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www.e-democracy.gov.uk

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Barriers to e-Democracy

Local government experiences and responses

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Notes:

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1. The e-Democracy moment

The idea that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the capacity to greatly enhance democracy is hardly new. As long ago as 1970, researchers were examining the possibilities and problems of technology mediated democracy and arguing that democratic engagement could be enhanced through ICTs (Martin and Norman, 1970). The possibilities and risks of e-Democracy have been widely discussed and analysed: some, such as Kenneth Laudon (1977) saw great possibilities in the technologies to enhance representative processes; others saw the opportunity to radically shift the democratic emphasis to more direct or deliberative modes of engagement (cf. Toffler, 1980; Barber 1984).

It was only in the 1990s, however, with the commercial development of the internet and its associated technologies that the possibilities started to translate into reality. Initiatives from as far a field as Canada (Lyon, 1993) and the Netherlands (Schalken and Tops, 1995) experimented with different forms of citizen engagement in local government based primarily upon the innovative application of new technologies. For the first time, new technologies were being taken seriously as a potential solution for some of democracy's contemporary problems (cf. Arterton, 1987; Abrahamson, Arterton and Orren, 1988).¹

Despite the existence of a range of e-Democracy tools and some significant experience of using them in different contexts, the penetration and take-up of e-Democracy in the UK, as elsewhere, remains limited. It is this gap between the existence of a variety of tools and their take-up that is the main focus of this research report. Based upon both a survey of all local government websites and in-depth interviews with a range of local authority officers and members, the report analyses the various issues and barriers to the implementation of e-Democracy. Rather than simply reporting the problems, however, it also looks to the future. How can the barriers to e-Democracy be overcome and how can the tools of e-Democracy be integrated with existing and emerging democratic practices offline? It is these questions that lie at the heart of the research.

A wide range of e-Democracy case studies already exist in both the academic and practitioner literature. Academic case studies include single instances of radical experiments in the UK (e.g. Coleman, 2002) and comparative studies of different initiatives. Practitioner case studies include examples of best practice as well as transferable ideas and resources in some instances (see, especially, DoWire – <http://dowire.org>). However, very little work has been undertaken that focuses explicitly on the way in which local government is seeking to develop e-Democracy tools as part of the wider process of democratic renewal. The one exception is the recent survey undertaken by MORI and Bristol City Council on behalf of the Local e-Democracy National Project, which aimed to provide a benchmark of current and planned e-Democracy practice among English local authorities (Hilton, 2005). The MORI/Bristol research provides a useful quantitative summary of what is currently taking place in English local government and likely future directions.

Our research has been designed to complement the MORI/Bristol survey by providing a more detailed analysis of the actual state of local e-Democracy (in the form of a website analysis) and more in-depth understanding of the problems and opportunities that different actors within local government perceive (in the form of interviews with a range of people in different local authorities). In developing the analysis we focus not only on what the current state of e-Democracy is but also upon the way in which initiatives are linked to an understanding of different democratic processes and the potential problems that local democracy currently faces. We do not start from the assumption that there is one best way to do e-Democracy or, indeed, that e-Democracy tools are necessarily good for local democracy. We do not even assume that there is a democratic vision that all can agree upon. Instead, the research reported here is focused more upon understanding the different and potentially competing democratic visions that local government actors have, the ways in which they are seeking to change or develop democratic practice in their localities (democratic enactment) and the barriers or problems that they face in achieving their visions. It is only in this way that the potential and limitations of e-Democracy can be understood.

¹ For detailed reviews of the early literature on e-Democracy (sometimes referred to as digital or tele-Democracy) see van de Donk and Tops (1995), Horrocks and Web (1994), Horrocks and Pratchett (1995) *inter alia*. For a summary of some of the recent literature, see MORI (2005)

What is e-Democracy?

There is a range of definitions of e-Democracy. If the value of e-Democracy to contemporary local government is to be properly evaluated then a clear understanding of its meaning seems essential. The Local e-Democracy National Project, of which this report is part, defines e-Democracy as 'harnessing the power of new technology to encourage citizen participation in local decision-making between election times' (cited in MORI, 2005, p9). This definition is a somewhat partial one, not least because it excludes the most comprehensive and significant political act in a representative democracy, that of voting. However, as the next subsection will show, these limitations are more to do with the nature of the Local e-Democracy National Project than a fundamental problem with its understanding or operationalization of the concept. Nevertheless, given this report's wider interest in e-Democracy, it is necessary to look at wider and more comprehensive definitions. We will examine a number of existing definitions before developing an appropriate definition which captures the essence of e-Democracy in the context of this research.

A good starting point is the definition adopted by the recent European Parliament study of e-Democracy in all 25 European Union countries. This study adopted a definition that focused especially upon the mechanisms of accountability in contemporary democracy:

e-Democracy consists of all electronic means of communication that enable/empower citizens in their efforts to hold rulers/politicians accountable for their actions in the public realm. Depending on the aspect of democracy being promoted, e-Democracy can employ different techniques: (1) for increasing the transparency of the political process; (2) for enhancing the direct involvement and participation of citizens; and, (3) improving the quality of opinion formation by opening new spaces of information and deliberation. (Trechsel *et al*, 2002)

This definition is interesting because it specifies a particular role for the electronically mediated communication that is expected between citizens and governments: one that is specifically associated with strengthening the mechanisms of accountability. Other definitions tend to be much more about participation because it is in some way intrinsically good. Chadwick (2003), for example, states that e-Democracy is about consultation, deliberation and participation. According to Tsagarousianou (1999), e-Democracy has three major claims, which are the improvement of *information provision*, *deliberation*, and *participation in decision-making*. These are ideas that are also adopted by others. Compare the following:

[e-Democracy is...] the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and computer mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media (e.g. the Internet, interactive broadcasting and digital telephony) for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication (Hacker and Dijk, 2000, p. 1).

'Strong democracy' requires strong and interactive links between the state and civil society; between government and the governed ... we have the prospect of national and local governments interacting with citizens via web sites, e-mail addresses and public information kiosks. We also have experiments with electronic voting, electronic voter guides, citizen juries and the like (Hague and Loader, 1999, p.13).

While these may be appealing definitions, they are useful only in so far as they tell us what e-Democracy does: not what it might achieve for democracy. Even where notions of accountability are acknowledged, they often remain implicit in the definition offered.

Steven Clift, one of the leading e-Democracy activists in the United States, defines e-Democracy as follows:

E-Democracy comprises a range of Internet based activities that aim to strengthen democratic processes and institutions, including government agencies. Some of the ways in which this can be delivered include: providing accessible information resources online; conducting policy consultation online; and facilitating electronic input to policy development (Clift, 2002)

Similarly, IPPR (2002) defines e-Democracy as the use of information and communication technologies in support of citizen-centred democratic processes. These 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 voluntary and non-governmental activities

Clearly, there is widespread recognition of e-Democracy's potential to provide new avenues of communication and engagement. What is missing from most of these definitions is a precise understanding of how participation and engagement will enhance democracy and, therefore, the limits to what can be achieved through particular initiatives. More participation does not necessarily mean more democracy, regardless of how good the mechanisms through which participation takes place. An often cited criticism of attempts to enhance participation that are not focused explicitly upon an understanding of how they will benefit or otherwise affect democracy, is the observation that the two most participatory and engaging regimes of the 20th century were the Third Reich and the Soviet Union (see, for example, Cochrane, 1996). No-one would argue that these regimes met the basic criteria of modern democracy yet local authorities continue to push on with encouraging participation, both online and offline, without specific reference to the democratic value that they are expecting to gain from their efforts. If the efforts at developing e-Democracy in local government are to be evaluated and understood then it is necessary to have a definition of e-Democracy that starts from the democratic assumptions that it is engaging with.

Democratic theory normally distinguishes between the core principles that underpin any democracy (principles such as freedom, equality, inclusion, transparency, responsiveness and so on) and the model of democracy that is associated with particular values (representative, participatory, associative, pluralist, direct and so on).² As Michael Saward (2003) argues, however, there is no single set of democratic principles that all can agree on and their realisation, through various models, remains essentially contested. Perfect democracy, therefore, is an incomplete, highly contested and, ultimately, unachievable project (Pratchett and Lowndes, 2004). At best, we can seek to improve the democratic practices available in order to enhance contemporary democracy or to address perceived failings in contemporary democratic devices.

In this context, our definition of e-Democracy adopts the Democratic Audit's criteria for democracy as having two fundamental principles that devices should be seeking to advance: *political equality* and *popular control* (Beetham, 1996). *Political equality* refers to the principle that all citizens should have equal opportunities to influence decision makers in their locality. As well as offering mechanisms that theoretically support equality (e.g. universal franchise, one person one vote etc), therefore, democracies should also include positive attempts to redress systematic imbalances in political engagement, develop inclusiveness and promote an equal sense of political efficacy among citizens. *Popular control* is the other side of the same coin and refers to the idea that citizens as a whole are able to control and direct what governments do on their behalf. Consequently, it includes such principles as transparency in government processes, accountability of governments and public servants, and responsiveness in policies and practices.

The implications for e-Democracy of these two simple concepts are significant. No democracy, at the level of either the nation state or local government, can claim to have met them fully. Citizens do not have equal power in their locality and governments are often accused of ignoring citizens' wishes. For democracy to work, therefore, it needs to have a number of mechanisms, all of which seek to achieve, in different ways, components of political equality and popular control. Furthermore, these mechanisms need to be continuously reviewed and updated to ensure that they remain relevant to the values that they are seeking to support. It is as part of this process that e-Democracy has an important role to play.

² See, for example, Held, 1996.

Modern local government uses a number of different democratic devices, both formal and informal, to develop political equality and popular control. At one level, the tools of e-Democracy provide another set of devices that can be used to support this process. At a more sophisticated level, however, the implementation of e-Democracy can be seen as an opportunity to raise the democratic agenda and to provoke a more systematic consideration of the democratic values that are in play in a locality. In implementing e-Democracy tools the sponsors and participants in such initiatives have the opportunity to reflect upon the problems and limitations of existing democratic devices and to establish the direction in which democracy should be renewed. In other words, e-Democracy can be a significant device for achieving 'democratic enactment' (Saward, 2003).

Our definition of e-Democracy, therefore, is that it involves the process of enacting democracy through particular devices that seek to enhance democratic practice by improving the political equality of citizens or the responsiveness of governments to their citizens. It is electronic democracy in so far as these devices are dependent upon ICTs to deliver this enactment. However, the technologies are only important where they help to improve democratic practice in relation to these core principles. An important part of the democratic enactment thesis is that individual devices do not operate in isolation from one another. It is only by the careful sequencing of different devices (both online and offline) that democracy can be enhanced. The challenge for those concerned with e-Democracy is to ensure that this opportunity is grasped by all those involved in the implementation of initiatives. The danger of so-called e-Democracy initiatives that do not seek to address this definition is that they run the risk of reinforcing existing political inequalities and further entrenching the power of political or managerial elites.

Before moving beyond definitions, the organisational focus of this definition needs to be addressed. This definition of e-Democracy is explicitly about how governments (and especially, in the case of this report, local government) can design in specific devices that will enhance democratic practice. It is inherently top-down in its approach. A significant criticism of this approach is that it is focused too much upon what governments are doing and insufficiently upon the behaviour and attitudes of citizens. Citizens, after all, are the lifeblood of democracy. Many of those working in the area of e-Democracy see the possibility for bottom-up, self organisation of citizens enhanced by their use of new technologies. Our definition does not deny the importance of citizens in making democracy work, nor does it ignore the many bottom-up initiatives that are being developed in many countries and in many different contexts. However, we are also aware that the way in which governments are organised – the institutional arrangements, the extent to which information is made widely available, the way in which participation is organised, the degree to which decision-making is inclusive or exclusive, and so on – all affect the opportunities for political engagement (cf. Lowndes and Wilson, 2001; Maloney, Smith and Stoker, 2000). The formal institutional arrangements and the informal rules by which politics works in a locality both shape the political culture and make some initiatives more relevant and appropriate than others. Our definition of e-Democracy, therefore, is concerned with the broader democratic infrastructure which supports participation and engagement and the ways in which the implementation of particular e-Democracy devices by governments might affect the political opportunity structures in localities.

The interest in top-down approaches to e-Democracy is both conceptual and pragmatic. Conceptually, this top-down approach is significant because it reflects a real concern that what governments do to support democracy (or, indeed, to ignore or undermine it) makes an important difference to how democracy is practised in a locality. The initiatives that local authorities choose to implement and the way in which different devices are sequenced will have an impact: not only upon specific policy outcomes but also upon the wider understanding of how democracy works. Pragmatically, the top-down focus also reflects the funding regime in which the Local e-Democracy National Project is working and the approach that it inevitably leads to. The 22 National Projects, of which the e-Democracy project is one, are all designed to help local government improve the electronic services it provides to citizens. The projects are expected to produce generic solutions and guides to how various e-government tools can support local government after the 2005 target of making all local government services electronic. Implicit in the national projects, therefore, is an expectation that the individual projects will primarily support local government rather than wider community initiatives. The Local e-Democracy National Project is unique, in some respects, in that it has also supported community led projects where they have had a direct and obvious benefit to local government. However, it has inevitably tended more to the top-down solutions that are led by local authorities.

The Local e-Democracy National Project

The Local e-Democracy National Project has its roots in a concern to support the democratic functions of local government through ICTs. Unlike other National Projects funded by the Local Government Online programme, which focused on the back office and one to one service dimensions of local government, this Local e-Democracy National Project was specifically conceived to address the contemporary and changing nature of local democracy. The context was shaped, therefore, by the Government's clear commitment to democratic renewal in local government in general and e-Democracy in particular. This commitment can be traced through a number of documents. First, the 1998 Local Government White Paper (DETR, 1998) made a clear commitment to enhancing local democracy by encouraging local authorities to develop new ways of engaging citizens in the work of the Council. Uniquely, this was backed up by a clear statement from the Prime Minister that exhorted local authorities to form the foundations of a modern and sustainable democracy through community leadership (Blair, 1998). Second, the Local Government Act 2000 introduced new structures of political management that have changed the decision-making structures of councils and placed new demands upon the way in which elected representatives work. Third, the 2001 Local Government White Paper (DTLR, 2001) continues to place an emphasis upon engaging citizens and learning from communities. Finally, the Office of the e-Envoy's consultation paper on e-Democracy reaffirms the Government's commitment to wider forms of citizen engagement and participation (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002). At the project's outset, therefore, there was clear policy recognition and support for the value of electronically enabled democratic participation beyond e-voting and the role of local government in leading the way. This commitment has been further advanced by the inclusion of several e-Democracy outputs within the ODPM's Priority Outcomes for local e-government.

In the context of this commitment, the Local e-Democracy National Project was conceived as a means of coordinating existing e-Democracy initiatives across local government and developing new frameworks and ideas. Notably, the Local e-Democracy National Project does not include electronic voting within its remit as the pilot programme for e-voting is being funded separately, although it acknowledges the relationship between e-voting and broader e-Democracy initiatives. Consequently, the Local e-Democracy National Project concentrates upon a range of e-Democracy initiatives that local authorities can undertake to support their wider attempts at democratic renewal. These initiatives range from specific support for representative democracy (for example, supporting the development of individual councillor websites) through to radical attempts to change awareness of local democracy among particular groups (for example, by generating a set of e-Democracy games).³

This report is part of the Local e-Democracy National Project in so far as the research was funded by work stream 1 of the project. The overall aim of work stream 1 was to develop a set of tools that would support those local authorities that wanted to explore e-Democracy and justify the investments necessary to make it work. As part of this process the Local e-Democracy National Project Board agreed that it was necessary to conduct primary research that could help understand, in more detail, the barriers that local authorities face in seeking to implement e-Democracy and to analyse the potential strategies that e-Democracy champions might adopt. It is this research that the report develops and analyses.

Although it is part of the Local e-Democracy National Project the report does not focus on evaluating the various projects that the programme of work has supported. This evaluation is being undertaken as part of Work Stream 3 and will be the subject of a separate report. Instead, this report focuses upon the real barriers and opportunities that local authorities face in considering e-Democracy: from the lack of information on what works through to practical limitations on how to set about implementation. The research runs alongside the other activities of the National Project, therefore, in so far as the research activity was undertaken before much of the output from the Local e-Democracy National Project was available. The barriers analysed, therefore, reflect the real perceptions of respondents, many of whom were largely unaware of the e-Democracy agenda being fashioned by the National Project. The research, therefore, is both timely and significant for the rolling-out of the National Project's tools to local government.

³ More details of the Local e-Democracy National Project are available on the project's website: www.e-Democracy.gov.uk

2. Researching barriers to local e-Democracy

Analysing why something is not happening is always harder than analysing why it is: yet this problem lies at the heart of the research undertaken here. Our research was interested in analysing not only what local government is doing to enhance e-Democracy but also the problems and barriers that local authorities face in trying to implement it. In those local authorities that lie in the vanguard of e-Democracy the remaining barriers may concentrate around technical or financial constraints. For others with more limited experience of e-Democracy, however, the barriers may be more conceptual or cultural. Consequently, a range of barriers and challenges need to be weighed in the research process against the potential opportunities that some may envisage in the implementation of e-Democracy.

To address this challenge, the project adopted a dual research strategy. First, it developed a detailed analysis of every local government website in England, assessing the democratic qualities of each. This website analysis allowed local authorities to be ranked according to the different democratic features of their online environment – a proxy measure for their approach towards e-Democracy. Second, using the ranked list from the website analysis, 15 local authorities were identified that provided a cross-section of approaches to e-Democracy. As well as their position on the ranking, local authorities were also selected that represented variance along other dimensions such as local authority type, size political control and so on. These local authorities provided the venue for in-depth interviews with a range of people who, have responsibility for, or an impact upon, the Council's approach to e-Democracy.

This report analyses the evidence from both of these research tools. However, before proceeding to the analysis it is helpful to explain in detail the tools that were developed for this purpose and the way in which they were applied.

e-Democracy website analysis

The website is a core strategic tool for local authorities. It is a unique medium for communicating information and providing services. But more importantly, for the purposes of the National Project, it is a medium that can potentially be used for encouraging political participation and democratic engagement. The website, hence, has a key role in providing channels for political participation and bringing life to the rhetoric of democratic renewal. In this research, the website analysis aimed to produce an e-Democracy baseline and a first indication of the gap between rhetoric and reality in the e-Democracy practices of local government.

Although other methods that we employed provide valuable information about the perceptions and attitudes of local government actors, they do not provide enough evidence about how local authorities are actually using the Internet. Analysing the websites enables us to reveal the extent to which local authorities' attitudes towards e-Democracy come into practice.

Although the analysis of media sources and political documents has a long tradition (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969), analysis of websites is a recent area of study within various disciplines. The research interests and specific research questions have differed across disciplines and depending on the purposes of the study. However, many of them start from the properties of the Internet and ask whether the examined websites exploit these properties or not. For example, Gibson and Ward (2000), in their analysis of political party websites, first identify the properties of the Internet and then ask "*given* these distinctive properties, what are the particular ways in which we would expect parties to be using the WWW (emphasis added, p. 304)?" This leads to a technology-led evaluation of websites. We think that taking the properties of the Internet as 'given' is a form of technological determinism. Instead, in this research we asked the following: "given the importance of participation and democracy in the current political climate and the role of elected local government to engender participation and democracy, how do local authorities use the Internet for democratic purposes?"

Accordingly, the main interest has been to evaluate the capacity of the websites to provide opportunities for citizen participation and the extent to which the websites provide information about the working of the local democratic system, such as information on elections, elected members, political management and so on. The framework also evaluated their ease of use by looking at features such as 'search' facility, or 'site map'. The full website analysis tool is included as appendix 1.

The website analysis is based on a quantitative approach. Although initial website analyses were descriptive and anecdotal, more recent studies have taken a more systematic approach. This requires identification of indicators to measure various aspects of websites such as ease of use, information content, and interactivity (Gibson and Ward, 2000; Musso *et al*, 2000). Quantitative studies allow for systematic analyses of political sites. They also enable the researcher to identify trends across time and different cases. SOCITM (Society of Information Technology Managers), for example, has been conducting a web survey of all local authorities in the UK since 2000 using more or less similar tools. In this research, we aimed to develop a framework that would enable us to conduct a systematic analysis of local authority websites and which can be used in the future for the same purpose. What distinguishes this framework from that developed and deployed by SOCITM is its specific emphasis on the democratic devices that are available (or not) in these websites. Therefore, we have not been interested in the capacity of these websites in providing services electronically.

Research into local authority websites was undertaken using a data collection tool designed to test various elements of what facilitated democratic engagement. The data collection tool consisted of 141 factors which, taken together, represented aspects of democratic practice. The aim of the research was to replicate the experience from the perspective of the average user. Consequently, a research assistant with only a general knowledge of local government was employed to analyse all local authority websites in England and Wales. Using a fast internet connection within the University, the researcher was asked to spend no longer than one minute attempting to find the answer to each question. Our assumption here was that a member of the public, probably using a slower connection than that available within a university, should not be expected to spend longer than one minute searching a local government website for information that supports the democratic process. The reliability of the research tool was validated by cross-sampling with two other researchers on 10 per cent of the websites analysed. The research was conducted from November – December 2004. All local authorities in England and Wales were included in the sample, therefore the sample and population was equal, $n(N) = 408$. There were no questions of an ethical nature to consider given the public access of web sites.

The research tool was divided into a number of sections, each of which investigates a different component of democracy as it might be offered through a website:

- *Maintenance and navigability* is concerned with the general look and feel of the website and its accessibility. Questions such as how easily the website can be found from a 'google' search and when it was last updated are all standard points of website investigation which clarify the value of the website to users. From a democratic point of view citizens should expect a website to be easily found and navigated, and for the information on it to be up to date.
- *Information* is a key role of any website. From an e-Democracy perspective, however, we can expect a good local government website to provide basic information on what the Council's roles and responsibilities are and how they are organised. Beyond this obvious information there are also some core documents that might be expected to be available, such as the Council's Constitution, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment documents and so on. These questions test for a selection of core documents rather than testing for comprehensiveness.
- *Elected members* are clearly central to the way democracy works in local government so it seems reasonable to expect websites to provide extensive information about them. As democracy is an inherently political process it seems reasonable for the Council's website to state clearly the political allegiance of councillors and the overall political balance of the Council: otherwise, the mechanism of political accountability is severely limited in the online world.
- *Information about elections* is also an important component of the democratic process and so the website survey tests for how much information is available on this topic.

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- *Political management* processes are clearly central to the day to day operation of local democracy. The survey tool asks a number of questions about the way in which political management processes are communicated through the website. The rationale behind these questions is to test the transparency of the new political management systems and the extent to which websites are being used to enhance the accountability of these new policy and decision-making structures.
- *Links to other bodies* are important in so far as local democracy is no longer just about elected local government but is also about much wider patterns of local governance (cf. Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002; Stoker, 2004 *inter alia*). It seems plausible to argue, therefore, that if local authorities are to fulfil their community leadership role and to lead on democratising governance structures, then their websites should provide at least some links to key partner organisations.
- *Consultations* are a significant means of ensuring responsiveness to the public. The survey tests the websites, therefore, for the range and accessibility of both online and offline consultation activities that local authorities might be engaged in. While these consultations are not necessarily about democracy they are nevertheless a good proxy for the openness of the council towards public engagement.
- *On-line discussion* forums are a widely recognised form of providing greater voice for the public. While opinion is divided on their value to the democratic process (see, for example, Wilhelm, 2000) again they provide a good measure of councils' willingness to engage with the public.

While it is evident that these questions are, in many cases, only proxies for the real democratic values that the research is addressing, they nevertheless provide a good baseline of what is actually happening in local government in relation to e-Democracy. The findings from the survey are analysed in the next chapter.

In-depth research interviews

The problem with quantitative surveys of websites is that they provide good aggregate information on how many councils do particular functions but leave many questions unanswered. Why is some information on councillors widely available but other information on political affiliation and so on more patchy? How is the information from consultations and discussion forums fed into the policy and decision-making process? Why are some councils doing more with the tools of e-Democracy than others and what are the barriers that they all face? It is these types of issues that the in-depth research interviews were designed to address.

Using information from the website analysis, 15 local authorities were identified that fulfilled a range of criteria. First, authorities were selected according to their rank score on the survey, with a cross-section from some of the highest, middle-ranking and lowest scores. Second, the type of authority was taken into account to ensure that the sample of interviews would include at least one from each of the main types of local authority in England (County Council, District Council, London Borough, Metropolitan District and Unitary Authority). Third the political balance was taken into account although we also recognise earlier research findings that demonstrate that democratic innovation is not a feature of one particular political party (Lowndes et al, 2001). Finally, the sample attempted to cover a range of geographic locations (urban/rural factors, north/south etc) in order to control for any regional or size related effects. Inevitably, with a sample of just 15 local authorities it is impossible to represent the full diversity of local government. Indeed, many argue that such diversity is impossible to capture in anything other than a sample of the full population because each local authority is a unique polity (Stanyer, 1976). Nevertheless, by taking these factors into account the research is able to offer a broad cross-section of different local government experiences. Consequently, the analysis reflects a broad range of issues and solutions that emerge from the interviews. As the respondents were promised anonymity as part of the interview process, we do not name the participating authorities or the individual respondents here.⁴

⁴ Anonymity is important to this type of project not only because it is good research practice but also because it is difficult to get some respondents to participate fully without this assurance – most people working in a 'successful' authority will be

Interviews were conducted with a range of elected and appointed actors in each local authority including the following:

- The chief executive (or other lead officer where this person was not available)
- The officer e-champion or other e-government person
- An officer with some responsibility for community engagement or participation
- The leader of the council or deputy
- The leader of the opposition or deputy
- A member of a scrutiny committee

The interviews were conducted between December 2004 and March 2005. In total, 92 interviews were conducted and used in the analysis set out below.

The interviews adopted a semi-structured style in which the interviewer had a range of topics to raise with each respondent but was allowed to develop these according to the direction of the overall interview (the outline questions for the interview are attached as appendix 2). Each interview was recorded and later transcribed⁵ and used for analysis. In addition, 'impressionistic' summary notes of each interview were created by the interviewer in order to capture the mood and general themes from the interview. Consequently, the analysis presented in the subsequent chapters is able to make use of both the hard analysis of interviews and the more subjective assessments of the interviewers.

The interviews were focused not only upon the specific discussion of barriers to e-Democracy but also upon the definition of e-Democracy offered above and the respondent's interest in pursuing aspects of democratic renewal. Consequently, the interviews concentrated upon understanding the respondent's perception of democracy in their locality as well as the specific barriers that they identified. Overall, the interview was focused on three groups of questions (although these were not always followed in this order, as the semi-structured nature of the process allowed the interview to move through different sections according to the respondent's answers). The first group of questions concentrated upon the respondent's understanding of democracy, the problems they felt were relevant to democracy in their locality and the way in which citizens should relate to local government. The second group moved the discussion to issues of e-Democracy, exploring particularly the relationship between online and offline participation and the overall attitude of the respondent to e-Democracy. The final group of questions concentrated more specifically upon the potential barriers to e-Democracy including the strategic vision of the council and the various structural and resource constraints that respondents feel exist. In this way, the interviews were able to gather both broad attitudinal perspectives on e-Democracy and more specific barriers.

One problem that arises in studying the topic of e-Democracy is the partial and imprecise nature of different respondents' knowledge in relation to the topic. Some have very clear opinions but many are ambiguous or ambivalent towards the topic. The challenge for the interviews was to elicit appropriate responses from the full range of respondents. To assist this process, two short summaries (non-comprehensive) of selected offline participatory tools and online e-Democracy initiatives were prepared for use during the interviews. These were not supposed to be detailed or precise tools but, rather, a means of provoking thought and response. The summaries were tabled at appropriate points in the interview in order to establish the disposition of the respondents towards particular democratic models and to assist them in surfacing the core values that they associated with different democratic devices. The summaries form part of the semi-structured interview material provided in appendix 2.

prepared to speak frankly but those in a less successful one are likely to be far more reticent or unwilling to participate without some assurance of anonymity.

⁵ All respondents were asked to sign a consent form (sample included in appendix 2) at the start of the interview which included agreement for the interview to be taped. Two respondents requested that the interview should not be taped. All others were happy for this process to take place.

3. The survey of websites – a baseline

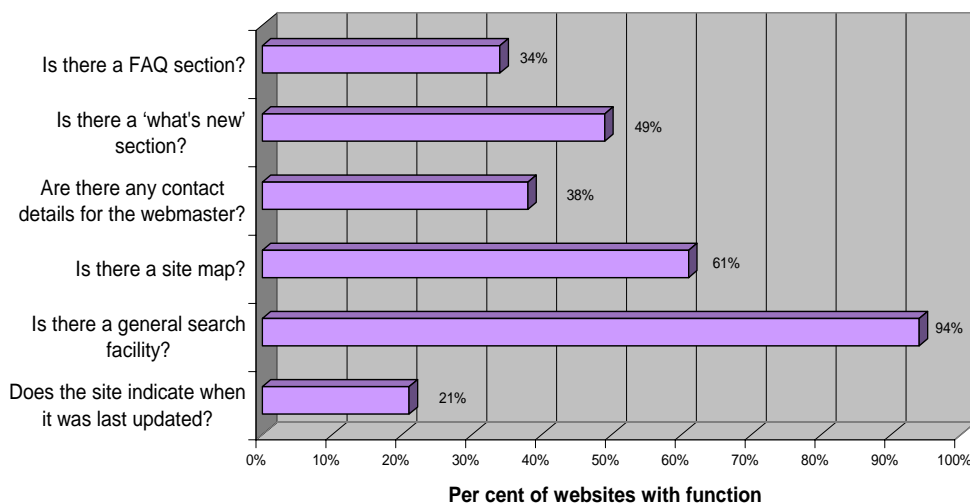
The analysis of websites provides a powerful insight into how local government is using the internet to promote democracy. Two aspects of website use are particularly significant. First, the analysis can reveal the overall commitment to e-Democracy in local government as it is a measure of actual behaviour rather than simply an attitudinal survey. Second, it can highlight the types of democratic structures that are being supported and the values that are being emphasised in the implementation of e-Democracy. We will return to both of these themes towards the end of this chapter but first we will concentrate upon the responses. This chapter will focus especially upon providing an analysis of the key themes of the website survey.

Maintenance and navigability

As the last chapter highlighted, maintenance and navigability are important from a democratic perspective because they indicate how much emphasis is put upon accessibility to the website across the community. Thus, the existence of a site map, an indication of when the site was last updated and so on (all of which are 'good practice' on web design), all provide some idea of how serious the local authority is about using the website as a tool for community engagement.

Even at the most basic level, many local government websites failed to meet these expectations. As chart 1 shows, only 21 per cent of websites indicated when the site had last been updated. This indicator might well not be directly related to democratic practice but it was related to ease of use of sites which in turn, it could be argued, is. Only 38 per cent provided contact details for the webmaster while less than half offered a 'what's new' section as part of their website. In terms of maintenance, therefore, many local government websites remain poor. However, on a more positive note, a significant majority of websites provided good navigability. Over 60 per cent offered a site map while 94 per cent of websites had a general search facility allowing users to search for their area of interest.

Chart 1 - Maintenance and Navigability



In many respects these findings match earlier analyses of local government websites (see for example, SOCITM, 2004), which show that the degree of 'professionalisation' and quality of websites varies considerably. This

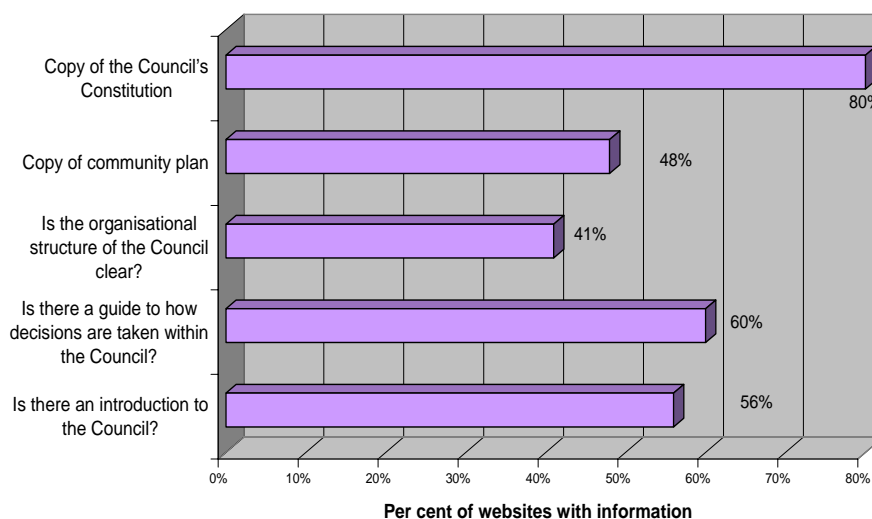
finding is not only true of local government websites in the UK but is also repeated in relation to local government websites in other European countries and, indeed, even in relation to some national parliamentary websites within the European Union (Trechsel *et al*, 2002)

Basic Information

Maintenance and navigability, of course, provide only a partial insight into how councils are attempting to communicate with the public. The basic information that the website makes available is another, and arguably more significant, means of assessing the democratic intentions of the Council. The questions in this section were designed particularly to take account of the way in which local authorities would try to inform citizens of the basic roles and responsibilities that they perform and the fundamentals of the political decision-making structures that exist. This type of information is important because, as the British Social Attitudes Survey found, knowledge of local government is, at best, partial among large sections of the community. Nearly half of respondents to the BSA's 1998 survey (admittedly before most local authorities had a web presence) agreed that the council did not keep them well informed about the services it provides (DETR, 1999). This finding is backed up by research for the Scottish Executive in 1999 which found that citizens in Scotland do not feel well informed about local services or local government more generally (Scottish Executive, 1999). Furthermore, the BSA survey found worryingly low levels of knowledge about local politics among citizens: only 14 per cent of respondents claimed to know the name of the leader of their local council and only one third of these respondents were actually able to name that leader correctly (DETR, 1998). This knowledge gap translates into wider political inefficacy at the local level (Rao and Young, 1999).

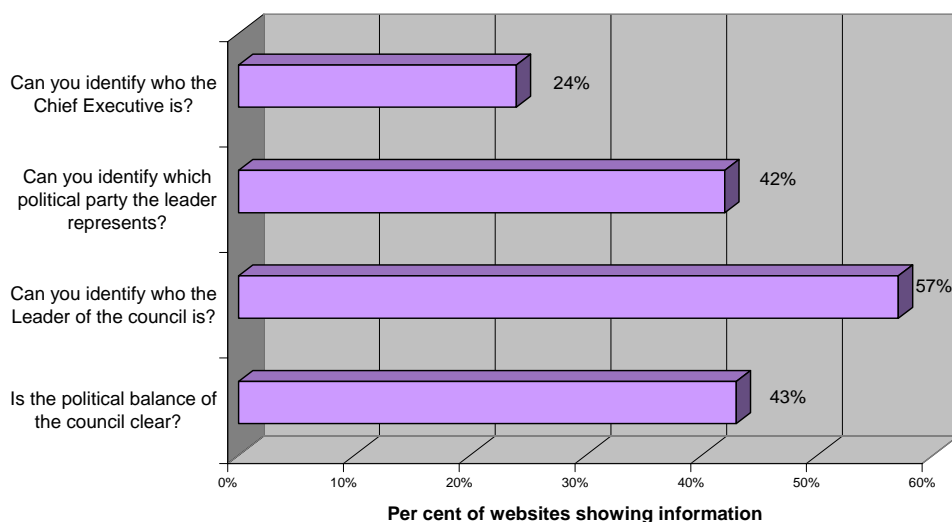
The potential for local government websites to narrow this information gap and, thereby, enhance potential engagement in politics is obvious. For them to achieve this goal, however, there is some fundamental information that might be expected to have emerged on local government websites as they have been developed over the last few years. As chart 2 shows, however, much of this information is surprisingly absent from local government websites. Only 56 per cent of local authority websites included a general introduction to the council. Some 59 per cent of web sites failed to clearly outline the structure of the council while 40 per cent failed to include a guide on how decisions were made within the authority. Even the most basic information that might be expected is missing (or is hard to find) in a significant number of cases.

Chart 2 - Basic information



Of more concern, however, was the finding that 57 per cent of authorities failed to show basic information on the political control and balance of the council: that is, which party had control and how many seats each party had. This information seems to be a fundamental component of any democratic institution. Party politics in local government has become a major feature of local democracy, with more local authorities being formally controlled by political parties than ever before (Rallings and Thrasher, 2003). It seems counter intuitive, therefore, that councils should not want to highlight the political features of its councillors and afford them some prominence on their websites – especially in a climate of declining political engagement and concomitant attempts to reinvigorate local politics. As chart 3 shows, however, there is an absence of clear information on political control and allegiance on many websites. We will explore some of the reasons and presumed barriers to this information gap in later chapters. However, the implications of this gap for effective e-Democracy need to be highlighted now. If even the most basic political information is excluded from local government websites, or buried to the extent that it is difficult to find for average citizens, then it seems not only that websites are failing to rise to the e-Democracy challenge but that they may also, in some instances, be militating against effective democratic engagement. A failure to provide this basic information on a website may not only reflect an information gap but may actively discourage interested citizens from becoming more engaged when they discover that they cannot find the information they feel they need on the website.

Chart 3 - Political balance



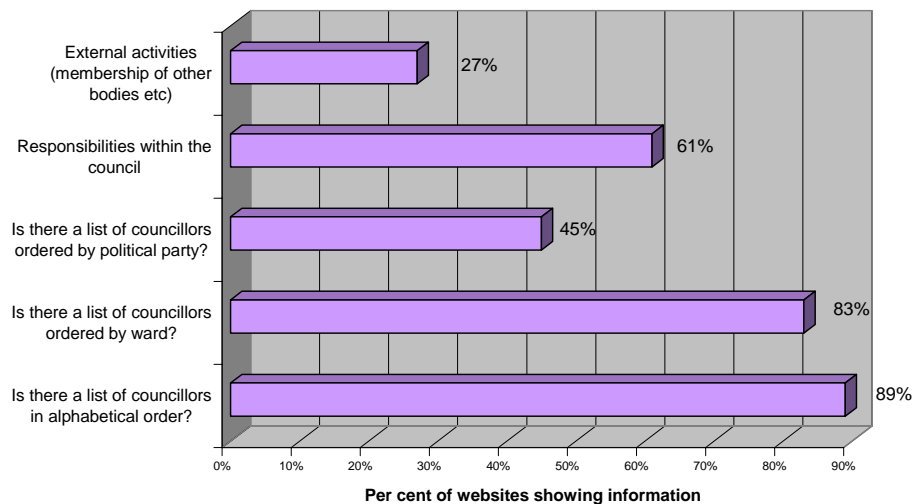
It should be noted that in some instances, the information on political balance could be obtained by looking at a list of councillors and then counting the number of seats that each party held. From our perspective, however, we discounted this information from the analysis because it does not specifically indicate political balance and its implications. For example, in hung councils it is not always clear what the coalition is (if it exists at all) simply by counting seats. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that all citizens will know that the majority of seats equates with political control.

Elected members

The issue of information on elected members follows from the previous point about keeping citizens informed about the political processes of the council. Citizens not only need to know the political balance and leadership of the council but also who their councillor is, their political allegiance and political activities on the council. Indeed, the ability to examine and monitor the political behaviour of elected members is one of the big advantages predicted by many in relation to the development of e-Democracy (Trechsel *et al*, 2002). It is somewhat

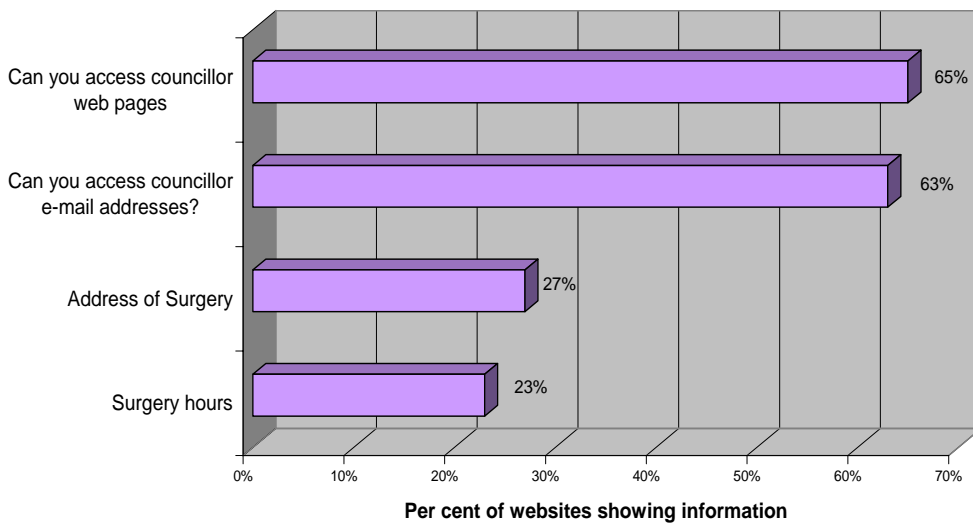
disappointing, therefore, that in many cases identifying elected members was as far as councils appeared willing to go. As chart 4 shows, on most websites there was a list of councillors by name (89 per cent) or by ward (83 per cent). However, on only 45 per cent of websites were councillors ordered by political party. Of course, this finding is not surprising given the evidence from chart 3. However, it does pose some challenging questions about how local authorities are seeking to develop e-Democracy if, at the same time, many of them are ignoring or, at best, downplaying the political aspects of the Council. What distinguishes local government from other elements of the governance structure is its elected nature that is based on party politics. Hence, it is difficult to understand why party identities are so weakly represented in local government websites.

Chart 4 - Information on elected members



One of the ways in which the Internet could be used to enhance local democracy is by supporting the relationship between elected members and citizens. This relationship could be enhanced through frequent use of email, online surgeries, councillor websites and so on. Chart 5 analyses the extent to which local authorities are exploiting these features. Two surprising features of the chart are worth emphasising. First, an encouragingly high number of websites offer links to councillor email addresses and councillor websites. Some 63 per cent link to councillors' email addresses and 65 per cent to their websites. However, it should be noted that a significant proportion of these are personal accounts rather than those provided by the council. This difference is significant because it means that councillor web sites and email addresses lack both the legitimacy and clarity of council owned addresses (i.e. with domain names that end with councilname.gov.uk). Members of the public cannot easily predict the name of a councillor's email address or website that is not in the council's domain and cannot be certain that their emails will be directed exclusively to their councillor when emailing a non-council owned address. Second, very few local government websites take the opportunity to provide information on councillor surgeries. Only 27 per cent show surgery locations and even less (23 per cent) provide surgery hours. This finding needs to be matched against the ODPM's priority outcomes for local e-government (ODPM, 2004) which encourage online surgeries to be developed. Of course, the lack of interest in either of these forms of communication with citizens reflects the fact that many councillors do not hold surgeries, preferring other means of keeping in contact with their ward constituents (cf. Copus, 2004; Rao, 2000).

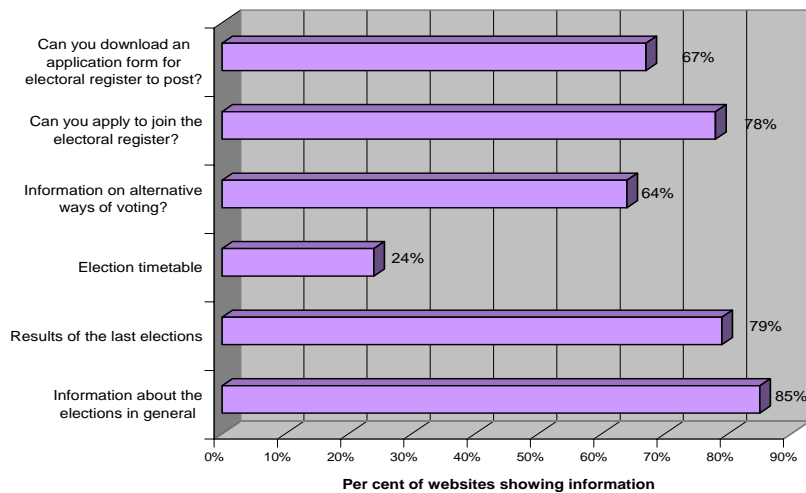
Chart 5 - Councillors Online



Elections

If information on party politics and councillors is limited, what about information on formal political processes? As chart 6 shows, councils make extensive use of their websites in transmitting the results from previous elections (79 per cent) and discussing elections in general terms (85 per cent). Less use is made, however, of the facility websites offer in informing users of the forthcoming election cycle (24 per cent). The research was conducted outside of any election period, therefore, there was no imperative on local authorities to discuss the electoral process. An important element of the discussions on e-Democracy focuses on the provision of alternative ways of voting including e-voting. Some 64 per cent of websites provided information about alternative ways of voting. The websites were also commonly used for electoral registration purposes (78 per cent).

Chart 6 - Election information



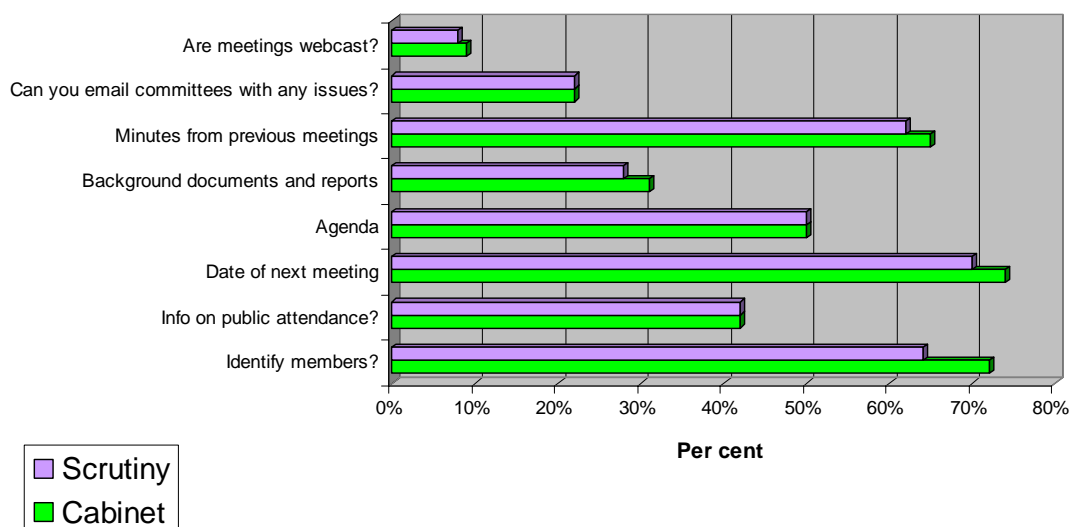
Overall, therefore, we conclude that local authorities are generally good at using their websites to provide election information.

Political management

The other aspect of local democracy is the extent to which the formal decision-making processes of the council are made more transparent through the website. One of the main reasons for reforming the political management processes of local government into a clearer separation of executive and assembly functions was to enhance such transparency (Armstrong, 1999). In exploiting websites, it can be expected that good councils will provide detailed information on cabinet and scrutiny functions.⁶

There was evidence of what could be considered good practice in informing web users of both the time and access to cabinet and scrutiny meetings in many authorities. There was some variability, however, between cabinet and scrutiny. While it was possible to identify cabinet members in 72 per cent of authorities the corresponding figure for members of scrutiny panels dropped to 64 per cent. Authorities were generally more reticent to use their website to inform users of the possibility of attending either cabinet or scrutiny meetings. In both cases only 42 per cent of authorities used the medium offered by the website to inform web users whether access was possible.

Chart 7 - Cabinet and Scrutiny



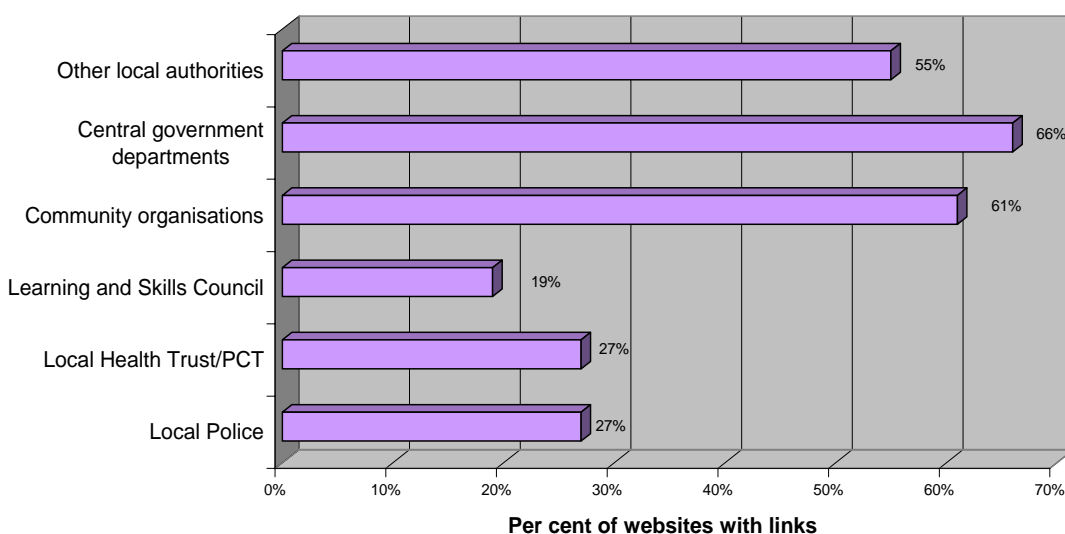
There is obviously scope for authorities to increase the channels of communication by adding e-mail links to members of cabinet/scrutiny, thereby improving communication. Currently, 78 per cent of authorities fail to provide a service whereby cabinet/scrutiny members can be contacted to discuss issues relating to their position.

⁶ The research recognised that there are some exceptions to the cabinet and scrutiny systems

Links to other bodies

So far the analysis has concentrated upon the internal features of representative democracy in local government. However, as most councillors and officers recognise, local policy making and decisions are increasingly a feature of a wider process of local governance in which a broad range of partners are necessary to effect changes in the locality. One of the main features of the internet is its potential for websites to help 'join up' disparate aspects of local governance (Perri 6 *et al*, 2002). However, the reality of this joining-up is much more limited. Almost three quarters of authorities fail to link to either the local Police Authority or the local Health/Primary Care Trust, even though these bodies are key partners in most local strategic partnerships. Websites are much more likely to have links to other elected local authorities (especially neighbouring) and central government departments than they are to other service providers in the locality.

Chart 8 - External links



Consultation

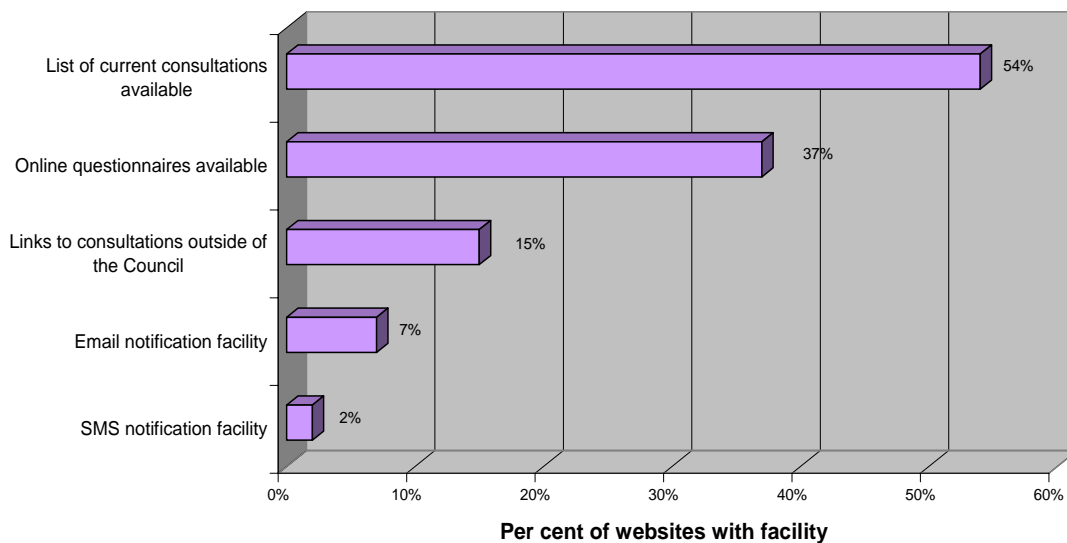
Public engagement through consultation has become a significant part of local government over the last decade and continues to grow in significance, encouraged by best value performance reviews and the responsiveness components of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (Lowndes *et al*, 2001). It seems logical, therefore, that councils should make use of e-Democracy tools to support consultation, not least because by 2001, 52 per cent of local authorities claimed to use an interactive aspect of their website to support consultation (Birch, 2002). Our website analysis, therefore, applies hard measures to this claim.

Chart 9 reveals some significant insights into the way local authorities are actually using online consultation, especially when compared with the claims they have made to surveys. While 54 per cent of local authorities provide an online list of 'live' consultations, on-line questionnaires were used by just over a third of authorities (37 per cent). It must be recognised that authorities may well have used this tool in the past but during the period of our research none were in use. Consequently, this evidence does not necessarily contradict the Bristol/MORI survey of local authority 'consultation leads' (MORI, 2005) which found that online surveys were conducted by 47

per cent of their respondents, but it does suggest the need to reflect upon the limited number of authorities that are using such tools.

The other interesting feature of chart 9 is that 15 per cent of websites have links to consultations outside of the council. These links include consultations undertaken by other agencies in the area (Police, health trusts, learning and skills councils, other local authorities and so on) or in collaboration with them. However, it is difficult to know how to interpret this figure. On the one hand, 15 per cent seems a surprisingly low level of linkage, given that consultation is a key feature of most local agencies' daily life and that almost all local authorities 'claim to be working in collaboration with other organisations on schemes to enhance public participation' (Birch, 2002). On the other hand, the fact that some local authorities are making such links is encouraging, suggesting that there is significant scope for local government to act as community leaders in citizen engagement through the effective use of their websites.

Chart 9 - Consultation



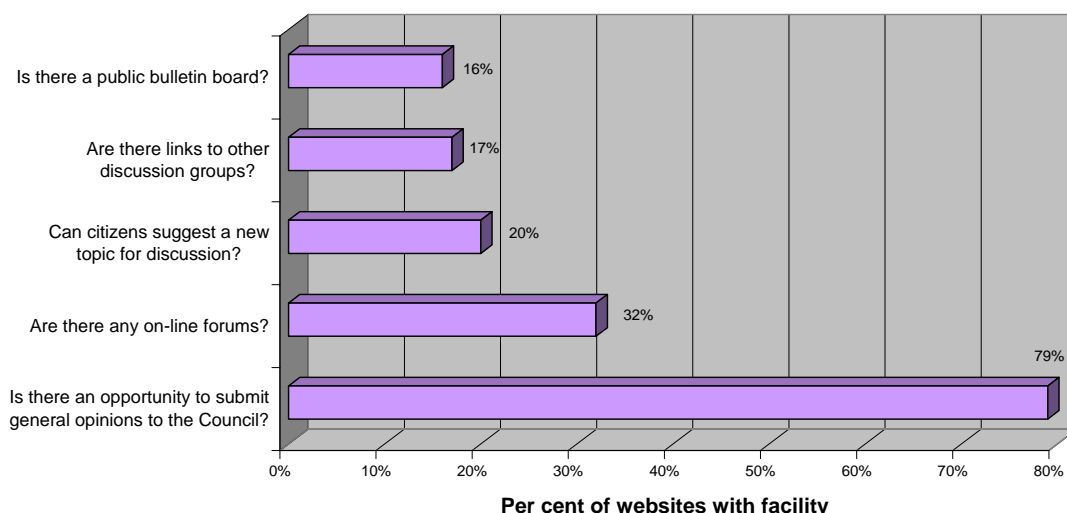
Finally, only a small number of local authorities are actively using new technologies to provoke or promote participation. Only 7% of websites offered an option for individuals to be notified of future consultation exercises by email and only 2 per cent offered a similar system by SMS text message. Even among those offering such facilities, the level of innovation was limited: only half of those offering alert systems allowed citizens to customise the consultation alert according to whether it had significance for their postcode or was in a policy area in which they had a specific interest. Given that such facilities are specified as one of the 'good' priority outcomes by the ODPM and are products that the Local e-Democracy National Project are now supporting, it can be expected that this type of facility will expand quickly in local government.

On-line discussion

The final area of interest from the web survey is the development of discussion forums as a means of providing citizens with an equal opportunity for 'voice'. For many, the development of various forms of discussion forum is the most promising feature of e-Democracy in so far as they provide the opportunity for citizens to engage on their own terms. However, there is also a critical literature on such forums which demonstrates that, in many instances, they do not lead to any form of deliberative engagement but merely provide another opportunity for those with strong views to 'talk past each other' (cf. Wilhelm, 2000; Wright, 2004).

Despite the apparent limitations of various discussion forums, chart 10 shows that a significant number of local authorities do provide such facilities. In 32 per cent of websites, there were online discussion forums some of which provided the opportunity for people to suggest new topics for discussion (20 per cent). The existence of public bulletin boards in 16 per cent of websites also supported this trend. However, what is not clear from this analysis is the extent to which these various forums are being used, the degree of moderation involved (if any) and the range of issues being discussed. Of possibly even greater significance is the extent to which they are being listened to by councillors or officers.

Chart 10 - On-line discussion



Conclusions on the website analysis

This analysis shows that local government websites are already providing many functions that can be deemed a feature of e-Democracy. However, there remains much more that they could do. The potential of the Internet for enhancing democracy is not fully exploited by local authorities and there remain considerable variations between different authorities. This conclusion does not necessarily mean that local authorities are not aware of the ways that they can use the Internet for democratic purposes. They may be encountering many barriers such as lack of resources both in terms of human resources and finance.

It is important to recognise the limitations of data collected in this way. The website analysis by itself does not tell us the full story about the attitudes of local authorities towards using the Internet for democratic purposes. Limited use of the Internet could be related to certain normative arguments against the use of the Internet. Previous research shows that concerns about social exclusion and overrepresentation of certain groups, worries about losing the personal and face-to-face relation with citizens and a *perceived* lack of demand from citizens for e-Democracy are important barriers to implementing e-Democracy in local authorities (Karakaya, 2005).

Likewise, the website analysis by itself cannot reveal whether the available information is made use of by citizens or whether the participation opportunities are used by them. In other words, the research did not examine the extent to which citizens had been using the council websites. Local authorities may be abstaining from using their websites for democratic purposes if they believe that citizens would not be interested anyway. Therefore, it is important to use more qualitative methods to understand the barriers and strategies that local authorities experience in implementing e-Democracy. It is to such analysis that we now turn.

4. Barriers to e-Democracy

This chapter starts from the premise, much like the Local e-Democracy National Project, that local authorities are already using many of the tools of e-Democracy but that there is much more they could be doing. The take-up and implementation of different e-Democracy tools varies considerably across local government, as does the wider approach to democratic renewal. This premise is confirmed by both the survey of websites reported above and the Bristol/MORI survey of 'consultation leads' referred to earlier. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the reasons why local authorities are doing what they are doing, and the reasons why some are not doing more: in other words, the barriers to e-Democracy.

The evidence for this chapter comes primarily from the interviews conducted in 15 local authorities with senior officers and members. The purpose, therefore, is to understand the barriers to e-Democracy from the perspective of those who are responsible for championing or implementing its tools. This approach is limited in so far as it cannot deal explicitly with external barriers that may prevent or distort the process. However, it is also more helpful in some respects, in so far as it reveals a wide range of barriers, some of which are practical and some of which are based on perception. Consequently, it explores barriers to e-democracy from the way in which they are perceived by actors from within local government. Following on from this analysis, therefore, it will also be possible to develop recommendations on how to address the full range of barriers that local government actors believe restrict or shape the direction of e-Democracy development.

In capturing the various barriers that local government officers and elected members experience in reflecting upon e-Democracy, it is useful to distinguish between barriers of four main types:

- *Democratic understanding* is concerned with the way in which those responsible for designing or implementing e-democracy understand the way in which democracy operates, the problems or limitations that they define in existing democratic practices and the types of reform that they are trying to engender through the implementation of e-democracy. The way in which individuals define democratic problems and the solutions that they seek to implement shape the direction of e-democracy in local government. Limitations in the conceptual understanding of local democracy and the potential role of e-democracy in that context are significant barriers to the future development and role of e-democracy in local government.
- *Organisational constraints* are concerned with the potential barriers that may exist within local authorities that inhibit the effective development of e-Democracy. These barriers include both the practical barriers to e-Democracy development (financial, technical and human resources) and the more conceptual ones around the absence or presence of political and managerial will to promote various e-Democracy initiatives.
- *Structural limitations* are concerned especially with the way in which factors external to the local authority shape or constrain opportunities for developing e-Democracy. These barriers include the impact of central government policies and priorities, the affect of democratic legacies being created by the recent attempts to reform local democracy and the influence of the e-Democracy market on policy decisions and strategies.
- *Citizen restraints* are concerned with the extent to which there is a demand within the community for e-Democracy, which types of e-Democracy citizens are perceived to want, and whether they are willing or prepared to use e-Democracy. As well as the obvious concerns with the digital divide and the capacity of citizens to benefit from particular e-Democracy initiatives, this dimension is also focused on whether citizens feel that e-Democracy solutions are relevant and legitimate forms of political participation, the latent demand that there is for electronic forms of political engagement and the incentives that might encourage citizens to use e-Democracy tools. Local government perceptions of citizen attitudes to e-democracy represent a significant barrier to implementation in so far as negative perceptions will restrain innovation and act as a check on the opportunity to develop existing applications.

The first three of these barriers are, essentially, about the factors affecting the supply of e-Democracy. They are establishing the different ways in which e-Democracy might be supplied and the barriers to achieving such objectives. The final barrier, in contrast, is about demand. How much do citizens want e-Democracy and how will they use it if it is supplied by local authorities? Of course, as noted above, this analysis is not measuring citizens' attitudes and so cannot fully answer this question. However, in exploring local government opinions on this issue, it is possible to understand the relationship between supply and demand. Positive or negative assumptions about demand will inevitably shape, to some extent at least, supply side approaches to e-Democracy.

We explore each of these types of barrier in turn. For each type of barrier we offer, first of all, a general discussion of the issues and their importance, before turning to the experience of local authorities as revealed in the interviews. Finally, for each type of barrier we suggest some of the strategies and solutions that have emerged from the research.

Democratic understanding

Local government members and officers have an intimate and well developed understanding of how democracy works in their locality. Elected members are subject directly to the disciplines of the electoral process and the majority of them are also continuously reminded of their democratic responsibilities through their party positions. Even though some are critical of the effectiveness of party politics in local government (see, especially, Copus, 2004) it is nevertheless true that most, if not all, elected members remain closely in touch with their communities and implicitly wedded to the democratic devices that give them their representative role (Wilson and Game, 2002). Officers, as well, have detailed knowledge of democratic processes and remain highly sensitive to the political environment in which they operate. Indeed, the democratic basis of local government has long been recognised as one of the defining features of the public service ethos to which most officers subscribe (Pratchett and Wingfield, 1996).

Given the attention that both members and officers pay to democracy, it seems strange to argue that democratic understanding is a barrier to e-democracy; yet it is precisely this point that has emerged from the interviews. There are both limits to democratic understanding and, in some instances, confused or conflicting attitudes towards it. The development of e-democracy, therefore, is both shaped and constrained by the attitudes of those with responsibility for promoting particular initiatives. Five potential barriers present themselves in this context.

i) The primacy of service delivery

Many of the interview respondents were keen to emphasise that the role of local government was primarily service delivery: democracy was something that underpinned the functions of local government but was not something that most concerned themselves with on a day to day basis. As one officer in a district council argued: 'we don't do democracy here – we provide services that the public want and need. Democracy is just the way we ensure that the services fit what the public want – or at least one of the ways that we do this'. This view, of course, is an extreme one which was not shared by many of the respondents. However, it does indicate the presence of a wider attitude that democracy is, in some way, a second order issue for many local authorities, especially where democratic enhancements may cost money. The attitude that 'people don't care about democracy as long as their council tax doesn't rise too much and the bins are emptied on time' (Assistant Chief Executive, District Council) was prevalent in many of the authorities visited, especially those that have less developed e-democracy profiles. Most of these respondents were not hostile to democracy: indeed, most talked eloquently in support of it. However, their emphasis was consistently upon service delivery as being of more importance than democratic enhancement. The Deputy Leader of a District Council (who was also a county councillor) summarised the approach as follows: 'democracy is not a particularly pressing issue here, or in the county – it works, what more can I say – improving our services for citizens will always come before spending on websites or other hi-tech gimmicks'.

The primacy of service delivery is understandable in local government, especially given the range of external inspections and audits that measure all aspects of local authority services. The publication of top level Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) scores for every local authority adds considerably to the emphasis on service delivery, even though CPA also includes some measures of citizen satisfaction and engagement. However, this primacy raises a significant challenge for e-democracy in so far as it demonstrates that the case for e-democracy has not been made in many local authorities. There will always be justifications for avoiding expenditure on e-democracy projects on the basis that service delivery should have priority. If e-democracy is to become part of the foundations of local democracy then its value to local government will have to be demonstrated.

ii) An emphasis on representation

Despite their reluctance to commit resources to e-democracy, many of the respondents had very clear ideas about how democracy should work and what its limitations were. Many respondents placed considerable emphasis on democracy being fundamentally about the representative process, as the following quotes show:

We are constituted as a representative democracy. We elect people to represent the people for four years. We do believe strongly in this model of democracy which means that they are representatives, not delegates. They are not mandated to vote or decide in a particular way (County Council Chief Executive)

Democracy is essentially the system which ensures that the majority of people who choose to exercise their vote have an opportunity to elect the people who will run local affairs for them for the next four years. It is about participation but it is obviously about representation...It is the system by which we ensure the will of the majority is what decides how things are run (County Council Head of e-Government)

Local democracy is first and foremost about councillors. It is them that make the difference. Everything else should be about making councillors better at representing communities (District Councillor)

This commitment to representative democracy pervaded much of the interviews and provides an interesting observation, especially in the context of the democratic renewal processes that have taken place in local government since 1997 (Pratchett, 2000; Rao, 2000). Two points are important. First, despite the moves to focus much more on citizen participation in local government (Lowndes et al, 2001; Birch, 2002), attitudes remain firmly wedded to the representative process. Participation is seen as an add-on to representative democracy, providing additional information for politicians and managers, rather than as an alternative form of democratic deliberation or engagement. Second, the development of new political management structures in local government, with their stronger emphasis upon political leadership and a separation of executive and assembly, does not appear to have had much impact upon the way in which democracy is perceived to work. Elected members and officers appear to remain committed to the idea that councillors start from the geographic principle: that is, that they are representatives of their wards or divisions.

The implications of this emphasis on representation are significant for e-democracy. Many of the devices that will most benefit democracy are seeking to develop wider deliberation in communities and better forms of citizen engagement. An emphasis and commitment to reinforcing representative democracy means that councils are likely to focus only on those e-democracy devices that support the electoral process and the subsequent practise of representation, rather than the full range of potential uses. Moreover, the continued commitment to small geographical units as the basis of representation limits the value of technology to democracy, especially given that one of the defining features of ICTs is their ability to overcome problems of space and time.

iii) Rejecting the conventional institutions of democracy

Despite the ongoing commitment to representative models of democracy local government actors appear to be curiously resistant to many of the institutions that make representative democracy work. Among almost everyone interviewed there was a strong commitment to participation beyond the ballot box. This commitment, however, is not surprising given the emphasis that participation has received over the last decade or so. However, what was significant was the growing distrust of those who are engaged. As the democratic services officer of a district council argued, the view of many politicians and officers is that 'citizen participation has a tendency to manifest itself where people are self-interested'. This officer went on to argue that the problem is that participation tends to encourage pressure groups to seek influence, obstructing the voices of 'ordinary people'.

The problem with this approach is that ignores the role that organised interests play in the development and aggregation of ideas in a democracy. Local authorities, in designing or developing democratic devices, appear to be trying to circumvent the very institutions of democracy (pressure groups, the local media, even political parties) that make it work in the first place. This attitude is problematic for e-democracy, because again it places limits on what the tools can be used to achieve. Local democracy works not only through the formal institutions of representation (elections, mechanisms of accountability and so on) but also through the active engagement of citizens: a point that is not lost on most local government people. This active engagement, however, is not likely to be an individual process but needs to be mobilised through the networks of associations, pressure groups, media and other informal institutions of local democracy. The danger of e-democracy initiatives that seek to ignore or circumvent these institutions is that new developments may undermine the very basis of local democracy, promoting the formal structures but disregarding the informal processes and practices that make democracy work.

iv) Confusion over the relationship between devices

Fourthly, and possibly most significantly, many respondents expressed a concern about their limited understanding of how different devices such as citizens' panels, focus groups, user forums and so on contributed to democracy. At best, these devices were seen as being an addition to the representative process, providing further legitimisation of the Council's decisions through various forms of engagement. As an elections officer in a district council argued, when presented with a list of different democratic devices:

I don't see any of these things as democracy unless they are informing some sort of democratic process. I see them all as being at some level a part of democracy because I think the very important thing about democracy is that it makes informed decisions – it's a balance that takes into account all the relevant issues and I think that the only way you can get at some of that information is by some of these mechanisms here. I think that when you are talking about actually taking decisions to strategic level for the authority you cannot devolve that sort of decision making to any of these forums. ...you need to put that power in responsible hands and accountable hands. I think that the other issue with democracy is that the people who are elected have to be accountable and that's the problem with a lot of these other bodies because nobody really knows where the accountability lies. I think that transparency, decision-making and accountability are fundamental in the democratic process. I think that is what people expect and what they deserve. As for any other mechanisms I don't know.

For many, however, the position was even less clear: they were uncertain about how these different devices would or should impact upon democratic processes. Often, citizen participation was seen from a very managerialist perspective, as providing feedback on individual preferences which could then be used to improve services. The relationship between specific participation initiatives and the wider impact it might have on democratic engagement was at best down played and at worst ignored all together.

The implications of this confusion for the e-democracy agenda are significant. If those implementing traditional forms of participation and engagement are uncertain or ambivalent about their impact upon democracy, it seems likely that e-democracy initiatives will suffer a similar fate. The danger is that e-democracy may be seen as a problem for the formal institutions of democracy rather than a means of supporting and developing wider democratic practice.

v) Distinguishing e-democracy from e-government

Finally, there is an issue around the extent to which individuals in local government see e-democracy as being a distinct process from the other aspects of e-government. For the National Project the e-democracy applications are clearly distinct, although the technology they use may well overlap with other e-government applications. For many local government officers and members, however, no such distinction exists. To some extent, this finding overlaps with the primacy of service delivery emphasised above. However, it is also a significant barrier in its own right where councils are not investing in e-democracy because they feel they have already achieved what they need to achieve.

The complex but limited understanding of democracy that is shown by both officers and members in local government is significant for the development of e-democracy because it highlights the limited ambitions that many local authorities have for democratic renewal and the role that e-democracy can play within it. Local authorities need to be convinced that e-democracy, and democratic renewal more generally, is worthy of resources. Even where they are convinced, there is a high level of conservatism in the way in which they want to implement democratic devices, preferring to reinforce existing practices rather than take the opportunity to radically change the way democracy works by shifting the balance of power. This approach is a barrier to e-democracy in so far as it shapes and limits the impact of e-democracy, thereby slowing down the potential for democratic enhancement that its devices offer local government. Dealing with the conceptual issues is a significant barrier to e-democracy.

Organisational constraints

This second set of barriers, the internal organisational and political factors that influence e-Democracy strategies, are in many respects the most obvious. Local authorities have always complained that they do not have sufficient resources to implement technological solutions. In the context of e-democracy, however, resource problems are particularly important because of the conceptual limitations highlighted above and the recognition that the case for e-democracy has yet to be made in many Councils. They are separate from the conceptual barriers, however, in so far as they are more tangible constraints on what local authorities can do. Four organisational constraints are worth highlighting.

i) Finance

Limited financial resources will always be a problem, especially where councils are trying to innovate. In the area of e-democracy, however, it appears to be particularly problematic. An e-government manager in a large unitary authority explained 'there is also a budgetary restriction – departments cannot afford to invest in technology – there is a combination of a tight budget and lack of interest'. Of course, complaints about lack of funding are inevitable. However, there is a serious barrier to e-democracy beyond the 'usual' refrain of an absence of resource. An e-champion for a county council summed it up as follows:

The big issue here I think is, all be it capital funding is made available to get things off the ground, sustainability is an issue and the difficulty that we in particular have, and I suspect it's common to most local authorities, is helping folk to understand that e-democracy isn't instead of but it's as well as. And so one of the difficulties that we have in our county is that our members say we can

only do it if we can make savings and we say no it won't make savings, it will increase services. And they say, well we can't afford to improve services because if you improve services and you get more take up, then we haven't got the resources to deliver. So it's a continuous sort of circle of pressures where the better you do, the more the take up and then the worse your resources become. And certainly, there's evidence to show that as you provide better access to services, then take up does increase.

Two points emerge from this quote. First, the issue of sustainability is important. A chief executive in a district council that is involved in some cutting edge activities explained that his authority were keen to undertake e-democracy initiatives because there was money that they could get to support them: 'but once the funding disappears, so will we in all probability'. In short, e-democracy is not a sufficiently high priority even among those authorities that are in the vanguard to sustain long term levels of expenditure without some form of external support. This position, of course, may change if citizen demand and expectation grows through exposure to existing pilots. Second, the issue of cost savings as a rationale for implementing e-democracy remains significant. Many councillors (and officers) still see investment in technology as a means of making services more efficient and expect, therefore, to be able to see savings from any ICT investment. The problem with e-democracy is that it is difficult to quantify the democratic pay-off from any investment. The gains of e-democracy are likely to be much more intangible. Indeed, even proxy measures such as the number of people using a particular e-democracy device or satisfaction with particular decisions are problematic in that they do not measure democracy but, rather, aspects of the democratic process. Justifying significant expenditure on e-democracy devices, therefore, is difficult without recourse to more conceptual and theoretical explanations for what is hoped to be achieved.

ii) Infrastructure and skills

Alongside concerns with finance, many respondents were also concerned that their technological infrastructure was not suitably or sufficiently developed to support some of the more advanced e-democracy opportunities that might present themselves. Part of the issue was the technology that was available to those within the Council who would most benefit from e-democracy. Councillors, particularly, were considered to be an issue in this regard. A common practice in many authorities now is to provide elected members with laptops. However, this practice has not necessarily delivered everything that local authorities might want:

What our councillors have is, they all have a laptop, we provided them with a laptop after the last elections. About half of them virtually never used them. There's a big learning curve to start with. There's a big problem with actually getting members to use their laptop, particularly backbench members. The leading members use them all the time, some of them even bring them into meetings and are very IT literate but because the council at the end of the day are a cross section of the community you are going to find very different levels of ability and knowledge. Some of them wait to the weekend until their grandchildren come and then they go on it, you know there are all sorts of variations. Some have surprised us and really engaged with it, others have never logged on. (District Council Elections Officer)

Like many authorities, this council provided significant support to elected members to make this process work. At a county council this level of support was quantified:

Yes, every member is issued with a PC at home and initially it was just cabinet members that had broadband, increasingly we're rolling broadband out to more and more members. And I would have thought in the next four years, every member will have broadband access. We have a ratio of support for staff of about 1 to 200 and a ratio of support to members of 1 to 6. Supporting members is very time consuming but we believe it's worthwhile (County Council e-Champion)

The problem here is a dual one of technological advancement and standardisation. On the one hand, some councillors are moving ahead with technology and reaping the rewards. They expect the

council to support them in this process. However, as a council leader in a London Borough argued, 'having recently acquired a Blackberry I can tell you it is a life-changing experience – and not necessarily for the good – I now am available 24/7 regardless of where I am in the world'. On the other hand, the reticence of others to engage even with the more basic technologies can act as a significant constraint on the wider development of e-democracy. While it is not necessary for all councillors to have a web presence or to be contactable by email, significant variations in that availability within one local authority may serve to deter engagement rather than enhance it for those councillors that are technologically competent. The interviews revealed a number of instances where councillors had been forced to have email addresses by the council but, when an email is sent to their address, an automatic response simply stated 'please telephone'. Moving forward with the technology in a way that provides both consistency and innovation, therefore, is highly problematic for those councils that want to be leaders in the field of e-democracy. For those that are less enamoured by the thought of e-democracy, this problem is a significant barrier and a justification for not developing initiatives.

Another issue in relation to infrastructure and skills concerns the way in which staff use the technology and the extent to which they have access to it. An officer in a large unitary authority stated that 'in a council made up of about 22,000 employees only 6,000 of them are registered email users – of course, some of them (the non-registered staff) are collecting rubbish etc'. However, as another officer went on to explain, a major concern is that staff do not always use email in the way that they should: 'they ignore some and take days to reply to others: they bombard you with trivial emails and miss the important ones that you send them'. This concern was one that was echoed by both officers and councillors in various settings. The implication was that local authorities have not yet mastered the technology sufficiently as an internal tool to use it effectively as a means of enhancing external communication and engagement with citizens.

A final issue concerned the relationship between some of the more advanced e-government facilities that local authorities now have in place and the development of democracy more generally. This problem is neatly illustrated by the concern raised by an opposition leader in a county council:

More and more people want to - they've made the point to me - want to access services or want to access what is happening to their complaint rather than waiting a week for me to reply in a letter. Some of them, quite a lot of them in fact, you know, I mean I'd say it's as high as 10% who have access to internet facilities would like to find out what's going on. They want me to carry out the role of banging heads together but as for what's happening and how it's progressing, how their complaint is progressing or their request is progressing, they want to be able to follow it up independently of me and not wait for me to come back in a week's time when I've got the time to do it. So they want to have access to tracking complaints.

As this councillor recognised, authorities such as this one have sophisticated Customer Relationship Management (CRMs) systems in place that can achieve this type of tracking. The problem that he is identifying, however, is that in achieving this tracking the system may be emasculating councillors and fundamentally changing their role as community advocates, thereby further undermining their efficacy as a primary pillar of representative democracy. This argument, of course, is not seeking to remove the utility of CRMs from local government but, more simply, to encourage councils to think through the relationship between different initiatives more carefully.

iii) Technology abuse

Even where councillors and officers have the appropriate skills and infrastructure in place, there remain significant problems where individuals take advantage of the technology to do things that were not possible offline. Two particular concerns emerged in the interviews. First, there were very real concerns from both officers and members that the continuous development of access to email and so on was generating the threat of information overload. A service director in a unitary authority explained that each day he probably had at least 40 emails and 60 letters that required a response every day. 'The problem is that while the number of letters is not dropping, the number of emails

seems to go up all the time'. This problem is of even greater concern for elected members, who envisage a point where the amount of emails they have to deal with – from officers, political party and constituents – may become unmanageable. The other point in relation to this concern is the expectation that responses to emails should be much quicker than other forms of communication with councillors. Concerns that this expectation will increase, together with the realisation that the amount of emails that everyone receives is growing, act as a significant constraint upon the development of such facilities.

Second, both officers and members have become concerned that the way in which new technologies are used can leave the council open to abusive behaviour. The following statement from a councillor in a county council was typical of this concern:

You end up getting the most peculiar spellings in emails and use of pigeon English, which gets worse as the evening goes on. So I mean especially after half past ten at night when some of them may have been out to the pub, you know, there's an additional use of words, which are outside of the normal vocabulary. So that is happening more and more and I'm getting more and more people inquiring, asking me to do things by email than just by somebody ringing me up or leaving a message or, you know, the normal things, writing a letter, less of that and more of electronic versions.

Of course, most of the time bad spelling and grammar is just a nuisance for those receiving the emails. However, some instances of abusive behaviour were also highlighted in the interviews, raising concerns that opening up the council through e-democracy may generate more of it. Some examples of abusive behaviour were restricted to rude, offensive or libellous comments on bulletin boards or other electronic forums. However, other examples included members of the public bombarding particular councillors with repeat emails of an unpleasant nature, through to racist, sexist or threatening emails. This type of behaviour is, of course, possible offline, and where it is of a potentially criminal nature (such as threatening individuals) it can be dealt with through the usual judicial processes. The significant point made in the interviews, however, was that the technology seemed to promote more of this type of behaviour because email could be sent instantly and had a less formal status than a letter but greater anonymity than a telephone call.

The problem is not restricted to citizens. One council highlighted a problem in which a few rogue councillors had used the internal email system to (unfairly) complain about the actions of a senior officer which was copied not only to all other councillors but also every officer in the council, including the most junior ones. Repeat emails used offensive and derogatory language to undermine the officer. The concern is that the accessibility of the technology and the ease with which unpleasant comments could be circulated to all staff makes this kind of action much easier and more likely where councillors are unhappy. The problem for e-democracy is that such actions act as a further disincentive for councils to move quickly towards universal adoption of these types of devices.

iv) Political and managerial will

This final organisational constraint refers to the need for leadership in the championing of e-democracy. It is widely recognised that for e-government projects to be successful they need to be championed by leaders at the top of the organisation: this understanding is the basis for the e-champions in local government. Those authorities that are in the vanguard of e-democracy clearly have such champions in place. Moreover, there was clear evidence of both managerial and political will to make e-democracy happen in these authorities. However, in many of the authorities visited, there was a clear absence of any political or managerial will to support e-democracy. The argument here is not that most authorities were openly resistant to the idea of e-democracy, although there were some individuals who expressed significant reservations. There were, however, many senior officers and members who were at best lukewarm to the concepts of e-democracy and often ambivalent. As a Chief Executive of a county council put it, 'I am not sure I believe in e-democracy. There are ways that it can provide us tools to consult or inform people better. You choose a tool to

serve a purpose. You don't do something because you have the tool'. In these situations, the other potential issues highlighted in this report become significant barriers to implementing e-democracy.

A good example of this managerial and political will in action can be seen in the different ways that local authorities set about implementing councillor websites. Councillor websites (that is, websites provided by the council for use by councillors on the council's own domain, as opposed to private website addresses on a commercial domain) are a fairly simple e-democracy tool that can have profound effects, enabling elected members to reach out to their communities directly. They are also a component of the Government's Priority Outcomes for Local e-Government. However, different councils have taken very different views on the legal position of such websites. For some, providing elected members with local authority sponsored websites would be a contravention of section 2(2) of the Local Government Act 1986 as amended by the Local Government Act 1988 section 27(1) (for a detailed discussion of this provision, see Leigh, 2000, pp74-8). This legislation prohibits local authorities from producing any publicity 'designed to affect public support for a political party or a body, or a cause or campaign identified, or likely to be regarded, or identified, as a political party' (Leigh, 2000, p77). In short, the legislation prevents local authorities from producing any publicity in support of party politics. Risk-averse local government solicitors interpret this legislation as extending to support for councillor websites. As one chief executive argued: 'it's OK if you can trust councillors to behave apolitically but we know that most of ours will not be able to resist the temptation to post partisan information and promote their own party political interests. If this is done on a council maintained website then we will clearly be in breach of the Act'.

Not all local authorities (nor, indeed, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) support this interpretation. Some are pushing ahead with easy to maintain councillor websites by developing codes of conduct and other instruments to work around the constraints of the legislation (see, especially, the Leicester City Council experiments on the National Project website). Others have adopted a more restrictive development of councillor websites. One London Borough, for example, manages the content of their councillors' websites to ensure that individuals cannot post inappropriate information in contradiction of the legal position. Consequently, where there is political and managerial will, there are solutions that can be made to work to achieve the broader e-democracy objective. The response is not simply a result of some councils being more prepared to take risks than others but, also, a clear demonstration of managerial and political will to make it happen.

Structural limitations

The constraints discussed above are all internal to the local authority and, thus, can be addressed by actions within the organisation. However, there is also a number of limitations that are imposed by the wider environment in which local authorities exist. These structural limitations can potentially be wide-ranging, encompassing everything from the global trajectory of managerial and technological trends through to the specific relationships that the organisation has with other agencies and actors in the locality. Many factors may shape, direct or limit the choices that local authorities have when implementing e-democracy, providing particular templates for action and implicitly disregarding others. Through the interviews, however, two particular limitations emerged.

i) Central government targets and priorities

The local e-gov strategy and its associated activities have clearly been a significant catalyst for the development of e-government across local authorities. Everything in this strategy, from the process around the Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) statements, through to the 21 National Projects that have developed generic tools and experience of local e-government, have shaped the way in which local authorities have adopted new technologies. The development of the 2005 targets, the application of BVPI157 (which measures the proportion of local government services available online) and the more recent development of the Priority Outcomes for Local e-Government, have all provided a focus and direction for local authorities. The strategy has acted both to shape and inhibit particular directions in e-democracy.

Shaping has occurred where the different policy instruments have encouraged local authorities to adopt particular technologies or solutions. To some extent there has been convergence around such technologies as websites (many of which have common information and layout – see the previous chapter), CRMs and so on. This convergence is a direct product of the e-government strategy and meets the Government's requirement that by the end of 2005 all citizens should be able to perform a range of functions electronically with public bodies. However, as one disgruntled county councillor recognised, beneath the surface this convergence may be less successful:

Most of the e-governance money that we're getting is being spent on things, some of it is being spent on new things but most of it is on things we would have been doing anyway. We were quite ahead of the game three or four years ago, so in a sense it's true to say that we were well down the road then. So if we'd have been using the e-governance money correctly, then we would have had all that wiring in place, we would have been able to have the deskilling of the roles behind the website and people would have been able to track things and pay for things online. But what's happened is that political priorities change and they don't see the need to put this money in if we're going to get it off the government, so we use the government money coming in, which is for extra stuff, use that to fund the stuff we would have been doing anyway. So that's slowed it down to virtually a stop. So all we're doing now is what the government are funding...

For this councillor, at least, the e-government strategy has weakened the Council's commitment to e-democracy and pushed its resources in directions where the Council will receive most government support.

The e-government strategy can also be seen to have inhibited certain types of e-democracy developments. For example, the development of the National Projects, which ensured that all applications were developed and managed within local government, had considerable strengths but one of its limitations was that every project was fundamentally about local government. Consequently, it was difficult to fund research or development activities that were not directly beneficial to individual local authorities in the short term, even if they were likely to have longer term advantages. Community groups that might have benefited from and contributed to the wider development of local democracy were, therefore, excluded from the process, except where they were working in direct partnership with a local authority. This limitation is a significant barrier to the development of e-democracy, especially given the wider expectation of community leadership that local authorities are now charged with.

ii) The e-democracy market place

The other external factor that has a significant influence upon the direction and scope of e-democracy is the commercial market for supporting and developing appropriate products. For local authorities to be able to take the e-democracy agenda forward, they need commercial suppliers to be competing to provide appropriate applications. Most interviewees recognised that the e-democracy market is still in its infancy and that real progress will not be made until a much more mature market has developed. However, the experience of interacting with the existing market was very mixed. Some had had very positive experiences of developing particular projects in collaboration with commercial organisations, sometimes with funding from external bodies such as the European Commission. However, others were more negative. Some felt that the larger commercial organisations tried to lock councils in and monopolise their activities, while others were more concerned that many of the current commercial organisations 'promise you the earth but never deliver what you really need' (District Council e-Champion). However, even those with the most positive experiences recognised the significant limitations of the existing e-democracy market place.

The existence of the Local e-Democracy National Project may have gone some way to helping the e-democracy market to mature, by providing resources that can support development. However, for it

to really mature, there will need to be some clear signs that there will be future investment coming from local government in particular types of product. This reassurance has emerged, to some extent at least, in relation to electronic voting. There is less certainty, however, in relation to other aspects of e-democracy.

Citizen restraints

All the barriers discussed so far have, in one way or another, been concerned with the factors affecting the supply of e-democracy. This final set of barriers to e-democracy focuses more upon the demand side of the equation, at least in so far as it is concerned with what local government officers and members feel is the demand within communities for greater opportunities for democratic engagement in general and for electronic democracy in particular. The digital divide and the challenges it poses to political equality is perceived to be a significant barrier to e-democracy among most members and officers. As an assistant chief executive of a district council argued, 'the problem we have is that e-democracy does not get to the very people we want to involve more – hard to reach groups. You have to question, therefore, whether it is of any use at all'. His attitude was reflected in many other comments that recognised that unequal access to the technology among citizens was a major barrier to moving forward on the e-democracy agenda. Concerns over the digital divide, however, were not so much a barrier to e-democracy as a brake on its rapid development.

Of more significance in many respects, was the opinion expressed by many respondents that there is not much demand among the public for most e-democracy devices. A head of democratic services in a county council expressed the concern in this way:

We've not been contacted by any citizen asking for better facilities. I think it would probably be a fairly IT literate citizen to look at the web pages and find out who I was and ask me to do that but, having said that, I've not been contacted indirectly either by member services or anything or by any members asking for services and access. So it seems to me to be authority led or essentially government led, in order to get take up.

Others were more direct about the limitations of e-democracy and the absence of a demand for it. A councillor in a local authority that was piloting web casting of council meetings was particularly scathing:

We have full council meetings with no-one in the public gallery apart from the press... why is this going to be any different at the end of the day? If people are that apathetic about what's happening I don't think that anything you do electronically is really going to change any of that.

The chief executive of the same council was even more honest, agreeing that 'council meetings are boring'.

Overall, the absence of demand among citizens reflected two concerns. First, there was the realistic observation that e-democracy initiatives were unlikely to stimulate significant changes in the behaviour of citizens and that most were largely unaware and disinterested in the development of such opportunities. This acknowledgement, of course, begs the question that if perceived citizen demand is so low, why are any local authorities pursuing e-democracy? The answer to this question seems to be confused but there is an expectation, among some authorities at least, that demand will grow when e-democracy applications are more widely available and have greater legitimacy. Second, however, there was also significant concern among many authorities that failed e-democracy initiatives could have very negative consequences for the Council and democracy more generally. As one county councillor argued:

The media give us a very hard time. You can see headlines like 'the council spends 3 million on call centre'. Why does the council spend this sort of money on this system? That is a real problem unless you can show real quick benefits. ...Local authorities, particularly members don't take risks. If you lose half a million on IT, it is not a good sign.

Indeed, it is not just failure of particular projects that concerns local authorities. For many local authorities there is also the realistic concern that even successful e-democracy initiatives will be deemed a waste of money by a public that is more concerned with efficient service delivery than it is with enhanced opportunities for political participation. In the end, this constraint, more than any other, may make or break the e-democracy agenda over the next few years.

5. Overcoming the barriers – a future for local e-democracy?

This report started with the argument that the e-democracy moment has arrived. However, it has then spent the subsequent chapters analysing the limited achievements of local e-democracy so far and the barriers that remain to further development. This concluding chapter, therefore, reflects upon the future for local e-democracy and the strategies that might overcome these barriers.

It is important to recognise that e-democracy on its own is unlikely to have a significant impact upon democratic practices in local government. The future of local e-democracy in the UK is intrinsically bound up with the wider process of local government reform and democratic renewal more generally. Local government and the broader institutions of local governance have been, and continue to be, subject to considerable change (cf. Wilson and Game, 2002; Stoker and Wilson, 2004, *inter alia*). At least four distinct changes can be seen to have a direct effect on local government (for a detailed analysis see Leach and Pratchett, 2005). First, the new political management systems brought in by the Local Government Act 2000 have fundamentally affected the internal workings of local democracy: the existence of a more visible executive (and in some cases a highly visible elected mayor) and the possibilities for a more robust form of scrutiny by back bench members has, supposedly, enhanced the transparency and accountability of local government (but, see Pratchett and Leach, 2003, for a critique of scrutiny's limitations). In principle, these reforms should not only have clarified responsibilities within local authorities but should also have provided more opportunities for citizens to understand and engage with local democracy. Enhanced public participation in local affairs was a key driver behind this process of reform (Armstrong, 2000).

Second, the shifting emphasis towards community cohesion and neighbourhood governance has significant implications for local democracy. To begin with, the development of new patterns of local democracy beneath the traditional unit of local government, together with the enhancement of parishes where they exist, will change the legitimacy of different tiers of government. Added to this, the significance of electronically mediated communication in areas that will, in most instances at least, be territorially very small, is questionable. Neighbourhood governance, therefore, could shift the democratic focus to small territorial areas, reducing the significance of e-democracy.

Third, however, and in contrast to the potential effects of neighbourhood governance, the growing emphasis upon institutionalised forms of local partnership is also important. The creation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and more recent initiatives to develop Local Area Agreements with the possibility of Local Public Service Boards in some areas moves the democratic emphasis beyond the confines of the town (or county) hall and into the wider remit of local governance. Different democratic institutions are necessary in an environment where a host of institutions not only need to be coordinated but subject to stronger forms of democratic accountability. The tools of e-democracy may be important catalysts to the types of democratic reform needed in the context of partnership and expanding modes of local governance.

Finally, and linked to the partnership emphasis, is the interest in alternative forms of local democracy that has emerged through at least one version of the new localism. Consequently, the desire to develop multiple and competing locations of democracy at the local level (Bleas, 2003; Stoker, 2004) in the form of elections to the boards of foundation hospitals, schools and other local service providers, offer a significant challenge to the hegemony and legitimacy of local government as community leaders. The tools of e-democracy may be used to support, manage or redress some of the legitimacy problems that this form of the new localism may introduce into local democracy.

Beyond these immediate changes, the wider shift in democratic engagement from collective to individual forms of political participation, and from organised forms of institutionalised party politics towards single issue social movements, have all impacted upon the way democracy is practised in localities (cf. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004; Pratchett and Lowndes, 204 *inter alia*). These changing repertoires of political practise, when linked to the significant reform of political institutions that has taken place since 1997, provide both the catalyst for, and a guiding influence on, the opportunities for e-democracy as part of the wider reinvigoration of local democracy.

In the context of this wider process of change and reform, e-democracy has an uncertain role to play. Electronic democracy is not a self-contained system of democratic change or even an independent influence on reform – for it to be effective it needs to work within this wider process of democratic renewal and change. At this point, we return to the process of democratic enactment discussed in chapter 1 of this report. The tools of e-democracy may not necessarily have a significant impact on their own but they do provide a unique opportunity to question the underlying assumptions about democratic practice in local government and to reinvigorate or reform failing institutions. Where new institutions are necessary (for example, in relation to neighbourhood or partnership governance) they also provide an opportunity to design in electronically mediated forms of democracy that are both institutionally efficient and effective. The opportunity is there for local authorities, and other actors in the local governance arena, to seize the e-democracy moment and use it to make a real difference to local democracy.

To make the most of e-democracy, however, local authorities and central government have to address the barriers that have been identified in the previous chapter. The problem of democratic understanding is both a simple and complex one to address. It is simple in so far as it requires local authorities and their partners to commit time to reflecting upon what they want to achieve in relation to democracy and how they prioritise reforms in relation to such issues as service delivery. It is also complex, however, because it involves challenging existing understanding of the way in which democracy works and, possibly, challenging embedded structures of political power in communities. It is important to ensure that e-democracy does not simply reinforce existing structures of politics and, particularly, does not become a tokenistic form of engagement that rubber stamps political decisions taken elsewhere. It is in this context that e-democracy can act as a catalyst to reform rather than simply as an end product or add-on to other features of democratic renewal.

The problems associated with organisational constraints are, arguably, the most tangible and easily addressed ones. There is much that central and local government can do to ensure a degree of stability and sustainability in the funding regime for e-democracy (even if that funding is limited). Organisational infrastructure and skills are likely to improve automatically over the next few years, while the evolution of formal and informal rules in relation to the use of the internet and email are likely to evolve to reduce some of the problems of technology abuse. Political and managerial will, of course, requires the emergence of individuals prepared to put their heads above the parapet and promote e-democracy in particular ways. There are already some examples of the emergence of such individuals and, with the right frameworks (such as the National Projects), central government and local authorities can create incentives for more of such champions to emerge.

The problems associated with structural imitations similarly lie in the hands of both central government and local authorities. Central targets need to be both realistic and sensitive to the current position of local government in order to provide the correct balance of incentives and encouragement to greater take-up of e-democracy. Similarly, it is only by demonstrating a desire to move more in this direction that a more mature market is likely to emerge.

The big outstanding challenge for local e-democracy, however, lies not in the supply side of e-democracy but more on the demand side. Both officers and members do not see a latent or pent-up demand for e-democracy and, indeed, are concerned that citizens are generally hostile to innovations in this area where it will cost them money. There is clearly a need for more research to understand how and when citizens may support and use particular forms of e-democracy. However, in the meantime, one justification for pursuing e-democracy in the absence of widespread citizen demand is that, by implementing now, local authorities are building their institutional knowledge of democracy and widening the opportunities for political engagement among future generations.

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge that measuring the impact of e-democracy is always going to be problematic. As with other democratic innovations, there is always going to be a wide range of factors that need to be taken into account. In particular, it is difficult to settle upon the precise criteria that should be used to measure improvements in democracy. Even if such criteria can be agreed, there remain problems in identifying the causal mechanisms in action (i.e. which of a wide range of potential factors actually caused changes to take place) and establishing the counterfactual (i.e. what would have happened without the innovations). Consequently, it is necessary to accept that we can never be certain that any particular e-democracy innovation has made a significant impact upon local democracy.

Just because the impact of e-democracy cannot be measured, however, does not mean that local authorities should ignore or avoid the e-democracy agenda. There can be little doubt that e-democracy provides a range of advantages to local government and could become a significant catalyst and basis for wider institutional reform. On its own, e-democracy is unlikely to achieve much for local government or democracy more generally. As part of a wider mix of democratic practices, however, it should become a major component of the institutional repertoire of local democracy.

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