e-participation in local government

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comment from the
local government association

The development of e-democracy is an important aspect of democratic renewal. Local authorities have actively helped to set the participation policy agenda using more traditional methods and we are still at an early stage in understanding the possibilities of using new technologies for e-democracy.

It is because we recognise the importance of this agenda that the Local Government Association assisted ippr with the survey for this report. There is still much to be done, but we are encouraged by some of the findings. Eighty-three per cent of authorities use the Internet to invite feedback from citizens on the nature and quality of their services; 70 per cent of authorities use the Internet to invite views from citizens as part of their consultation and policy-making process, and 56 per cent make special attempts to publicise and promote the use of Internet consultation among their citizens.

We recognise that there is scope for increased sharing of e-democracy knowledge and promotion of e-democracy principles and practice and we hope that this ippr report will contribute to the debate on the development of e-democracy in local authorities.

acknowledgements

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executive summary

This paper presents primary research evidence into e-democracy practices in local authorities in England and Wales. It also sets out a series of Good Practice Guidelines which we hope will be of use to e-democracy policy practitioners and suggests a new e-democracy policy framework spanning local authorities, local authority support bodies and central government.

The paper argues that, despite extensive policy and research attention on local e-government, there has been far too little focus on the equally if not more important issue of local e-democracy. It also, in Chapter 2, argues that this is a serious omission since e-democracy tools and techniques could help local authorities to meet a series of current threats and opportunities.

The threats to which e-democracy is relevant are:

● *Disengagement from the political process*

   Participation in politics is at near crisis levels both locally and nationally. E-democracy may be able to do something about this crisis by facilitating, broadening and deepening participation.

● *Technological stagnation*

   It is becoming easier and easier to get online using a variety of devices from a variety of locations. The numbers of people going online are also increasing and so is the amount of time being spent online. Unless local authorities respond to this situation by putting citizenship opportunities online, they will increasingly run the risk of local political processes being out of touch.

The opportunities relate to the Modernisation agenda. E-democracy tools could be used to:

● improve the capacity of authorities to play a *community leadership* role

● maximise the positive effect and impact of *e-government*

● improve citizen engagement in *Best Value* processes, and

● improve and extend the possibilities opened up by *new political structures*

Despite the value inherent in future-proofing the political system and in grasping the potential benefits of e-democracy however, the research evidence presented in Chapter 3 shows that, with the exception of a few islands of good practice, e-democracy is currently in a highly undeveloped state. Survey evidence drawn from 235 authorities in England and Wales and follow-up research into a further 120 of them, shows the following key findings:

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summary of key research findings

- There are some islands of good practice, particularly on issues such as explanation of moderator roles to citizens, the privacy and data gathering statements provided by some local authorities and, in a few cases, partnership working with community groups
- However, e-participation traffic levels are low and are heavily concentrated on e-mail links between individual citizens and council officers.
- Use of interactive web-discussion spaces and e-mail discussion groups is taking place in very few cases
- E-participation efforts are not effectively marketed by many authorities
- The vast majority of authorities do not make clear commitments to citizens to respond to communications received over the internet
- Less than ten per cent of responding authorities are providing clear guidelines to citizens to set out what they can expect, and what their rights and responsibilities are, in e-democracy terms
- Not enough attention is being paid to attempts to make e-participation genuinely inclusive of hard to reach groups
- Few authorities use moderators in e-participation activity and even fewer provide any e-democracy training, either to moderators or to other officers or elected members
- Only one in five responding authorities are building online trust with citizens by explaining current data gathering practices
- Few authorities are actively seeking out community and voluntary group activity which they could either help to further develop, or collaborate with in public/voluntary e-democracy partnerships

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Given the demonstrated relevance of e-democracy to the local government context, and the undeveloped state of current e-democracy practices, the report argues that the evidence speaks for itself and clearly demonstrates that a new e-democracy policy framework is needed. Consequently, Chapter 4 of the report sets out a new policy framework with proposals for action aimed at local authorities, local government support bodies, and finally central government. The key policy recommendations are presented below.

the recommendations

Local authorities should:

- conduct a review, under the leadership of senior executive officers and elected members, of current e-democracy practices and draw up plans to bring those practices into line with the Good Practice Guidelines

- post-review, conduct new pilot online consultations

- gradually deploy e-democracy tools and techniques in a wider range of settings such as in support of scrutiny committees, as part of citizens panel work, in online Youth Parliaments and in Best Value reviews

- experiment with new e-functionality, such as providing options for citizens to set the local consultation agenda and, by combining web-discussion and online polling technologies together in the same initiative, by running new local neighbourhood democracy experiments designed to give people real influence on local issues

Local government support bodies should:

- provide an online resource base of innovative and successful e-democracy practice which policy officers and elected members in local government can use

● create a community of local government e-democracy practitioners able to exchange ideas and experience

● take a lead in developing, coordinating and providing e-democracy training initiatives

Central government should:

● make it a duty on local authorities to conduct experimental e-participation activities

● support local government e-democracy activity by running an e-democracy competition which all local authorities can enter and offer the winning authority a substantial additional resource with which to further develop e-democracy activities

● launch and fund a series of e-democracy pathfinder projects in areas of high disengagement with the specific intention of testing the capacity of e-democracy tools to deliver benefits in terms of democratic renewal

● provide additional e-democracy capacity building support to NGO and community groups

the Good Practice Guidelines

Both the empirical research conducted for this report, and some of the policy recommendations draw upon a series of Good Practice Guidelines developed by the ippr. We present them in brief here for easy reference. The full guidelines appear on page 19.

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the ippr e-democracy Good Practice Guidelines

Marketing: Citizens can only take part in e-democracy activities if they are aware of the possibilities. E-democracy initiatives must be well marketed to attract attention.

Responsiveness: If citizens are to take part in e-democracy activities, they need to know that their views will be taken into account and their complaints dealt with. Local authorities must be responsive to e-communications from citizens.

Published Rules and Guidelines: E-participation is a new form of participation and the rules of engagement are therefore not obvious. Published rules and guidelines are important to clarifying expectations and obligations.

Inclusiveness: To have any legitimacy in democratic terms, e-participation efforts must be as inclusive as possible and must not be allowed to become a channel where those who engage already can simply do so more easily and more conveniently.

Use of Moderators: E-participation, particularly as it relates to online group interaction rather than simply e-communications between individual citizens and their local authority, requires moderation. Moderation by an independent official can ensure that e-participation stays focused and useful and that any participation rules and guidelines are observed in practice.

Privacy: Privacy, and in particular a sense of freedom from surveillance and intimidation is important to democratic politics. In the digital age, privacy can be impacted by the data-gathering practices of local authorities. Consequently, it is important that authorities both respect privacy in any e-participation activities and communicate clearly their data gathering practices to the citizen.

Working in Partnership: Given the levels of current disengagement, local authorities cannot simply expect that building e-participation spaces on the internet will result in major increases in political involvement. Instead, they must work in partnership with NGOs and voluntary groups to develop successful e-democracy policies.

Training: The skills required to engage in e-participation must be recognised and training provided to develop them.

1 introduction

The first half of 2002 has seen the publication of a string of e-government reports from a wide variety of sources. High profile among these have been *Government on the Web II* and *Better Public Services Through E-Government*, both from the National Audit Office; *Councils and E-Government*, from the Audit Commission; and *Better Connected 2002?* and *Local E-Government Now, 2002*, from SOCITM and the Improvement and Development Agency. The DTLR also recently added further to the noise with publication of its welcome consultation paper on a strategy for local e-government.[1] Meanwhile, and against this backdrop, all levels of government have been busy with the attempt to get public services online by 2005 at the Prime Minister's behest and, galvanised by the need to produce IEG statements to the DTLR last year, local government in particular has been focusing serious energy on meeting the 2005 target.

What we have not seen in all this, however, is much by way of action or research related to e-democracy, a smaller but nonetheless important strand of the e-government agenda.[2] Beyond attempts to experiment with e-voting at local level, e-democracy has been largely invisible as a serious area of policy endeavour, despite continued rumours that central government intends to publish a consultation paper on the issue. Nowhere is this more evident than in the DTLR paper mentioned above. In a 109-page document, e-democracy is mentioned only a handful of times and, on each occasion, the focus of policy comments is dominated by reference to a small number of e-voting pilots. E-participation between elections, in policy proposal terms, is simply omitted and, in a footnote, effectively handed over as an area of responsibility to the Office of the E-Envoy. It can only be hoped therefore, that any policy emerging from the latter source, should one emerge, will provide a full assessment of the needs of local as well as of central government on this issue.

In one sense, this overall situation is not surprising. Central government is busy with the attempt to reform the core public services and even the high profile drive to electronic service delivery has been pushed lower down the political agenda by more pressing concerns. Local government, for its part, is going through a modernisation process of its own and is fully occupied with the attempt to transform attitudes and working practices with the limited resources at its disposal.

In another sense, however, this omission of e-democracy policy is worrying since it effectively turns the e-government debate into one focused on little more than the application of e-business processes to the public sector. It ignores the issue of how digital technologies can change the democratic aspects of the state-citizen relationship and indeed the ways in which e-democracy may be able to help in meeting wider policy goals. It also further questions the real extent of political commitment to respond and respond comprehensively to the onset of the networked world and is a situation which, precisely because of all of these weaknesses, should not be allowed to continue.

1 e-gov@local: Towards a National Strategy For Local E-Government, DTLR and LGA, April 2002.

2 The exception to this has been the extensive research work conducted by the Hansard Society E-Democracy Programme.

Consequently, in this short report, we attempt to redress some of the wider imbalance in the current e-government debate, at least in so far as it is impacting on local e-government strategy. We set out the strategic rationale for local government taking e-democracy more seriously and present a range of threats and opportunities facing local government which we

believe e-democracy can help to meet. We also provide primary research evidence into the current scale and character of existing e-participation practices at local level and assess those practices against a set of criteria of good practice developed for the purposes of the research. Finally, we lay out a set of policy proposals spanning local government, local government support bodies, and central government, in the hope of kick-starting a debate on e-democracy policy which both goes beyond e-voting and is grounded in the practicalities of what to do next and how to do it. In doing so, we hope to fill a policy gap and to contribute something of relevance to wider ongoing debates on modernisation and democratic renewal.

Clearly then, this document is aimed at those with a responsibility to provide the leadership and frameworks necessary to make further progress in local e-democracy policy possible. It also is aimed, however, at those engaged in attempts to develop e-democracy in practice on the ground at local level. We hope that the Good Practice Guidelines provided in Chapter 3 and the policy proposals set out in Chapter 4 will provide a new framework for policy practitioners to think through the kinds of e-participation policies which could be developed, the kinds of innovations in functionality which might be possible, and the range of authority activities to which e-participation is most relevant. The document is being distributed free to all local authorities in the hope that it will get used and is also being supported with case studies in innovative e-participation practice on the ippr website at www.ippr.org.

In terms of the structure of the report and the presentation of material, the bulk of the research evidence into current practices is presented in Chapter 3 with the policy proposals following on the basis of this in Chapter 4. First, however, in Chapter 2, we turn to the clarification of what 'e-democracy' means in practice and to the setting out of the strategic case for local government taking it more seriously.

2 what is e-democracy and why does it matter?

As a relatively new term in public policy debate, e-democracy is often used by different people at different times to refer to a wide variety of different types of activity. These activities encompass but go well beyond government to include phenomena as diverse as the online political activism of anti-globalisation protesters on the one hand and the conduct of online election campaigns by political parties on the other. Given this context, it is obviously crucial to have a clear working definition of e-democracy before one can usefully proceed with a discussion of what a more developed e-democracy policy for local government might look like. For the purposes of this discussion therefore, e-democracy is defined as *the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in support of citizen-centred democratic processes.* Both the technology and the terrain of politics which this definition is intended to capture are set out in Box 2.1 below.

box 2.1 E-Democracy: a working definition

E-Democracy involves the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in support of citizen-centred democratic processes.

The principle ICT of relevance here is considered to be the internet, accessible by a variety of devices such as PCs, mobile phones and interactive digital TVs.

Citizen centred democratic processes are taken to be those which allow citizen engagement in:
- the act of voting for elected representatives
- ongoing relationships with elected representatives
- ongoing relationships with the executive
- processes through which policies are formed
- decisions on service delivery and resource allocation
- processes by which legislatures may hold the executive to account
- a wide-range of non-governmental and voluntary activities

Furthermore, within the political terrain set out, the kinds of activity we have in mind when talking of e-democracy include some or all of the following:

- The use of e-voting technologies to create possible plebiscitary or direct democracy

- The use of online techniques to sample public opinion (such as through online surveys and polls)

- The building of online communities by NGOs and local community groups

- The use of website discussion spaces and e-mail discussion groups to stimulate online public deliberation and debate.

When defined in this way, it is our contention that e-democracy is particularly relevant to the current context of local government in at least two important respects. E-democracy

offers local government a set of tools which could help to manage the twin threats of political disengagement and technological stagnation on the one hand, and a set of tools with which to grasp key opportunities embedded within the modernisation agenda on the other. We deal with each of these threats and opportunities and set out the potential of e-democracy to do something about each of them below.

e-democracy and current threats to local government

Each of the key threats facing local government today is the product of a historical trend. While participation levels in democracy have been declining steadily across the western world, internet penetration and usage rates have been moving ever upward. This combination feeds directly into a powerful rationale for taking e-democracy more seriously.

e-democracy and disengagement

There can be little doubt that we currently face a serious crisis of democratic disengagement. While this does not affect the UK alone, it does affect the UK more than many other countries according to figures released in the Electoral Commission's 2001 Election report.[1] The UK came only 65th, for example, out of 163 countries, when ranked according to average turnout in *national* elections between 1990 and 1997. And, as we all know, UK national turnout slumped even further to an appallingly low figure of only 59.4 per cent in the 2001 General Election.

If anything, the situation in local government is even worse than it is at national level. Local government elections saw a 29.6 per cent turnout in 2000, falling from an average 41 per cent in the 20 years between 1976 and 1996. This situation comes perilously close to removing the claim of any local authority to speak with legitimacy as the authentic voice of its community and the slightly improved picture after the 2002 local elections is no reason for complacency.

E-democracy techniques are relevant to attempts to reverse this decline both through e-voting and through wider attempts to stimulate e-participation between elections. With regard to the former, research evidence indicates that difficulties or inconveniences associated with the voting process itself are to blame for significant numbers of people failing to exercise their right to vote.[2] Consequently, e-voting, particularly remote e-voting where the voter can cast a vote from a home PC, digital TV or mobile phone could have a major and positive impact provided security and electoral integrity concerns can be effectively managed.[3] The e-voting pilots run in the May 2002 local elections showed some positive signs in this regard, particularly in Liverpool, but further, larger scale trials are necessary.

E-participation on the other hand, defined as the use of tools such as e-mail discussion groups and web based discussion spaces, may have real potential to connect citizens with the political process *between* elections by facilitating, broadening and deepening participation in a variety of ways. E-participation can facilitate involvement, by making it simpler and easier for citizens to obtain information, follow the political process, scrutinise government and connect with the views and opinions of others. It can also make it easier for citizens to form groups of like-minded people and to campaign on issues of some importance to them. E-participation schemes can also broaden participation, by creating new channels of democratic inclusion which may make participation less intimidating and more inclusive of previously excluded or hard to reach groups. And finally, e-participation can deepen public involvement in political processes by increasing the frequency and enriching the content of dialogue between citizens, elected representatives and all levels of government.

The Swedish city of Kalix has become one well known example of a major and successful experiment in the use of e-participation tools. In 2001, the city authorities in Kalix were considering plans for a major city centre renovation project and used online deliberation

1 See *Election 2001: The Official Results* Politicos, London

2 In the post election survey conducted by MORI for the Electoral Commission, 21 per cent of non-voters said they had not voted because it was too inconvenient to get to the polling station, while a further 16 per cent of non-voters gave being away on election day as the main reason for not taking part. *See Election 2001: The Official Results*

3 In its recent report, The Independent Commission on New Voting Methods set out a wide range of security concerns in relation to remote e-voting but it also set out a wide range of measures through which many of these could be managed.

spaces to allow citizens to engage with local politicians and to express their views on the issue. Over a two week period, several channels of communication were used for consultation purposes but of those taking part, 86 per cent chose to use the internet channel. In total, 1200 residents out of a total population of 15,000 took part in the exercise. Not only was this a substantial level of involvement from such a small community but in subsequent evaluations 72 per cent of citizens reported that they had found the exercise a useful initiative.

e-democracy and the threat of technological stagnation
The second major threat is more a threat to local political processes than it is to local authorities directly, although any threat to the former is obviously bound to impact on the latter too. Here the concern is that local political processes will increasingly be perceived as technologically out of touch and will consequently be seen as irrelevant to the new ways in which people increasingly live their lives. This threat itself rests upon two key trends.

The first is that, in terms of technological development, we are moving into a world of easier to use, cheaper, more mobile and more functional networked devices. Increasingly, being online will not require the citizen to sit at a PC. It will be possible more and more to go online using a variety of devices which are available in ever increasing numbers and at ever reducing cost and which also can be used at home, at work and in public places or while on the move. Network connectivity is slowly becoming ubiquitous.

The second trend is that, despite the slight dip in the growth of home internet use toward the end of 2001, internet use continues to grow. Recent figures from the Office of National Statistics and OFTEL show that 56 per cent of the population has now used the internet and, crucially, that the amount of time being spent online is increasing.[4] Moreover, the younger generation continues to take to the networked world in especially large numbers. Despite the still relatively new nature of internet technology, the majority of 15-24 year olds are already using the internet from home and 82 per cent of this age group have accessed the internet at some time.[5]

It is clear then that both the trend of technological development and the behaviour patterns of citizens point to a world in which more and more people will be spending more and more of their time online.

The challenge to government, including to local government in this context, is to provide opportunities for people to behave as citizens in the online environment and to do so while popular perceptions of what the internet is actually for are still being developed. Not to take this opportunity would be to increase the likelihood, over time, of local authorities and local political processes literally being out of touch with the way people live.

4 See Office of National Statistics (ONS) *Internet Access: Households and Individuals* 30 April 2002 and *Consumers' Use of The Internet*, *Oftel Residential Survey* Q8 February 2002.

5 See *Internet Access: Households and Individuals* 30 April 2002, ONS.

6 The structure of the argument in this section is partly drawn from *Role Models for The Information Age* Foundation For Information Technology in Local Government (FITLOG), 2001. This is an excellent paper which attempts to get across the relevance of e-democracy to many areas of local government policy.

e-democracy and the opportunities of modernisation

The government's modernisation agenda overlaps in many ways with the desire and need to achieve democratic renewal already discussed. Modernisation is, after all, aimed at overcoming old fashioned attitudes and working practices to make local government more open, accountable, transparent and efficient. In practice, it consists of a number of policy initiatives covering community leadership, e-government, Best Value, and the introduction of new political structures to local authorities and e-democracy connects with, and potentially has something to offer, each of these strands of the modernisation policy agenda.[6]

e-democracy and community leadership

With regard to *community leadership*, the Local Government Act 2000 bestows upon councils a duty to prepare local community strategies which are designed to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas. This reflects an underlying shift in perceptions of the role of local authorities away from a view in which they are seen merely as deliverer of services to one in which they are seen as community leaders fostering debate, articulating a vision and acting as advocates for their communities. Guidance on preparing community strategies stresses the need to engage and involve local communities and councillors in dialogue and also the need for authorities to work in partnership with a range of other local bodies. Some of the e-democracy techniques already described in this chapter, particularly e-participation techniques, could and should be used to facilitate this process, to provide convenient easy to use ways for local people to make their views known and, moreover, to enable them to see and to understand the views of others. Such tools could also be used to provide work-spaces which bring together people from a variety of local organisations to foster cross organisational debate and understanding while laying the foundations for future partnership working.

e-democracy and e-government

E-government of course, is at least partly about the application of e-business techniques and infrastructures to the machinery of government. It holds out the prospect of providing highly personalised and convenient services to citizens whenever and wherever they need and want them. It also offers a cost effective opportunity to make more information more readily available to the public than has ever been the case before via publication on the internet. Consequently, if local government can successfully transform itself into e-government, the prize in terms of closer relationships with citizens, a better understanding of citizen needs, and subsequently the delivery of services that are life enhancing and meet the real needs of local people may be great.

Central government policy requires local government to grasp this agenda and to have all services online by 2005. Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 157 provides a method for assessing progress toward this target and also lists the types of transactions which are considered to be suitable for delivery in electronic form. Crucially, one of those types of transaction thought suitable is consultation.

As an excellent report published by the Foundation For Information Technology in Local Government (FITLOG) in 2001 made clear, therefore, e-government 'covers interactions as important for local politics as they are for local service delivery, and involves activities like developing online consultation and providing information' which can both inform wider discussions on service delivery and develop closer, ongoing and more meaningful connections between citizens, representatives and government.[7]

In practice, this means that e-democracy activities not only have the potential to be important and informative in shaping the e-government services that people want and need but also themselves need to be seen as an integral part of the e-government agenda in their own right.

e-democracy and best value

The Best Value regime is obviously currently being applied to local government to ensure that scarce resources are being used to maximum effect. This regime involves a series of fundamental service reviews which challenge how and why a particular service is being delivered, compare that service against the best examples of similar services being offered elsewhere, and assess the competitiveness of service costs given a particular level of service quality.

7 *Role Models For The Information Age* FITLOG, 2001.

Best Value also however involves a commitment to consult all sections of the local community on what the key Best Value priorities and objectives ought to be. Again, e-democracy tools are extremely relevant in this context since they can be used to create e-participation spaces which allow more people to take part in service related discussions in a way which does not require people to attend public meetings at set times and locations. They also have the advantage of allowing citizens to see and understand the views of others in their own community and to engage in debate over what the service priorities are.

e-democracy and new political structures
An important part of the modernisation of local government concerns the introduction of new constitutional arrangements designed to streamline, simplify and make more transparent the lines of political control and accountability in local government. At the heart of these new political structures lies a clear distinction between those exercising local executive power, the wider legislature, and citizens. This distinction in turn has created a number of distinct roles in the policy making process.

On the one hand, for example, the executive role involves the development of policies and budget proposals to put before full council. This itself requires extensive consultation with local people and a need to put before both the public, and non-executive elected members, suitable information to allow well informed deliberation and debate.

The role of non-executive elected members on the other hand, can be divided into two distinct areas, namely the need to scrutinise the activity of the executive, and the need to represent the interests of constituents. With regard to the first of these, overview and scrutiny, non-executive members are required to carry out a range of activities such as examining specific executive decisions, carrying out independent policy analyses, and investigating and reporting on any activities going on outside the council which have community significance. In terms of the second, representation of the people, elected members freed up from the previously excessive burdens of committee work are expected to invest more time in building relationships with their constituents and in coming to better understand and more ably articulate the needs and wants of those living in their areas.

Across this range of roles created under the new political arrangements, e-democracy tools have real relevance and potential benefits to offer. As far as assisting the executive goes, e-democracy tools can be used to create consultation spaces to link the executive directly to members of the public and can also be used to improve the quality of information flow and therefore the quality of the consultation process itself. This could significantly add to the openness and transparency of the policy making process, particularly where councils are careful to give citizens a say at the policy formation stage and not simply at the 'response to draft' stage.

Elected members involved in overview and scrutiny committees could also use e-democracy tools to run online consultations both to access the views of members of the general public and to take evidence from people with expertise or experience of relevance to the issue being considered by the committee. This has already been tried at national level as the example in Box 2.2 below indicates and, when this kind of online consultation is well managed, it has the potential not just to make the policy making process more open and transparent but also to ensure that the content of policy itself is grounded in the practical experience and understanding of those either most knowledgeable about the subject or most likely to be affected by any subsequent policy.

This group took part in an online consultation in March 2000. The consultation included around 200 women survivors of domestic violence, a group which had not previously been involved in giving direct evidence to parliament in such numbers. The online format of the consultation provided a convenient and non-intimidating way for the women to feed their experiences into the policy process. MPs took part in the online consultation and a summary report of findings was prepared and subsequently passed to government for an official response.

See *New Media And Social Inclusion*, Stephen Coleman and Emilie Normann, Hansard Society E-Democracy Programme

Finally, e-democracy tools could be used, alongside more traditional techniques such as ward surgeries and community forum meetings to build closer relationships between ward councillors and the citizens they are there to represent. The forward looking representative will see e-democracy tools as one more way to be effective in understanding, articulating, and fighting for the needs and aspirations of local electors.

conclusion

It is clear then, that e-democracy is relevant to many policy challenges currently facing local government. Indeed, in relation to that portion of the e-democracy agenda which is concerned with electoral procedures and the election of local representatives, the government has already responded with new policy innovations. Over the last two years it has allowed a series of e-voting experiments to take place in local council tax referenda and ward elections and, most recently, allowed several remote online voting pilots to go ahead in the May 2002 local elections. E-voting has also recently been the subject of at least one good recent research report.[8]

However, by comparison with the attention paid to e-voting, e-participation has received relatively little attention from policy-makers. While it occasionally enjoys a passing mention in policy documents with a wider focus, therefore, at the time of writing it had still not been the subject of a major policy document in its own right either at national or local government level. It also remains striking that, to date at least, there has been no systematic attempt to assess the state of e-participation practice on public sector websites, including those of local authorities, nor any coherent framework of principles or good practice guidelines set out which might influence and shape that practice as it emerges. All this, despite the fact that e-participation tools such as e-mail discussion groups and web discussion spaces have the potential to assist local authorities in meeting the variety of threats and opportunities currently being faced. The remainder of this report therefore attempts to fill something of this policy gap.

8 See *Elections in The 21st Century: From Paper Ballot To E-Voting* The Independent Commission On Alternative Voting Methods, Electoral Reform Society, 2002

3 local authority e-participation practices

In this chapter, we present the findings of research carried out into the current e-participation, as opposed to e-voting, practices of local authorities in England and Wales. The evidence presented is the result of work conducted in late 2001 and early 2002 using a variety of methods including a survey questionnaire to all local authorities in these areas, follow up telephone interviews with a smaller number of authorities, and reviews of relevant parts of council websites where this could add a further layer of detail.

We received 235 questionnaire replies after a mail out to all 410 local authorities in England and Wales. This represents a response rate of 57 per cent. We then conducted follow up research into 118 of the responding authorities. We believe the evidence base is therefore sufficient to provide a reasonable snapshot of the level and character of activity being conducted.

Before going into the research findings, it is important here to point up the principles and concerns which shaped the research and gave it its focus. Given the range of challenges facing local government as set out in the previous chapter, for example, we felt it important to research e-participation activity both as it relates to feedback channels on service delivery issues and as it relates to attempts to include citizens in policy deliberation, dialogue and debate. Both areas are important to councils and by researching the two as distinct areas, we are able to see whether there are noticeable differences in approach between the two.

We were also guided in the design of the research project by a set of good practice guidelines drawn up first on the basis of leading attempts at e-participation going on elsewhere and second after a wider reading of the available literature on e-participation. These guidelines are set out in Box 3.1 and, in combination with the influence of the local government policy agenda as set out in Chapter 2, they partly inform the structure and presentation of research findings in this chapter.

The research evidence presented below therefore is organised into four key sections. These include:

● local authorities' perception of their own activity

● citizen feedback via the internet on service delivery issues

● use of the internet for citizen input to policy consultation and debate, and

● current e-participation efforts and the Good Practice Guidelines

Marketing: For e-participation experiments to be a success, people need to take part and they can only do so if they are aware that the opportunity exists. One of the common reasons for failure in running e-participation activities is poor marketing. Consequently, any e-participation efforts must be publicised in an effective and targeted manner.

Responsiveness: Obviously, if no one in local government was listening or responding to communications received over the internet then there would be very little point in citizens attempting to use this channel. Citizens need to know both that specific complaints and points will be responded to and that, if they take the time to participate in an online discussion or debate, that there is some chance that councillors and officers will take note of the views expressed.

Consequently, commitments on responsiveness are a crucial part of good e-participation policy.

Published rules and guidelines: E-participation is a new form of participation and the rules of engagement are therefore not obvious. Both the citizens taking part, and those running e-participation activities on behalf of the authority need clarity on what is involved and what is and is not allowed or expected. This is particularly true in relation to participation in e-mail discussion forums or website discussion spaces but, in all cases, the citizen is entitled to know what his or her rights are and what he or she can expect both from the local authority responsible for managing e-participation activity and from other citizens by way of online behaviour.

Inclusiveness: To have any legitimacy in democratic terms, e-participation efforts must be as inclusive as possible and must not be allowed to become a channel where those who engage already can simply do so more easily and conveniently. Inclusive e-participation therefore requires specific attention to providing information and access to a variety of 'hard to reach' minority groups.

Use of moderators: E-participation, particularly as it relates to online group interaction rather than simply e-communications between individual citizens and their local authority, requires moderation. Moderation by an independent official can ensure that e-participation stays focused and useful and that any participation rules and guidelines are observed in practice. This can maximise the value to all involved, provided the role and behaviour of moderators is explained to participating citizens.

Privacy: Privacy, and in particular a sense of freedom from surveillance and intimidation is important to democratic politics. In the digital age, privacy can be impacted by the data-gathering practices of local authorities. Consequently, it is important that authorities both respect privacy in any e-participation activities and communicate clearly their data gathering practices to the citizen.

Working in partnership: Given the levels of current disengagement, local authorities cannot simply expect that building e-participation spaces on the internet will result in major increases in political involvement. Instead, they must work in partnership with NGOs and voluntary groups in their areas to develop e-participation spaces which address the needs and interests of the groups of citizens involved, and also assist those community groups to get online and begin using the internet for enhanced engagement in their own right.

Training: The skills required to engage in e-participation must be recognised and training provided to develop them. E-participation efforts can have their legitimacy damaged in their infancy by inappropriate activity and it is important to recognise this at the outset and to commit to identifying and providing the skills necessary.

local authorities' perception of their own activity

In order to gain some insight into what local authorities themselves thought of their own performance, we asked first for a view on whether each respondent felt their own council was doing enough. As Figure 3.1 indicates, a majority of respondents, 54 per cent, felt that they were.

figure 3.1 On balance, and in your opinion, does your authority place enough importance on developing ways of using the internet to engage with citizens?


54%   46%

☐ yes   ■ no
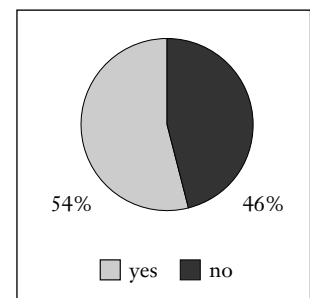
base All respondents (235)

This is an important finding not only because it tells us something about how authorities view their own performance, but also because consequently, when viewed against the rest of the research findings, it provides an insight both into the level of importance attached to e-participation activities in general and indeed, some insight into levels of awareness of what good e-participation practices might consist of. The key issue in terms of assessing this finding, then, is whether the confidence expressed by a majority of authorities is justified.

Citizen feedback via the internet on service delivery Issues

figure 3.2 Does your authority use the Internet to invite feedback from citizens on the nature and quality of services delivered by the authority?
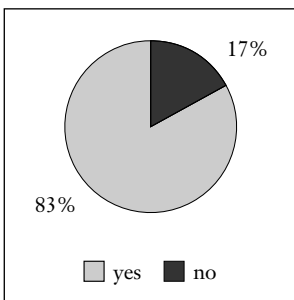
base All respondents (235)

Next, we turned to the scale and type of e-participation activity being used for purposes of local authority interaction with citizens on service delivery issues. In terms of the scale of activity, we asked first whether authorities actually did invite service feedback from citizens over the internet and the answer to this was a resounding yes. In total, 83 per cent of responding authorities invite feedback in this way (See Figure 3.2).

Within this, the type of internet communication most preferred by local authorities when dealing with service related issues, seems to be e-mail, and principally e-mail contact with council officers rather than with elected members. When asked, for example, which internet communications channel does the authority encourage citizens to use for feedback on service delivery issues, 81 per cent of respondents said that they encouraged citizens to e-mail a council officer. Only 56 per cent said they encouraged citizens to e-mail an elected member. Even fewer authorities, around 10 per cent, use anything more open and interactive, such as an e-mail discussion group or web discussion space, where citizens can not only communicate their views to the authority but can also see, understand, and respond to the views of other citizens (see Figure 3.3).

figure 3.3 Which of the following internet communication channels does the authority encourage citizens to use for giving feedback on service delivery issues?
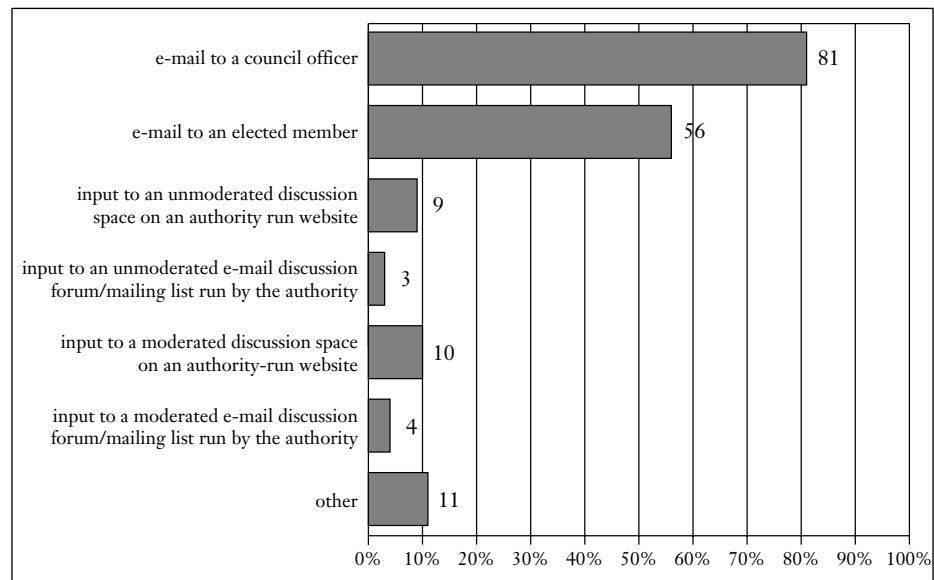
note Some authorities use more than one channel simultaneously

base All respondents (235)

Of course, the number of authorities inviting feedback and the number of citizens actually accepting the invitation are two different things. Consequently, we asked authorities next about the levels of traffic (judged by numbers of communications received each month), which were being experienced. Just over one quarter of responding authorities said they were receiving in excess of 50 communications per month. However, just over 60 per cent were receiving less than this and almost half of all responding authorities received 25 communications or less per month over the internet on service feedback issues (See Figure 3.4).
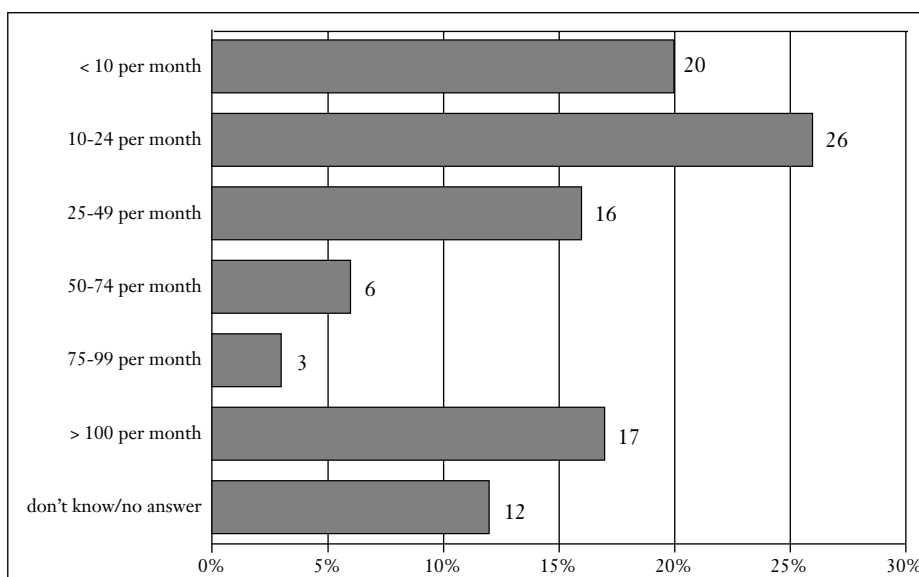
Traffic levels then, are not high, and clearly the internet is not the main channel of communication between citizens and local authorities at this point. Nevertheless, some authorities are experiencing substantial traffic levels and, as the internet becomes more embedded in everyday life, the number doing so can be expected to increase.

Moreover, in terms of local authorities' preferred mechanism of response to feedback received over the internet, the vast majority, some 83 per cent respond using e-mail. Over half also respond to internet communications with letters sent to the individuals concerned and a further 15 per cent respond via use of a council newsletter. Less than ten per cent respond by posting a message back to a source such as an e-mail discussion group or web discussion space, reflecting the low level of activity being encouraged in such spaces by local authorities in the first place (see Chart 3.5).
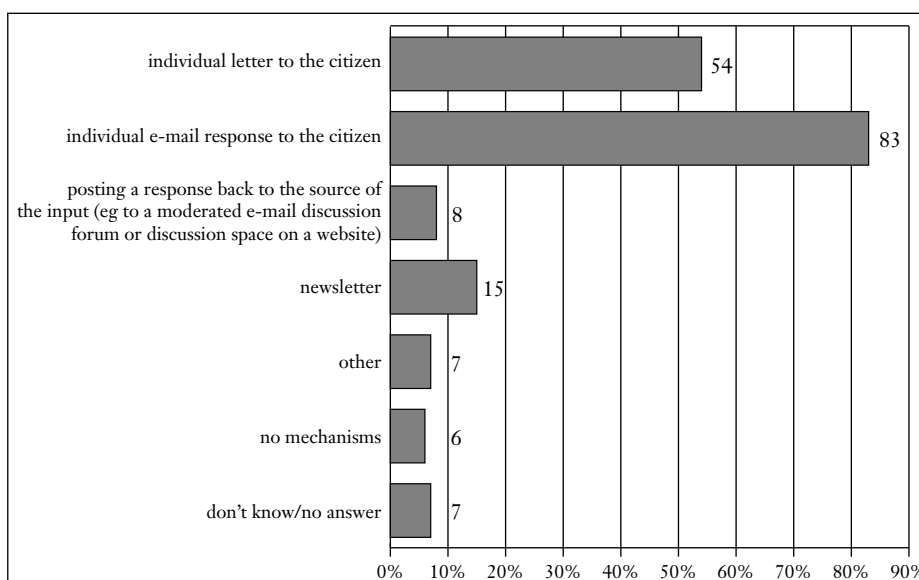
The general picture on the scale and type of local authority interaction with citizens over the internet for purposes of securing feedback on service delivery issues then is one of still relatively low traffic levels, a heavy authority concentration on e-mail contacts between the council and individual citizens, and a greater emphasis on the role of council officers than on that of elected members. Facilitation of citizen to citizen contact and use of e-mail discussion groups and web discussion spaces is evident only on a very limited scale.
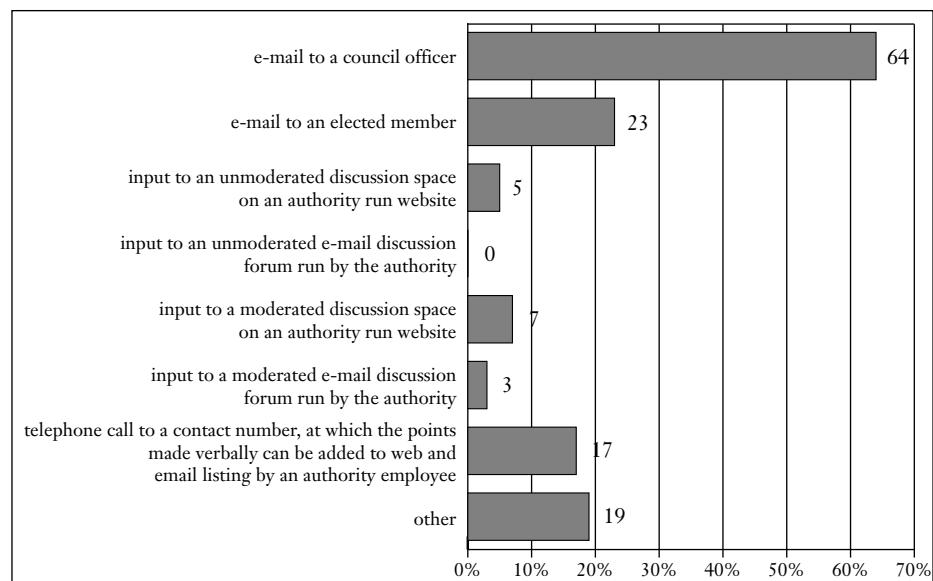
30%

70%

☐ yes ■ no
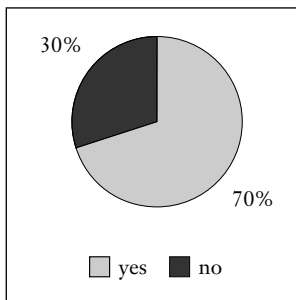
base All respondents (235)

use of the internet for citizen input to policy consultation and debate

The evidence on local authority use of the internet to engage citizens in policy consultation and debate shows some similarities with internet usage patterns to gather feedback on service delivery issues, but also some differences. The main difference is that the number of authorities who say they use the internet for policy consultation purposes is lower than the number using it as a feedback channel for matters concerned with service delivery. Whereas 83 per cent use the internet for the latter type of activity, only 70 per cent do so for the former (see Figure 3.6).

The main similarity is that, as with the type of internet communication preferred by councils for service feedback from citizens, there is a big preference among authorities for e-mail to a council officer when it comes to policy consultation issues. Sixty-four per cent of authorities that responded to the questionnaire said they encouraged citizens to use this channel whereas only 23 per cent encouraged citizens to e-mail an elected member. More generally, the evidence on policy consultation also suggests a very low level of interest and activity in use of e-mail discussion groups or web discussion spaces as tools to engage citizens in the policy formation and policy deliberation process. Only three per cent of responding authorities appear to be attempting to use moderated e-mail discussion groups, whereas seven per cent are running moderated website discussion spaces (see Figure 3.7).

Channel	Percentage
e-mail to a council officer	64
e-mail to an elected member	23
input to an unmoderated discussion space on an authority run website	5
input to an unmoderated e-mail discussion forum run by the authority	0
input to a moderated discussion space on an authority run website	7
input to a moderated e-mail discussion forum run by the authority	3
telephone call to a contact number, at which the points made verbally can be added to web and email listing by an authority employee	17
other	19

base All respondents (235)

It is notable too, that traffic levels on policy consultation channels are lower than on those aimed at gathering feedback on service delivery issues. Whereas just over a quarter of responding authorities appear to be receiving over 50 communications per month on service feedback issues, only around three per cent could claim the same level of activity in relation to policy consultation and debate (see Figure 3.8).

In choosing how to respond to consultation comments received over the internet, responding authorities rely heavily upon a mixture of e-mails to individual citizens, letters to individual citizens, and more general newsletters. Around ten per cent of authorities also reply to messages on web discussion spaces, reflecting the level of use of such spaces (see Figure 3.9).
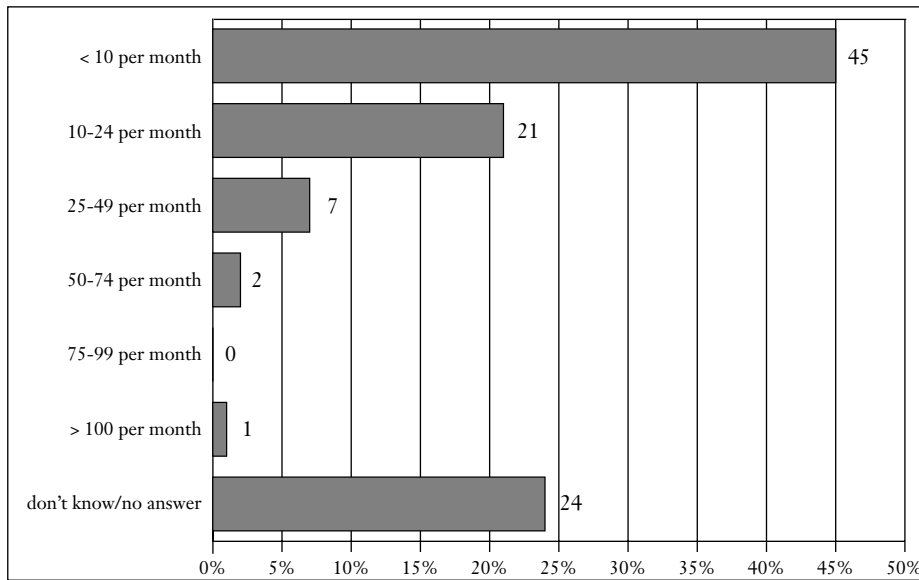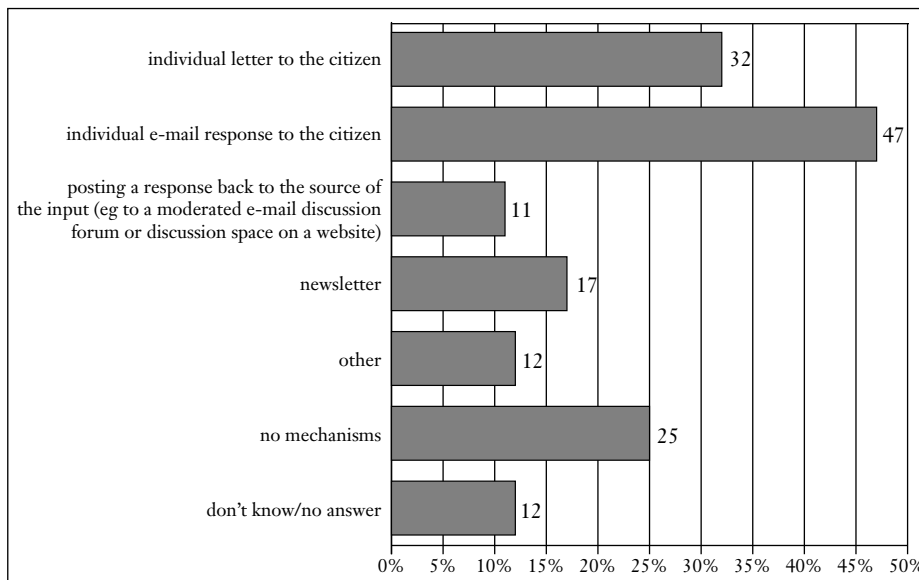
The general picture on scale and type of authority-citizen interaction on policy consultation issues therefore, is one characterised by even lower traffic levels than those described earlier in relation to service feedback, very low levels of use of e-mail discussion groups and web discussion spaces, and greater emphasis on interaction with council officers than with elected members.

current e-participation efforts and the Good Practice Guidelines

Against this backdrop of evidence on the scale and type of activity which appears to be going on, we move next to a more detailed assessment of how local authorities are performing when assessed against the good practice guidelines set out at the beginning of this chapter. In this section, we present evidence drawn both from the questionnaire returns and from follow-up telephone and web research as it applies to each guideline in turn.

the marketing of e-participation opportunities
First, the evidence gathered on authorities' efforts to market their online service feedback channels indicates that more could be done to raise awareness among citizens. While 83 per cent of responding authorities say they are inviting feedback on service delivery issues over

42%

9%

49%

☐ yes ■ no

■ don't know/no answer
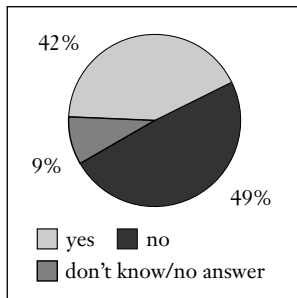
base All respondents (235)

the internet, for example, only 42 per cent appear to be taking any special measures to publicise this fact and this clearly may be one explanation for the low traffic levels being experienced (see Figure 3.10).

Follow-up research into 20 'marketing active' authorities, however, does indicate that a variety of techniques are being used for this purpose. Of the 20 authorities contacted, fourteen are using regularly published newsletters or magazines to encourage citizens to offer feedback to the council via the internet. A further eleven are mentioning e-mail and website feedback channels in published leaflets related to specific service issues and a few authorities (five and four respectively) are using press releases and adverts in the local press to draw attention to these channels. Despite this variety of techniques, however, it remains the case that too few authorities are actively attempting to market the internet as a channel through which citizens can provide feedback on authority services.

Evidence on the marketing of policy consultation and deliberation opportunities, for its part, appears to show a healthier scale of activity. Over half of responding authorities, some 56 per cent, claim to be engaged in marketing activity in relation to online policy consultations (see Figure 3.11).

41%

3%

56%

☐ yes ■ no

■ don't know/no answer
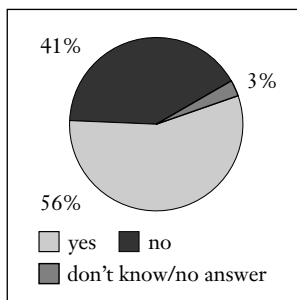
base All respondents (235)

This is encouraging, since it represents a closer match with the 70 per cent of responding authorities who say they are using the internet to offer e-participation in policy consultations. As with the marketing of online opportunities to offer feedback on service delivery issues, a variety of marketing techniques also appear to be being used. Of 20 authorities contacted in follow-up research, 12 authorities were able to provide details as to how their online consultations had been marketed to citizens and the various activities of these 12 can be said to fall into three broad categories.

First, the most used method of publicising and promoting online consultations appears to be the delivery of council magazines, newsletters and leaflets to households. Eight of the authorities that we contacted had used regular council magazines or newsletters to inform citizens of online consultation opportunities. A further three had used a special leaflet delivered to households to publicise a specific consultation that had an online element. These techniques are popular with authorities because, through use of them, they can be certain that they are reaching a large proportion of citizens with their publicity material.

Second, a total of seven local authorities said that they attempted to get coverage in the local press by issuing a press release whenever a new online consultation was being launched. Three of these authorities also paid for advertising space in order to ensure that the consultation was mentioned in local newspapers.

Third, authorities also used online publicity. Four of the 12 authorities mentioned that they made a special effort to ensure that online consultations are made obvious to all citizens who visit the authority's website. In two cases this was done by putting a link to the consultation page from the front page of the authority's website. In the other two cases, a link to the consultation page was included in the 'what's new' section of the website. The obvious disadvantage of this latter strategy is that it only targets those people who are already accessing the authority's website, not those who might wish to participate in online consultations but are unaware of the authority's online activities, or those who, as yet, are to be persuaded of good reasons to get online at all.

Furthermore, none of the authorities contacted during the follow up research had developed special strategies for publicising and promoting use of online consultation mechanisms among specific groups within their community. That is to say, none of the methods used were being deliberately varied or adapted where a specific consultation might be more relevant

to some people than to others and the notion of a segmented approach to marketing efforts did not appear to have taken hold.

responsiveness
The evidence on local authority attitudes to responsiveness to internet communications would also suggest that things could be better. When asked whether they made any public commitments to respond to service feedback communications received over the internet, only 17 per cent of responding authorities were able to answer in the affirmative (see Figure 3.12).

Moreover, when we visited the websites of 20 of the authorities who did claim to make this kind of commitment, on only ten could we find such a public statement committing the authority to responding to complaints, enquiries or feedback on services.

This performance was even worse in relation to online policy consultations. Only 13 per cent of responding authorities said they made a clear, publicly-stated commitment about responding to citizen opinions received over the internet as part of a consultation exercise. We visited the websites of 20 of these authorities and found that six were running online consultations. In none of these six cases did we find a clear commitment to respond to citizen opinions received as part of these online consultations (see Figure 3.13).

presence of e-participation rules and guidelines
As made clear in our list of good practice guidelines, good e-participation requires a clear framework of well understood rules, guidelines, and expectations for all involved. Again, however, the evidence from the research is that local authorities have not yet grasped the importance of providing such a set of rules and guidelines for participation. Of all responding authorities, only eight per cent said that they provided such rules and guidelines and, upon a survey of 15 authority sites drawn from those making up this eight per cent, only two authorities were found to be displaying a set of rules and guidelines in practice (see Figure 3.14).

Authorities clearly, therefore, need to do more to shape expectations when connecting with citizens over the internet.

inclusive e-participation
Making e-participation inclusive is obviously crucial since equality of participation is a central tenet of any democratic system. At one level, given the current numbers of people online, this obviously involves a need for increased access to ICT equipment and skills for those people who do not currently have either the means or the confidence to be online. However, at another level, the variety of groups to which an e-participation policy needs to be addressed requires a multi-faceted approach. To feel included in e-participation activities, the elderly may require something different to those from ethnic minorities and people with literacy problems may have different needs to those with disabilities. The problem, in short, is more complex than one simply of providing more equipment and training. It also involves the use of a variety of software and hardware tools and the presentation of content in a variety of forms to make both the internet in general and e-participation opportunities in particular accessible to all those groups who might otherwise be excluded.

Consequently, we asked authorities about which 'hard to reach' groups they had access policies for and included five named groups in the questionnaire. These included the disabled, people excluded by language difficulties, people on low incomes, those with literacy problems and the elderly. The findings as they relate to each of these groups are presented in Figure 3.15.

figure 3.12 Does the authority make a clear, publicly stated commitment to the citizen about responding to service feedback received over the internet? (eg a guaranteed time-frame for a reply)
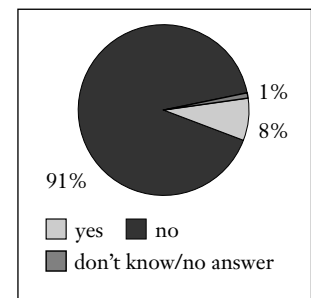

3%
17%
80%
□ yes ■ no
■ don't know/no answer
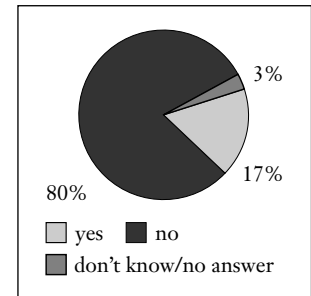
base All respondents (235)

figure 3.13 Does your authority make a clear, publicly stated commitment to respond to citizen opinions received over the internet as part of a consultation exercise?

5%
13%
82%
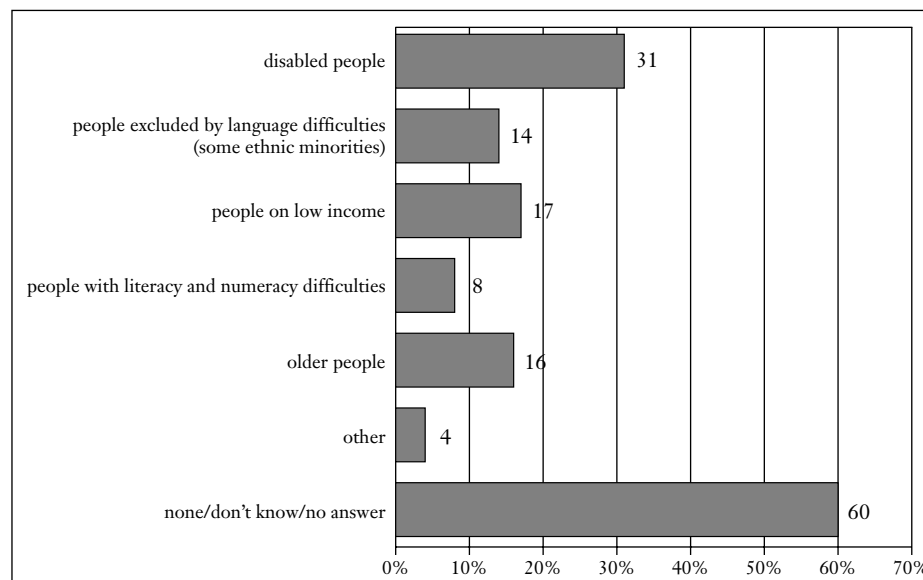□ yes ■ no
■ don't know/no answer
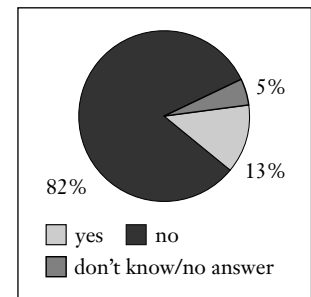
base All respondents (235)

figure 3.14 Do you publish participation rules and guidelines to citizens who choose to relate to the authority via the internet?

1%
8%
91%
□ yes ■ no
■ don't know/no answer

base All respondents (235)

As can be seen, around a third of authorities have policies in place to address the needs of the disabled but for all other named groups, the figure was less than 20 per cent. More generally, the findings from the questionnaire showed that 40 per cent of survey respondents had an access policy in place for at least one of the potentially excluded groups mentioned but the remaining 60 per cent either had policies for none of the groups or simply were not able to provide answers to the question.

Moreover, only 11 authorities, some 4.5 per cent of the total number of responding authorities, stated that they had an inclusive access policy in place for all five of the groups mentioned.

This is a worrying set of findings in e-participation terms since by definition, authorities not pursuing policies aimed at securing access for these groups are rendering any e-participation efforts already underway largely exclusive given their implicitly limited reach to these segments of the population.

Much more work therefore needs to be done both to understand the requirements of providing genuinely inclusive opportunities for e-participation on the one hand and to deliver those opportunities in practice on the other.
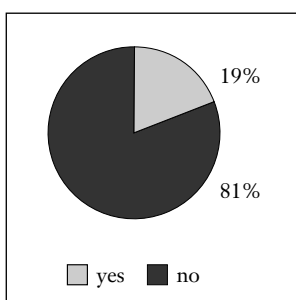
use of moderators in e-participation activity
The use of moderators is important in keeping citizen engagement focused and in consequently ensuring that such engagement adds value to services, to policy, and to citizens. Given that both e-mail discussion group activity, and website discussion forum activity is happening only on a small scale as already pointed out, it is unsurprising to find that few authorities use formal moderation of activity as part of their e-participation endeavours. Only around 11 per cent of responding authorities said that they moderated e-participation activity of some form. Around 56 per cent said that they did not and a relatively large number, around 33 per cent said that they did not know. This indicates not only that there is a low level of moderated activity but also that for a large number of authorities, awareness of moderation as an issue is quite low (see Figure 3.16).

Moreover, of those indicating that they did moderate citizen-authority activity on the internet, only 19 per cent said that they were providing a statement to the public to explain what the moderator's role was (see Figure 3.17).

Upon further investigation of the five authorities concerned we found that two of these, Cumbria County Council and North Kesteven District Council, did in practice have clear, easily visible statements on their websites which outlined the responsibilities of moderators. (The statement made by Cumbria County Council is presented in the box below). The other three authorities made less comprehensive statements, simply mentioning that discussion forums were moderated and that the moderator might add or remove messages from time to time where this was felt to be appropriate.

The Cumbria County Council Statement on Moderator Roles and Responsibilities
(www.cumbria.gov.uk)

The CCC Discussion Forum is administered 'technically' by the *forum administrator*, and this includes ensuring that the forum operates properly and that any usability problems are resolved. However, the forum administrator has no responsibility for controlling the discussions that take place under the topics created within the forum. That responsibility falls to *topic moderators*. Once a new topic has been created (which can only be done by the forum administrator) the customisation of that topic, including security, the initial 'About' message and the creation of any sub-topics is the responsibility of the relevant moderator.

The moderator is also responsible for monitoring the discussions that take place within their topics to ensure that they don't drift away from the subject, that any questions raised which require an 'official' response are dealt with, and that anyone misbehaving (eg being abusive or personal) is dealt with. The target for official responses to messages is two working days. The moderator has total control over the messages posted, including the ability to delete inappropriate messages, although this should be used with caution and a message from the moderator explaining why a message was deleted should be put in its place.

Moderators are also responsible for closing discussions once they have run their course, and normally the moderator will first disable further posts to the discussion, and then after a period of time (typically one month) the discussion will either be removed or archived.

To ensure that it is clear to everyone when a moderator is posting a message to a discussion in their official capacity, rather than as themselves, special moderator usernames will be set up as required.

All moderators are listed under the *Contact* button on the forum navigation bar, where you will find details on how to contact them and which topic groups they are responsible for.

Moreover, only seven per cent of authorities using moderators provide their moderators with any training to perform the role. This seven per cent figure represents just two authorities. We contacted both of them to ask for more details on the approach to training being adopted. Only one of these authorities could give us details of the training. In that case, the training was informal and undocumented. Those given the training were also, it transpired, not moderating a discussion forum related to policy-making or to the authority's services but rather were moderating a bulletin board run by the authority's arts development team (see Figure 3.18).

privacy
Privacy is an important feature of our democracy since, as a value defended in a political context, it represents a limitation on the power of the state over the individual. It is manifested most obviously in our political system in the use of the secret ballot at elections but also is important in facilitating a more general sense in which democratic political activity can take place free from any concerns over surveillance or intimidation. In the digital age, data gathering is becoming an important feature of the citizen's sense of privacy and local authority practices in data gathering are therefore an important feature of the democratic landscape. Citizens will only participate using the new internet channels if they feel that their activity is not being tracked and monitored.

figure 3.18 Where citizen communication with the authority over the internet is moderated, does the moderator receive any special training for the role?

4%
7%
89%

□ yes   ■ no
■ don't know/no answer
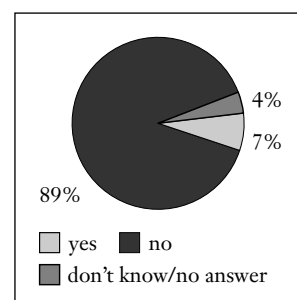
base All whose authority moderates communication (27)

16%

20%

64%

☐ yes   ■ no

■ don't know/no answer
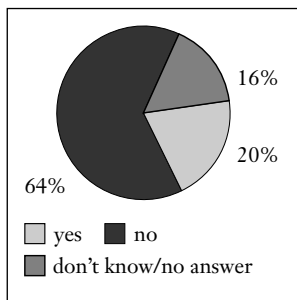
base All respondents (235)

Despite this reality, only one in five responding authorities indicated that they provide any guidance to the citizen on what current data gathering practices are in use on authority websites (see Figure 3.19).

Of these, when we conducted follow up investigations into twenty authorities, we found only eleven to have clear information on data gathering practices available on their websites. Ten of these made it clear that they monitored the IP addresses of users, but not for purposes of individual identification and online behaviour tracking. The statement made by Hampshire County Council on this issue was typical.

> *Hampshire County Council only monitors the IP addresses of visitors to assess which pages are the most popular. These IP addresses are not linked to any personal data so all visitors to our site remain anonymous.* (www.hants.gov.uk)

Ten of the authorities also described in more general terms how personal information submitted to them over the Internet was being treated. Ashford Borough Council's statement was particularly clear.

> *We respect the privacy of our visitors.*
>
> *You are not required to provide any personal information to visit this site. Users who voluntarily provide information are assured that it will be used for contact only and will not be shared with any third party.* (www.ashford.gov.uk)

However, despite these islands of good practice, the overall level of awareness and activity on this issue is low and, if e-participation were to become more mainstream then this would soon become unsustainable, may undermine trust in e-participation activities, and could ultimately damage any attempt to further embed such activities into the emerging digital society.

connecting with civil society e-participation schemes
As noted in the statement of good practice principles set out earlier in this chapter, it is important for local authorities not only to attempt to create e-participation activity on their own websites but also to attempt to connect with and to facilitate e-participation activities led and managed by others within their own area.

12%

7%

81%

☐ yes   ■ no

■ don't know/no answer
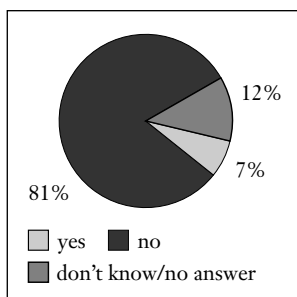
base All respondents (235)

In relation to this issue, we examined local authority activity designed to uncover non-council led e-participation work going on in the locality. Only seven percent of survey respondents were found to be making any special efforts in this regard (see Figure 3.20).

Of the 19 authorities which this figure represents, we contacted ten by telephone and email to ask for further detail. Of these, only two, Rutland County Council and Nottingham City Council, could provide concrete information and we present details of their respective activities in the boxes below.

Rutland County Council (www.rutnet.co.uk)

Rutland County Council's website is hosted by Rutland On Line Ltd. as part of 'Rutnet'. Discussion forums on Rutnet are administered by Rutland On Line Ltd. and provide a space where any person or group is allowed to set up their own forum or to introduce a new topic within existing forums.

Rutland County Council has an interest in some of the topics, such as local transport and infrastructure, which are discussed in the forums. For this reason, several of the authority's

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employees visit the discussion forums regularly in order to note what is being discussed and to make sure that any relevant issues are brought to the attention of the appropriate officer.

In addition, elected members frequently post messages both as private individuals and also in an official capacity in order to put the authority's point of view on the issue being discussed. In most cases it is clear whether or not elected members are speaking on behalf of the authority. Although these councillors have chosen not to reveal their email addresses in the discussion forums, these are available elsewhere on Rutnet, allowing citizens to e-mail them privately if they wish.

Nottingham City Council (www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk)

The press office at Nottingham City Council is responsible for identifying online discussion spaces being used by Nottingham residents. Officers working in the press office monitor the online discussion forums introduced by BBC Nottingham and the Nottingham Evening Post in order to identify concerns raised by citizens that relate to the authority. These websites can be reached by a link from the Nottingham City Council website and their bulletin boards cover topics from local public transport to the effect of pigeons on the city centre.

Those monitoring these websites don't generally wish to post messages themselves as it is felt that doing so might be seen as an attempt to control debate. The forums are usually just monitored with information being e-mailed to the appropriate officer if it is felt that the authority needs to take a specific action. Occasionally though, a response from the authority is posted to ensure that accurate information is available for citizens participating in the debate.

Nottingham City Council also has a partnership with Nottingham Web Resources, a local, non-commercial website. Nottingham Web Resources maintains a list of links to local websites and these links are then placed on the City Council website. In addition to identifying locally relevant websites, Nottingham Web Resources hosts a discussion forum on its own site, which can be reached via a link from the City Council's website. The forum is similar to that on Rutnet and, although not particularly well used, is also monitored by council officers.

As with the issue of privacy therefore, it is clear that there are islands of good practice. Nevertheless the evidence indicates that far too few authorities are attempting to link their e-participation efforts to other online activity going on in their areas and indeed to community groups and NGOs in general.

trained officers and representatives

The issue of e-participation training for key authority staff and indeed for elected members is the final item on our good practice checklist. E-participation is not only new to citizens but is also new to authorities, to council officers and to elected members whether in executive or non-executive roles. Consequently, we asked authorities about the existence of training for both officers and members and, in structuring the questions, we made a distinction between general training in the use of the internet and training aimed specifically at using the internet to engage with citizens.

The findings on training in the use of the internet in general are encouraging. A large majority of responding authorities confirm that training has been given to at least some officers and members (see Figures 3.21 and 3.22).

However, the figures are much, much smaller when it comes to any training in the use of the internet to engage with citizens. Only seven per cent of responding authorities say any elected members have received this kind of training, and only 17 per cent for officers (see Figures 3.23 and 3.24).

Consequently, there is a clear need to address training in the use of the internet to engage with citizens as an issue.

figure 3.21 Have any of the elected members in your authority received any formal training in the use of the internet?

3%
71%
26%
yes   no
don't know/no answer
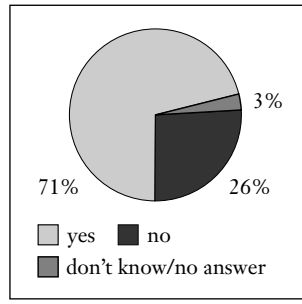
base All respondents (235)

figure 3.22 Have any officers of the authority received any formal training in the use of the internet?

1%
12%
87%
yes   no
don't know/no answer
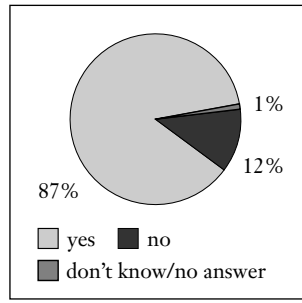
base All respondents (235)

figure 3.23 Have any of the elected members in your authority received any formal training in the use of the internet specifically to engage with citizens?

6%
7%
87%
yes   no
don't know/no answer

base All respondents (235)

figure 3.24 Have any of the officers of the authority received any formal training in the use of the internet specifically to engage with citizens?

4%
17%
79%
yes   no
don't know/no answer

base All respondents (235)

conclusion and summary

In this chapter, we have presented a wide range of evidence drawn both from responses to our survey questionnaire and from follow-up research. We have provided information on the scale and type of activity currently going on, have identified a key set of good practice guidelines 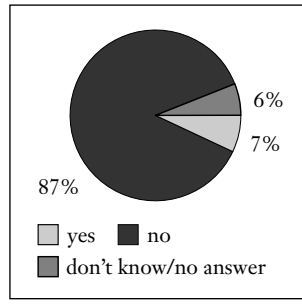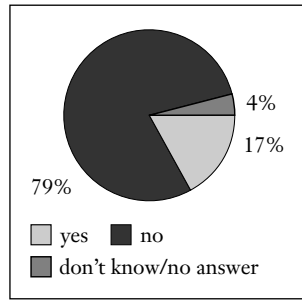which we believe should shape behaviour in this area, and have evaluated current local authority practices against them. We believe that this evidence base should now form the backdrop to new policy thinking on e-participation in local government and, in the next chapter, we go on to identify what we believe is required in policy terms. Before going on to this, however, we present a summary of the main findings of this chapter in Box 3.2 below.

box 3.2 Summary

- There are some islands of good practice, particularly on issues such as explanation of moderator roles to citizens, the privacy and data gathering statements provided by some local authorities and, in a few cases, partnership working with community groups.

- However, e-participation traffic levels are low and are heavily concentrated on e-mail links between individual citizens and council officers.

- Use of interactive web-discussion spaces and e-mail discussion groups is taking place in very few cases.

- E-participation efforts are not effectively marketed by many authorities.

- The vast majority of authorities do not make clear commitments to citizens to respond to communications received over the internet.

- Less than ten per cent of responding authorities are providing clear guidelines to citizens to set out what they can expect, and what their rights and responsibilities are, in e-participation terms.

- Not enough attention is being paid to attempts to make e-participation genuinely inclusive of hard to reach groups.

- Few authorities use moderators in e-participation activity and even fewer provide any training, either to moderators or to other officers or elected members.

- Only one in five responding authorities are building online trust with citizens by explaining current data gathering practices.

- Few authorities are actively seeking out community and voluntary group activity which they could either help to further develop, or collaborate with in public/voluntary e-participation partnerships.

4 the policy implications

So far in this document, we have attempted to set out the reasons as to why e-democracy, and in particular e-participation, should be taken seriously by the local government community and we have presented the findings of research into the current scale, type and quality of local government activity on this issue. We believe that the evidence speaks for itself and that it shows an urgent need to develop policy further in this area. Consequently, in this chapter we move on to a discussion of the policy measures necessary both to allow local government to take full advantage of the potential benefits of e-democracy, and to 'future proof' local democracy against the onset of the digital society.

It is important to note here at the outset however, that policy innovation in this field is not something which can be left to local authorities alone. E-participation policies need to be developed in local authorities, in local government support bodies, and indeed in central government if they are to be successful, and each of these sets of bodies needs to work with the other two to ensure that maximum impact is derived from any effort and resource put in. As a result, we present policy recommendations below as they relate to each of these levels.

new policies for local authorities

In this section, we divide policy recommendations into steps which can be taken in the short and medium term. By short term, we refer to measures which could be implemented within the next 12 months. By medium term, we refer to the period between 2002 and 2005, both because we believe that much could be achieved in that time-frame and also because e-democracy policy needs to be put on the same demanding timeline as the rest of the drive to build e-government.

short-term measures

In the short term, the research evidence indicates an urgent need for each local authority to:

● *Review current e-participation practices against the good practice guidelines which we have already set out.*

Such a review would be aimed at improving existing efforts in this area and also, at policy level, at improving understanding of the issues involved and at increasing the general level of corporate readiness to address them in earnest. In each authority, this review should be headed by a senior executive officer and a senior elected member and should have as its objective the kinds of outputs listed in Box 4.1.

box 4.1 Individual Local Authority Reviews of E-Participation Activity

These should:

● Produce a draft framework policy document, for internal dissemination and use, setting out a clear best practice process for the conduct of all e-participation activities. This would cover pre-consultation planning issues, the process and conduct of e-participation activity in practice, and post-consultation evaluation and final reporting procedures.

- Produce a marketing strategy which explicitly addresses the issue of how e-participation opportunities are to be brought to citizen's attention. This should include general marketing, but also the issue of how participation on specific themes could be marketed specifically to the groups most likely to be interested. It should also address the issue of how to link e-participation opportunities to high profile offline activities.

- Produce a set of participation rules and guidelines designed to explain to citizens what their rights and responsibilities are when engaging in e-participation activities. Specifically, this should also be aimed at explaining to citizens what they can expect by way of response and influence on council decisions.

- Produce, in collaboration with IT staff, a new 'inclusive e-participation' policy document which defines what 'inclusive' means in this context and translates the need to reach excluded groups into specific measures to be built into both e-participation efforts aimed at the general public and into e-participation efforts aimed specifically at hard to reach groups.

- Identify training needs for a small number of e-participation moderators and for a small number of 'wired elected members'.

- Draft a set of privacy guidelines to be read by all citizens prior to taking part in e-participation activity.

- Collate information on the existence of online discussion and debating spaces run by local community groups in the authority's area and offer an assessment of the needs of those groups in terms of taking this kind of activity forward. The authority should also spell out how it intends to develop experimental e-participation partnership activities with such groups.

The outcome of such a review should be an increased capacity on the part of each authority to conduct e-participation activities which are responsive, clearly understood and trusted by the citizen, inclusive of hard to reach groups, and valuable by way of being focused on important issues of concern.

- *Conduct a series of pilot online consultations which add more group centred discussions and debates to existing individual e-mail contact between citizens and the authority.*

  These could be conducted on a trial run basis on authority intranets initially, drawing upon the fact that many employees are often also living in the area and are therefore citizens as well as employees.

  However, within 12 months each authority should demonstrate in practice its capacity to offer a well run online discussion either on a specific service delivery theme or on an issue of policy importance to the local community by actually conducting and evaluating the activity at least twice; once as a stand-alone authority consultation and once as a co-owned and co-managed partnership debate run in association with local community groups. This would begin a new phase of practical implementation and policy learning and, if marketed properly and linked to offline activities, should substantially raise awareness of e-democracy channels among citizens.

medium-term measures (2002-2005)

In the medium term, local authorities should concentrate on two areas of innovation. These should include:

- *the deployment of e-participation practices in a wider range of settings.*

  Here, there are a number of possibilities based on the rationale for e-democracy that we set out in Chapter 1. Local authorities could deploy e-participation tools as:

- part of the consultation activity involved in Best Value service reviews

- part of direct executive attempts to consult on policy development

- part of the work of scrutiny committees to draw in, in a convenient and non-intimidating way, those with relevant experience and expertise

- part of a new series of online ward surgeries to be run by wired elected members

- part of broader citizens panel activities

- part of attempts to democratise bodies working on neighbourhood renewal and regeneration schemes

- part of a targeted attempt to stimulate dialogue and debate with the young, the elderly, those from ethnic minorities and others from minority groups

Despite the solid bedrock provided by the good practice guidelines, each of these kinds of activities will require a slightly different approach. Some will require explicit recruitment of participants and very targeted marketing, as well as explicit linkage to a package of wider access and inclusion policies aimed at getting a particular group online and able to participate. Others will be aimed more generally at the wider public. Some will focus on very specific service feedback issues and others will offer opportunities for the public to be involved in policy development at a very early stage. All however, will need to be explored if the local government community is to reap the full potential benefits of e-democracy which ultimately lie in treating it as a genuinely cross-cutting set of activities capable of serving the wider modernisation agenda.

In order to provide a focus to e-participation development, local authorities should commit themselves to the deployment in practice of e-participation tools in at least two of the settings mentioned by the end of 2003.

- *The development of additional and experimental functionality, built into a wider and more ambitious set of e-participation initiatives.*

    Although the possibilities will change in this respect as the technology changes, a number of innovations already suggest themselves. These include:

    - *Provision of website functionality to allow citizens both to specify an idea to be put up for consultation, and to campaign online for that idea.* Should sufficient public support for the idea be achieved, the local authority should commit itself to a formal examination of the proposal. This kind of activity has the potential to dramatically alter the citizen's perception of what engagement can mean in terms of impact and outcomes and would offer an e-facilitated opportunity for local citizens to set the agenda of local policy debate.

    - *The combination of online debating spaces and e-mail discussion groups with online polling tools to allow both debate and opinion sampling to be built-in to a single e-participation exercise.* Innovative authorities might also want to link such combinations of functionality to a wider set of democracy experiments. Some of these could be aimed at neighbourhood level and some at specific segments of the population.

Neighbourhood democracy experiments, for example, could devolve a small amount of resource to a local area and involve online citizen discussion, debate and ultimately voting on what to do with it. If linked to a coherent access and inclusion policy, and if centred on issues of some controversy, this kind of activity could dramatically impact on the perception that participation is irrelevant to outcomes and might, as a result, contribute something to democratic renewal. It could also provide an opportunity for local ward councillors to build profile and connect with the views of local residents if they play a leading role in developing and taking part in such experiments.

Experiments aimed at specific segments of the population could include online youth parliaments or 'silver surfer forums' which would allow citizens themselves a convenient opportunity to connect with each other and to articulate their views and needs as they relate to the local political process. Such online environments could be invaluable in supporting the wider development of habits of deliberative citizenship, and could be useful vehicles in their own right for the spreading of ICT skills.

new policies for umbrella and support organisations

Much of the activity called for on the part of local authorities obviously requires new learning and a need to stay abreast of innovative developments going on elsewhere. It is imperative in this context that every authority does not attempt to invent the e-participation wheel in isolation. Consequently, there is an urgent need for umbrella and support organisations to provide some key elements of a policy support framework which local authorities cannot provide for themselves. In particular there is a need to:

● Provide an online resource base of innovative and successful practice which policy officers and elected members in local government can visit and draw upon when looking for ideas on how to further develop their own e-participation practices. The ippr Digital Society team has placed summaries of, and links to, several innovative e-participation schemes underway both at home and overseas on its website at www.ippr.org, but there is clearly a need for a more comprehensive resource.

● Create a Community of Practitioners to facilitate meetings, conferences and the exchange of ideas among those grappling with e-democracy issues in local government

● Commission and coordinate the provision of training for e-participation moderators, for policy officers with e-democracy responsibilities, and for wired elected members, to build capacity and expertise in the use of the internet for engaging with citizens

The local government community should, as a matter of urgency, determine which body or combination of bodies is best placed to perform this support and coordinating role and should draw up plans to implement the suggestions above before the end of 2002.

new policies for central government

All of the measures outlined so far can only be successful if they take place against the backdrop of a suitably supportive national e-democracy policy framework. Central government can provide this at two levels. First, by providing very specific support measures to parts of the local authority policy programme which we have already outlined and second, with a series of more general measures aimed at preparing the country and its democratic system for the digital age.

specific support measures to local government

These should include:

● *Making it a duty* that local authorities should conduct experimental e-participation activities within the next 12 months, as suggested on page 32.

● *Supporting that activity by linking it to an annual 'e-participation in local government' competition* which all local authorities can enter, and by providing the winning authority in that competition with a substantial resource to further develop e-democracy activities.

● *Introducing and supporting a national competition for the best 'Wired Elected Member' working in local government and providing a prize to that member to further enhance the e-democracy work with which he/she is engaged.*

● **Launching and funding a series of local e-democracy Pathfinder projects**. These should be aimed initially at deprived areas where levels of democratic participation are low and should include:

  ● home internet access for all citizens in the area

  ● training in the use of e-democracy applications

  ● the use of a wide variety of user interfaces to ensure inclusive participation of minorities

  ● tailored e-democracy content to reach specific groups such as the elderly, the young and ethnic minorities

  ● experiments with the neighbourhood democracy pilots and with combinations of e-participation and e-voting tools as set out on page XXX.

Pathfinder areas should also involve partnerships between local authorities, local elected members, community groups and individual citizens. They will require the involvement of senior local politicians and council officers and should be aimed where possible at areas which have controversial issues to decide on during the period in which the Pathfinder project is up and running.

Pathfinders such as these would provide a number of benefits. They would:

  ● provide a high profile way of using e-democracy to target the disengaged and could therefore form part of wider initiatives to stimulate democratic renewal.

  ● cap costs by being geographically limited in scope, thus making the schemes affordable

  ● provide an evidence base to inform a further wave of policy development and

  ● stimulate thinking in local authorities up and down the country on what kind of e-participation activity should be going on, since authorities would be asked to bid for e-participation Pathfinder status.

more general measures

More generally, the strategy of development suggested in this paper for local government would have a better chance of being successful if central government also took measures to build wider e-democracy capacity. In particular, central government needs to:

- Create and support a National Centre of E-Democracy Excellence which goes beyond merely reviewing innovative experience and brings together social scientists, policy practitioners and technologists to explore new ways in which digital technology can support and enhance citizen centred-democratic processes. The remit of the centre would go far beyond local government but it could also provide advice and expertise to the local government community and, by collaborating with local government support bodies, could help to raise the level of knowledge, awareness, and capacity to deliver e-participation activities across local government. In particular, it would also advise local authorities and community groups on thee kinds of software applications available which have e-democracy potential.

- Provide more practical support to the use of ICTs, including the use of e-democracy tools and applications, within the NGO and voluntary sectors to build capacity.

- Enhance citizen capacity to understand, feel comfortable with, and take part in e-democracy activities by introducing the notion of digital citizenship training to wider citizenship training in schools, and through offering e-democracy and data literacy training in UK online centres.

If adopted, this package of measures would amount to a serious attempt both to apply e-democracy to the needs of democratic renewal and to prepare citizens and the democratic process for the challenges and opportunities of the networked world.

5 concluding note

This paper has set out the findings of research into current local authority e-democracy practices in England and Wales. On the whole, despite some examples of good practice, the evidence indicates that far more needs to be done both to take advantage of the opportunities presented by e-democracy on the one hand, and to future-proof our local political processes against the effects of rapid technological change on the other.

In response to this situation we have set out two main sets of ideas aimed at taking policy on this issue forward. First, we have provided a set of good practice guidelines which we hope will be of some use to those with responsibility for implementing e-democracy initiatives at local level. Second, we have also presented a wider set of policy proposals aimed at individual local authorities, at local government support bodies, and indeed at central government since it is our belief that an integrated, multi-level approach has the best chance of stimulating and sustaining innovative e-democracy practices at local level.

We are aware in all this, of course, that the use of the internet for purposes of democratic engagement is in its early stages and that government at both central and local level is facing a wide range of demanding challenges against a backdrop of serious resource constraints. Nevertheless, e-democracy policy has for too long now been a neglected aspect of the e-agenda and of the modernisation debate more generally. We believe that if government at any level is serious about e-democracy, then it is time for a focused debate around a set of specific policy proposals. We have consequently provided just such a set of proposals in this report and we invite just such a focused debate.

references

Below we list a selection of the recent publications referenced in some way in this report. A more developed list of e-democracy resources can be viewed at www.ippr.org, where we provide both brief summaries of important documents and a set of links to other documents which policy-makers and practitioners may find useful.

internet access and use

Office of National Statistics (ONS) statistics on internet access
(www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/intacc0402.pdf)

Oftel surveys into residential consumer use of internet services
(www.oftel.gov.uk/publications/research/index.htm)

local e-government

Audit Commission (2002) *Councils and E-Government: research so far*
(www.auditcommission.gov.uk/ publications/ pdf/egovernment.pdf)

DTLR and LGA (2002) *e-gov@local: towards a national strategy for local e-government* DTLR
(www.local-regions.dtlr.gov.uk/consult/egov/pdf/lgo_main.pdf)

National Audit Office (2002) *Better Public Services through e-government: report by the Comptroller and Auditor General* The Stationery Office, London
(www.nao.gov.uk/publications/nao_reports/01-02/0102704-I.pdf)

National Audit Office (2002) *Government on the Web II: report by the Comptroller and Auditor General* The Stationery Office, London
(www.nao.gov.uk/publications/nao_reports/01-02/0102764.pdf)

elections and e-voting

Electoral Commission (2001) *Election 2001: the official results* Politicos, London

The Independent Commission On Alternative Voting Methods (2002) *Elections in The 21st Century: from paper ballot to e-voting* Electoral Reform Society

further reading on e-democracy

Foundation for Information Technology in Local Government (FITLOG) (2001) *Role Models For The Information Age: using information technology to support the new political management arrangements* FITLOG.

Coleman and Normann (2000) *New Media and Social Inclusion* Hansard Society.

Coleman and Gøtze (2001) *Bowling Together: online public engagement in policy deliberation* Hansard Society.