

Engaging with Citizens Online: Understanding the Role of ePetitioning in Local Government Democracy

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Abstract

According to the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act introduced in 2009, UK local authorities are expected to implement “a facility for making petitions in electronic form to the authority”. Motivated by this arrangement, this paper reflects on the findings of a case study investigation conducted with the Royal Borough of Kingston (one of the first local authorities to implement such a service since 2004). Lessons learnt from the case suggest that ePetitions reveal increased potential to enhance local government democracy, but are also shaped by challenging open implementation issues which can highly influence the initiative’s impact. Our conclusions are developed within the general debate about online public participation or eParticipation and particularly examine the implications for policy makers.

Keywords: ePetitions, eParticipation, eDemocracy, Case Study, UK Local Government, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, Public Sector ICTs.

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Introduction

According to the Oxford Internet Survey (Dutton, Helsper, and Gerber 2009), ePetitioning is the most popular form of online political participation in the UK¹. This fact is thought to follow to a large extent the success and controversy rising from the popular UK government's ePetitioning website which managed to attract millions of signatures. EPetitions particularly come at the forefront of online citizen engagement efforts due to the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act introduced in 2009. The Act imposes a duty on UK local authorities to respond to petitions and calls them to implement complimentary online petitioning facilities.

This mandate demonstrates that Internet technologies for facilitating public participation are particularly gaining increased attention by authorities. Bearing in mind concerns over dominant managerial models of citizen-government interactions (Chadwick and May 200), it seems that advancements in technical means and cultures raise even more interest around the idea of

¹ Petitions are the most popular form of civic action also offline (Communities and Local Government 2008a).

eParticipation ² (Saebo, Rose, and Flak 2008; Macintosh, Coleman, and Schneeberger 2009).

There are now numerous cases of eParticipation projects initiated by different actors in different contexts; a rich set of examples is summarised by Caddy, Peixoto, and McNeil (2007). Nevertheless, sustainability and citizen acceptance for online public participation projects has proved a quite difficult task from theory to practice (Saebo, Rose, and Flak 2008). Whether viewed as simple eGovernment services or catalysts for better governance, online engagement projects in policy making activities form an interesting field calling for future examination (Irani, Elliman, and Jackson 2007).

It could be argued that, in fact, ePetitions have so far been the only online institutional activity managing to attract such an important volume of citizen participation (Chadwick 2009). Hence, ePetitions have stimulated discussions over the potential of Internet democracy and associated initiatives and policies. Questions remain around their pragmatic usefulness for essentially enhancing democratic processes and connecting citizens with authorities in a meaningful and responsive way.

In this paper, we aim to contribute to this debate by analysing the case of Kingston's ePetitions as one of the first ePetitioning systems (along with Bristol) implemented by a UK local authority since 2004 as part of the Local eDemocracy National Project (2005). Findings suggest that ePetitions can contribute to citizen engagement efforts and propose particular benefits for involved parties. However, although ePetitioning websites bear simple technological characteristics, their implementation can involve challenging operational and administrative aspects.

Our study principally aims to assist local policy makers better configure this forthcoming service by drawing attention on emerging issues. To this direction, the paper pursues the long-standing recommendation to increase the relevance of ICT research to practice by selecting and reporting on exceptional cases of high value for key practitioner stakeholders (Benbasat and Zmud 1999; Dubé and Paré 2003).

The next section provides some background information on the use of Internet technologies for public participation in policy making processes and particularly focuses on ePetitions. Our research approach follows, leading to the case description and analysis. The discussion involves around emerging issues for integrating ePetitions in local authorities and lists some interesting implementation issues.

² The eParticipation term is related to or might be used interchangeably with eDemocracy.

Background

This section discusses some background information on eParticipation from the local government perspective. The brief review aims to introduce ePetitions as one key activity viewed within the broad perspective of eParticipation.

EParticipation in the Local Government Context

There is a common belief that public participation in local government is easier to achieve since the distance between the public and the authorities is significantly reduced compared to national government (Gelders et al. 2010). Different hierarchies and levels of granularity are also applicable within local authorities, e.g. neighbourhoods.

Since scale seems a major challenge for eParticipation initiatives (Macintosh 2004), local government can indeed offer increased opportunities for establishing on-going interactions with citizens. However, scale is not the only major issue as other challenges also require careful consideration when launching such initiatives. Macintosh (2004) also highlights that ensuring coherence and commitment among the different policy making activities is equally important regardless of the online engagement scale.

Apart from ePetitioning, there are numerous examples of local government eParticipation initiatives and interaction areas. For example, planning applications (Conroy and Evans-Cowley 2006) and participatory budgeting activities (Peixoto 2009) demonstrate increased potential for local authorities. Other initiatives may include consultations, panels or webcasting which can foster openness and accountability³.

Although simple, yet difficult to manage in a responsive way, an organised email handling system can significantly boost local engagement culture; such is the case of the Taipei City Mayor's Mailbox as reported by Ong and Wang (2009). Finally, publishing detailed information related to democratic processes online, although not involving two-way interactions can also be promising and complementary to other eParticipation activities (Grimmelikhuijsen 2010).

As expected, institutional characteristics of local authorities can have a significant effect on eParticipation potential and intentions. Medaglia (2007) notes that English local authorities are subject to target-driven auditing processes and a centralised funding system led by the Department of Communities and Local Government. Therefore, UK local authorities acquire less degree of autonomy and are likely to be more influenced by public sector institutional dynamics. Pratchett and Leach (2003) describe this system as

³ See for example the webcasts organised by the Bristol City Council:
<http://www.bristol.public-i.tv/site/>

selectivity (central government can focus resources and priorities) and *diversity* (autonomy to match local needs).

Within this context, the 2009 Act provides a quite unique opportunity to examine the implementation of an eParticipation policy in such a scale and examine emerging issues. The next section elaborates on the ePetitioning concept as the focus of this research.

Petitions and ePetitions

Petitions have traditionally been a process of official political participation in the form of documents addressed to public authorities asking to consider a particular issue. A petition is a formal request to a higher authority signed by one or more citizens, e.g. (Macintosh 2004). Most petitions are addressed to parliaments or governments and concern issues related to legislation, public policy change or even personal issues or requests for grants. In some cases, petitions need to be sponsored by an official representative or supported by a minimum required threshold of citizens. The earliest petitions date from the middle of the 13th century.

EPetitions, as the online transfer of this activity, are thought to accumulate particular benefits which can be quite promising for local government democracy. Typically, they can increase responsiveness, foster simplicity, broaden geographical scope, allow citizens to gather around common interests and enable authorities to formulate decision making agendas according to the needs of their public. Petitions usually address the agenda setting stage of the policy making lifecycle although they might concern rethinking or cancelling an existing policy or decision.

EPetitioning is one of the first collective action practices that emerged from Internet users mainly through mailing lists or websites which act as hosting portals⁴. In terms of technical characteristics, ePetitioning websites mainly contain a digital space where users can sign or initiative petitions, as well as track the progress of existing ones. Other tools to support the petitioning process can also be integrated. Support services involve discussion forums, commenting functionalities or agree/disagree options. In any case, whether offering basic or extended services, adequate administrative personnel is required to overview and manage the process.

Lindner and Riehm (2009) compare the ePetitioning systems used by the Scottish Parliament, the Parliament of Queensland, the German Bundestag and several Norwegian Municipalities. They conclude that, although in all cases seeking political legitimacy was the rationale for considering ePetitions, there is a close connection between technical design, procedural standards and institutional contexts. In other words, ePetitions were implemented in a way

⁴ For example see <http://www.petitiononline.com/> and <http://www.gopetition.com/>

which highly reflected the traditional petitioning process of these political institutions. Will this also be applicable in the case of UK local authorities?

Research Methodology

The purpose of this exploratory research *is to examine the role of ePetitioning in local government democracy and investigate challenges related to the implementation of such initiatives.*

Following the need to research this contemporary phenomenon within its real-life environment, an in-depth qualitative case study methodology was selected (Yin 2009). A case study methodology is particularly well suited to “understand the interactions between information technology-related innovations and organisational contexts” (Darke, Shanks, and Broadbent 1998, p.273). Furthermore, case studies open horizons for new ideas and highlight the opportunities and challenges faced by actors involved in IT implementations (Dubé and Paré 2003).

The empirical study was conducted with Kingston upon Thames. Kingston is a small borough council in the south-west part of Greater London with a population of around 150,000. It was the first local authority in the UK to consider an ePetitioning service through its involvement with the Local eDemocracy National Project. The system’s existence since 2004 provides an important opportunity to reveal topics of interest compared to the usually more limited experience from similar projects. Kingston’s initiative itself, considered a kind of “best-practice”, was one of the drivers for the 2009 Act. EPetitions, also piloted at the same time in Bristol, were one of the many tools considered by the Local eDemocracy National Project.

The study was conducted between January and July 2010. The nature of our enquiry required a thorough understanding of the role of ePetitions for local political processes and the involvement of different stakeholders in the system’s administration and use. To gain such a holistic perspective, the main source of data collection was semi-structured interviews conducted with:

- *Four members of the civil service* focusing on how the petitioning process is designed and managed.
- *Four local councillors*. Three of them were affiliated with the party leading the council (Liberal Democrats) and one with the formal opposition (Conservatives).
- *Two members of local community organisations* who elaborated on their experience as principal ePetitioners.
- One representative of *the service provider* who explored technical issues and the way collaborations are established with the council.

Interviews with the civil service lasted 45 minutes on average while interviews with the rest lasted around 25-30 minutes. Almost all participants welcomed our study and expressed interest for coming across broader issues related to

online participation projects. The interviews were mainly conducted in telephone and in person and most of them were taped and transcribed. Further issues were clarified through email follow-up contacts.

Before reaching the interview stage, a wide range of complementary material was gathered and analysed. First, we examined the system's pilot evaluation as reported by Whyte, Renton, and Macintosh (2005). Next, we collected material related to the system's use and local political processes in general: petitioning statistics, topics and signatures, internal processes for managing the website and handling petitions, as well as the council's structure and meeting minutes. Most of this material was available through the council's website. Finally, we examined documentation related to regulatory and consultation documents produced by the UK Department of Communities and Local Government, e.g. (Communities and Local Government 2008b; 2009).

Material from the interviews and the documentary analysis was organised in the form of a case study database. For the data analysis part, first we reviewed all material looking for potential relations and contradictions. Then, we identified emerging themes and classified them in four main categories to facilitate our case study presentation, namely: (1) the main petitioning process, (2) support services and campaigning petitions, (3) indicative petitioning examples and (4) stakeholders involved and their views. In the next section, the case study findings are presented and discussed.

An Illustrative Case: ePetitioning at the Royal Borough of Kingston

UK local authorities have now a duty to respond to ePetitions and the process needs to be visible, clear and understandable by the public. Kingston residents traditionally had the opportunity to raise issues through petitions, either individually or through support of elected representatives. Before the introduction of ePetitions as a parallel channel to address the council, a coherent process to handle petitions was already established. Politicians and local officers agreed in highlighting that ePetitions are viewed as another, yet important way to connect citizens with formal decision making processes and increase participation.

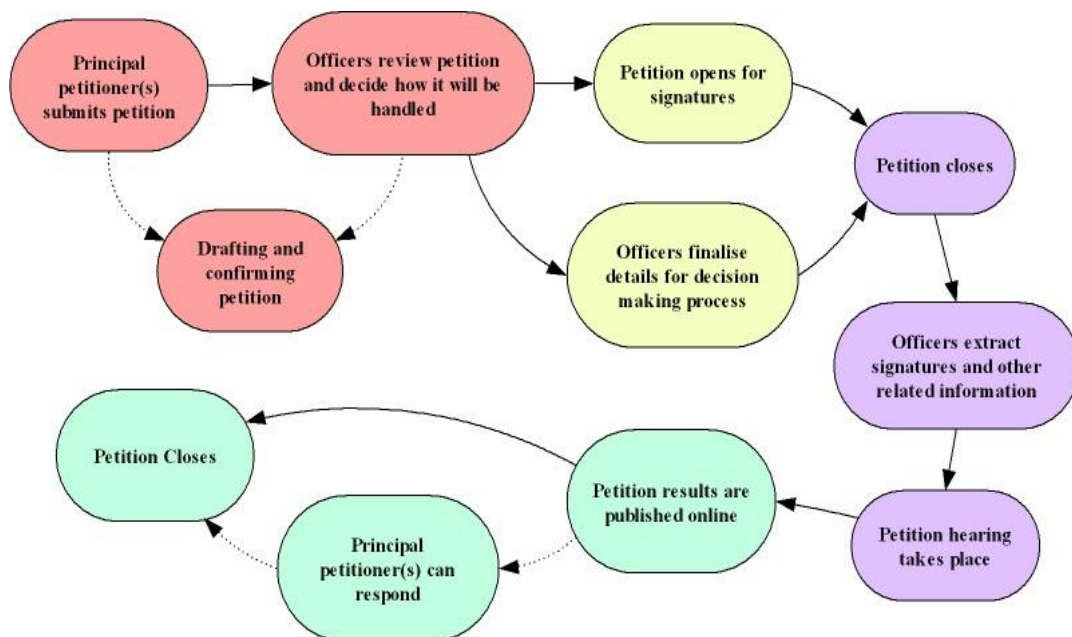
Given the fact that the barriers to entry in this political process are lowered compared to traditional petitioning, engagement numbers were seen as one of the main benefits. High Internet usage within the borough provided an additional indication of potential positive responses. The initial ePetitioning website launched in 2004 was also used by the Scottish Parliament (Macintosh, Malina, and Farrell 2002). The system's provision was later assigned to a private company.

The main petitioning process

Before designing the petitioning process, a decision on the threshold of signatures which can trigger a response needs to be made. According to the consultation on the duty to respond to petitions, authorities are expected to set such a threshold and amend it if it proves difficult to accomplish. Then, authorities need to think how petitions will be processed and the ways in which decisions will be achieved and communicated to the public.

In Kingston, there is no threshold for a petition to be considered. Democratic services are responsible for handling petitions and ePetitions. Handling a petition is not an easy task for responsible officers as it requires holistic knowledge of policy topics and authorities; certain petitions might also require legal advice. Furthermore, the ability to coordinate internal and external involved actors is also important. Petitions might concern different groups such as local politicians or organisations. Some of them might even rise controversies among citizens or require further investigations before a decision can be reached.

Figure 1: ePetitioning Process Overview



Officers emphasise that early intervention to petitioning topics and appropriate preparation of formal decision processes can significantly contribute to the success of the initiative. Compared to paper petitions, the website enables them to review petitions in advance and make appropriate arrangements for public meetings. They are also able to include background information on topics and finalise details while the ePetition is open for collecting signatures. After the petition closure, officers extract signatures and

other associated information for the public meeting (in case the petition is presented in one). Following the hearing, they post the results online and archive the petition after receiving the principal petitioner response (optional). Figure 1 summarises the process.

Support services and campaigning

Critics of ePetitioning express concerns that it constitutes a participation activity which lacks deliberative mechanisms over public policy topics and doesn't take into account their background debates (Chadwick 2009; Miller 2009). It is believed that ePetitions need to be supported by additional characteristics which enhance the process and increase participation quality.

In Kingston's ePetitions, support services are provided through assistance to draft petitions, mailing services to receive updates and links to background information. Posting background information on petitioning topics, including documents and links to other material seems to essentially contribute to the process, leaving the discussion part mainly for the petition hearings. During the first months of the system's operation, an online discussion forum was also available; it was suspended since moderation proved to be labour-intensive.

However, it was noted that although additional functionalities might enhance the experience of some users, others might find the process more complicated. Keeping the process as simple as possible maintains its main advantage. As one of our interviewees stated, if the system involved complicated extensions, he might have decided to use a paper petition instead. Issues of digital divide also remain relevant to eParticipation exercises in this aspect; such initiatives are not solely addressed to savvy Internet users and should not favour the technological and political elite (Macintosh, Coleman, and Schneeberger 2009).

ePetitioners are still responsible for campaigning their petition in order to attract support; it is however much easier to disseminate ePetitions even combining offline and online means. For the latter, an interesting direction for attracting signatures and generating discussions is related to organising support groups in social networking sites. Paradoxically, it seems that support from social networks can be related to official ePetitioning signatures in an unpredictable way. Panagiotopoulos et al. (forthcoming) analysed more than 500 Facebook groups created to campaign petitions on the UK government's website. They found that in many cases Facebook support can be either ineffective or accumulate excessive group membership which however doesn't seem to be converted into official signatures.

According to the consultation, local authorities are required to respond to petitions addressed only through their own system, although they can take into account support from other online sources. In Kingston, the council intends to encourage participatory behaviour from all different activities and

sources. How informal means such as social networking sites can be part of formal processes is a forthcoming challenge.

Indicative Examples

Since the website's launch, there have been around 70 online and 110 paper petitions. Their volume has remained rather stable. Petitioning topics and their outcome are available on the council's website. Petitions and ePetitions are related to all the different activities of the council, e.g. council tax, planning applications, local schools and libraries, recycling, post offices and so on.

As expected, more localised issues tend to receive fewer signatures and issues which concern the whole borough can generate wider support. In addition to the examples mentioned in the system's pilot evaluation (Whyte, Renton, and Macintosh 2005), there have been some interesting cases of ePetitions. One important example concerns a petition against the closure of a local library. The ePetition, organised by a councillor of the opposition party, managed to collect 700 online and 1800 paper signatures in about three weeks. It was finally decided to withdraw the closure proposal from the council budget.

Another interesting example is related to a change in a planning application which divided residents up to the point of having two opposing petitions submitted to the council. Both petitions received a comparable amount of signatures and led to a resolution of collecting more detailed data before reaching a final decision.

Finally, in 2010, a popular petition was generated in order to prevent the opening of a new night club in a local area. The petition managed to gather nearly 500 online signatures in addition to around 300 paper signatures. The principal petitioner recognised the convenience of campaigning petitions online compared to gathering paper signatures and estimated that most online signatures were generated through chain email contacts.

Stakeholders involved

EPetitions involve a wide range of stakeholder: government officers, political parties and local councillors, service providers, citizens and other local organisations.

From the officers' perspective, ePetitions can have diverse effects. They might increase the total amount of petitions addressed to councils since the website significantly accelerates and facilitates the petitioning process. However, ePetitions provide officers an important advanced warning over forthcoming topics and thus allow them to better monitor and coordinate the response process. This was manifested in Kingston compared to paper petitions. Arrangements for ePetition hearings are made during the drafting process and can be finalised while the petition is at the signature collection

stage. The total amount of petitions has remained rather stable during the system's operation, also compared to paper petitions.

Support to ePetitions by councillors and local political parties can add considerable impact and legitimacy to the initiative. In Kingston, the system's success can be attributed to a large extent to political leadership, support and usage. Quite a few petitions were sponsored or triggered directly by councillors or non-elected members of political parties. It is also important that one of the local councillors was leading the pilot implementation nationwide through the Local eDemocracy National project. Apart from individual citizens and politicians, local organisations have also managed to launch some popular ePetitions.

Although the advantages of the online system are widely recognised, some of our interview participants pointed out that, in essence, the website does not change people's attitude to get informed and participate. Others, expressed their views that the benefits of ePetitions should be assessed compared to their cost, especially in a period of public sector cuts and rethinking priorities. In general, it seems that ePetitions serve the needs of the local community and there are no outstanding complaints on how petitions are handled regardless of their outcome.

Discussion

The retrospective analysis of Kingston's experience illustrates the ePetitioning concept for UK local authorities and leads to some important implications. Similarly to what Lindner and Riehm (2009) note, it seems that Kingston's ePetitions are highly dependent upon the authority's context and participatory standards.

The success and sustainability of the initiative sources from the intention to design a coherent process to respond to petitions customised to local capacity and needs. This process, already well-established offline, allowed the integration of ePetitions in a far less challenging task. In turn, the website itself enabled the delivery of particular benefits in terms of better monitoring and facilitating the process, extending geographical reach for petitions and fostering transparency and responsiveness.

Effectively coordinating policy making processes was achieved through continuous effort of responsible officers and involvement by key local political actors. Handling collaborations with involved parties (petitioners, representatives, internal departments and service providers) is a basic element of the process which should not be taken for granted from the officers' side. In fact, petitions cover so diverse topics that response processes cannot be completely routinized and require ad hoc initiatives (e.g. deciding who needs to be consulted or notified, what background information should be included and so on). Research has emphasised that integrating ICTs in public sector

organisations always has important administrative implications and requires active support by the civil service (Brewer, Neubauer, and Geiselhart 2006).

It seems that, although petitions and ePetitions are driven by citizens directly, the quality of the process remains mostly to the authority's responsibility and is bounded by its institutional culture and capacity. Authorities seeking to gain a lot from the process can seize the opportunity to use petitions as an integrated point of eParticipation linking it properly to the rest of their online material and public activities. Furthermore, ePetitioning systems can build characteristics which might provide additional benefits such as intranet functionalities. On the contrary, authorities willing to discourage or delay the massive use of petitions can set high signature thresholds or not publicise the system adequately.

In any case, experimentation and open mindedness are required before achieving a long term balance and understanding of ePetitions' new role. Indicative open implementation issues include the following:

- How will ePetitions affect the total volume and signatures of petitions received by local authorities? Respectively, will ePetitions increase or reduce decision making costs and quality?
- How should authorities design and communicate the petitioning process so that the public can be encouraged to use ePetitions in a manageable way by authorities? Deciding on the appropriate signature threshold can be an important aspect.
- How will paper petitions be combined with ePetitions? E.g. will paper petitions be published and archived online? What should be the process when petitioners use both online and offline channels simultaneously?
- How should the website be made as visible and linked with other activities as possible? Continuous improvement and evaluation needs to be practiced in a creative way, e.g. understanding users and non-users, working closely with service providers, training and maintenance.
- What additional features could be implemented as support services to enhance the process and make it more meaningful but also not more complex? Alerting mechanisms for different involved stakeholder groups should probably be prioritised for this aspect.
- How should authorities react to complementary types of online submission and support to ePetitions (e.g. emails, social networking groups)? Although not their responsibility, authorities could try to assist the campaigning stage in different possible ways.

Finally, it should be noted that there is a rapidly growing market in the UK offering ePetitioning services for interested parties. This market is not limited to petitions or tools exclusively for local authorities, but also includes a wide range of eDemocracy solutions such as collaborative environments, forums and geographical systems. Similar to ePetitions, manageability, integration and sustainability should be considered with such tools.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to increase our understanding of the role of ePetitioning in local government democracy and reveal issues related to designing such systems. Kingston's ePetitions demonstrate potential for enhancing democratic processes and delivering benefits for involved parties. Successfully implementing ePetitions remains to a large extent a result of political will to approach the public and ability to design, integrate and manage the process.

Our exploratory research is subject to certain limitations. The empirical study is single and does not systematically take into account the user side. Furthermore, although ePetitioning is certainly an activity of international interest, technologies for political participation always remain embedded in contexts which affect conditions on their use (Park and Kluver 2009). Therefore, our conclusions are affected by the historical popularity of ePetitions in the UK and the institutional environment of UK local authorities (as discussed in the background).

Future research on the ePetitioning topic can improve our understanding on the use of Internet technologies in formal policy making processes and contribute to the instrumental, normative and evaluative agenda of eParticipation (Saebo, Rose, and Flak 2008). The 2009 Act offers a unique opportunity to assess a promising eParticipation technology at such massive scale and examine the long term results beyond pilot stages. It can also reveal important aspects of institutional change since to effectively design and operate ePetitions, most local authorities need to rethink internal process and emerging issues of operational alignment and administration.

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