e-democracy in bristol

Connecting Bristol
meeting the digital challenge

BRISTOL · CITY COUNCIL ·

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Contents

introduction

This guide aims to inspire and reassure local authorities that e-participation is safe, cost-effective and important. Over the past six years, Bristol City Council and other pioneering authorities have taken risks, experimented, won UK and European awards and have only occasionally failed to deliver.

A considerable amount of learning and knowledge has resulted from this collective work. We now know that it makes no difference whether your authority is large or small, urban or rural, excellent or not. We are certain that e-participation offers a route into a new, more open and meaningful dialogue with citizens, service users and communities.

Most authorities aspire to be "community leaders", "listening councils" and "customer-focused." Therefore, e-participation will almost certainly be high on your agenda anyway. This guide will simply help you to recognise how much more than us you already know.

However, if your authority has none of these ambitions then you should carry on holding public meetings in draughty church halls on the same night that England plays whoever. Just don't be surprised when your meeting is poorly attended or hijacked by one or two particularly disgruntled residents. At this point, we hope you might remember this guide, pick it up and start reading. Just maybe you will be inspired to do something different.

This guide draws on Bristol's first-hand experience of e-participation. It is presented in three main sections, electronic information sharing, e-consultation and e-participation. We very much hope you find the guide useful and welcome your feedback.

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Acknowledgements

Information, preparing for take off

The Freedom of Information Act came into force on 1st January 2005. The Act aims to promote a culture of openness in public authorities and to give people the right to access much of the information they hold.

Despite this, if you stop people on the street and ask them how council decisions are made, many will still describe a scene of clandestine meetings in smoke-filled committee rooms. They may not be aware that committee meetings, papers and minutes are likely to be open to the public. They may not even realise that the council has banned smoking!

If you stop a council officer and ask for his or her view on whether the general public is sufficiently knowledgeable to offer a useful opinion on their service priorities they may laugh out loud. What's the answer? Information!

Information is a precursor to involvement. Without it people don't recognise that they have the right to be consulted; they cannot participate in a meaningful way or respond to a consultation with an informed view.

However, it is not only citizens who suffer from lack of information. Whilst councils may theoretically be awash with the stuff, lack of investment in co-ordination and dissemination means that for too long, information has remained locked in filing cabinets, databases and officers' heads. In many types of council there is still a risk that several different departments will consult the same person or group at the same time. A lack of co-ordination means that well-intended officers are unaware of this duplication and fail to recognise the inefficient use of resources.

Consultees on the other hand are only too aware of the frustrations caused by being asked to respond to numerous consultations all at once. So common is this frustration that it has been given a name – "consultation fatigue". Over time, consultation fatigue reinforces a belief that responding to consultations is a waste of time and effort. Consequently, response rates wither and trust declines.

New technologies are having a huge impact on the way that information is produced and shared. In fact, the Internet has sparked an e-communications revolution that is no less radical in scope than the changes brought about by the invention of the printing press five hundred years before. Now all citizens and communities can search for and find relevant information in a matter of nano-seconds. They can publish and broadcast information immediately and for little or no cost.

Some authorities will feel threatened by this shift towards democratisation. The good news is that public authorities also have greater access than ever before to a range of online communication channels and co-ordination tools.

MORI research suggests that through the effective combination of mobile phone, Internet and digital TV authorities can directly reach the vast majority of their local populations. Even better news is that

e-communication is also frequently cheaper than traditional communication methods, not relying on the dissemination of expensive and non-environmentally friendly printed materials.

The following section describes some of the most interesting "e" approaches to information sharing. As more councils find their feet in this, the digital age, these approaches will increasingly become the norm.

1.1 Webcasting

The term "webcasting" derives from the phrase "web broadcasting". Webcasts are like TV transmissions over the Internet. They allow multiple viewers to watch and listen to live or recorded events such as council meetings or the latest happenings from the Big Brother house.

Webcasts make use of streaming technology. This enables users with the appropriate media player software to view the broadcast without having to download the entire file to their computers. As video files are large, streaming offers a user-friendly way to watch these files.

Webcasting doesn't have to be complicated but there are some important decisions to make before you begin. Firstly you need to establish whether to broadcast the event live or to record it and webcast it later.

If you are planning a live webcast you will need to test the sound and picture quality. You may need to arrange a sound feed from a Public Address (PA) system and to install temporary spotlights. You will also need a conveniently located point to connect to the Internet so that the webcast can be uploaded to the host website. Ideally, this will be a dedicated or high-capacity line but as a minimum, you will need to test in advance that it can cope with the large volume of data.

The most nerve-wracking aspect of live webcasting is that if something unexpected happens, your Internet audience will see it at the same time as you. However, this can also make viewing a more exciting and interesting experience. A further advantage of live webcasting is that web viewers can be offered the opportunity to interact with the event by emailing in questions for the speakers, or taking part in votes or surveys online.

If you decide to record your meeting to webcast later additional features can subsequently be added to the recording, such as captions to identify speakers, slides from presentations and "bookmarks". Bookmarks are index points that allow viewers to skip to specific agenda points or particular speakers within the webcast. These features can also be added to "archived" webcasts that were transmitted live but have been stored online for further viewing.

Until recently the size and complexity of the equipment has restricted the kind of events that could easily be webcast. The cumbersome nature of the technology meant events needed to be held in a specific location. This suited council meetings and parliamentary debates as they are held in specific meeting rooms or council chambers. This sort of webcast can be a useful tool for bringing the council's decision-making processes to a wider audience and therefore making them more transparent.

Recently, portable webcasting packages have been developed and it is now practical for community meetings held outside of council premises to be webcast. This makes webcasting a useful tool for community groups and partnerships that want to reveal themselves to the wider Internet world.

Case Study, North Lincs. Housing Transfer

As part of the Local e-Democracy National Project, North Lincolnshire Council webcast a meeting debating whether to transfer the entire housing stock to a housing association. This was the first meeting the council broadcast live on the Internet. The meeting was also relayed live to a screen in a local school where members of the public could view proceedings. Viewers of the webcast could email questions to councillors, who responded to some of these issues during the meeting. Six hundred and seventeen people tuned in to watch the debate live. The archive broadcast of the meeting has been accessed over four hundred times since the debate.

Top Tip Kevin O'Malley, e-Democracy Project Manager

"Promote a webcast on the subject being debated rather than focusing on the novelty of the channel itself. The public are more likely to be engaged by a relevant and interesting debate than a flashy new technology channel."

Webcasting Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time
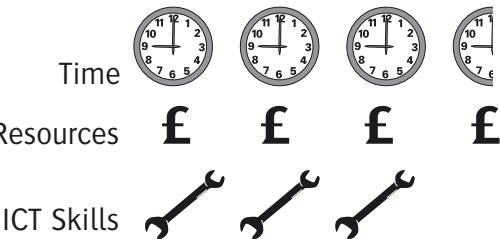
Resources   £ £ £ £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources   £ £

ICT Skills
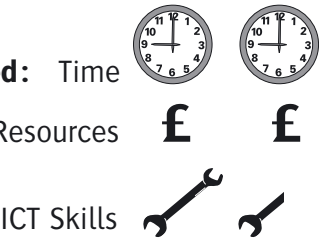
The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information   High
Engagement   Medium
Decision making Low–Meduim

Google this "Streaming Video" "South Oxfordshire Council" "Camden Council" "Public-i" "Westminster Digital"

Examples www.bristol-city.public-i.tv/site/index.php
www.devoncc.ukcouncil.net/site/index.php

1.2 SMS and email Alerts

Many people don't take part in council consultations simply because they don't hear about them. When people do take part, a lack of feedback puts many people off taking part again. Fewer and fewer people read their local newspaper and only a dedicated minority regularly browse their council's website. A Short Message Service (SMS) using mobile phones or email alert system can help publicise your consultations, provide feedback and boost response rates.

It is now fairly common for football teams, weather channels, job bulletins and TV shows to invite audience members to sign-up for email or SMS alerts. Increasingly, pioneering councils, such as Kirklees and Kingston-upon-Thames are following suit by offering email and SMS text bulletins.

Alert systems link an electronic data source, eg the council's web site, to a means of sending out information eg email or SMS text. Subscribers normally use the council's website to register for alerts by creating a user account with an email address and password. Users can also set preferences for the type and frequency of information they want to receive, for example, a daily update or a weekly summary. Whenever the data source is updated, new information is automatically sent out to all who subscribe.

Off-the-shelf products exist, which deliver the data source and an alert system. Developing a bespoke system in-house can be difficult. The starting point for any alert system is a good quality data source. If you are planning to send out alerts and feedback about consultations, details need to be routinely added to a central consultation database. This in itself is a useful co-ordination exercise and, if available on the website, is a publicly accountable record of the council's consultation in one convenient place.

With your data source established and with the help of your ICT colleagues, or a technical partner, you can set up your alert system. Email/SMS alert systems are most effective when they dispatch relevant information to customers. It is important to strike a balance between too much detail at the subscription stage, which will make the registration process tedious, and not enough detail, which could result in rapid subscriber loss if they are sent too much irrelevant nonsense. Also, don't overdo the security of the system – a user account is needed so people can change their subscription details, but remember we're not dealing with top-secret information!

Many councils currently shoulder the administrative burden of maintaining a database of consultees. With an alert system, the onus is on the customer to update their email address and the information they want to receive. At practically zero distribution cost, the system dispatches information to people who want it – very useful and very sustainable.

Case Study, Kirklees Alerts

Kirklees Council launched its "Kirklees alerts" service in April 2005. Users can receive information about jobs, public consultations and planning applications by email, SMS or both. Subscription is free and the council are continually looking for opportunities to extend the range of information on offer. Events around Kirklees and emergency announcements are being considered at the moment.

To use this service you must register by providing a username and password. Depending on your alert preferences, you will be asked for a mobile phone number or email address. Once registered, you will receive an email and/or SMS message with an "activation code". This code is used to verify the contact details that you have supplied.

The "My alerts" section allows subscribers to choose what information they are interested in receiving. They are also able to choose from a wide range of criteria relevant to the subject. For example, for planning applications the user can specify an application number, the applicant or agent name, a postcode, street, area or an electoral ward. Promotion of the service is limited to the council's website. Since its launch, over 2,900 people have subscribed. The majority of subscribers have signed up to receive email alerts, with 37% choosing to have information sent to them via SMS.
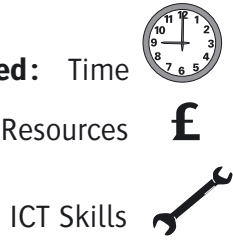
SMS and Email Alerts Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time
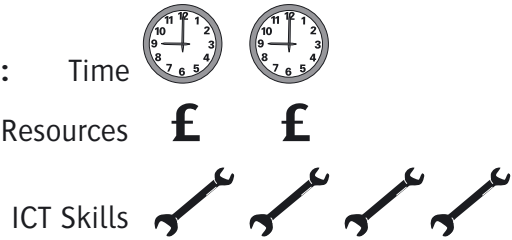
Resources £ £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information   Medium–High
Engagement   Low
Decision making Low

Google this "Google alerts" "BBC news desktop alerts" "info4localgov" "local alert" "guardian jobs"

Examples www.bristol.gov.uk/newsdirect
www.kirklees.gov.uk/alerts

1.3 Consultation Finder Database

Many councils grasp the advantages of public engagement and actively choose to consult widely, others do so in response to government requirements. Whatever a council's motivation, citizens might be surprised to learn just how much public consultation is carried out. Planners, policy officers, social workers, housing officers and a wider variety of professional groups routinely engage the public in consultation. But unless their efforts are effectively co-ordinated they may be wasting precious time and scarce resources. This is where consultation databases come in to their own.

A consultation database or "consultation finder" acts as a central repository for consultation knowledge. Consultation databases can be internal, hosted on an Intranet but arguably are most effective when the information they contain is made publicly accessible via a website. The added "incentive" of public and stakeholder scrutiny means that records are more likely to be kept up-to-date and in many cases, there is an opportunity for the person accessing the information to go on to participate in the consultation.

Consultation databases capture standardised information about consultation activities. Details vary but common data fields include the consultation name, start and end date, details of who is consulting and why and a description of who should participate. In addition, URLs can be added to link records to background papers, online questionnaires and discussion forums where these exist. Search tags can be assigned to each consultation record to make them easier to find. These should be generic, relating to the sort of words that lay people use to describe council services – Young People, Older People, Bins, Council Tax – rather than official departmental titles or technical names.

Once a consultation is complete, the database should be updated with a summary of the consultation results. In time a further outcomes URL might be added, for example linking to a set of committee meeting minutes showing what decision the council eventually reached.

At the very simplest, a consultation database might consist of a single spreadsheet held on an unlucky council officer's computer. Although simple, this type of solution does not allow for shared access to information or dispersed publishing rights. There are now a wide range of off-the-shelf Consultation Finders and database packages available. Many come bundled with other software applications, which enable surveys to be created and published online and reports to be generated. Advanced systems may include GIS or RSS functionality, enabling complex consultation information, drawn from across a range of partner organisations, to be shared and disseminated centrally.

Case Study, The Consultation Finder

Bristol's Consultation Finder was launched in 2001. It was developed as an online tool to bring information and results from Bristol's past and current consultations in to one place on the web. The database can be searched online by area of interest (not council department) and by ward. The latter is important, as Bristol's elected members would often comment that they were amongst the last to know about council-led consultations with the people they represent.

Through Consultation Finder we were also keen to ensure that council officers weren't conducting new consultation work unnecessarily and that they were making the best use of information that had already been gathered. As the database grew to attract several thousand unique visits each month we also recognised there was a significant democratic opportunity to be gained. Simply by placing consultation information in one place on the web it became far easier for citizens to find out what consultation was going on and to register their interest in taking part.

Top Tip Stephen Hilton, Corporate Consultation Manager

"Create an easy to remember web address for your consultation database. Make sure it is used in all council press releases about consultation."

Consultation Finder Database Summary

To implement this approach councils need:　Time 🕙🕙🕙

Resources £ £ £

ICT Skills 🔧🔧🔧

To participate in this approach citizens need:　Time 🕙

Resources £

ICT Skills 🔧

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information Medium–High
Engagement Medium
Decision making Low

Google this "Consultation Finder Plus" "Community People" "Delib" "iNovem"

Examples www.consultationfinder.com/cumbria/default.aspx?From=www.barrowbc.gov.uk
www.derby.gov.uk/yourcityyoursay/MyConsultationSearch.aspx

1.4 Blogs

Blog is a technology term created by shrinking the phrase "web log". People who keep blogs are called "bloggers".

Essentially a blog is a personal web site containing an online diary or journal. A typical blog has a number of elements. There is the title banner, which can be descriptive, "the Google Blog" or esoteric, "Isobel's Exploits". There is often an "about me" section with a picture and a short description of the blog owner. The main body of the blog is made up of a series of dated entries or "posts" usually presented in reverse chronological order. Each post includes a permalink, which allows people to link to the entry directly rather than to the blog as a whole. Finally, there is the blog roll, the blog owners recommended links to other blogs or websites. Many bloggers allow readers to submit comments about what has been written. Comments can be pre or post moderated.

The software needed to run a blog is available free of charge from sites like Blogger, Word Press and My Space. More advanced web users can download software and install it on their own web space. Installing software can be a technical challenge, however once installed, most software is relatively easy to use and requires no specialist knowledge of web languages to operate.

A more straightforward way to get your blog up and running is to set up a free online account with a blogging service. Most blogging services allow users to customise the look and feel of their blog, some allow photos, videos and sound files to be added.

Because blogs are an open forum for the writers to express themselves and for readers to leave comments, there have been some concerns expressed about legal issues particularly defamation. Some of the general legal questions are addressed at **www.weblaw.co.uk**/**art_blogs.php**

In the last few years, blogs have increasingly been used as political tools. The Iraq war in particular saw a diversity of opinion and passionate debate played out in the blogosphere. Most famous of these was the Salam Pax blog that covered life in Baghdad during the invasion of Iraq.

As blogging emerged as a significant media for presenting and debating political views, established politicians and political candidates began to make use of the technology to outline their opinions and elicit responses from readers.

During the 2004 US Presidential campaign Howard Dean recognised and exploited the power of the weblog. He regularly wrote entries while campaigning and used his blog to consult and seek advice from his supporters on key decisions.

In the UK, David Milliband was one of the first Cabinet Ministers to start a blog. He explicitly states on his site:

"**This blog is my attempt to help bridge the gap – the growing and potentially dangerous gap – between politicians and the public. It will show what I'm doing, what I'm thinking about, and what I've read, heard or seen for myself. I will read and, as often as I can, respond to people's comments on my posts. So please use this site as a notice board for new thoughts.**"

Case Study, Read My Day

The ReadMyDay project is providing civic leaders with free software, know how and coaching on how to be an effective blogger. The aim is to explore whether weblogging can bring a more accessible tone to local government, replacing the dry, formal and static content of many traditional government websites.

Griff Wrigley, a blogging expert from the States, has provided coaching to civic leaders, more than 70 have taken part so far. The project has been exploring some more innovative areas of blogging such as moblogging, audioblogging and vlogging.

Top Tip Andy Martin, e-Democracy Expert, Firetail

"**The secret to successful blogging is regularity. You have to post as often as you can. It's the difference between lots of readers and nothing.**"

Blog Summary

To implement this approach councils need:

Time 🕐 🕐 🕐 🕐

Resources £

ICT Skills 🔧 🔧

To participate in this approach citizens need:

Time 🕐 🕐

Resources £

ICT Skills 🔧

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information Medium–High
Engagement Medium
Decision making Low–Medium

Google this "blogger" "Google blog search" "vox politics" "Read My Day" "Mary Reid Mayor" "Howard Dean" "Jamie's big voice" "David Miliband" "Salam Pax" "ConnectingBristol blog" "Word Press"

Examples www.readmyday.co.uk/
www.lynnefeatherstone.org/blog.htm

1.5 Games and Simulators

Every parent knows that children learn through play. But it is not only children who can benefit from the "light-hearted approach". Public authorities are starting to experiment with online games and simulators as a way of helping citizens get to grips with complex budget and policy information. Through virtual role-play citizens can gain insight in to the difficult choices that decision-makers face; they can trade-off competing priorities and attempt to make the council's books balance.

Organisations such as the BBC produce a range of online educational games aimed at young people, particularly through schools and there is increasing evidence to support their usefulness in the classroom. A small number of specialist companies are developing similar tools that councils can put to wider community use via their own websites.

Games and simulators have been developed to help increase young people's understanding of democracy. These games allow participants to run a virtual campaign and role-play being a councillor for a day. They have mainly been developed for online use but some have been adapted for mobile phones.

Games may offer participants the ability to create a character or avatar to represent them in the game play. Such personalisation draws comparisons with hugely popular virtual reality games such as "sim city", "second life", "runescape" or "habbo hotel".

Some games rely on quick decisions being made which helps focus attention. Others allow participants to compare scores with their peers, which increases enthusiasm and leads to greater participation.

Not all games are aimed just at young people. Budget simulators are designed to provide an easy introduction to complex council financial information, which needs to be understood before participants can make an informed response. Typically, budget simulators encourage people to review proposed budget figures for different service areas; read a description of what these services do and then experiment by increasing or decreasing budgets on an incremental basis, eg + or − 5% or 10% for social services. More advanced simulators show people the consequences of their actions either by demonstrating the impact on council tax levels, or by rejecting proposed changes until the overall budget balances.

Although games and simulators may allow participants to leave comments, and general patterns of response may be analysed, their real strength is in developing understanding. If combined with an online survey or discussion forum, they may also become a genuinely useful and novel consultation tool.

Case Study, Bristol's Budget Simulator

Between 8 February to 30 April 2006, Bristol City Council invited members of the public to take part in a budget review that included the council's budget meeting being webcast, an online discussion forum and a budget simulator.

The budget simulator was designed by Delib to encourage citizens to interact with the budget decision-making process. It took them through the different stages of the budgeting process and allowed them to allocate budget resources and experience the outcomes of their decisions.

The simulator allowed participants to review the data by department. The role of each department was explained in brief including priorities for the forthcoming years and an example was given to provide guidance on costs for particular services. The participants were able to amend each department's budget by increments of 5% and were then invited to comment on their proposed changes. Potential participants were told that the exercise would not influence the budget for 2006−2007 but would be taken into account for future budgets.

Top Tip Richard Fletcher, Parks and Green Spaces Policy officer

"Using games as a consultation tool within schools helped our parks review but we needed a member of our team on hand to help the school use the game and to support the teacher."

Games and Simulators Summary

To implement this approach councils need:

Time	🕐 🕐
Resources	£ £
ICT Skills	🔧 🔧

To participate in this approach citizens need:

Time	🕐 🕐
Resources	£
ICT Skills	🔧

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information	Medium
Engagement	Medium
Decision making	Low−Medium

Google this "demgames" "captain campaign" "councillor quest" "e-democs" "delib" "radioactive waste management game ITC" "pimp my party"

Examples www.budgetsimulator.com
www.bbc.co.uk/schools/citizenx/local/index.shtml
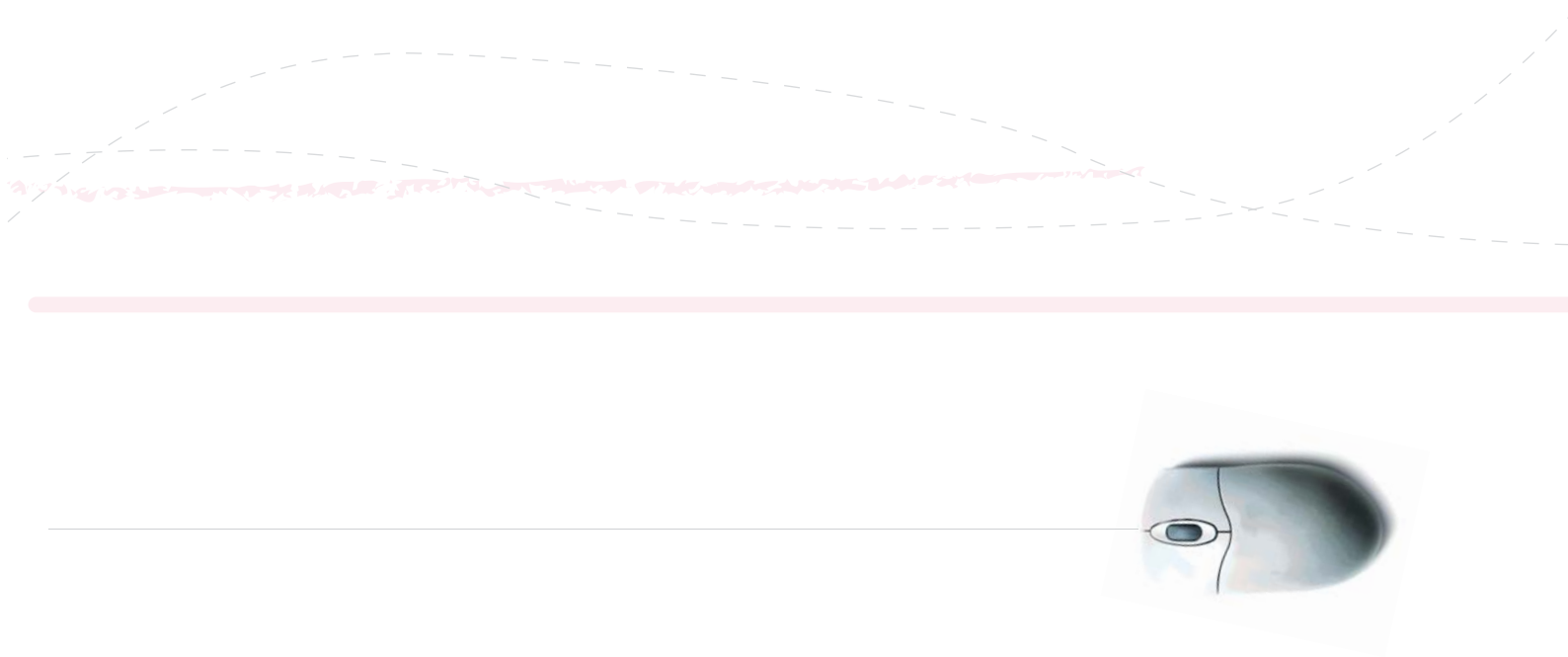
e-consultation, revving the engines

Councils sometimes confuse information with consultation. If a decision has already been taken then whatever happens next can only be 'for information'. Consultation takes place when there is still a real decision to be made based on a choice between different possible courses of action.

Some may see this confusion as desirable. However, implying choice when in reality the matter is closed does no one any favours (especially politicians). The public are increasingly media savvy and can smell a CON-sultation when they see one. Scrutiny and audit requirements mean that if consultation is deemed to be of insufficient quality, there is a high risk that authorities will have to rip it up and start again. It is best to be honest and open. If there is no will or no space to consult then just say so.

Fortunately, the vast majority of council consultation is genuine and it is increasingly professionally managed. Councils use a wide range of tried and tested consultation approaches such as sample surveys, citizens' panels, in-depth interviews, focus groups and public meetings to collect and analyse citizens' views. So what can e-consultation possibly add to this repertoire?

E-Consultation is often seen as faster, more efficient and more cost effective than traditional consultation methods. And it is certainly true that savings in time and resources are there to be made. Electronic distribution of consultation documents saves on expensive printing, stuffing and postage costs. Encouraging respondents to complete surveys online saves on cumbersome data entry. Arranging online focus groups, particularly between geographically dispersed participants, will often be quicker and easier than arranging the real world equivalent.

However, e-consultation is not simply about saving time and resources. It is also about reaching out more widely to increase the breadth and depth of consultation, resulting in more citizens feeling more engaged.

We cannot underestimate the extent of civic disengagement in many sections of the community. Whilst it is not actually true that more people vote in Big Brother than in local elections, it feels true and councils need to use all of the mechanisms at their disposal if they are to promote inclusive engagement and create strong, confident communities.

It is also true that "time-poor" citizens for whom work, study and shopping are likely to take precedent over attending a public consultation meeting in a draughty community centre or church hall, increasingly expect e-consultation methods. After all, who queues in the bank instead of using the nearest cash point unless they really have to?

The following section describes different approaches to e-consultation. Many are easily understood as they simply take a familiar consultation method such as a survey and transfer it to the online environment. However, even when the method appears familiar, the impact of moving it online can sometimes be surprising.

2.1 Quick Polls

Quick polls are a mildly engaging introduction to the world of e-consultation. As the name implies, quick polls are fast. They invite off-the-top-of-the-head responses to simple questions such as, "How do you rate this web site?" or "Isn't the Chief Executive fantastic?"

Quick polls are the virtual equivalent of lifting a finger in to the air to see which way the wind is blowing. The results do not have the rigour of more structured e-consultation activities. However, a topical, regularly updated quick poll, positioned in a prominent position on the home-page will entice web-users to linger for longer and will foster a sense of engagement with even the most static council web site.

One or two mouse-clicks are all that is required to select and submit an answer to a quick poll. In return, there is instant gratification in the form of a pie chart or bar graph displaying the current result of the poll and usually, the total number of participants to date.

A high number of quick poll participants draws attention to the popularity of the web site. A low number may have the opposite effect.

Quick polls are created using a quick poll editor. This is an easy-to-use online application, which may be downloaded for free from the Internet. However, free editors often come with built-in advertising banners, which are prohibited by many council web policies.

The quick poll editor allows for the creation of a simple question and a set of answer options. You must also set a start date and an end date for the poll. A week or two is usually long enough.

Quick poll applications calculate results based on the total number of participants in the poll. To be effective, quick poll questions must only require a single answer option (tick one) rather than be multiple-choice (tick any). For example, this is a good single-answer quick poll question – "How often do you visit this web site?" – every day, at least once a week, once a month etc. The following question might be answered with multiple ticks so would not work as a quick poll – "Which of these services do you use?" – library, parking, schools, housing benefits etc.

Whilst quick polls are commonly left open for the general public to respond to they can also be effective when targeted to discrete audiences, for example young people, local authority employees or business.

Case Study, Bristol's Quick Polls

Bristol City Council developed a quick poll facility for its website in early 2002. Since then, the council has posed over 40 questions to the public on a variety of issues, some deadly serious and others more light-hearted.

Externally, the council uses its quick poll facility to draw attention to consultations or major projects it is undertaking or has just completed. For instance, a quick poll was used to ask people about tall buildings; this was an easy and fun way into the consultation and included a link to the main survey.

Another question asked people about redevelopment plans for a Bristol concert hall and what new facilities people thought were a priority for this development – there's more than one way to get your message across.

Sometimes quick polls can bring unexpected national publicity to a council, like the time the council capitalised on the popularity of the BBC's Great Britons series to ask a question about Great Bristolians. This gained mention on BBC News Online **http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/2410475.stm**

Quick Polls Summary

To implement this approach councils need:

Time

Resources £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need:

Time

Resources £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information	Low
Engagement	Low–Medium
Decision making	Low

Google this "Opinion power" "snap poll"

2.2 Online Surveys

Online surveys are the mainstay of many councils' e-participation work. Indeed, online surveys represent the start and finish of e-participation for many. They bring major benefits to councils in efficient data processing and simply represent an increasingly preferred way for people to participate.

In the UK, forward-looking councils have been using online surveys for over 10 years. In the last 2 years, it has become common to offer an online survey option when councils consult.

Online surveys allow respondents to give their opinions to a consultation online, typically through the council's website. At a basic level, question and answer options are presented in a vertically scrolling page. In recent years, it has become increasingly common to see online surveys that use automatic routing; respondents are presented with a relevant question based on their previous answer. This shortens the survey length and improves the quality of the data – you're less likely to have respondents answering questions that do not apply.

Step-through online surveys are also becoming the norm, presenting one or a limited number of questions in each step. This helps the respondent to focus on the questions. However, some of these newer features may cause problems producing fully accessible surveys, but don't lose sight of the strong benefits from routed and step-through online surveys.

Online surveys require a minimal culture shift in authorities and bring substantial benefits. Chiefly, your respondents do their own data inputting, reducing errors; saving money on data inputting and reducing post-survey processing time. With a growing number of your respondents likely to have Internet access, the ability to respond to a survey online will now be expected by the majority of respondents. Online surveys can facilitate higher response rates, as you don't need to make that trip to the post box.

Compared to analysing paper surveys, online survey analysis is a dream. Gone are the days of wading through hundreds of paper surveys, inputting them and waiting for the data file. When the survey closes, the first results from an online survey can be available within minutes. Most packages that enable you to set up online surveys also include analysis tools. Indeed, it's likely that the online survey creation package was added onto an existing analysis package like SPSS or SNAP. Many local authorities are comfortable using statistics packages to analyse surveys and your online survey tool should export data compatible with it.

Online surveys can be left open for anyone accessing the web anywhere to respond to. In which case, it is sensible to include a question about whether people live, work or study in the local area or elsewhere. Online surveys can also be password protected or hidden from the view of the casual browser. This is particularly useful when your survey is targeted at a known sample or user group. If you suspect foul play, server logs can help identify multiple responses from a single computer.

Case Study, Height Matters

Height Matters was a planning consultation about the future construction of tall buildings in Bristol. It was a landmark consultation for Bristol City Council, as 85% of the 1000+ responses that we received were made online.

The online survey was step-through with plenty of pictures to get respondents thinking. It was hosted on the council's website amidst professionally designed pages providing background information. The online support for the consultation was further enhanced by a deliberative poll, e-decide, looking at both sides of the issue. At every opportunity the online survey was promoted on the website and offline via flyers and posters.

Top Tip Simon Caplan, Head of Corporate Communications

"Don't fail at the last hurdle by not clearly telling people across all media, online and offline, that your online survey is available for completion. Be relentless in promoting the URL for your survey."

Online Surveys Summary

To implement this approach councils need:

Time

Resources £ £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need:

Time

Resources £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information Low
Engagement Medium
Decision making Medium–High

Google this "SNAP Mercator" "SPSS" "Key Point"

Examples www.survey.bris.ac.uk/
www.kerrier.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=9501

2.3 E-Panels

E-panels are a way for councils or other organisations to carry out regular online consultations with a known group of citizens.

The most well established e-panel is YouGov, established by a market research company in 2000 to provide research for public policy, market research and stakeholder consultation.

Councils have adapted this idea to have a way of consulting a group of people on a regular basis using a range of technology. It provides a quick and potentially cheap way of staying in touch with a group of citizens and of hearing their views.

Market research companies tend to focus their e-panel activities on online surveys but other interactive technologies such as discussion forums or VIP messaging help to create a sense of online community and enable e-panel members to participate in the consultation process, suggesting topics for discussion that the council might not have considered. Enabling e-panel members to communicate and deliberate with each other as well as with decision makers allows a more informed response from participants and increases input into local authority decision-making.

E-panels can be run alongside traditional offline activities and their strength is seen to be as a way of increasing participation in local democracy, particularly amongst young people or those who are time poor. By providing information and consultations in easy to manage portions, people can dip in and out, participating at a time and place that suits them.

Participants are asked to register with a certain amount of demographic information before taking part in any e-panel consultations. When the council sets new issues, emails are sent to e-panel members encouraging their participation. Follow-up emails may highlight some of the key points already raised to encourage others to get involved. When the issue closes, the council analyses the results and shares these with e-panel members.

Feedback is an essential part of the e-panel process. Results and feedback should be published openly to participants to encourage their ongoing involvement.

E-panels have the potential to enable local authorities to reduce their administrative costs – no paper questionnaires or postage is required, there are limited additional costs to run a focus group or live chat (just the cost of online facilitators), data input is not necessary and analysis is generally quicker and can be immediate depending on the type of e-consultation being used.

Case Study, Wolverhampton Partnership

Wolverhampton's Local Strategic Partnership established an e-panel in early 2005 to provide a way for all members of the partnership to gain community input through online consultations.

A number of recruitment activities took place including the use of a market research company to target local internet users, give-aways such as key rings and mouse mats, marketing materials such as posters and leaflets that were distributed through a range of public venues such as libraries and doctors' surgeries.

After the first year, three hundred and sixty people had been recruited to talk about issues from baseball caps and hoodies in shopping centres, to what issues scrutiny should consider and to participate in activities like a "Talk to your police chief" live chat and a webcast of the annual council meeting.

Top Tip From the evaluation of e-enabled Citizens Panels, Local eDemocracy National Project, 2005.

"**Striking the balance between interesting topics and topics which deliver useable results is important... Finding out issues/subjects people want to discuss is also very important – involve the people in the process.**"

E-panels

To implement this approach councils need: Time

Resources   £   £   £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources   £   £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:
Information   Medium
Engagement   Medium–High
Decision making   Medium–High

Google this "e-panels" "Ask Bristol" "YouGov"

Examples www.askbristol.com
http://consultations.wton-partnership.org.uk/inovem/consult.ti/system

2.4 Discussion Forums

Online discussion forums, sometimes referred to as message boards or even chat rooms, can be a key e-consultation tool. However, the mere suggestion that citizens might be allowed to add their own comments and content to a council's web site is enough to bring out many local authority Web Managers in a nervous rash.

Forums are usually organised as threaded discussions. This means that responses to an initial message, or post, are displayed sequentially in the form of a tree. Branches of the tree can usually be expanded or collapsed by clicking on a plus or minus, or some other symbol. This means that the whole "conversation" can be revealed in one go, or just the particular post that is of interest.

It is usual for people to read what has been written in forums for quite some time before they pluck-up the confidence to post a message of their own. This habit of quiet observation is known as lurking. A number of tools have been developed to keep lurkers occupied. Flags and buttons next to individual posts can be clicked-on to register agreement or support for the point being made. These features also mean that people don't have to go to the trouble of re-typing the same point if someone has got there first.

After a few weeks or months of lurking and clicking and more lurking, most people feel the urge to share their own point of view. And once they have made their first post, there is usually no holding them back!

A major decision about how forums are managed is whether posts are pre or post moderated. Pre-moderation means that comments, like cheques, are held in a suspense account until they have been cleared. Clearance is a manual process and requires the forum host (AKA the moderator or facilitator) to check that the message contains nothing offensive and is not in breach of the forum's acceptable use policy. Pre-moderation can be time consuming work. It is also frustrating and demotivating for forum participants if they have to wait several days for their message to appear.

Increasingly, major forum providers such as the BBC have gone over to post moderation. This means that all posts appear instantly. Other forum members are encouraged to report anything that they feel is unacceptable to the forum host who will make a decision as to whether the post needs to be removed. Risk adverse council Web Managers **always** prefer pre moderation. But Bristol's experience suggests that relatively few comments have to be removed, and the embarrassment of no comments in a forum can do more harm to the council's reputation than a couple of temporary expletives.

Case Study, the Banksy debate

Banksy is a celebrated street-artist whose work commands a very respectable fee. When Banksy recently left a cheeky offering on the side of a council building in Bristol city centre, the council launched an on-line discussion forum to investigate whether the public would like it to be treated as art or removed as graffiti.

In the first week of the Banksy "street art or graffiti" forum 246 users registered with the askbristol site and there were 315 unique user logins. This compares to just 19 new users and 61 unique logins for the whole of the month before (when we were consulting on sustainability and core cities issues).

One comment had to be removed as it contained offensive language but the vast majority formed an interesting and intelligent debate, resulting in overwhelming support for the Banksy to stay.

> **Top Tip** Carol Hayward, experienced forum Host.
>
> *"Don't underestimate the work involved in analysing and writing-up an online discussion forum. Leave plenty of time to read and summarise the main points that have been made."*

Online Discussions Forums Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time
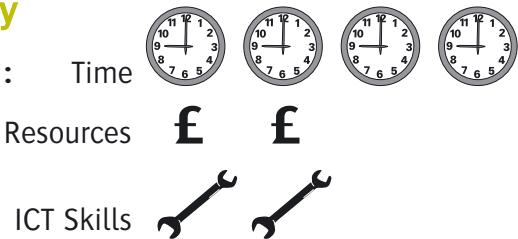
Resources £ £

ICT Skills 🔧 🔧

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources £ £

ICT Skills 🔧
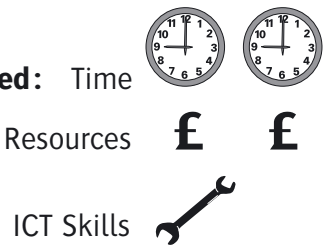
The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information   Medium–High
Engagement   Medium–High
Decision making Medium–High

Google this "IDeA knowledge" "BBC" "Ask Bristol" "Local Vision Forum"

Examples http://www.southwark.gov.uk/SouthwarkDiscussion/ShowForumGroup.aspx?ForumGroupID=15
http://services.salford.gov.uk/heritage-forum/

2.5 Deliberative Polls

Professor James Fishkin invented Deliberative Polling™. It is a technique that combines small group discussions with random sample surveys to provide informed public consultation on complex policy issues. A number of Deliberative Polls have been conducted around the world. In the UK, central Government departments, notably DEFRA, DoH and DCA, have expressed interest in deliberative approaches to citizen engagement.

A deliberative method is one where participants are provided with a lot of information, time and space to absorb arguments for and against a course of action. For example, priorities for the health service, badger culling or trade agreements between America and Iraq. Small breakout groups are often used so that participants can exchange points of view. The principal benefit of using a deliberative approach is that it enables participants to reach informed, considered viewpoints at the end of the process.

"A deliberative process is one which provides participants with relevant facts, from various perspectives, time to discuss and think critically about the issues before them, and an opportunity to enlarge their perspectives, opinions and understandings" (Opinion Leader Research).

There is a general acceptance that new technologies can support deliberative consultation but as of yet, no one has fully worked out how! In the States, conferences have been held to consider developing tools for online deliberative democracy. In the UK, work is currently underway to develop an online application to support citizens juries, which are one of the most commonly used approaches to deliberative consultation, see
http://skdc.citizensjury.org.uk

Being a non-academic organisation, Bristol City Council has worked with a company called Community People to develop a "simplified" deliberative tool called eDecide. This forms the basis for our case study.

eDecide resembles a quick poll in that it poses a question and invites respondents to agree or disagree. However, whereas in a typical quick poll this is the end of the matter, eDecide "bites back". eDecide takes participants on a deliberative journey, presenting a series of pre-prepared arguments 'for and against the topic. The particular argument that the participant sees is triggered by their previous response. If a participant votes "yes" then a "no" argument is displayed. If they vote "no" the opposite will happen. Any number of arguments can be included for consideration before the participant is invited to cast a final vote – which is the one that is counted.

Case Study, eDecide

Bristol City Council has used eDecide several times, as part of our Height Matters consultation, in support of consultation on the proposed control of urban gulls and on cycling in the city centre.

In the gulls consultation we used eDecide to present a series of opposing arguments from a pest control expert and from the RSPB. EDecide helped bring balance to the debate, ensuring that all points of view were reflected and considered. Approximately 120 people participated.
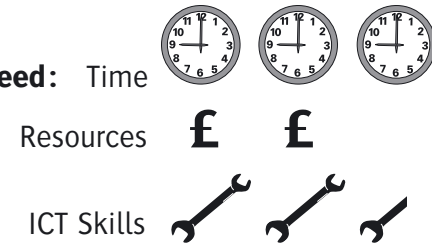
In our consultation on cycling we used eDecide as an innovative way to conclude an online discussion forum. The askbristol online panel had been debating the pros and cons of cycling in the city centre for several weeks. No overall consensus had emerged although the majority of participants appeared to be "anti" rather than "for". To close the discussion, we identified common arguments that participants in the discussion had raised. We programmed these in to an eDecide and invited all participants in the discussion to reconsider all of the arguments before reaching a final view. Approximately 80 people worked their way through the eDecide and interestingly, the overall balance of opinion appeared to change.

Deliberate Polling Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time   🕐 🕐 🕐 🕐

Resources   £ £ £

ICT Skills   🔧 🔧 🔧

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources £ £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:
Information High
Engagement High
Decision making Medium–High

Google this "Centre for Deliberative Democracy" "Stanford University" "eDecide" "argument map"

Examples www.defra.gov.uk/news/2006/060712b.htm

2.6 Live (VIP) Messaging

You no longer have to be a parliamentary bigwig to debate policy with Tony Blair. The Prime Minister, a self confessed technophobe, has recently been happy to make himself available to us, the public, through live online messaging.

Live online messaging enables members of the public to have "real-time" online discussions with "VIPs" such as our political representatives, other decision makers, or recognised experts on a particular issue.

These chat sessions employ "instant messaging" technology similar to MSN Messenger. Live messaging can operate through dedicated software or via a web browser. The advantage of running your software through a browser is that users don't need to download and install a new application.

In order to take part in a VIP session, users are required to register their details and log in with their unique user ID or user name. In an open session individual users' comments can be identified by their ID. The VIP may also conduct live messaging sessions as private conversations with individuals or groups.

As your VIP and participating citizens need to be logged-on to the system at the same time to take part, these "chats" need to be widely advertised in advance as specially scheduled events. Sessions will typically run for an hour or until the questions dry-up.

The private VIP chat model has been used to recreate an online version of the offline MP or Councillor surgery. A real or automated administrator who organises the queue of users as they log on, transferring them to chat directly and privately with the VIP as their turn comes up, manages the process.

A transcript of an online chat session can be generated but as the content, particularly of private chats, might be sensitive these should be managed with discretion.

Group chat sessions allow individuals to pose questions to the VIP and receive answers, all of which are visible to other logged on users. You should be prepared for a lively discussion! It's best to set out clearly what is acceptable, and have users sign up to this as part of the registration process.

If you are intending to run an online chat you may want to check your VIP's typing speed and if it isn't up to scratch provide someone else to type the responses they give.

Case Study, Kingston's Virtual Surgeries

Live online chats were trialled as a method to increase political engagement among young people in the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames.

The sessions, modelled on traditional political surgeries, allowed for private online messaging between young people and elected representatives across all tiers of Government.

Through five surgeries, sixty young people communicated one-on-one with MPs, local councillors, Greater London Assembly Members and their Member of the Youth Parliament. Topics discussed included graffiti, spaces for young people, Iraq and careers.

The surgeries proved an effective and popular event, resulting in the young people involved demonstrating a greater interest in politics and their politicians.

Top Tip Kate Watson, Consultation and e-Participation Officer.

"If your VIP is uneasy with the technology or the process of the online chat it's a good idea to have a practice chat session before the real event to make them feel more comfortable."

Live (VIP) Messaging Summary

To implement this approach councils need:
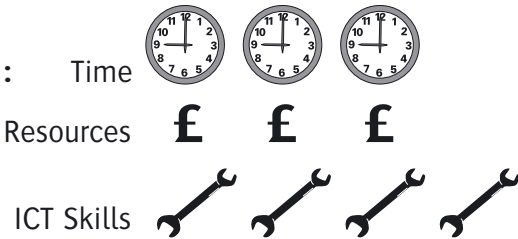
Time 🕐 🕐 🕐

Resources £ £ £

ICT Skills 🔧 🔧 🔧 🔧

To participate in this approach citizens need:

Time 🕐 🕐

Resources £ £

ICT Skills 🔧 🔧 🔧

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information Medium
Engagement High
Decision making Low–Medium

Google this "Online surgeries" "Hansard Society" "Royal Borough of Kingston" "Online Chat" "Instant Messaging"

Examples http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk/edemnews/onlinesur.htm
http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/node/view/475

2.7 Interactive Voting

Add a bit of drama and excitement to your meetings with interactive voting. Pioneered on TV shows, the technology equips each audience member with a voting handset so that opinions can be displayed instantly – now there's no place to hide!

Questions are normally created by inserting question objects in MS PowerPoint, so it's a bit more difficult than producing a normal presentation. The handsets are wireless and communicate to a portable base station. Results are displayed instantly on a screen, through a laptop and projector. Care needs to be taken to ensure all this is done correctly, as "no shows" are embarrassing and stressful!

Interactive voting is used by some councils in their council chambers eg London Borough of Hounslow, and more commonly at participation events, where it can improve attendance and make for a more enjoyable experience.

Interactive voting can change the dynamic of a meeting, often in a positive way, just be prepared for these phenomena. The vocal ones can often hijack public meetings – you know the type, the retired lawyer who is an accomplished public speaker. To the observer, the opinions of the vocal few can appear to be the majority opinion in an event. Interactive voting often shows opinion is more divided or contradicts the eloquent or noisy. So, it gives a true reflection of an audience's views to your questions.

Interactive voting generates instant results to questions. The audience sometimes expects that their "vote" determines the course of action for a council, so care needs to be taken to inform the audience how their views will be used. The immediacy of the results can energise a meeting, but equally there is no PR filter for the results to go through – a good thing some of you might say! The Consultation Manager also benefits from getting more focused results than an open public meeting by deciding the questions, however, you could face an angry mob if you don't allow sufficient opportunities for free expression.

There are a limited number of suppliers in the market and costs can be quite prohibitive. Some councils have bought their own kit and manage smaller events themselves. The initial outlay for your kit can be expensive, but you can get good return for your investment. Other councils hire in a supplier to handle interactive voting for them. The equipment is portable, some more than others, and can be easily transported to road shows and events. Some councils have wired up their council chambers and routinely use interactive voting in debates and committees. The most forward-looking councils have combined this with webcasting – impressive stuff.

Case Study, Devon County Council

Devon County Council bought a handheld voting system in 2005 from Cat and Mouse, who run the voting technology for "Who Wants to be a Millionaire". Since buying it we have certainly recouped the cost – using it for all kinds of events from access consultation with the deaf community to fun quiz shows (complete with compére) at the county show.

Most recently we have used it to help us engage with young people – one example being at a weekend-long event for young people organised by the Youth Service. This included a "Question Time" event where questions submitted by young people were put to a panel of decision makers, including our Chief Executive.
After discussing each question the 120-strong audience were able to vote on the issues through the keypads, which kept them engaged and interested throughout the event – a marked comparison to the same event last year (without interactive voting) when there were less than 10 people remaining by the end!

Top Tip Philip Higgins, Interactive voting expert.

"Keep your questions short & snappy and don't ask too many – if the audience has to plough through lots of long-winded questions and answers they will soon lose interest – despite the fun technology!"

Interactive Voting Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time
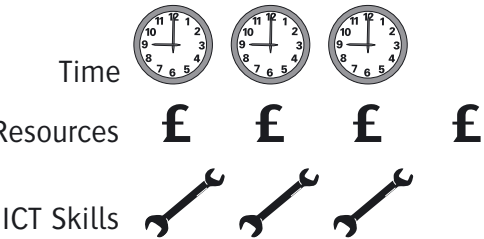
Resources   £ £ £   £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources   £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information   Medium
Engagement   Medium–High
Decision making   Medium

Google this "IML" "cat and mouse TV" "audience response system" "ask the audience"

Examples www.iml.co.uk/pages/Easington-District-Council/easingcase/default.htm

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2.8 Street Kiosks

Go to most major UK cities and the chances are you will encounter an on-street kiosk. These can be used to inform the public about a have-your-say opportunity or host one of your e-consultation tools eg an online survey.

Councils have been providing public access terminals at tourist information centres and transport hubs for many years, however, a growing number of cities now have on-street networks of terminals. These are often provided by, or in partnership, with a major advertising company like City space (a subsidiary of Clear Channel). The new on-street networks normally provide a range of news and information services, including council information, and advertising for visitors and residents. Experience shows young people are attracted to them if they include free email and video messaging.

Kiosks could be useful with consultations in the informing phase, as part of a range of techniques to get the message out, and as a delivery medium for an e-consultation tool like an online survey. Experience in Bristol shows higher use of the information kiosk, or I+ kiosk, as it's known locally, near the University of Bristol. The enthusiasm of younger people to use the kiosk may make it more suited for e-consultation with younger people. Also, the anonymity of the kiosks has been used by Women's Aid in a domestic abuse survey.

Kiosks' high use amongst visitors to a city would make them ideal for a visitors' survey. Care should be taken with use of on-street kiosks: they could add to the information mix and add a "channel" to the way you deliver your e-consultation tool, but they will not be the main method you use.

The most obvious e-consultation tool which could be used with on-street kiosks is an online survey. Street kiosks normally incorporate touch sensitive screens. Online content for kiosks usually has to be customised to be easy-to-use – making it simpler with big buttons and obvious navigation. This means your

online survey may have to be re-written in a different format to work properly on a kiosk which could add to the cost. You may also have to remove some questions eg free-text questions that won't work as well on touch-screen kiosks.

If your on-street kiosk has been provided in partnership with an advertising company, you may also need to pay for the on-street kiosk to host your survey. To attract people to your consultation, you will need to ensure it is clearly signposted from the welcome screen on the kiosk – again, there may be a charge for this.

Case Study, I+ Points

With these on-street kiosks, provided by advertising giant Clear Channel, popping up all over the place, councils can take their questions on the street with its quick poll facility. This is prominently promoted on the welcome screen on these kiosks.

Like a quick poll on a website, councils can use them in a wily way to promote consultations, current initiatives and if there are none of these, ask their local population about a national issue.

The kiosks could host more complete surveys, but these would have to be adapted for the touch sensitive screens. This was done in 2002 as part of Womenspeak, a UK government backed consultation supported by Women's Aid and the Hansard Society, which aimed to use new technology to find out the views of women experiencing domestic violence. The survey attracted over 140 responses and was noted for the anonymity it afforded respondents – there was no trace on the home computer.

On the I+ points, this experiment in on-street kiosk surveying doesn't appear to have been repeated – an opportunity, perhaps, for future innovation?

Street Kiosks Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time

Resources £ £ £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:
Information   Low–Medium
Engagement   Low–Medium
Decision making Low–Medium

Google this "city space" "I plus"

Examples http://www.cityspace.com

2.9 SMS Text Voting

Mobile phone penetration is higher than Internet usage with practically every young person possessing one and a good proportion of older people too. TV has blazed the way by using SMS text voting in shows like Big Brother. Government and public authorities are now starting to catch-up, using this approach to engage with young people in particular.

SMS voting differs from SMS alerts as the audience decides the result rather than merely receiving information. The two can be combined for greater impact.

Succeeding with SMS voting is all about choosing the right issue and in turn identifying a clear group who will take part in the vote. You are more likely to have a successful vote if the outcome decides something, preferably instantly. To mount a successful vote, will also require plenty of publicity. An example of a recent successful SMS vote was the elections for the Southampton member of the UK Youth Parliament. We'll look at this in the case study, but you can see how the selection of a clear issue and audience with a decisive result determined by voters contributed to the success of the election.

In choosing an issue, you need to think about what sort of security may be required. If it's important to try to eliminate repeat voting, you may need to issue unique voter codes to your sample.

Typically, you will need to enter into an agreement with an SMS company to support your SMS vote; there are several to choose from. The company will need to create a mobile number for each answer option – these could be short codes or full-length mobile numbers. Voters then send an SMS text message to the number that corresponds with their choice. If you are planning a secure poll, voters will also need to send their voter code.

Normally, voters will have to cover the cost of sending in the SMS text. However, this may not be a huge barrier as many people receive a large number of texts bundled in with their mobile phone package. If cost is a concern, it is possible to arrange for SMS texts to be reversed-billed to a central number.

Finally, check if your technical partner provides a secure web site through which you can log-on and check the progress of the vote. Once the voting is closed, the web site should also allow you to send out a bulk SMS text notifying participants of the result.

Case Study, Southampton Youth Parliament

In 2005 Southampton's Youth Involvement and Consultation Partnership and their technical partner, iMeta achieved a 1,775% increase in voter turn-out in the election for the Southampton member of the UK Youth Parliament, in part thanks to iMeta's e-voting platform, Mi-Voice which allows an electorate to cast a secure vote by SMS.

They revamped the process for electing a Youth Parliament member and implemented SMS voting as the only way to vote. SMS voting was particularly appropriate for the young audience in this election, largely mobile owning and accustomed to using them. The organisers of the election also benefited from the cost savings in voting electronically.

Running a credible, secure vote was vital in this issue and so unique voter codes were issued to the young electorate. This enabled iMeta to automatically detect any duplicate voting. As the votes came in, the organisers of the election were able to monitor progress on a secure website. So, Daryl Hickman became the first member of the UK Youth Parliament to be elected entirely by SMS voting, in a process verified by Southampton City Council's Returning Officer.

Online Surveys Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time

Resources £ £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources £

ICT Skills
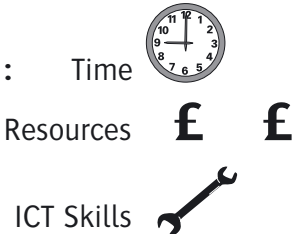
The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information Low
Engagement Low
Decision making Low

Google this "SMS vote" "Big Brother" "iMeta"

Examples www.kirklees.gov.uk/itex

section 3

e-participation, learning to fly

If consultation offers a choice between two or more pre-determined options, participation offers greater say in the options that are being consulted on.

For many community engagement professionals, genuine participation is the ultimate goal and consultation will only ever be "participation-lite". However, such a view fails to understand that both consultation and participation have their place in the workings of busy public authorities.

The main difference between consultation and participation is how much freedom or willingness the authority has to relinquish control over the outcomes. Consultation on known options will, of course, deliver no surprises. On the other hand, participation may result in ideas or options that the authority has not considered. This can be enlightening but some ideas may prove impractical or will be unpalatable to local authority decision makers. Therefore, for participation to deliver tangible benefits for all, it is particularly important that participation exercises are underpinned by good quality information setting out known opportunities and constraints.

Participation can also be more demanding on the "participant" than consultation is on the "consultee". Whilst this is not always the case, sitting on a citizens' jury for 2 weeks, considering evidence from a range of witnesses before attempting to reach a consensus decision with your fellow jurors is clearly more demanding than filling in a quick online survey about bins. Consequently, it can be particularly difficult to encourage all sections of the community to participate equally and at worst, participation exercises can become dominated by older, articulate, financially comfortable participants.

As with e-consultation, e-participation can help broaden engagement. By using technology to make the process more manageable and more convenient for the time-poor, e-participation can open up the debate to people who would not be able to participate otherwise. But this is not the end of the story.

Participation is frequently based on passion; strong feelings or first-hand experiences leading to a desire to bring about change on an issue or in an area. Technology can help channel this energy in a constructive way. Without this direction, strong feelings can easily turn to frustration and leads to anger and conflict. Through e-participation, people who feel strongly about an issue can seek out each other, whether they live in the next street, town or country. They can make contact and try to move things forward. Some will succeed, some won't but if nothing else, participation is about trying.

The following section describes some different approaches to e-participation. Some require little from authorities other than a willingness to listen. However, as well as being top-notch service providers, Government increasingly expects councils to act as community leaders. Active listening is central to successfully fulfilling the community leadership role and fortunately, e-participation is here to help.
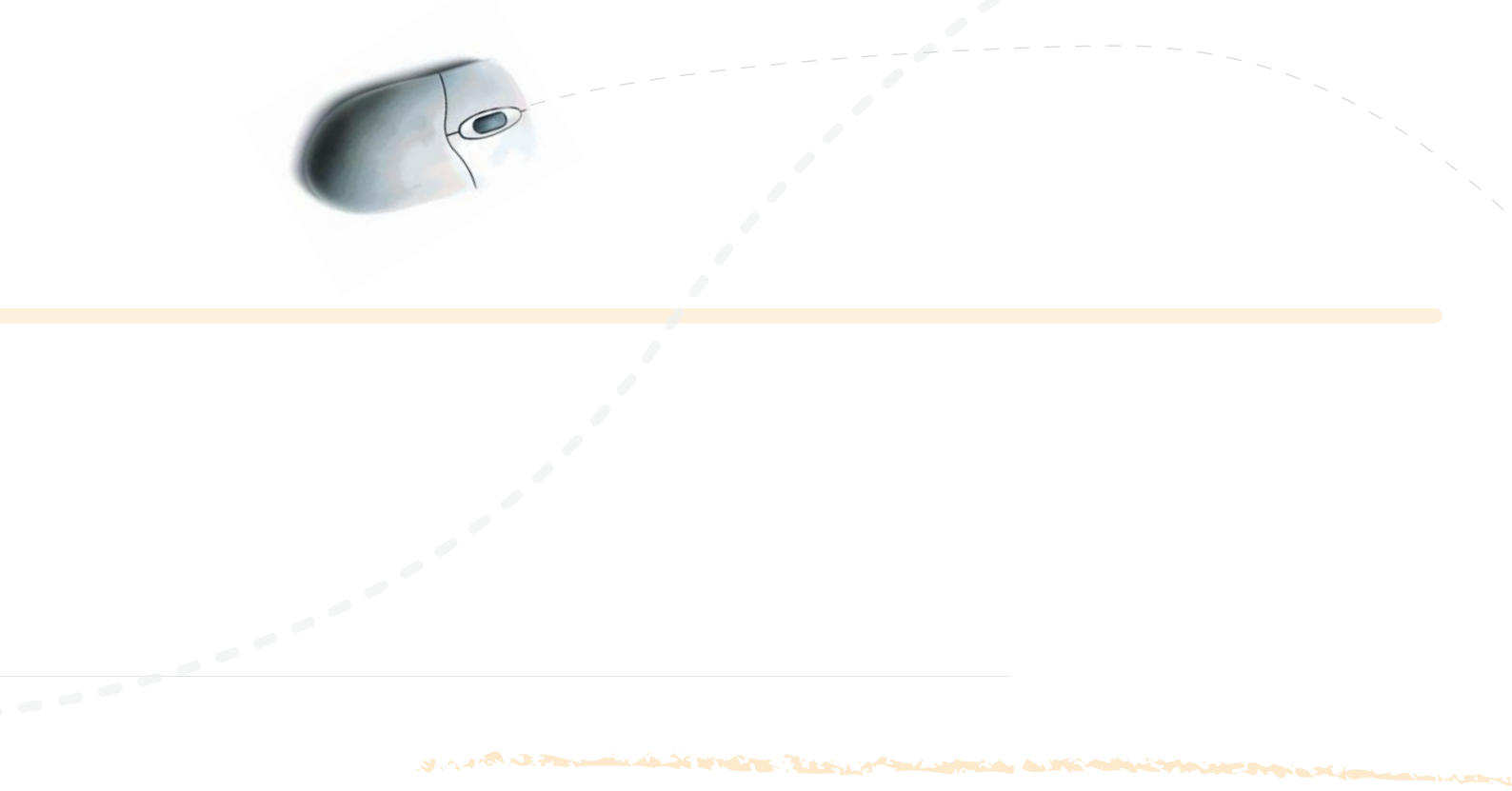
3.1 E-Petitions

For centuries, governments have kindly allowed citizens to voice opinions through petitions. E-petitioning brings this 'human right' into the twenty-first century.

E-petitions can be started, read and signed on the web. An e-petitioner application is used to create and host e-petitions that could include associated online discussion forums, email updates and feedback web pages.

E-petitions are more open and visible than their paper-based equivalent. E-petitioning offers greater opportunity for informed debate, provides increased transparency in decision-making and can lead to sustained community engagement.

An effective e-petition contains a well thought out "request" – what it is that the petitioner wants the council or accountable body to do (or stop doing). It includes the name of the e-petition owner(s) and lists the supporter(s). An e-petition is valid even if one person supports it. However, the greater the number of signatures the more likely the e-petition is to be taken seriously and to have impact.

The e-petitioner application is easy to use but every e-petition needs to be checked against an acceptable use policy before it can be made live.

Once visible on the e-petitions web site, people can show support by adding their name, e-mail and postal addresses to the e-petition. Personal details can be displayed or can be submitted in confidence.
This information is subject to basic verification checks at a later stage so the level of reliability of an e-petition can be gauged.

When someone signs a paper petition this is usually the end of their involvement. E-petitioning is more engaging and is habit-forming. If someone is uncertain about supporting an e-petition they can email the owner for clarification. Supporters can also interact with the e-petitions web site, checking on progress, reading and adding to online discussions and receiving feedback once the e-petition has concluded. If someone strongly disagrees with the e-petition they can say so online or even start a counter e-petition.

Following an e-petition's close, a report is produced setting out the number of signatures, their reliability and summarising discussion comments for and against. It is the e-petition owner's responsibility to present the petition to the council. In many cases, the local councillor will agree to do this. Feedback on the results of e-petitions should always be published on the council's website.

Case Study, Bristol's e-Petitions

Bristol City Council offers public access to most committee meetings and has a well-developed consultation strategy. The council began using e-petitions in 2004 as a way of extending democratic arrangements. The council worked with Napier University to adapt the Scottish Parliament's e-petitioner. Bristol and Kingston became the first UK local authorities to pilot this approach.

Between September 2004 and July 2006, Bristol received 39 e-petitions with more than 10,000 people taking part. Subjects have ranged from ID cards to bridge closures, pedestrian crossings to street art. The e-petition attracting most support concerned plastics recycling. More than 4,600 people signed this e-petition in just 11 weeks. What's more, it was started by a councillor and responded to by an Executive Member from the same political party. Monitoring shows that e-petitioning is used by men and women, the young and old from all parts of the city. Many say they have never signed a petition before.

Top Tip Carol Hayward, e-Democracy Project Manager

"Make sure councillors know how to use e-petitions. In Bristol, councillors in non-executive roles successfully use e-petitions to raise the profile of policy issues affecting their wards."

E-petitioning Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time

Resources £ £ £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources £ £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information Medium
Engagement Low–Medium
Decision making Medium–High

Google this "Epetitions" "Scottish Parliament" "Bundestag" "International Teledemocracy Centre" "Ann Macintosh"

Examples www.bristol.gov.uk/epetitions
http://epetitions.kingston.gov.uk
http://petitions.pm.gov.uk

3.2 Pledges

Pledges are a useful tool for citizens who feel strongly about particular issues to take action without the fear of being the only person to do so. The aim of pledgebank.com – the main portal for pledges in the UK – is to help citizens overcome feelings of powerlessness by connecting them with other people who also want to bring about change. Tools such as pledgebank.com enable individuals to build communities and networks around issues, recognising that groups of people can achieve more than an individual.

The way pledges work is very simple. A citizen can start a pledge on any issue, specifying an action they will take if a specified number of other people agree to take similar or complementary action. For example, you could pledge to write to your local council about a particular issue but only if 20 other local people do the same, or you could pledge to organise an event or rally but only if 50 people agreed to attend. Other members of the public can then sign-up to support the pledge and/or leave comments, thus encouraging debate around issues, as well as action.

Pledges are about people taking action and getting things done by organising collectively. Within this scope, the applications of pledges are limitless. Example pledges on pledgebank.com include: a business in Rutland promising that it will recycle all its waste paper, but only if 3 other local businesses do the same; a library user who promises to set up a British Library users group, but only if 20 more people promise to join the group; and a pledge from Tony Blair promising that he will become the patron of a London community sports club but only if 100 other public figures in London will join him by supporting other clubs.

Pledges are a flexible and inspirational way of encouraging citizens to engage in both their local and national community. Pledges can include things as diverse as organising groups or events, writing letters to decision makers, engaging in direct action (eg protests or rallies), changing behaviour (eg recycling or using sustainable energy), and making charitable donations (in terms of either time, money or skills).

Whilst there is no guarantee that citizens will fulfil the pledges they make, it is likely that fostering networks between people with common concerns acts to motivate people who may otherwise feel disinclined to take action alone. Indications are that pledges are successful in achieving this aim. For example, **pledgebank.com** surveyed a collection of financial pledges and found that typically three quarters of people fulfilled their pledge.

Case Study, Pledgebank

The pledgebank.com archives contain information on successful pledges ranging from campaigning for vegetarian marshmallows to protecting civil liberties. Pledges have been set up on local, national and international issues. An example of local government related pledges is a Brixton resident who pledged to **"send my newly elected councillor an email using www.writetothem.com asking that they review their current policy regarding the fencing off of events in Lambeth Parks but only if 15 other local people will too".**

The pledge creator provided background information on Lambeth council's policy of requiring events attended by more than 2000 people to be fenced off and how this had deterred organisers of free/charitable events from holding their events in Lambeth parks. 25 people signed-up to the pledge (10 over target), thus highlighting this particular pledge as a successful example of how pledges can be a useful tool at engaging citizens with local issues.

Top Tip From the Pledgebank FAQs: How many people should I ask for?

"We recommend that you pick the lowest target you can possibly bear to. Choose the number of people for which you could only just be bothered to carry out your part of the pledge. One more than the number where it wouldn't be worth it."

Pledges Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time

Resources   **£**

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources   **£**

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information	Medium
Engagement	Medium–High
Decision making	Medium–High

Google this "Tom Steinberg" "My Society"

Examples http://www.pledgebank.com

3.3 Photo Sites

It's often said that the camera never lies, which is a shame as sometimes it takes some pretty ugly photos. But now we can use images to share our views and impressions about local issues.

BBC Online has been publishing user-generated photographs alongside their stories for the past couple of years and has seen them generating growing interest and increasing impact.

As nearly everyone's mobile phone now has a built-in camera and nearly everyone has a mobile phone, most of us are now in a position to snap a photo at the drop of a hat and show it to our friends, families and neighbours. By uploading these images to the web we can just as easily show them to the world.

Photographs and comments can be uploaded to a photo site using three methods:

Via the web: Successful photo sites need to employ a strong content management system (CMS). A simple-to-use CMS allows users to upload and publish their images and add text comments very simply without needing specific knowledge of web languages. This method allows users to publish images from stand alone digital cameras and web cams as well as camera phones.

Via MMS: Users with Camera Phones can take a photo, add an explanatory text caption and send it, using the phones Multimedia Messaging Service, to a given recipient.

Via Email: Perhaps the most straightforward method of getting a photo published is by sending it attached to an email to an email address. Appropriate explanatory text can be added in the body of the email. Again, digital images captured with a variety of tools can be published in this way.

Although the technology would allow photographs and content to be published directly after a user submits them it is recommended that a moderator approve them first to prevent any inappropriate images being published on the site.

The copyright of submitted images can be a potential source of concern and is certainly worth taking advice on, being explicit about in the terms and conditions, and having users sign up to. Creative Commons provides a way for users to manage ownership and publication rights.

The BBC website requires users to grant them a royalty-free, non-exclusive and sub licensable permission to publish and reuse images uploaded to their site. Essentially this means they can reproduce images however and wherever they want, but that the user can too. The user retains the copyright to everything they contribute.

Case Study, Norfolk Life Swap

On the 18th October 2005, five councillors and five young people in Norfolk took part in the Life Swap initiative. The participants were provided with camera equipped mobile phones and every hour were prompted by a text message to take a photograph illustrating where they were and what they are doing. They added captions and uploaded it to a website **www.norfolklifeswap.org.uk** using MMS.

The project helped young people and their representatives to understand more about each others' lives and clear up misconceptions on both sides. The use of mobile phone cameras resulted in a raw and accurate view of young people's lives.

Fran Farrar, Deputy County Co-ordinator of Active Citizenship at Norfolk County Council said "**We need to think of new ways of engaging with people and in particular young people, to get them interested in local issues, and hopefully this will help with that**".

Photo Sites Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time 🕐 🕐 🕐

Resources   £   £   £

ICT Skills   🔧 🔧 🔧 🔧

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time 🕐 🕐

Resources   £   £   £

ICT Skills   🔧 🔧 🔧

The potential for impact of this approach on:
Information   Medium–High
Engagement   Medium
Decision making   Low–Medium

Google this "Norfolk Life Swap" "Love Lewisham" "Gallomanor" "You Tube" "Our Media" "My Space" "Your news, your pictures"

Examples http://www.beaconlifeswap.org.uk
http://www.lovelewisham.org

3.4 Video Views

It is not just what people say that is important, but also how people say it. Video Consultation projects are a powerful tool in humanising the consultation process and allowing people to express themselves and their opinions outside of the constraints of traditional and formal consultation.

With the emergence of vlogging, the creation of video content by everyday citizens is a growing phenomenon. Citizens are using web-based applications such as YouTube to upload and view video clips on subjects as diverse as fly-fishing, line dancing and local democracy. YouTube has said that its users are now watching more than 100 million videos per day.

Video consultation projects can capitalize on the popularity of this medium, encouraging citizens to engage directly with the council, making use of increasingly commonplace technologies such as video cameras, web cams and mobile phones. Video is an exciting and engaging medium that has the advantage of giving citizens editorial control over how their voices are represented.

Providing web platforms for the viewing of videos can add value to Video Consultation projects by providing a wide audience, stimulating further debate, and increasing the transparency of consultation processes. Decision makers can more easily access video views via a council-managed website, as opposed to searching the immense archives of sites such as YouTube for relevant content.

Video can be used by citizens in a variety of ways. As well as simply recording images of themselves speaking, citizens can record images of issues and problems in their local area. In this way the visual and "real" nature of video helps bring consultation "to life" for both citizens and decision makers.

Video Consultation has particular advantages for engaging groups of citizens who may not have previously participated. In particular, those with low literacy levels or learning difficulties may find video consultation a more appropriate way to express their views to decision makers. Hard-to-reach but technologically savvy groups, such as young people, can also be encouraged to participate via video consultation.

Case Study, Surrey County Council

As part of the Local e-Democracy National Project Surrey County Council explored the use of video to engage local young people in council processes through a series of filming events under the banner "More than just a Voice". The project aimed to engage young people aged 13–19 in dialogue with local councillors and to particularly target those in the age range who were considered "hard-to-reach".

A mobile video kiosk was purchased and young people were encouraged to make short (1–5min) films about issues that affect them. The project also worked with a group of young people from the traveller community to make a film and ran a number of studio-based events involving interviews with young people and with decision makers.

The videos were showcased on the **UrcountyURsay.net** website and there were regular webcasts to schools and the public.

Video Views Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time

Resources   £   £   £   £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources   £   £   £   £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:

Information   Medium
Engagement   High
Decision making   Medium

Google this "video consultation", "citizen journalism", "political vlogs" "you tube" "ninety second challenge"

Examples http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/youngpeople
http://www.mymanchester.net/videos/
http://www.dissidentvox.com/

3.5 Local Issues Forums

Local issues forums have been pioneered in the States. They are citizen-led online or email discussions, which ideally operate under a defined set of rules. Roughly speaking, issues forums follow the principles of an open public meeting, where anyone can talk about any subject or issue that is of interest to them. The concept has been around for many years and simple issues forums and listservs can be set up using free software such as yahoo groups.

In an issues forum a local citizen can raise an issue or ask a question, which is then published on the main forum pages. Other people can contribute to the discussion, through the website or by email, depending on the software. The forum highlights the topics that have been added or discussed most recently.

Maintaining forums with varied topics and ensuring that newcomers feel welcome can be difficult. Simply put, forum members are asked to "be nice" to each other. This should specifically refer to rules like no spamming, no offensive comments and no advertising. Some issues forums also restrict the number of comments participants can make in one day. This prevents one or two strong voices overwhelming the discussions and is seen to encourage other people to participate.

Ideally, a steering group should be established to oversee a local issues forum. This will help ensure the broad interest of the issues forum and help to attract a broad mix of participants.

Ideally, forums should be owned and run by the community rather than the council. The council can help facilitate the process by providing support or funding. Issues forums can be an invaluable way for a council to keep their finger on the pulse of local citizens' concerns about their local area. Members and council officers should be willing to contribute and respond to issues raised but should try to avoid dominating discussions or being overly sensitive to criticism.

If councils run their own local issues forums, it can be difficult to overcome citizens' cynicism and lack of belief that the council will be impartial to the comments received. There again, if the council is not represented, issues may never turn into action.

Case Study, Winona Online Democracy

Winona Online Democracy is an ongoing, community-wide discussion via email about issues that affect life in Winona. It began in mid-August of 2000 and includes a cross-section of community members, members of the media and local leaders such as elected officials, school board members, and state representatives. The goal of Winona Online Democracy is to give everyone a greater voice in decisions that affect the community, increase civic participation, and help to encourage more input into solutions to local problems.

Prior to launching the forum, 106 members were recruited to participate. This included a broad cross-section of the community as well as a good representation of elected officials, city administrators and community leaders. Two months after the launch date, the list had 170 members.

One important aspect of starting the project in a small town was that people felt more comfortable if they perceived the forum to be home grown. Particular effort was made to encourage elected officials and community leaders to join the list. Having these people involved not only provided credibility but also confidence that ideas and opinions will be heard by those that make the decisions.

Local Issues Forums Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time

Resources £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:
Information   Medium
Engagement   Medium
Decision making   Low–Medium

Google this "Steven Clift" "do wire" "yahoo groups" "phpBB"

Examples www.e-democracy.org/newham
www.e-democracy.org/brighton-hove   www.hotwellscliftonwood.org.uk/forums.htm

3.6 Online Campaigns

Nobody knows their local community better than the people who live there. It can be frustrating when you feel that things could be done better in your area but you don't know how to get things changed.

In recent years people have become very energised by the power of national public campaigns, such as Make Poverty History, or environmental campaigns that are designed to change things for the better.

This sort of action can be just as effective at a local level if communities can organise themselves and find the guidance and resources they need. In fact, authorities increasingly recognise that community campaigning has the potential to be a direct and powerful method of finding out what their local communities feel.

Local Authorities have an obligation to be Civic Leaders. To do this successfully, authorities need to create an environment where citizens and community groups can actively introduce issues that concern them into the council's policy and decision-making processes.

One of the key dilemmas that authorities face is that there is an uneven playing field. Established community groups are likely to have greater access to resources than individuals or newly formed groups, and are therefore likely to be able to communicate their issues or concerns more effectively.

Therefore, there is a need to inspire people who are probably not already democratically active to do something positive by starting a campaign quickly and easily.

Some authorities are recognising the benefits of providing online tools and guidance for all local citizens to help focus their ideas in a constructive way.

Case Study, Campaign Creator

Campaign Creator, a pilot project funded under the Office of the Deputy Prime Minster's e-Innovations grant fund and run by Bristol City Council, is an attempt to offer citizens resources to organise themselves around issues of shared concern.

The project put together a suite of online and offline tools and information resources to enable citizens, who don't have any experience of activism, to run a credible and serious community campaign.

Within 10 months of launch over 500 users had registered on the website to start a campaign. There has also been considerable international interest from campaigners in New Zealand, Canada, Tanzania, USA, Tajikistan, Cameroon, Nigeria, South Africa, Belgium, Ireland, Ghana, Australia and Switzerland.

A campaign was started using the Campaign Creator challenging the proposed name for the Broadmead Shopping Centre redevelopment in Bristol. "Merchants Quarter" was seen by some to be offensive because of its connotations with the city's slave trading past. The leader of Bristol City Council, Barbara Janke, publicly supported the campaign. The developers, the Bristol Alliance, decided to drop the name as a result of this public pressure.

Top Tip Emma Gorbutt, The Scarman Trust

"Word of mouth 'hype' is the best way to really get a campaign going, however email is probably the most efficient way to manage your campaign once it is off the ground."

Online Campaigns Summary

To implement this approach councils need: Time

Resources £ £ £ £

ICT Skills

To participate in this approach citizens need: Time

Resources £ £ £

ICT Skills

The potential for impact of this approach on:
Information   High
Engagement   High
Decision making   Medium–High

Google this "Community Campaign" "Friends of the Earth community" "BBC Action Network"

Examples www.campaigncreator.org
www.campaignon.com

conclusion
meeting the digital challenge

E-democracy is of course just democracy with an additional letter appended to the front. Sometimes there is also a hyphen. As with the 'electric' typewriter, the "electronic" calculator or the "HD ready" TV, the appendage highlights a step-change in the product on offer. Sooner or later, if the product is strong enough and it is marketed effectively, it will be taken-up widely. At this point, the appendage is somehow deemed unnecessary and it is collectively dropped. After six years of "e-democracy" in Bristol, we feel the time is right for it to become just "democracy".

We are now in a digital society where technology is rapidly changing the way we live, work and play. The public expects information to be free and instantly available. The notion that democracy could be anything over than "e" is barely worth defending.

More than this, citizens of the digital world expect two-way communication. They increasingly expect to be able to produce as well as consume digital content and services. Through a renewed emphasis on inclusive digital democracy, as a way of meeting the digital challenge, we hope to create a product that is widely valued and taken up. Not because it has been marketed effectively but because democracy has become the co-product of authorities and citizens working together.

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glossary

Acceptable use policy A broad set of rules and conditions that set out what is allowed and not allowed in an online environment.

Audioblogging Adding an MP3 file of your voice to your blog, rather than typed text.

Automatic routing Guides the respondent to a specific question based on the answer to the previous question.

Avatar An icon or representation of a user in a shared virtual reality.

Blog roll A collection of links to other web logs.

Blogoshere The world or community of blogs and bloggers.

Content management system (CMS) An online tool, which allows users to create and modify information on a web site, without needing to know any web programming languages.

Creative Commons (CC) A non-profit organization devoted to expanding the range of creative work available for others legally to build upon and share.

Deliberative poll An opinion poll conducted before and after respondents have been given information related to the poll's issues, as well as time to discuss and deliberate upon the information.

Discussion forums A place where people can exchange messages of common interest. A sense of virtual community often develops around forums that have regular users.

e-panels A form of citizens' panel that uses new technology such as discussion forums, online surveys, live chats, quick polls or votes.

e-petitioner application An application used to create a web page containing an e-petition.

e-petition An online request for a council or other accountable body to do something.

GIS Short for Geographic Information Systems. Tools used to gather, transform, manipulate, analyse, and produce information related to the surface of the Earth. This data may exist as maps, 3D virtual models, tables, and/or lists.

Instant messaging Allows registered and logged in users, with the appropriate software, to exchange real-time messages with other users over the Internet.

Listservs A way of communicating via email on various topics of interest by joining a particular email discussion group.

Media player software Software for playing back multimedia files

MMS Allows users to add multimedia clips (such as sound, pictures or graphics) to their mobile phone text message.

Moblogging Moblogging, or mobile blogging, is the process of adding content to your blog while you're out and about, usually via mobile phone. You can use your mobile phone to add audio, photos, and video clips right to your weblog.

MSN Messenger Microsoft-developed free instant messenging system used to have an online chat. Other messenging systems are also available but users need to be connected to the same system.

Permalink A term used in the world of blogging to indicate a URL which points to a specific blog entry. A permalink is accessible even after the entry has passed from the front page and into the blog archives.

Post-moderation All comments go straight to the e-consultation and the moderator typically monitors every 24 hours and removes any comments that breach the conditions of use.

Pre-moderation All comments are sent to a moderator who decides whether to accept them based on the conditions of use.

Quick poll Instant web based survey with a single question.

Quick poll editor On-line application used to create a quick poll.

RSS Short for either Really Smart Syndication or Rich Site Summary, it is an XML format for syndicating Web content. A web site that wants to allow other sites to publish some of its content creates an RSS document and registers the document with an RSS publisher. A user that can read RSS-distributed content can use the content on a different site.

Search tags Keywords used to identify the topics and concepts contained in the document.

Short codes Special telephone numbers, significantly shorter than full telephone numbers, which can be used to address SMS and MMS messages from mobile telephones.

SMS The Short Message Service is used to send text messages to mobile phones – either from a mobile phone or as a bulk message from a computer-based system to groups or individuals

Spamming The practice of sending irrelevant, inappropriate, or unsolicited postings or e-mails over the Internet, esp. indiscriminately and in very large numbers

Step through The ability to only view one or a limited number of questions in each step of the survey.

Streaming technology A technique for transferring data such that it can be processed as a steady and continuous stream.

Uniform Resource Locator (URL) The global address of documents and other resources on the World Wide Web.

User account Identifies someone using a computer system, often with a username and password.

Vlogging A vlog or videoblog is a blog which uses video rather than text for entries.