



# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Democracy

e-petitioning and local government

An NLGN Paper by **Giorgia Iacopini**



New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this White Paper as part of its innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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## 1 *Introduction*

**We are faced with an increasing disengagement of the public from politicians, government and political parties. The extent of this trend, manifested mainly through low voter turnout and decline in party identification, has been such that our political system is said to be facing a “crisis of legitimacy”.**

Efforts to re-engage citizens are crucial: in the face of growing challenges brought about by the changing nature of society and the changing and complex demand for services, the successful delivery of such services depends on the active and continuous engagement of the service user. As the role of local government grows, so too does the importance of public participation. Disengagement undermines the legitimacy of local authorities and identifying ways to re-engage local citizens is an urgent challenge.

Governments, both at local and national levels, should restore public confidence and interest in the democratic process. Achieving this means finding ways to address the underlying sense that the views of the public are not actively sought or not adequately taken into account.

In order to meet these challenges, democracy should change the relationship between government and citizens and create new methods and mechanisms for citizens to engage. There is ample evidence that people are turning away from formal democratic institutions as a means to voice their concerns and opinions but that interest in affairs that touch their lives are alive and well. Democracy should therefore not only be about turning up at the polling station. It simply isn't enough. Rather, it should be about creating opportunities that ensure on-going dialogue; increase transparency and accountability and strengthen the opportunities for local leadership. By encouraging participation in local issues outside of elections, citizens are more likely to consider voting and take part in the overall political process, be it locally or nationally.

The question is: how can this be done? A lot of effort has been put into devising mechanisms to better enable citizens to voice their opinions and to engage with their representatives. Examples include Citizen Juries, Area/Neighbourhood Forums and Citizens Panels. However, more can be done to ensure those wider and on-going participation methods that are so desperately needed.

This paper argues that a better use of e-petitions could become an effective tool in creating that constant dialogue between communities and their leaders and in adding value to the existing democratic, representative structures. It briefly describes how an 'e-petitioning system' at the national level is being used to achieve wider citizen engagement and facilitate dialogue. The paper then describes how two local authorities in England have applied the system to serve their specific local needs.

Despite the benefits showed by the two projects piloted, e-petitioning systems have not been widely used and take-up has not been high. They have tended to be isolated exercises and, as yet, they have not fed into a coherent and sustainable participatory environment.

## 2 *Challenges to formal democracy*

**Much of the debate surrounding the extent of citizen engagement focuses on the two main indicators that are used to measure citizen participation: election turnout and party membership. The downward trend in both of these areas suggests that people are turning away from formal democratic structures. Additionally, the most telling figures relate to a growing divide across socio-economic and age characteristics: the existing systems of representation are failing to attract and engage particularly those who are younger and more disadvantaged.**

### **Electoral turnout**

The decline in electoral turnout is perhaps the most telling sign of a growing estrangement from political life. General election turnout dropped to 59.4%, marking its lowest post-war level in 2001. Turnout in the 2005 election was 61.3%, only 2% above that historic low.

The picture appears similar in local elections, where turnout has fallen by around a tenth since the 1980s, with the result that little more than a third of registered electors turnout to vote in most local elections. Although turnout for some types of local elections has improved over the last few years, participation in local elections in the UK rarely exceeds 40%.

Just a third (36%) of British adults know who their local councillor is, two-thirds (67%) have never met their local ward representative and only 17% have presented their views to a councillor in the last two or three years.<sup>1</sup> A poll conducted by MORI between 18-22 April 2002 adds that these figures do not have a class or education bias: middle-class professionals are no more

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<sup>1</sup> MORI (2002) *Many Councillors 'Divorced' From the Electorate*, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/2002/greenissues.shtml>

likely to have met or know the name of their councillor.<sup>2</sup>

These trends suggest that the public gives a *low priority and low importance to politics at local level*. However, a MORI survey carried out in 2006 shows that people give more importance to their local representatives than to their national ones. Local MPs are the most highly regarded (48%), followed by local councillors (43%). This contrasts with the relatively low regard given to MPs (29%) and government ministers (23%).<sup>3</sup>

### Turnout inequality

As turnout has fallen, so the difference between the rates at which different groups vote has increased. Older people and richer or better educated people tend to vote in much higher numbers than young and poor or less qualified people.

What is apparent is that young people are disproportionately represented among those who are not inclined to vote. Although, generally, young people are less likely to be engaged in politics than older people, the figures display that those who vote are those who fall within the older age-cohorts.

Since 1997, voting among the 18-24s has decreased with each general election. Moreover, the Electoral Commission notes that the impetus to non-voting appears to have spread to the next age-bands: younger age groups are losing the habit of voting and are carrying forward their lack of interest in voting into older age.<sup>4</sup>

Another trend can be noted: although there has been some decline in turnout among all income categories since 1964, the decline is most rapid for those in lower income groups. MORI polling data for the last two elections similarly

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<sup>2</sup> MORI (2002): *Local Elections: Why No-one Gives A Monkey's*, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/mrr/2002/c020503.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> MORI (2006): *Survey of public attitude towards conduct in public life 2006*, p.23

<sup>4</sup> University of Essex (2005): *The 2005 General Election in Great Britain – Report for the Electoral Commission*

shows a 15-16 percentage point difference between the rates at which the top class (ABs) and the bottom class (DEs) turned out. MORI estimates that 70% of ABs voted in the 2005 election, compared to 54% of DEs.<sup>5</sup>

Research commissioned by the ODPM found that while high numbers of the self-employed, professionals, owner-occupiers and pensioners in a ward are associated with higher levels of participation in local elections, there is a high negative correlation between voter turnout and the proportions of young people aged between 16 and 29, of council tenants and of the unemployed.

### **Party identification**

The act of voting is not the only way in which voters and non-voters can engage with the political system. One of the key ways in which political engagement has changed in Britain over the last 40 years concerns 'party identification'. The long-term feature of party identification in Britain has been its progressive decline since the early 1960s.

In 1964, just under 45% of respondents said that they had a 'very strong' party identification. By 1997, this figure had fallen to about 15%. At the same time the percentage of people declaring themselves to have a 'not very strong' party attachment rose from 10.7% to 31.5%.

By 2001, only 13% of the electorate could be classified as very strong identifiers. It is also clear from the figures that this process of 'partisan dealignment' continued through to 2005.

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**5** Cited in IPPR (2006): *A Citizen's Duty*, p.12

**Figure 1** Some of the main issues that are undermining local participation and the potential barriers to the enhancement of local democracy.

### Local Elections:

#### Lack of Councillor visibility

- *“It is hardly surprising that local polls attract less than one third of the electorate. A result we can expect to be repeated - many councillors and voters are effectively divorced”, said Tom Curtin, managing director of Green Issues Communications.*<sup>6</sup>
- *Affluence - or its absence - was not important. In fact, turnout was low in two very affluent areas and high in the most deprived ward.*<sup>7</sup>

#### Lack of adequate and diversified representation

- *Comparing voting patterns in the 2001 general and the 2002 local elections, it was found that people who hadn't voted in either were younger, and less likely to see a duty to vote or a point in voting, than those who had voted in both or in the general election only.*<sup>8</sup>
- *Voters appeared to require a more specific incentive - an interest in the potential benefits of the result.*<sup>9</sup>
- *Interestingly, some 36% expressed an interest in local issues but said they were uninterested in politics. Hansard and the Electoral Commission...should increase their efforts demonstrating the connection*

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**6** MORI (2002): *Many Councillors 'Divorced' from the Electorate*, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/2002/greenissues.shtml>

**7** ESRC: *Local Electoral Participation: the importance of context*, [http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Plain\\_English\\_Summaries/governance\\_and\\_citizenship/participation/index55.aspx?ComponentId=9392&SourcePageId=11722](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Plain_English_Summaries/governance_and_citizenship/participation/index55.aspx?ComponentId=9392&SourcePageId=11722)

**8** Ibid

**9** Ibid

*between politics and people. This should take place both throughout the electoral cycle.<sup>10</sup>*

- *Research commissioned by the ODPM, for example, found that while high numbers of the self-employed, professionals, owner-occupiers and pensioners in a ward are associated with higher levels of participation in local elections, there is a high negative correlation between voter turnout and the proportions of young people aged between 16 and 29, of council tenants and of the unemployed.<sup>11</sup>*

### **Lack of adequate information**

- *People were far more likely to vote if they felt they had been well informed by the literature they had received from the political parties and if they had been personally canvassed.<sup>12</sup>*
- *Research carried out in 2002 shows that 61 % said that “More information being provided about the candidates and their views” would make them more likely to vote, while only 2% thought it would have the opposite effect, and by 54% to 4% the public also thought “Having more information from the council about the election and how to vote” would help.<sup>13</sup>*

### **Lack of accessible means**

- *The ODPM found that the proportion of authorities using mobile polling stations had risen from half in 1996 to more than 60 per cent in 2002,*

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**10** Hansard Society (2006): *Audit of Political Engagement*, p.25

**11** ODPM (2002): *Turnout at local elections: influences on levels of voter registration and voting*, p. 78

**12** ESRC: *Local Electoral Participation: the importance of context*, [http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Plain\\_English\\_Summaries/governance\\_and\\_citizenship/participation/index55.aspx?ComponentId=9392&SourcePageId=11722](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Plain_English_Summaries/governance_and_citizenship/participation/index55.aspx?ComponentId=9392&SourcePageId=11722)

**13** MORI (2002): *Local Elections: Why No-one Gives A Monkey's*, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/mrr/2002/c020503.shtml>

*and some authorities had experimented with polling stations in supermarkets. There had also been moves by some authorities to increase accessibility to polling places, but significant access issues still exist.*

### **Lack of trust and political efficacy**

- *The public's trust in political parties and party politicians has declined significantly over the last decade and a half... Given the fall trust in politicians, it is not surprising that satisfaction with the way the country is governed has also fallen since the 1970s.<sup>14</sup>*
- *ONS 2002 Household Survey found that while 20 per cent of people from the most deprived areas reported feeling they could influence things in their local area, more than 30 per cent of people from most affluent areas reported the same.<sup>15</sup>*

This situation appears somewhat paradoxical: whilst it has amply been recognized that local authorities are best placed to act as community leaders, able to pull together the voices of their communities and represent them in the decision-making arena, what appears to be the case is that local people do not value their local representatives and are generally unengaged from local politics. The turn-out in local elections is low and, more strikingly, the majority of people appear to be disconnected from their representatives and do not see them as people able to channel their opinions.

There is in fact ample evidence that people are committed to political affairs, and this can be seen in the rise of non-electoral participation. A report by the Centre for Research into Election and Social Trends (CREST) states that “people do not seem more disengaged from the political system.

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**14** Cited in IPPR (2006): *A Citizen's Duty*, p.18

**15** *Ibid*

Participation outside the ballot box has increased somewhat over the last fifteen or so years. Levels of political interest have not fallen, and people remain confident in their own ability to engage with the political process."<sup>16</sup>

Data from the Citizen's Audit of Britain shows that 62% of the population donate money to causes they believe in; 30% help raise money for a political or campaigning group; 42% sign petitions. Campaigning activities and membership of pressure groups has increased over the past three decades.<sup>17</sup>

What should be pointed out is that even if non-electoral participation is rising, suggesting an increasing interest in political affairs, there is evidence that it's the better educated who are more likely to feel they have the skills and resources required to engage in these forms of political activity and are therefore more likely to do so.<sup>18</sup>

A CREST survey carried out in 2004 shows that among a number of non-electoral forms of participation, few of those without any qualifications report having done anything other than signing a petition, while almost two-thirds have not done anything at all. In contrast, only one in four graduates have never undertaken any non-electoral activity.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, those who do not engage in non-electoral participation are more likely to not vote.

Two patterns can be highlighted: firstly, there is mismatch between peoples' desire to participate and the channels available for them to do so; secondly, it appears that specific groups are facing a "double disengagement": they don't vote and they are not inclined to participate in other non-electoral forms of activity. These patterns are causing a loss of public trust in representatives, which is fostering a "crisis of legitimacy".

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**16** CREST (2004): *Is Britain facing a crisis of democracy?*, p. 20

**17** Power Inquiry (2006): *The Report of Power –an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy*, p. 42-43

**18** CREST (2004): *Is Britain facing a crisis of democracy?*, p. 8

**19** *Ibid* p. 8

The main issues that emerge appear to be:

- Turnout and political activity is split along socio-economic/age characteristics;
- There is a feeling of lack of efficacy (“my vote won’t make a difference”) and lack of trust in politicians;
- There is a lack of visibility of local councillors and no belief in the council’s leadership role, linked to the low importance given to local politics. In turn, this is linked to a;
- Lack of readily available and accessible information.

With this in mind, re-engaging citizens, revitalising democracy and strengthening community leadership means getting closer to the electorate and establishing mechanisms that aim to:

- Widen participation to include those who appear to be more disengaged: the young and the those who are less well-off;
- Establish methods of ongoing engagement that give people the ability to voice their opinions with methods accessible to them and the ability to see the impact this has;
- Ensure methods of accountability and direct dialogue with representatives;
- Provide methods by which information is readily available and accessible.

One way of achieving this could be harnessing the potential of ICT and, in particular, making better use of e-petitioning.

### 3 *What the Government has done so far*

*“Empowering local authorities must go hand in hand with local government empowering citizens and neighbourhoods... This means more opportunities for individuals to have influence and choice over what, where, when and by whom a service is provided”.*<sup>20</sup>

A lot of effort has been put into devising strategies to widen public participation, strengthen local decision-making and engage citizens in discussion.

In October 2007, Communities Secretary Hazel Blears published an ‘empowerment action plan’, which outlines how Government intends to deliver its commitment to devolve power to communities. Some of the proposals include:

- **Increasing the use of participatory budgeting**

Also called “community kitties”, this measure seeks to give people a direct say in the way in which public funds should be spent.

- **Supporting Asset Transfers**

In many areas local authorities have already transferred assets such as disused buildings, or old swimming pools to local groups in an effort to give communities the power to shape their communities. The Government wants to continue this process and publish a toolkit for local authorities and community organisations in 2008.<sup>21</sup>

- **Exploring Community Land Trusts**

The Government is keen to explore further the potential role of community land trusts involving local people in creating the affordable homes Pilots are currently underway and evaluation projects will follow next year.

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**20** David Miliband *Renewing our Democracy* Speech to the Local Government Association Annual Conference, 2005

**21** <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/516935>

- **Shaping policy through Citizens' Juries**

The first Citizens' Juries, announced in 2006, focused on issues around education and children services, as well as crime and the future of the NHS. The Government is currently looking to use these juries to consult on issues around housing growth, community cohesion and migration.

- **Petitions**

The Government wants to find ways to give more power to people to trigger action on their priorities by raising the status of petitions. A consultation on petitioning will be launched shortly.

The proposals outlined above are all steps in the right direction but it is still difficult to see how far they go towards the continuous dialogue and public conversation that makes ongoing participation accessible.

Will these methods enable people to raise any issue they may feel strongly about and do so as and when they wish? Should public officials not respond to concerns that do not sit neatly under already-prescribed topics? Will the government's proposals create a habitual, ongoing and conversational environment?

Firstly, the methods proposed may be of most value to those who are already relatively engaged in political and community activities. It is difficult to see how the more disengaged would be willing to take part in a citizen forum while they lack the time, the skills, the required information, the confidence or the motivation to do so. Secondly, as they currently stand most of these mechanisms by and large remain *consultation* exercises, which is still different from *participation*.

More can be done in terms of establishing a continuous, two-way relationship between citizens and their representatives. Picking up on the petitions idea, there is an opportunity that should not be missed.

## **4** *Enhancing local democracy: the case for wider established e-petitioning processes*

**A site launched in November 2006 to enable online petitions to the UK Prime Minister's Office attracted much interest when nearly 1.8 million people signed a petition on road pricing. This triggered a major debate in the media about the role of e-petitions and, more generally, of government–public consultations.**

This goes to show that there is scope to establish petitioning as a method that can and should be used as a means to engage citizens. This can also be seen from the current Government's commitment to look into the petitioning practices with a view to enhance their role and significance.

Thus far, however, politicians have been wary of letting go completely and even harnessing the use of ICT as a means to enable a more participative system of petitioning has not been adequately formalised, despite the benefits and positive examples that can be seen from the few success stories available. Regardless of any efforts, take-up of has been scant and has not been able to create that positive, empowered feeling that citizens need in order to engage.

### **E-petitioning: comparing the Scottish Executive and Downing Street**

A good way to start understanding how to maximize the opportunities that come with a good petitioning structure is to compare the parliamentary petitions systems of the PM's office and the Parliament of Scotland. Both systems provide access to the traditional petition system of their Parliaments, where members of the community can express their view on any issue to the Parliament. However, the two systems differ in the level of interactivity they provide and a close look at the differences will highlight what more can be done to harness the potential this system has to provide that on-going relationship between citizens and their representatives.

The Scottish Parliament has a reputation for its use of petitions that allow citizens to raise concerns through the Public Petitions Committee (PPC). It is one of the few examples of a new form of citizen participation. The e-petitioner system was designed to achieve “the key aspects of modern democracy: *openness, accessibility and participation.*”<sup>22</sup>

The PPC’s website hosts a valid petition for an agreed period of time during which petitioners have the opportunity to attract wider public interest and gather more names in support of their petition. Each e-petition also has a dedicated forum where people can discuss the petition and related issues can be and debated for a prescribed period. The site also includes an archive of all petitions submitted and background information on the issues. After this process ends, the petition is formally submitted for consideration by the PPC. Petitioners may also be able to make a personal presentation to the PPC. The Committee ensures that the petitioners are kept informed of progress at each stage of the Parliament’s consideration of the petition.

Designing the system was done in partnership with the Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University. This ensured that careful research was carried out in order to fulfill the requirements of people wishing to participate were adequately met.

By comparison, the e-petition system in Prime Minister’s Office has a long way to go in achieving the same results. The PM’s Office will accept electronic petitions with more than 300 genuine signatures. Unlike the Scottish approach (which has no minimum number of signatures), the British government will not host petitions. Although the PM’s Office lists the valid petitions received, there is no indication that they have any effect at all and there is no scope for discussion.

Whereas the main trend in UK e-governance is towards a ‘managerial’ system of efficient service delivery, Scotland’s devolved Parliament specifically aimed to formalise methods of e-democracy as a means to foster public engagement.

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**22** Macintosh. Ann (2005): *Digital Democracy through Electronic Petitioning*, p. 4

In sum, the Scottish e-petitioner system takes on four different functions<sup>23</sup> which, taken together, can be seen as a first step towards creating a different meaning of what a democratic process should entail. The system:

- 1) allows direct contact between citizens and Parliament;
- 2) allows citizens to co-ordinate their action, by creating open lists inviting others to sign;
- 3) allows debate between citizens about the petitions and the issues surrounding them; and
- 4) establishes a channel by which Parliament can inform citizens about decisions made about the petitions and about any actions taken.

The success of the system lies in its ability to create a conduit between representatives and citizens: a conduit which enables people to present their ideas, discuss them and wait for a direct response. The end product is that decisions that are still made by representatives will have gone through a deliberative, open, inclusive and transparent process.

By contrast, the form of e-petitioning as seen in the PM's office has no formal structure or importance and therefore avoids becoming a something that government needs seriously consider. It is not embedded within the traditional democratic structures and the effect that the petition has is not clear. E-petitioning to the Scottish Parliament is more directly integrated into the formal parliamentary process, with a Public Petitions Committee deciding which are formally presented.

### **E-petitioning at the local level: Bristol and Kingston**

At a local level, efforts to create a direct relationship with communities have been more visible. Bristol City Council and the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames have led the implementation and piloting of e-petitioning

projects. It is the “localised” version of the Scottish system as a way for citizens to raise their concerns within the formal process of the local authority.

An evaluation of the projects, carried out in 2005, found that much had been accomplished in both Councils. The system had been used by hundreds of citizens and showed early signs of impacting on decision-making. Between September 2004 and July 2006, Bristol received 39 e-petitions with more than 10,000 people taking part. The e-petition attracting most support concerned plastics recycling. More than 4,600 people signed this e-petition in just 11 weeks. What’s more, it was started by a councillor and responded to by an Executive Member from the same political party. Monitoring shows that e-petitioning is used by men and women, the young and old from all parts of the city. Many say they have never signed a petition before.

**Figure 2** Summary the main conclusions that were pulled together by a study carried out to evaluate the two projects.

### **How has e-petitioning enhanced local democracy in Bristol and Kingston<sup>24</sup>**

- Citizens, Officers and Members who took part in the evaluation were almost unanimously in favour of e-petitioning. It has enjoyed strong support from councillors in both Kingston and Bristol, particularly Kingston, and from the departments who are directly involved in the day-to-day servicing of representative government.
- The website and its associated guidelines on petitioning makes both the process and the petition outcomes more visible. The added visibility applies to paper as well as e-petitions, since paper petitions that are presented at Council meetings are also listed on the e-Petitioner page.

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**24** This summary has been taken from International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University (2005): *e-Petitioning in Kingston and Bristol*

- There was some evidence that e-petitioning reinforces civic-mindedness, as it has so far been used by people who believe that community action can influence decision-making but have not previously taken such action themselves.
- There was support for the view that e-petitioning strengthens the role of the councillor by making it more visible and by offering greater convenience and choice to citizens who wish to raise concerns through the formal processes of their council.
- The e-petitioning project increased transparency
- Encourages debate
- The issues raised through e-petitioning are unarguably issues that are important to citizens, and are evidently addressed through local authority decision-making.

Developing an e-petitioning system has addressed some of the issues that influence low voter turnout and disengagement from local politics and in this sense has made important steps forward to the establishment of more appropriate measures to revitalize democracy.

More specifically, the e-petitioning systems have:

- built a means to evolve conversations between local leaders and local people;
- provided citizens with the opportunity to initiate proposals to be taken into consideration and offered opportunity for informed debate;
- widened participation (in Kingston, the project was mainly aimed to target young people);

- enabled transparency in decision-making;
- at the local level, they have raised the profile / visibility of councillors as strong leaders and representatives.

The projects demonstrate that by explicitly supporting e-petitioning, public sector actors can establish a dynamic platform for citizens to highlight issues through channels that are convenient for them, and to watch their concerns progress through the stages of public decision-making.

Successful implementation of an e-petitioner system offers a wide variety of opportunities and benefits. Although different local authorities will have different ways to access their communities, the projects show that an adequately designed and carefully targeted system of e-petitioning can effectively be used to overcome some of the barriers to democracy. These should be actively promoted.

Issues around “digital divide” and increased exclusion often go hand in hand with proposals to make use of ICT to widen citizen involvement. E-democracy, the argument goes, is suited for those who already have access to technologies and the skills and willingness to do so. This argument, however, should not be the reason standing behind inaction. Governments at all levels should encourage the use of ICT as a means to participate in community life and should equip the most disadvantaged to be able to choose to do so.

During the set up of the e-petitioner system in Scotland with Napier University, a BT spokesperson said: “BT Scotland is committed to working with our partners and government to tackle the issues of digital exclusion. The use of e-democracy in the modern political age is central to widening participation in the political process and the application of the technology to this project will facilitate a broader understanding of the issues”.<sup>25</sup>

Behind the establishment of the petitioning system in Scotland, was the aim

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**25** <http://lists.access-it.org.uk/ukco.org.uk/archive/conet/2000-November/003742.html>

to widen participation as much as possible. Accompanying the creation of the system was a series of recommendations to the Scottish Executive to support this project with actions and measures aimed at reducing exclusion.

What this shows is that projects of this kind can increase their potential if they are specifically aimed to widen inclusion and if governments' action provides measures for this to happen. It may take time to ensure success, but this should not mean that steps in this direction should not be taken now.

With a view to foster debate around how an e-petitioning system could be established, NLGN suggest the following:

- 1) Public petitioning should become a formal mechanism within the "Community Calls for Action", and the LGA should develop guidance on strengthening this procedure with e-petitioning.
- 2) E-petitioning should become integral to the decision making processes. In general, it should also integrate and strengthen those procedures already in place to channel peoples' voices, such as Area Committees and Area Forums. This could be done firstly by putting in place a firm procedure, which could involve the following steps:
  - o Establishing a minimum number of signatures needed to support a petition (the number could be established on a ward, neighbourhood or borough-wide basis);
  - o If a petition raises enough signatures, it should automatically trigger a council debate and be presented as an item for further discussion in the arena that is best suited to the topic;
  - o There should be a specific time-frame within which the authority must respond.
- 3) Councils should establish guidelines and management processes, which include the following:

- Ensuring councillors are notified of the petition once this has been launched and filtered through officers with identified responsibilities for the task;
  - Developing well-established inter-departmental policies dealing with the handling of petitions;
  - Establishing a maximum time within which a response needs to be given; and
  - Publicising the outcome of the petition.
- 4) The Audit Commission should reward authorities in the new CAA process who demonstrate a deep commitment to establishing new approaches, such as e-petitioning, aimed at widening citizen engagement. The reward could consist of a prize fund for those councils that used e-petitioning and could show within 2 years that they had increased participation so that 20% of the population were in dialogue with the council. Councils achieving this goal would receive a financial reward of 5 pounds per person.
- 5) Councils should foster visibility of the service by publicising it widely. This should be done by:
- Ensuring that the e-petitioning service appears on the home page of the council's website and adding links on each of the council's services web-pages;
  - Including the website address on all council publications and communication methods;
  - Including a list of the most popular e-petitions in community newsletters and local newspapers
  - Engage with schools and ensure young people are informed about the role of the council and about the opportunities of e-petitioning systems as a means to "have their say" on issues they feel strongly about.

- 6) Ensuring that all members of a community have the opportunity to easily access an e-petitioning service is a step that councils should take in order to begin a process of councils should address accessibility and issues around “digital divide” by:
  - o Working in partnership with network community groups in order to raise awareness and inform local people of the possibilities of using online petitions;
  - o Building in measures that comply with Disability and Equality duties;
  - o Actively use libraries to establish dedicated advice and information services together with the availability of computers; and
  - o Creating “wi-fi” plazas and “e-democracy hubs” that can be accessed not only on the streets, but also in buildings, such as job centres and housing services.
  
- 7) Councils should establish monitoring processes in order to measure the success or otherwise of the system: to this end, regular consultation processes should be carried out to ensure the system can follow the needs of the community.

## 5 *Conclusion*

Formal structures of participation are not adequate on their own: revitalising democracy means creating new opportunities for people to have their opinions and concerns addressed. More importantly, local democracy should aim to establish on-going dialogue between elections, wider participation, increased transparency and accountability and through this, strengthen local leadership. If these mechanisms are in place at a local level, citizens are more likely to also re-engage with political process at the national level.

Efforts to re-engage citizens are crucial, due to the changing nature of society which commands that their voices are heard in order to ensure the adequate delivery of public services. The new “place-shaping” role that local government is taking on to create and maintain vibrant communities cannot happen without strong leadership and public buy-in.

Whilst positive efforts to re-engage citizens are being made, this paper has argued that more could be done: there is scope to make further use of e-petitioning systems as a means to revitalise local democracy.

New mechanisms that aim to widen participation and create a dialogue between the public and its representatives can begin to address the barriers that are standing in the way of a re-vitalised democracy. Starting at the local level is the easiest way to address the “crisis of legitimacy”. Getting citizens involved through channels best suited to them and through methods that allow ongoing discussion is likely to also improve turnout at elections and therefore, strengthen that legitimacy and leadership role that councils need in order to adequately tackle the challenges of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century

