

# A Comparative Study Of E-Democracy Initiatives In UK Local Government

## Research Objectives

To design a pilot study for what will become a major project that studies the promotion, delivery, effectiveness of different forms of democracy.

## Research Strategy

The extent of the practice of E-Democracy in Local Governments across the UK

The extent to which the initiatives and programmes are driven by national/supranational or local considerations

The amount of resources available to develop and sustain said facilities

The extent to which these initiatives have become embedded in practice

The extent to which these initiatives transform and embed different models of citizenship

## Methodology

The initial research for the project was conducted on the internet. The problems that were faced by us here were centred on the abundance of information about E-Democracy. The E-Democracy itself is highly contested and means many different things to different people. The information on, and definitions of E-Democracy was extremely varied. It ranged from the concept of independent on-line news websites, blogs, and forums, to questioning the validity and technology of voting on-line. The debates about democracy featured heavily in many journal articles and whether voting on-line would help encourage more voters. A facet of this argument was that of the 'Democratic Deficit' and whether it could be stilled by increasing interaction of politicians with their constituents via the internet.

The research was then split into two separate categories – Theoretical and Empirical – to break down and organise the research into a clear direction. The Empirical data leaned heavily on reports done by bodies such as *The Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM)* and *The Digital Inclusion Team* a group set up by *The Social Exclusion Unit*. The reports provided by these bodies, as well as the organisations such as *Minnesota E-Democracy* which did an analysis of the state of E-Democracy in the United States, have given insight into what is now a field that has had significant government spending, and is now growing organically.

However, the concept is still a contested one, as evidenced in many journals of Political Science. However, the internet is a democratising tool, and the debate about democracy on-line takes in all directions that come with this concept. Whether or not the internet will lead to a greater amount of democracy is a continual debate. What this study will endeavour to achieve from understanding the theoretical aspects is to understand better what models of democracy are being promoted by Local Councils

## Local Council Websites

Below, are three examples of local council websites. These three in particular have been chosen due to certain requirements. The first is Oxford City Council, as an in depth look has been given to this particular case. The second is the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, which was the only website to achieve 'Excellent' status in the *SOCITM* Annual Report. The third website is Torbay County Council, which used a particularly innovative method in enabling local citizens with regards to the County Budget.



As one can see there is a great deal of difference between each website; each council goes about enabling it's citizenry in different ways. The object of this pilot study is to understand what model of citizenship each council is trying to promote. However it is plain to see that each website has different means of promoting different things. While any attempt to reduce the democratic deficit is noble, it seems as though some areas of the country are better equipped to reduce this deficit than others, whether it be a simple matter of funding, or whether the council is attempting to force through greater enfranchisement, or even whether it is the deed of a person or group trying to make the council a better tool for democracy without any higher directive.

## The 'Digital Landscape'

The 'Digital Landscape' of Britain is changing, and it is clear central and local government is keen to keep up with this change. What this change means for citizens is, hopefully, to make local government more open and available. The problems that are faced by local councils in this respect range from who the websites are run by to who they are marketed to, to whether they can really and truly be an effective democratising feature of politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A report by digital inclusion in Britain showed that there is strong evidence that "Those who are on the wrong side of the digital divide are also socially excluded" (*Digital Inclusion: Landscape in Britain*, Page 16). To answer the question of what model of citizenship is being promoted by local councils through their websites, we must look at who uses the website, and for what purpose. Before we can begin to think about this, it is imperative to know what each website contains, and whether it is 'transactional' (where it is possible to utilise the website to fill a council tax form or TV Licence, or apply for planning permission) or 'promotional' (where if the website is merely an on-line brochure of the local council, with phone numbers). The Annual *SOCITM* Report is meant to judge these different factors. More and more people are using the internet from home, and usage of council websites has increased steadily over the past 2 years, what information each website holds and how that information is used, is an important part of this research. To return to the digital divide, it is plain to see what implications this may have. Those on the 'wrong side' of the digital divide can range from low income households, who do not use the internet, to those who simply do not know how – this group includes pensioners, and the disabled particularly the visually impaired.

## Torbay County Council

The Torbay County Council website was specifically picked out here due to the fact that it has a genuine example of a council enabling its citizens. The Torbay council uses an internet company called delib.com. This company specialises in consultations with local government; they also offer a game available on their website where people can pretend they are being consulted on a local council's budget. They offer packages to local websites where the local council users can participate in the consultations regarding their council's budget and actually have an effect. Of all the examples of websites promoting E-Democracy, this has been by far the best example. Citizens were actually able to take part in deciding what the council spent their money on, and were given the opportunity to see if more money was spent on one area, less would be spent on other areas. It was seen as a large success, as many got involved. The model of citizenship being promoted here is clearly one of being active within a community, to take part in what the local government is trying to do, and to be able to have a voice in expressing support or lack of, for any particular policy. If this is the way councils will be run in the future, then the digital landscape will have to change greatly with the times, but the benefits are plain to see, as there is a promotion of active citizenship, and direct democracy, brought about by E-Democracy.

## The Questionnaire

The purpose of this research project was to design and create a questionnaire that would become a cross national research tool. The questionnaire would be broken down into these categories:

- Source of Initiatives and/or Policies
- Nature of Initiatives and Projects
- The Nature of Electronic Democracy
- Nature & Content of Initiatives & Technologies Used
- Models of Citizenship and Engagement Used
- Intended Outcomes
- Cost and Benefits
- Future Plans

The difficulty with the design of a questionnaire is in determining how to ask the questions. We do not know who exactly will be replying, and whether each person will really be able to answer questions of citizenship. If person responding is merely a designer of a website, and not in charge of the content, how would we be sure that we would be getting sufficient answers. The questions were designed on the basis that they could be coded, and made easier to analyse if there were only a certain number of ways to answer a specific question. This is also partly due to the fact that when disseminating the information, having 350 different answers to the same question can be rather difficult in understanding.

The fact that this questionnaire is trying to gauge, amongst other things, the differences in the way websites themselves, and which direction they intend to go; there is a need to understand why certain things are being promoted, and to what end. The importance in what the website and council wants to achieve and what the long term goals are, are fundamentally important to the conceptual models of citizenship.

## Conclusion & Evaluation

The research done on this project has been successful in UK understanding the implications of E-Democracy in UK local government. While the questionnaire itself has not been tested, there is evidence to suggest that the questionnaire will be a success due to the implicit understanding of what local councils are trying to do. The increase in data from local and central government to enable citizens more, by simply giving out more information in different ways, shows that the basic model of citizenship that is being promoted is one where citizens take a more active role in local government, and use the resources that are available to them. A more in depth analysis of what local councils are trying to achieve they are trying to promote in the next step in this project. The incorporation of theoretical and empirical data, just shows that E-Democracy is a growing field of research, that is highly relevant to academic study, as well as the changing nature of democracy itself.