EVALUATING HOW EPARTICIPATION CHANGES LOCAL DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

Given the ever expanding use of information and communication technologies by governments in their efforts to re-invigorate representative democracy and engage with citizens, there is a need to better understand current eParticipation applications and learn from these experiences. Although there appears much enthusiasm for eDemocracy initiatives at local government level, the objectives of different systems are quite diverse, as stakeholders tend to view them differently and have varying expectations. This paper describes methods and results from the evaluation of eParticipation projects conducted under the UK Local e-Democracy National Project. We argue that eParticipation evaluation is in its infancy and there is a need to develop a coherent evaluation framework, encompassing a range of methods and perspectives. Our evaluation of four local authority led projects demonstrates the importance, but also the barriers to using a multi-disciplinary approach. The evaluation results presented here start to develop an understanding of how various stakeholders perceive local eDemocracy and, as such, how ICTs can both affect and effect local democracy.

Keywords: eDemocracy, digital democracy, eEngagement, e-Government, eParticipation, Evaluation

1   INTRODUCTION

The potential for information and communication technologies (ICTs) to increase political participation and address the growing democratic deficit across the USA and Europe has long been the subject of academic debate (e.g. Barber, 1997). However only relatively recently has there been sufficient practical design and application of ICTs to support democracy that this 'potential' could be considered within a real-world context (Weber et al, 2003). The term 'eDemocracy' captures both the intent to support democracy and studies of the outcomes and context. Hacker and van Dijk (2000), using the term 'digital democracy' as opposed to eDemocracy, discuss the emergence of the concept. They define digital democracy as

> "a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT or CMC1 instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional 'analogue' political practices." (p1)

Previous work (Macintosh 2004) gave a definition of eDemocracy as:

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[1] These terms were expanded earlier in the reference as Information and Communication Technology and Computer-Mediated Communication

> "concerned with the use of information and communication technologies to engage citizens, support the democratic decision-making processes and strengthen representative democracy. The principal ICT mechanism is the internet accessed through an increasing variety of channels, including PCs, both in the home and in pubic locations, mobile phones, and interactive digital TV. The democratic decision making processes can be divided into two main categories: one addressing the electoral process, including e-voting, and the other addressing citizen e-participation in democratic decision-making."

This paper builds on these baseline definitions and uses a working definition of eParticipation, as the use of ICTs to support information provision and "top-down" engagement, i.e. government-led initiatives, or "ground-up" efforts to empower citizens, civil society organisations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives. Effective information provision is often seen as a corollary of effective engagement and empowerment.

The academic literature on eParticipation is growing and includes a number of papers that start to discuss methodological frameworks for undertaking evaluation. However, although the importance of rigorous evaluation of eParticipation projects is recognised there is little evidence demonstrating the use of such evaluation approaches in practice. The 2001 study by the OECD considered possible off-line methods which government could use to engage with citizens and provided a number of 'guiding principles' for offline citizen engagement. Guiding principle number 9 on 'evaluation' stated:

> "Governments need the tools, information and capacity to evaluate their performance in providing information, conducting consultation and engaging citizens, in order to adapt to new requirements and changing conditions for policy-making." (OECD 2001, p.15).

During 2003 the OECD team responsible for citizen engagement commissioned a study into the potential of ICTs to support citizen engagement in policy-making. The resulting report made an initial attempt to scope the eParticipation domain from a government perspective, describe a number of eParticipation case studies in OECD member countries, and highlight the major issues facing eParticipation. The report highlighted five major issues, one which concerned evaluation. The report stated that a major challenge was:

> "Evaluating eParticipation: Making sense of what has, or has not, been achieved; understanding how to assess the benefits and the impacts of applying technology to the democratic decision-making processes." (Macintosh, 2004a)

However, there is a difficulty; the evaluation of off-line participation is still a new and emerging area. As noted by the OECD:

> "There is a striking imbalance between the amount of time, money and energy that governments in OECD counties invest in engaging citizens and civil society in public decision-making and the amount of attention they pay to evaluating the effectiveness of such efforts." (OECD 2005, p 10).

This latter report continues by explaining the "evaluation gap" as being due to the relatively recent realisation by governments of the need to engage with citizens and therefore the evaluation of public participation is an even newer concept. This is despite the fact that the OECD report published four years earlier provided the guiding principle number 9 on 'evaluation'!

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the application of a range of methods and techniques to evaluate local eParticipation initiatives. The aim of such an evaluation approach is to increase understanding of eParticipation and, consequently, how to measure impact and potential opportunity. Understanding how stakeholders perceive local eDemocracy and how

the technology is used in practice is critical if we are to establish how ICTs may be *affecting* local democracy by changing existing practice, and *effecting* it as they become new instruments for achieving local democracy.

The results discussed in this paper were researched as part of a larger study commissioned by Bristol City Council to evaluate the Local eDemocracy National Project. The national project on local e-democracy (see http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk/default.htm) was funded by the UK Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, as part of a £80 million National Project Program aiming to help drive the modernization of local services The e-democracy project had the following five overarching objectives:

1. To encourage all local authorities to consider the ways in which they can use e-democracy tools to enhance local democracy and to develop locally appropriate strategies for implementing such tools where relevant.

2. To ensure that the knowledge and experience of e-democracy that already exists is systematically exposed and shared across local government to the benefit of all.

3. To develop new tools that support or enhance local democratic practice both within local government and beyond.

4. To provide a focal point for democratic innovation and the dissemination of best practice.

5. To begin a sustainable process of electronically enabled participation and engagement that complements existing democratic structures and processes.

An impressive array of tools were developed and / or used in the national project, ranging from webcasts to e-panels. In the majority of cases the design of the tools gave high priority to ease-of-use and accessibility to minimize barriers to using them. Although there were a number of projects designed for young people and the elderly, the majority of the projects were aimed at the general public. Therefore the tools and their content needed to be designed to cater for the widest possible range of literacy and IT skills.

The authors were responsible for undertaking an evaluation of four of the government-led eDemocracy initiatives. These 'top-down' projects were in various states of readiness at the time of the evaluation and the consequences of this on the evaluation are also discussed.

After this introduction, the second section explores some methodological approaches for evaluating eParticipation. Section 3 focuses on the specific evaluation of the government-led eParticipation projects funded under the National Project. Finally, section 4 provides the overall conclusions.

2   METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Rigorous evaluations of eParticipation applications are hard to find. There are a number of researchers starting to develop evaluation frameworks (e.g. Whyte and Macintosh, 2003, Frewer and Rowe, 2005) but work in this area is limited. Forss (2005), when considering eParticipation evaluation, suggests three purposes for undertaking evaluation: audit; management and learning and states that in the public sector the emphasis has been typically on the audit – where there is a need to monitor the spending of public money and ascertain whether services are effective and efficient (page 45). However, if one considers the immaturity of eParticipation work, evaluation undertaken for the purpose of learning from the current set of pilots would seem appropriate. The publication provides a useful source of general reference material for those wishing to undertake evaluation, however it does not explore in sufficient detail the specific requirements of eParticipation evaluations.

In the same OECD publication, Frewer and Rowe (2005) consider some of the practical issues in evaluating public participation exercises based on their experience of evaluating a number of bio scientific and environmental related citizen engagement exercises. The annex to their paper provides a list of possible evaluation criteria with suggested questions. Although this a useful basis for constructing an evaluation it does not cover, in the necessary detail, the evaluation of ICT as the media for the engagement.

Evaluation is firstly a practical concern of those responsible for undertaking particular e-participation initiatives, who want to assess its value in relation to the policy-making objectives. It is also an academic concern of those who wish to develop an understanding of e-participation that is grounded in practice, build theory from it, and in turn inform broader e-participation practice. Whyte and Macintosh (2003) argue that to address these concerns there is a need for evaluators to ask appropriate questions from political, technical and social perspectives.

To address the concerns of *practitioners*:-
- The political perspective asks: Was the e-engagement effective in contributing to the decision-making process, and did it do so transparently? Did it engage the community affected? Were their contributions relevant to the policy topic, and were they informed contributions? How were conflicts handled and consensus reached? How were the contributions responded to? The more difficult question is; to what extent did they affect policy?
- The technical perspective asks: To what extent did the design of the ICTs directly contribute to the e-participation outcomes? In designing e-participation tools and materials there is a need to take account of the skills and experiences of the target participants, what settings they are likely to use the tools in, and to satisfy what needs or desires. These issues are addressed through evaluation frameworks from the software engineering and information systems communities and typically include questions of usability and accessibility.
- The social perspective asks: How were the outcomes related to the e-participation process, how effectively did it enable those targeted to accomplish what they wanted, what circumstances helped or hindered them to realistically contribute, and were others excluded who should have been included?

For *academics*, the overlap between social and technical perspectives is substantial, and socio-technical perspectives are increasingly used alongside perspectives from political science and public administration (e.g. Hoff, 1999). Anttirioko (2003) suggests that in evaluating eDemocracy the added value of technology should be articulated through:-
- Institutions. To what extent are the ICT-based citizen-centred solutions and applications integrated in the practices of existing political institutions and how do they affect actual decision-making processes.
- Influence. Are the eDemocracy experiments or practices such that people involved may truly influence the issues of interest?
- Integration. Is the potential of technology used optimally in integrating the basic elements of the entire eDemocratic process, including agenda-setting, planning, preparation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation and control?
- Interaction. Is the potential of technology in disseminating information, facilitating interaction and conducting political transactions used so as to increase the transparency, efficiency, flexibility, cost-effectiveness and inclusiveness of the democratic process? (p.125).

While the need to consider overlapping socio-technical and political factors is clear, the methods available for doing so are equally diverse. Gil-Garcia and Pardo (2006) discuss the necessity of taking a multi-method approach to eGovernment research, they argue that eGovernment is a complex and social phenomenon and as such can greatly benefit from the

use of multiple disciplines. The case for such a multiple-method approach to eParticipation evaluation is even stronger.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of the questions asked, methods may be drawn from across the qualitative and quantitative spectrum. Although this is likely to depend on methodological preference and the usual constraints of access, capabilities and budget, we propose a range of possible data gathering and analysis methods that should be appropriate for e-participation contexts:-

- field observation of relevant actors using the eParticipation tool in a real world setting;
- interviewing and group discussion with relevant actors;
- analysis of any available online questions and online discussion
- analysis of any available project documentation;
- usage statistics gathered by the tools and in web server log files.

The combination of methods ensures that the evaluation provides evidence of what people actually do with the eParticipation tool as well as what they say about the experience. Using a variety of methods helps to maximise the validity of research results, by providing for triangulation of the methods and/or the data.

It is important for the evaluation to learn from an appropriate range of stakeholders' actions and experiences. For government-led eParticipation projects these stakeholders are likely to include:-

- government officials setting up and administrating the eParticipation;
- people who have used the online engagement site;
- citizens who have not used it but have experience of other forms of citizen engagement;
- elected representatives or officers considering the eParticipation results;
- other interested elected representatives;
- project managers;
- technologists supplying the online tools.

The difficulty is to ensure each is involved as appropriate in the evaluation, considering also the need to match the relevant research method to the appropriate stakeholder bearing in mind constraints such as the timing, and their skills and availability.

3 THE LOCAL EDEMOCRACY EVALUATION

As stated previously, this work is based on research undertaken as part of the UK Local eDemocracy National Project, and specifically it formed part of "Workstream 4: Public and Stakeholder Opinion and eDemocracy". Our aim here was primarily to provide evaluation results that were relevant to practitioners and policy-makers, rather than to advance theory per se.

The local eDemocracy projects had originally been classified as either top-down projects (which were government-led and mainly concerned linking citizens to council processes), ground-up projects (which are mainly concerned to encourage community networks) and youth-related projects, such as eParticipation tools and games designed for use by young people.

The authors were responsible for the research into 'top-down' projects (Whyte, et al, 2005); a team from the Oxford Internet Institute led the research into 'ground-up' projects (Coleman, 2005); in addition, a Leeds-based consultancy, conducted specific research on youth-related projects. As well as a shorter study of projects involving webcasting; these evaluation reports are available on the Local eDemocracy website.

In all cases the evaluations were constrained by the very limited time provided for the eParticipation projects to be designed and developed, which resulted in most of them

remaining at formative stages of implementation. The projects should have commenced in March 2004 but some did not start until much later and all were only funded until the end of March 2005. In this short timescale the project staff had to be recruited, suppliers contracted, applications implemented, working practices examined and the actual eParticipation tools publicised and used. Unfortunately these restrictions led to uneven coverage of the projects and in some cases lack of involvement of key actors.

3.1   The Local eDemocracy projects

The four government-led projects discussed in this paper focus on:
- An ePanel for citizen engagement;
- ePetitioning to support citizens lobby their local authority;
- a personalized survey tool, named 'Micro Democracy', for local authorities to make engagement more relevant to individuals and more specific to identified target groups;
- Best practice to enable partnership consultation on cross-cutting issues.

We describe each in turn below.

3.1.1   *The ePanel*

The ePanel project was led by Bristol City Council and had three main aims:
- To demonstrate that the democratic potential of citizens' panels can be increased through the increased use of eDemocracy 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.
- To strengthen links between authorities who are engaged in on-line consultation.

Work in Bristol to set up the e-panel began in June 2004. The e-panel was based around a standalone website, Askbristol.com and integrated various forms of eParticipation using tools such as discussion forums, surveys and live chats. Registered e-panel members could discuss issues with experts and with each other before giving their final views in polls or surveys. Figure 1 shows the e-panel as part of the Ask Bristol website.
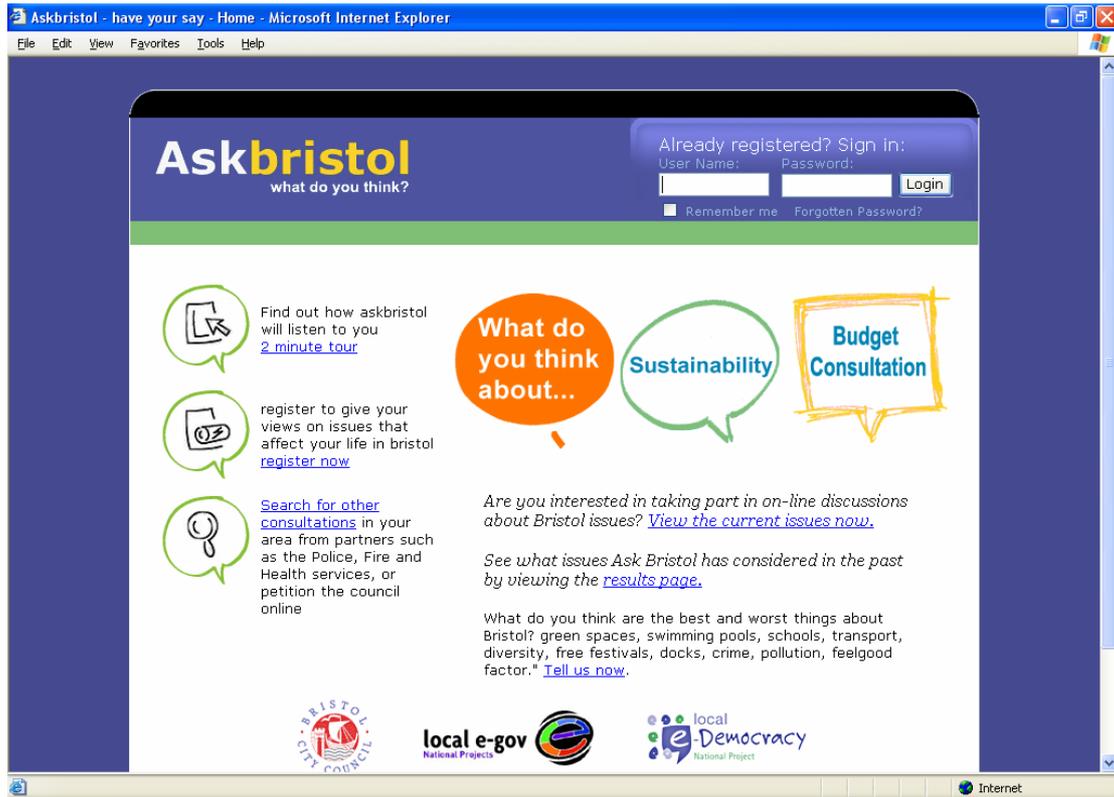
Figure 1: Ask Bristol website (visited on 9th June 2006)

3.1.2   *ePetitioning*

The ePetitioning project was led by The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames. 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 (Adams et al, 2005). The local authority ePetitioner is based directly on this system with the same functionality.

Kingston local authority trialled the online petitioning service alongside traditional paper petitioning processes. The new service aimed to increase transparency, accessibility and strengthen the petitioning process through creating an online service for starting and joining petitions, and a central location where petitions can be viewed and their progress tracked.

Figure 2 shows the ePetitioner at http://epetitions.kingston.gov.uk/list_petitions.asp.
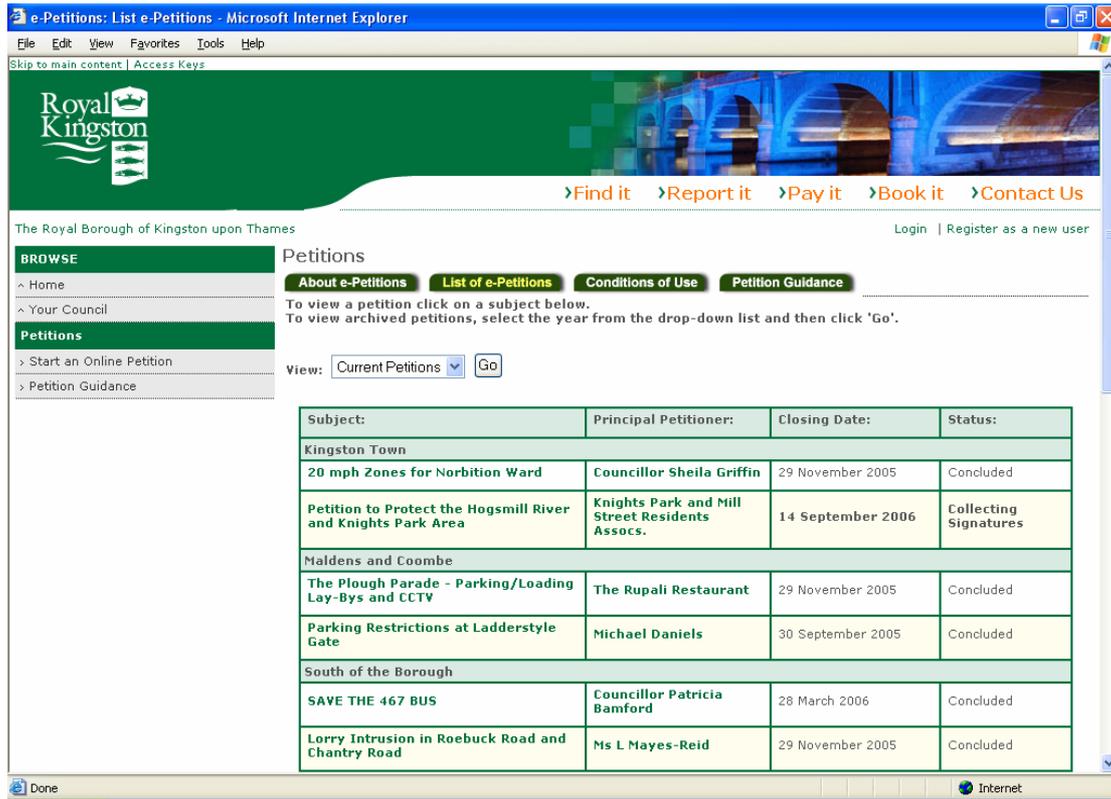
Figure 2: ePetitioner website (visited on 9th June 2006)

3.1.3   Personalised survey tool

This project, called the Micro Democracy Project, was led by Swindon Borough Council. It aimed to pilot a highly personalized and localized "micro democracy process" for informing and consulting citizens. It utilized techniques from customer relationship management and knowledge management. The stated specific aims were:

* More efficient and effective consultation in terms of cost per consultation undertaken and improved response rate;
* Personal engagement about issues that matter to the individual;
* Multi-threaded approach – it was not anticipated that the system would be the sole method of eParticipation but would be complemented and integrated with other online and offline approaches.

The developed tool is not a publicly available website but a web-based tool that users within the local authority may use to generate questionnaires, and distribute them both online and on paper according to the recipients' preference.

3.1.4   Partnership consultation on cross-cutting issues

This project, with the official name of "Democractising Cross-Cutting Issues and Partnerships" was led by Wolverhampton City Council. The aim of the project was not to develop a specific eParticipation tool as such, but rather to develop best practice guidelines on engaging citizens on issues that cut across organizational boundaries, and engaging them with the work of partnerships. There is a Wolverhampton Partnership website that describes the partnership and links to an ePanel tool which is used to conduct online engagement initiatives within a partnership context.

3.2   Evaluation Design

To undertake the evaluation it was first necessary to understand clearly the objectives, as expressed both at the level of the Local e-Democracy National Project as a whole, and the individual projects assessed.

The National Project had, from the outset, defined a set of overarching 'democratic criteria' which scoped what the top-down projects should do to support and enhance democracy. These are summarized in Table 1. They were used to frame the overall reporting of the evaluation results.

Criteria	Description
Representation	eParticipation should be used to support, complement or enhance the activities and understanding of representative government, and should not undermine the value of representative democracy.
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.
Transparency	Projects need to make decision-making processes more transparent.
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.
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.
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.

Table 1: Democratic criteria[2]

In the case of the individual local projects their aims and objectives involved one, some or all of the following:

- Engaging with a wider audience: Usability criteria, such as 'ease of use' and 'appropriate design' are important elements of any evaluation irrespective of this being an explicit project objective. However, the acceptability (and hence use) of the technology will be affected by other non-usability oriented criteria that will be different if there is no explicit intent to widen participation.
- Obtaining better informed opinions: Where the engagement method deliberately provides respondents with background information in order to elicit better informed opinions the evaluation should analyse the use made of this information as an indication of how relevant it has been.

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[2] Source: Project Initiation Document, National Project on Local e-Democracy v3.0

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- Enabling more in-depth consultation: This requires an engagement method that goes further than simply providing background information by supporting deliberative debate. The evaluation should therefore consider making an analysis of the content and structure of the discussion to assess the depth achieved.
- Automating analysis of contributions: The use of online electronic submission of responses creates the opportunity to carry out more cost effective engagement. Not only does it save on transcription costs but responses to closed questions can be subjected to automated analysis.
- Providing feedback to citizens: This provides participants with information about the comments received and their impact on the local authority's intended actions. In this case the evaluation needs to consider some means to assess the public response to this feedback.

To address whether these aims and objectives had been met we employed a range of research methods from the list outlined in section 2 above, these were:

1. Semi-structured interviews involving both face-to face and, where necessary, supplemented with telephone interviews. These were all audio-recorded and notes taken during them to enable quicker analysis (given the timescales for reporting results).

2. Field tests of eDemocracy tools involving observing how members of the public interacted with the tools in order to get an understanding of the acceptability of the tools and the nature of any usability problems that occur in a real-world setting.

3. Online questionnaires to gauge the public's perceptions of how well the tools might be accepted.

4. Project documentation which gave an understanding of the project scope and local authority expectations.

5. Results of online discussions.

6. Web server log files providing information on the number of visits to the home page of the eParticipation tool, number of page requests and number of unique visits.

The stakeholders identified as needed to be involved in the evaluation were:

a) Citizens who had used the deployed eParticipation tools;

b) Citizens who had not used the tools;

c) Local 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 local authority or by suppliers;

f) 'Internal' users: e.g. forum moderators or administrators.

To appreciate how each should be involved and plan appropriate questions the 'key dimensions' of eParticipation described in table 2 were used. These were adapted from previous work to help characterize eParticipation initiatives (Macintosh, 2004b).

Dimension	Description
Type of engagement	Information provision, top-down engagement or ground-up

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

Table 2: Key dimension of eParticipation projects

As well as the above dimensions, the evaluation questions drew on 'quality criteria' appropriate for assessing online tools. These took into account aspects of usability, usefulness and social and technical acceptability, based on the work of Neilson (1993) and the Quality Framework for UK Government Websites[3]. The tool quality criteria are described in 3.

Criteria	Description
Social acceptability	
Trust and security	Is the information presented accurate, complete and reliable, and is the information users have provided handled in a secure manner?
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	
Accessibility	Is the level of compliance with Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) content guidelines sufficient to meet the needs of users with disabilities?
Appeal	Is the take-up in line with expectations, and do the intended

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[3] See http://e-government.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/Resources/WebGuidelines/fs/en

	users like it enough to want to use it?
Content clarity	Can users understand what the content means in relation to their task or situation?
Responsiveness	Does the tool and/or process answer the user's questions quickly and effectively?
Usability	
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?
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?
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?

Table 3: eParticipation tool quality criteria

As we have mentioned, we sought to identify overlaps between the criteria applied to the programme, the individual projects and their tools dimension and the quality criteria. For example, the Duration and Sustainability dimension had the following question: "How does the project impact on other public engagement activities when they also have an online element?"

We then developed an evaluation framework which gave for each detailed question, the list of research methods which would be used and the actors who would be involved. Table 4 gives a sample of the questions, methods and actors for the *Accessibility* dimension.

Accessibility (Key Dimension)	Research methods used	Actors involved
What measures have been taken to provide appropriate *accessibility* levels (in terms of the Web Accessibility Initiative)?	1, 2, 4	all
What is the relative *appeal* to citizen-users of the main online functions provided?	1, 2, 3, 5, 6	(a), (b)
Whose voice is represented in the results? E.g. 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
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)

Table 4: Example of detailed evaluation questions and how they were addressed

Note that the numbers and letters in the methods and actors columns are for illustration only. For the complete list of questions, methods and actors see Whyte, et al (2005, p.96).

Table 5 shows which research methods were used within each of the local authorities.

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

Table 5: Research methods used

The aim was to use at least three methods with each of the participating local authorities. However in the case of Swindon, procurement issues delayed the project start until August 2004. Further delays were caused by a change in the political leadership of Swindon Council and subsequent budget cuts. However at the time data was being collected for the evaluation (February-March 2005) Swindon's 'Micro Democracy' project managers were able to demonstrate a working system and discuss the concept underlying it.

Table 6 indicates the type and number of stakeholders interviewed in each local authority.

	Bristol	Swindon	W'hampton	Kingston
Citizens: users and non-users	12	-	-	7
Councillors involved in engagement	-*	1	-	2
Engagement 'owners'	-*	1	1	5
Project managers & 'technologists'	3	2	2	1
Internal users, administrators	1	1	1	2

Table 6: Stakeholders interviewed

(*)There had been extensive internal evaluation of the e-panel, prior to this current study and this raised issues of duplication and 'evaluation fatigue' among participants. We therefore agreed with Bristol City Council not to re-interview individuals who had already been interviewed, but were provided with past interview summaries.

The field tests were carried out in Bristol with nine participants in group test, and two individually and in Kingston-upon-Thames with six individuals. Swindon and Wolverhampton were unable to accommodate field tests in their schedules.

3.3   Evaluation Results

The detailed evaluation results were fed back to the local authorities and technology providers (Whyte et al 2005) In this paper we are concerned as to if and how eParticipation was changing local democracy.

Representation

The major strength of Bristol City Council's e-panel was the development of existing liaison between the consultation team and service departments, in some cases with their direct participation in online discussion. The Royal Borough of Kingston's e-petitioner project had strong support from councillors, although (at the time of the evaluation) the outcomes of e-petitions remain uncertain and there were weaknesses in the integration with other engagement processes. The Personalised Survey project in Swindon Borough Council generated keen interest from councillors. The Wolverhampton Partnership project rested on a strong consultation infrastructure, although active support from partners appeared focused on collaborative working between staff. Although this had the potential for a strong basis for sustainable citizen engagement, support for it at the time 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 was that this was forthcoming, but only when the issues were general enough to affect a broad cross-section of citizens.

Transparency

The ePetitioner project was strongest on this point since it established a process for publishing decision outcomes. There was 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 the Micro Democracy personalised survey project which we had strong concerns about.

Conflict and consensus

Each of the projects provided an online forum and opportunities for divergence of opinion on the issues raised and the method for raising them, with the exception of the Personalised Survey project. The preparation for effective moderation of such discussions was a strong feature of e-panel project and the Wolverhampton Partnership project. Although the ePetitioner software supports the moderation task, Kingston's preparations for moderation were not extensive and should any controversial e-petitions have stimulated heated online discussion there was a risk officers concerned may be unprepared to deal with any consequences.

Political equality

The projects each showed 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 personalised survey project also had strong potential given its integration of online and offline channels, although its take-up could not be assessed during the evaluation period.

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 the ePetitioner and e-panel projects. 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. The Micro Democracy personalised Survey project placed much emphasis on responsiveness, though again citizens' views on that were unavailable.

4   CONCLUSIONS

The National Project on Local e-Democracy has opened up a vast range of possible tools and methods that can be used by local authorities to engage with citizens. However, these tend to be isolated exercises and, as yet, there is no view of what a coherent, and sustainable participation environment should be like. More consideration needs to be placed on when and how to use tools in order to enhance democracy. The local authorities need to appreciate which tools to use in which contexts and how to combine tools to enable inclusive engagement.

In the majority of cases, the design of the tools gave high priority to ease-of-use and accessibility to minimize barriers to using them. However, the main barriers to citizens making effective use of the tools are much more likely to be the organizational ones of coordinating the provision and use of the tools on the one hand, and, on the other hand, societal ones of citizens being motivated to use them. Developing usable and accessible technology is important but not enough to ensure enhanced participation.

Critically, local authorities are still relying on questionnaires that deal with user satisfaction levels to assess whether local democracy is being enhanced by eParticipation. There is a strong case for using field study methods to observe and analyse eParticipation tools being used in community group settings and public places. A focus on behaviour in context, as well as views expressed in individual discussions and group workshops, is required for a fuller understanding of the appropriateness of the technology. There is a need to develop an appropriate eParticipation evaluation framework, as described in this paper, which recognises the complexity of the domain and clearly defines the relevant perspectives, stakeholders and research methods to meet the needs of all those with an interest in the outcome.

With such a rigorous framework we could begin to answer the question "Is eParticipation transforming local democracy?".

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