tools by citizens and stakeholders? With what outcomes? What specific 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 the tools 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

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