A ‘Reaching In Scenario’: The Potential for E-Petitions in Local Government

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Abstract

Petitions have long been a way in which people have sought to influence local decision making, and councils have a variety of mechanisms in place with which to deal with them, although more recent developments with e-petitions and more formal systems to deal with petitions, may have the potential to increase the ability of people to ‘reach in’ to representative institutions in relatively accessible and potentially meaningful ways.

This paper considers the extent to which petitions and e-petitions provide an approach which might allow citizens to ‘reach in’ to local authorities. It is clear that this may not always be straightforward, and there are issues and risks associated with e-petitions (as with many other participative initiatives, digital or otherwise), not least how and to what extent they might align with traditional approaches to representative democracy, and it is possible to alienate/disappoint people, but, there may also be potential lessons that can be learnt from them, not simply in terms of enabling ‘voice’ and participation, but also in helping educate and inform petitioners about local democracy and decision-making.
Introduction

While petitions have long been a mechanism through which people have sought to address politicians and public officials, recent developments in both technology and attempts to encourage greater public engagement with and involvement in politics and representative institutions have given new impetus to their use.

As with other attempts to enable citizen participation, it is possible to identify both benefits and risks from the more widespread use of petitions. This paper focuses on the development and use of e-petitions systems, and explores the potential for them to allow citizens to ‘reach in’ to local authorities.

Digital democracy

The development and use of technology has been fundamental in the recent apparent enthusiasm for e-petitions. It has allowed the development of systems by which citizens are able to generate and support (and indeed publicise) petitions online, and the possibilities for representative bodies to provide their own platforms to receive and process e-petitions. In that respect, the use of e-petitions needs to be set against wider debates about the uses of technology and the growth of digital democracy.

There is now a considerable, and growing, literature on digital democracy. Dahlberg (2011), for example, identifies four positions on digital democracy:

- Liberal-individualist – focusing on the opportunities for individuals to have their particular interests realised through liberal political systems, and seeing digital media as a means for the effective transmission of information and viewpoints between individuals and the representative decision-making process;

- Deliberative – sees digital media as supporting the extension of a deliberative democratic public sphere of rational communication and public opinion formation that can hold decision makers accountable;

- Counter-publics – emphasises the role of digital media in political group formation, activism and contestation, rather than rational individual action or rational consensus-oriented deliberation. Digital media is seen as offering the potential for voices excluded from dominant discourses to form counter-publics and counter-discourses, to link up with other excluded voices, and to contest the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere;

- Autonomist Marxist – sees digital communication networks as enabling a radically different democratic politics in the form of self-organised and inclusive participation in productive activities that bypass centralised state and capitalist systems. This view goes beyond the extension or
reform of liberal democracy envisaged by the other three positions to envisage an entirely new form of democratic society.

It is possible to identify elements of at least the first three of these in the arguments of supporters of the development of e-petitions.

However, as discussed further in relation to e-petitions later in this paper, not all are necessarily supportive of the idea and practice of digital democracy. Branstetter (2011), for example, draws on Habermas to analyse digital democracy, and in particular the web, and from this suggests that: the web may be biased against those who do not have significant financial or social resources; while it does not preclude anyone from questioning any assertion, its institutional arrangements and position relative to other media may discourage the rational process of questioning; while the web may be increasing the capacity to say anything about politics, that is not in itself a good thing, as it may retard rational dialogue; while the web does not actively block access, there remain hidden institutional barriers that violate the conditions of ideal speech; and while the web may appear to provide further means of the public holding their representatives to account, it is not necessarily used in that way. He concludes that ‘It is a serious risk to champion the web as a source of democratic improvement without more evidence that it is doing so’ (p. 159). He argues that it is not a free market of ideas, but that there are inequalities and imbalances within the web. While there may be the potential for the web to contribute to an improved democracy, it would have to be harnessed correctly and a culture of rational discussion encouraged.

Lee at al (2011) summarise some of the barriers to e-participation, many of which are similar to those to more traditional forms of participation (Bochel et al, 2008). They include social complexity (the range of diverse actors with different resources, as well as physical or geographic barriers); political culture (the lack of trust in politicians and governments and the dangers of a lack of commitment to citizen engagement); organisational structures (the lack of integration of e-participation into government structures and policy processes); technological dependencies (including the myth that technologies alone can resolve participatory problems, so that there is a need for technologies to be integrated into broader government-citizen relationship building); and finally the fact that e-participation is still a relatively young area that requires further study in order to understand its intricacies.

More broadly, Mackintosh (2004) proposed three levels that might characterise involvement in e-participation initiatives:

Information – a one-way relationship with government producing and delivering information for use by citizens;

Consultation – a two-way relationship with citizens providing feedback to government, but with governments defining the issues and managing the process;
Active participation – where the relationship is based on partnership between government and citizens, with the latter actively engaged in defining the process and content, although responsibility for the final decision rests with government.

Lee et al. (2011) develop this idea slightly further, relating it to Kingdon’s (1984) multiple-stream model of policy making, and suggest that informing relates to knowledge utilisation and the problem stream (for example by highlighting popular issues); consulting can relate to the problem stream (again, highlighting issues were there is a potential need for change through deliberative debate between stakeholders) and the policy stream (with deliberative debate between stakeholders highlighting potential solutions); and empowering relating to the problem stream (new topics or issues can be introduced), the policy stream (new solutions or policy ideas may be introduced) and to policy entrepreneurship, with stakeholders being guided on how to become policy entrepreneurs.

Focusing on the UK, Moss and Coleman (2014) argue that despite the rhetoric from both Labour and Coalition governments around the Internet’s democratic potential, progress has been disappointing. They suggest that ‘online communicators are finding their way to politics even if political elites are not finding their way to them’ (p. 423), but that ways ‘need to be found to channel these energies and practices into effective venues and institutions; in short, to link civil society with the political sphere’ (p. 423), and suggest that non-deliberative initiatives such as e-petitions (in this case the Number 10 Downing Street system under Labour, with a brief reference to the systems in Scotland, Wales and local government) and crowdsourcing have the potential to be such a link. They note that e-petitioning reflects a ‘limited model of single-click citizenship’ (p. 420), but also point out that ‘even if citizens are not actively debating the pros and cons of petition proposals, some of them may be engaging in what Goodin (2000) has called ‘internal deliberation’’ (p. 420) and weighing up the arguments in their own minds.

Moss and Coleman also argue that initiatives such as e-petitions highlight some of the weaknesses of existing democracies: ‘the lack of meaningful opportunities for citizens to compare and contrast their reasons for holding views and to engage in such activity in the knowledge that public authorities and political representatives are similarly engaged’ (p. 423). Hence, ‘Non-deliberative practices can contribute to enacting democratic ideals, but they remain of limited value in the absence of public deliberation’ (p. 423).

Petitions, and e-petitions, could potentially fit into different places in these varying categorisations and debates on digital democracy, depending in part on the nature of the system in a particular body and how it relates to the wider political and policy-making system.
The history of petitions and petitioning

Historically petitions were the equivalent of a prayer or a plea to Parliament, with the first recorded petitions being in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (House of Commons Information Office, 2010), and while they have long been recognised (including in the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights 1688) as a legitimate means of seeking redress, after a considerable period of decline, it is arguably only over the past decade that they have again begun to assume some real significance, and indeed been actively encouraged by institutions of government, not least because of technological developments.

In the nineteenth century petitions were widely used, and the number of petitions to the House of Commons ‘rarely fell below 10,000 per session’ (House of Commons Information Office, 2010, p. 7). In the twenty-first century petitions are back in vogue, and are one of the most common forms of political participation (Hansard Society, 2010). While the numbers of people identified as engaged in signing a petition or e-petition varies (for example, from 40% in Audit of Political Engagement 7 (Hansard Society, 2010), to 27% in Audit of Political Engagement 9 (Hansard Society, 2012), and 31% in Audit of Political Engagement 11 (Hansard Society, 2014)), it still remains one of the most common forms of engagement, alongside voting, donating money or paying a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation, and discussing politics or political news with someone else.

As discussed in this paper, one of the significant changes that we have seen in recent years has been the establishment of a number of systems that can be seen as ‘formalising’ the treatment of petitions in some representative bodies in the United Kingdom. Even the European Union introduced, in 2012, the ‘European citizens’ initiative’ which ‘is an invitation to the European Commission to propose legislation on matters where the EU has competence to legislate’ (see ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/welcome), although the thresholds and barriers are fairly high.

Many factors underpin this greater use of petitions, including ideas around the empowerment of individuals (Barnes et al., 2007); the trend towards and encouragement of citizen participation by government (Home Office, 2005); the desire to address the perceived decline in political engagement (Dalton, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Hansard Society 2010); the opportunities provided by online systems to facilitate interactions between citizens and governments (Cruickshank and Smith, 2009; Jungherr and Jurgens, 2010); and the emphasis on improving the policy making process, including through the greater participation of citizens and users (Bochel and Evans, 2007; Bochel et al., 2008).

Petitions can have value in these respects, since, as discussed in this paper, ‘as a tool for participation they have the potential to act as a significant input to representative forms of democracy by providing a mechanism to enable the public to express their views to those in elected representative institutions. While there may be challenges associated with this, petitions systems may help underpin the legitimacy and functioning of representative institutions’
(Bochel, 2012, p. 798), while e-petitions, in particular, appear to provide an opportunity for larger numbers of citizens to make their voices heard in a relatively easy and cost-effective manner (see also Mosca and Santucci, 2008).

In addition, the dual impacts of austerity and technology have perhaps, in some respects, assisted the development of the use of petitions. For example, the Local Government Association (2013) have argued that in the current economic climate the existing model of public services is unsustainable, with demand and costs increasing, but funding falling. They suggest that a transformed and independent local government could make public services efficient, effective and local responsive, and could rebuild democracy. And in respect of the latter the Local Government Association (2014) has argued that technology and digital tools can: enable a deeper understanding of local patterns of need and interaction with government; more effective management of demand; more reliable, faster and precise handling of routine repetitive tasks; faster access to and sharing of data between councils, customers and partner organisations; and new ways of working that potentially reconcile the goals of providing a better quality of customer experience while cutting costs. Petitions systems, appear in theory, and perhaps in practice, to assist in achieving some of these ends.

Understanding e-petitions

It is important to make a distinction between e-petitions (and indeed petitions) in general, and those where there is some form of system established to process them, with the latter being the focus of this paper. The former might include the submission of ad hoc petitions, such as those which may be created to oppose a new road or the closure of a hospital, which have long been submitted to public agencies. The latter reflect the more recent development of formal systems to accept and, to varying degrees, process, petitions, arguably linked both to a desire to enhance citizens’ engagement with elements of the political process, and to the increased ability to generate petitions with significant levels of public support following the growth of the Internet, and the consequent ability to use petitions in a somewhat different manner from many in the past. These would include systems such as those in the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament. This distinction is not necessarily entirely straightforward, as, for example, there has long been a ‘system’ for dealing with paper petitions to the House of Commons, but the newer systems considered here arguably seek to deal with and respond to petitions in a very different fashion.

An alternative distinction might be between petitions as ‘bottom-up’ attempts to intervene in the political system and petitions to systems set up by institutions to enhance citizens’ participation (e.g. Mosca and Santucci, 2009). Similarly, Pratchett et al. (2009a, 2009b) distinguish between two different forms of petitions in the UK: those that have no obvious relationship with the formal institutional decision making of public authorities; and those that require a formal institutional response. However, such a distinction is again
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not straightforward, as much would depend on what is meant by ‘a formal institutional response’. They note that outside the UK the position can be even more complex, so that in addition to the above there may be:

Advisory initiatives, where petitions lead to a popular vote, but where the vote is not binding;

Direct initiatives, where the proposition is placed directly onto a ballot, which if successful is binding;

Indirect initiatives, where the position is first considered by the public authority. If it is not implemented in an acceptable form for the proponents, the proposition is placed on a ballot, which if successful is binding.

They looked at twenty examples and identified five ‘influencing factors; signature qualification (threshold), time limits, whether there is a requirement for a public authority response, whether there is the possibility of a popular vote, and whether the popular vote is binding. Their overarching conclusion is that ‘a relationship between the petition and decision making is critical for achieving community empowerment’ (p. 128). They suggest that the most effective means is where a petition is linked to a popular vote (as in an initiative or popular referendum), although they note that legislation initiated by such methods can sometimes be a vehicle for repressive outcomes. They also point out that there is a danger that well-resourced groups can dominate the petition process. For petitions that are not connected to popular votes, they suggest that the significant factor is that ‘public authorities take petitions seriously in terms of their institutional response’ (p. 129), highlighting the Scottish Parliament as exemplary.

Böhle and Reihm (2013) distinguish three types of e-petition operating at national level within the European Union:

Petitions submitted electronically – compared to traditional paper petitions, the novelty of this e–petition type merely refers to the initial submission phase;

Public e–petitions – where the petition text is published on the Internet, irrespective of the way it has been submitted. This may be supplemented with additional information, on the issue, on the procedural steps related to the petition, or on the final decision;

Public e–petitions actively involving the public – where there are functions allowing the participation of citizens, with the most widespread function being the possibility to supporting a public e–petition electronically.

They argue that it is important that e–petitions are not seen just as a technical innovation to make a petition system more user–friendly by adding a submission channel, but that the petition process goes public and may
actively involve citizens. To some extent building on such ideas, Ergazakis et al. (2012) propose a series of criteria, which they term 'key performance indicators', against which e-petitions could be evaluated:

- Political – contribution to policy, engagement of citizens, engagement of decision makers, the relevance of contributions, and the quality of the content provided;
- Social – participation of targeted groups, benefits of participation, barriers to participation;
- Technical – performance, usability, accessibility, sustainability.

It is primarily the first two of these that are the concern of this paper.

Clearly, defining the scope and nature of an ‘e-petitions system’ is not necessarily straightforward. However, for the purposes of this paper, an e-petitions system might be one that:

- Enables petitions to be created, signed and submitted on a website of an elected representative body and which has a process for delivering a response.

It is also worth making the point that, in order to reduce the potential for disadvantaging citizens with no or limited access to the Internet, such a system could be accompanied by a paper system, as in the cases of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

**Current situation**

There is a small but growing body of recent work on petitions systems at the national, devolved and local levels in the UK (see, for example, Bochel, 2012, 2013; Carman, 2006; Fox, 2012; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2011). This reflects the range of formal systems currently in place, including a facility in the House of Lords which is rarely used, a paper system in the House of Commons, an e-petitions system set up by the Coalition government in July 2011, which replaced the Number 10 Downing Street e-petitions system (set up by the Labour government in November 2006), a paper and e-petitions system in the Scottish Parliament (the former set up in 1999 and the latter in 2004) and a paper and e-petitions system in the National Assembly for Wales (the former established in 2007 and the latter in 2008).

The Labour government (1997-2010) introduced in the 2009 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act, a requirement for principal local authorities in England and Wales to respond to petitions. In 2010, however, the incoming Coalition government scrapped the Number 10 Downing Street e-petitions system, replacing it with the new system, and repealed the requirement for local authorities to respond to petitions in the Localism Act 2011.
The number of petitions systems at local level is unclear, as they are established at the discretion of local authorities and there is no central mechanism for collecting the figures. Bristol and Kingston upon Thames were arguably the first local authorities in the UK to introduce an e-petitions system, in 2004 (Hilton, 2006). Since then, as noted earlier, they have been joined by a substantial number of other councils, particularly in England. There has, however, been relatively little research on e-petitions systems at the local level in the UK.

Panagiotopoulos et al. (2011), however, identified more than 280 e-petition facilities among the 353 English local authorities, although they suggested that in many there was little done to promote the systems, and in more than one-third of cases the facilities were not easily visible on the council’s website. They also undertook an assessment of e-petitioning tools in English local government. Following the regulatory arrangements introduced in 2009, all English Local Authorities were required to implement those tools by the end of 2010. Given that the study was conducted shortly after the 2010 deadline, the results of the legislation may not have been fully embedded in local authorities. Despite a number of positive indicators, such as signature thresholds being realistic and the petitions systems themselves being accessible (one click from the authorities’ home page in around 45% of cases), they argue that ‘it seems evident that most local authorities allocated the minimum possible effort and resources to this new initiative’, and that, ‘regardless of most systems operating for less than three months, in most local authorities the initiative was not advertised or promoted; the absence of even a single petition in 192 out of 277 websites looks like a clear indication’ (p. 212).

In the rest of the United Kingdom e-petitions systems are scarce within local government: as at February 2015, only four (Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Renfrewshire) of Scotland’s thirty-two councils had systems with e-petitions facilities (i.e. where petitions could be created and signed online), in Wales no council appears to have such a system (it is possible to find a reference to an e-petitions system on the Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council website, although not to find the system itself), while similarly, none of Northern Ireland’s 26 councils appeared to have a system.

Panagiotopoulos et al. also comment on other forms of e-participation activities, suggesting that ‘local authorities tend to favour forms of participation that do not require significant resources and, more importantly, can be bureaucratically controlled by public officers… disseminating council information through social media does not imply continuous interaction with the public nor empowers citizens to set the agenda as for example petitions do’ (2011, p. 213). This both helps draw attention to the possible tensions between participative and representative democracy, and suggests that local authorities may often want to use forms of participation that are located at the lower end of Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation.
Methodology

This paper draws on case studies of petitions systems at the national, devolved and local levels, including the systems in the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, Wolverhampton City Council, Renfrewshire Council (Westminster City Council, Nottinghamshire County Council, North Kesteven District Council). The primary research was carried out in number of stages between 2009 and 2012. The case studies were chosen to represent different levels of government and different types of local authority.

Potential models for e-petitions systems

It is useful to see what might be learned from existing systems and whether there are any lessons that might be applied to the local level and to enable citizens to ‘reach in’ to local authorities.

Lessons from Scotland and Wales

The systems in Scotland and Wales are widely seen as models of good practice. In particular, the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee has seen interest from local authorities in England and Scotland, as well as from other states at both national (such as the Australian House of Representatives, the Czech Chamber of Deputies and the German Bundestag) and regional (including the Catalan Parliament, the State Parliament of Saxony and the Principality of Gauteng in South Africa) levels, so it is worth considering these in a little more detail.

The main features of these systems are that they are open – anyone can submit a petition as long as it is within the remit of the Parliament or the Assembly. Both devolved bodies have a clear statement of purpose so that petitioners know what they can and cannot achieve. They also set out a clear process, so that anyone submitting a petition knows what they can expect at each stage in the process.

All petitions that meet the admissibility criteria, regardless of the number of signatures, are considered on their merits by a Petitions Committee and receive a response. At a minimum, petitioners will have had the opportunity to have their petition discussed by a Petitions Committee and thus the opportunity for their voices to be heard. The Committees can take a wide range of actions, for example: they can invite petitioners to give evidence to the Petitions Committees, they can request further information from relevant bodies and organisations (the most common action), forward the petition to another committee or organisation, request a debate as part of normal business in the Parliament or the Assembly, call for further work to address the issue raised in the petition, hold roundtable evidence sessions, commission inquiries, request that ministers attend the Petitions Committee to answer questions/give evidence in respect of particular petitions, agree to the petitioners request, or take no further action and close the petition.
Petitioners are involved throughout the process. They are kept informed about the progress of their petition and encouraged to respond in writing to evidence provided by the different organisations that have been consulted about their petition topic. Contact with clerks and perhaps MSPs and AMs, alongside detailed information including video clips of petitioners talking about their experience of the petitions process helps to underpin the educative functions of these systems.

Petitions, underpinned by an appropriate system for handling them, therefore offer a potential way for local authorities to enable citizens to ‘reach in’ to them, raising issues and putting forward ideas across a whole range of subjects and services. The experiences of Scotland and Wales, in particular, along with some councils, demonstrate that it is possible to use petitions systems in a way that is acceptable and useful for both citizens and elected representatives. The use of petitions is not, however, entirely unproblematic, and the next sections therefore deal with some characteristics that might be desirable in a petitions system, and with some of the challenges that need to be addressed.

A ‘reaching in’ scenario: characteristics of a strong e-petitions system

Drawing on the systems in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, it is possible to suggest a number of characteristics which might contribute to a strong e-petitions system at the local level (see also Pratchett et al., 2009b, on e-participation). These include:

• A clear statement of purpose – so that petitioners know what they can and cannot achieve by submitting a petition. This is partly about managing expectations;

• Direct access – petitioners should be able to submit a petition without having to first go through an elected member;

• A low signature threshold – a threshold should not be simply about numbers, otherwise relevant issues which fail to garner large numbers of signatures may not get heard;

• The opportunity for the petitioner to receive advice and guidance on their petition, perhaps from clerks, before it is submitted;

• A mechanism such as a Petitions Committee to consider each petition on its merits, and to make a decision on how to progress each petition. This need not be a dedicated Petitions Committee; it could, for example, perhaps also be a committee that has a scrutiny function;

• Some sort of ‘tracking’ system – so that petitioners can see the progress and outcome of their petition online;
• Specific feedback on the petition topic to the petitioner, and those who have signed the petition;

• The petitions system should be taken seriously by the council, and be seen as an integral part of the wider local political system. The petitions systems in the devolved legislatures appear to be taken seriously, so, for example, Ministers attend them on a regular basis to give evidence and answer questions on specific petitions;

• Some have argued that an accompanying discussion forum could allow those who support or oppose a petition, or who have supplementary points to raise, to have some input (Mosca and Santucci, 2009; see also Pratchett et al., 2009b, on moderation and e-participation). However, there are clearly potential dangers here and such an approach would need to be tested and monitored;

• Finally, and perhaps somewhat differently, petitions offer the opportunity to develop an educative function, enabling citizens to engage with the political system, through conversations with members, officers and clerks, and perhaps learn more about how it works. In many respects this might be as valuable an outcome as from other aspects of the system.

Challenges for e-petitions systems

Whilst in theory petitions systems are open to everyone, in practice access may be affected by a number of factors, including those associated with access and socio-economic factors:

Access to the Internet – the fact that, 73% of Households in England and Wales and 64% of households in Scotland are estimated to be online (Office for National Statistics, cited in the Hansard Society 2011, p. 1), suggests that many households would be excluded from purely online participation. There is therefore a need to ensure access to petitions systems for those who do not have access to the Internet;

Socio-economic differences – Ipsos MORI/Carman (2009, p. 6), looking at the Scottish Parliament system, noted that ‘there is a strong relationship between social grade and having internet access in that internet access diminishes substantially as one move down social grade’. More generally, Medaglia (2007, p. 213) says that, ‘the fact that income per household was positively related with higher system usage probably confirms the conclusion that political participation online favours traditionally privileged citizen groups’;

Knowledge of the political process and of existence of a particular petitions system – Ipsos MORI/Carman (2009, p. 6), in respect of the Scottish Parliament’s system, note that ‘the public is not well informed about the Scottish Parliament’s public petitions process’, and, reflecting the previous
point, that ‘Individuals from lower social grades (C2DE) were less likely than those belonging to the higher social grades (ABC1) to be aware of the petition system...’.

These are in many respects interconnected challenges, relating in large part to differential socio-economic status and access to the Internet, clearly reflect key social issues, and are to a considerable extent mirrored in other forms of participation (for example, Bochel and Evans, 2007; Bochel et al. 2008; Whiteley, 2012; Hansard Society, 2014; see also Lee et al. (2011) on barriers to e-participation. These are therefore challenges for politics and political institutions as much as for petitions and petition systems. Nevertheless, a strong e-petitions system, reflecting the characteristics outlined earlier, might be expected to be at least as open and accessible as most other methods that seek to link participative elements to representative democratic bodies.

Nevertheless, there are also other potential challenges for e-petitions systems, including:

**Issues around the number of signatories** – there is a set of tensions around petitions, and perhaps e-petitions in particular, associated with the number of signatories. For example, Panagiotopoulos and Elliman (2012) suggest that ‘The weight of public sentiment behind the request is indicated simply by the number of signatories to the petition’ (p. 80). Leaving aside questions of authentication, the importance that should be attached to simple numbers of signatories is not entirely clear. For example, if a large organisation or a media group is able to marshall large numbers of signatories for an e-petition, does that automatically mean that it is of greater importance or priority than an e-petition with smaller numbers of signatories? Indeed, for many politicians, a concern that there is a potential for e-petitions to be led or hijacked by the media or large organisations wishing to run campaigns appears to be a significant concerns (Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, 2015; Procedure Committee, 2014). Looking at the examples of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, over 60 per cent of petitions submitted to were submitted by individuals, whilst over one-third were submitted by groups and organisations which ranged from national associations, such as the British Heart Foundation and Action for Children and trade unions such as Unite and UNISON through to school groups and societies. These large organisations were using their skills and resources to promote the interests of those whom they represent, although it might be argued that such groups have other methods at their disposal such as lobbying ministers, and that their submissions to petitions committees occupy time which might be better used to consider petitions from individuals (Bochel, 2012). However, as noted above, in Scotland and Wales these do not seem to have had an undue impact. This is, though, perhaps another reason why the systems should not be based purely on numbers thresholds;

**Too easy to sign** – to some extent related to the previous point, some have criticised high-volume, low commitment actions (‘clicktivism’), and questioned their value as a genuine indicator of interest in or importance of a particular issue. At the same time, it is this ease and accessibility, and the levels of
engagement in terms of the numbers of citizens that are seen as appealing by many, particularly for e-petitions. In the cases of Scotland and Wales, it is the role of the petitions committees to make some form of judgement about which committees to progress, and the evidence to date suggests that they have so far made such decisions to a considerable some extent regardless of the number of signatories;

*Number of petitions* – there have been concerns, especially amongst politicians, who might be most likely to be affected by these issues, over the sheer number of e-petitions that can be created, and that might have to be processed and potentially responded to. Systems such as those in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales manage this by having clear guidelines on what issues/topics are within the remit of the Parliament/Assembly and by not accepting duplicate petitions. They also require petitioners to demonstrate that they have taken steps to resolve the issue raised in their petition elsewhere, for example, by contacting their local MP, NHS Trust, or other relevant body before they submit a petition;

*Resources* – while developments in technology mean that it is relatively easy to establish a mechanism to enable the receipt of e-petition, staffing a committee, investigating and responding to petitions, particularly in the current economic climate, may be challenging. However, given ongoing concerns about public disengagement with the political system, an e-petitions system does represent a relatively straightforward means of enabling public input into local authorities on issues that citizens themselves perceive as important;

*Data security/privacy issues* – concerns are sometimes expressed over data management and privacy in relation to e-petitions systems (for example, Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, 2015). However, most e-petitions systems simply gather sufficient data on each e-petitioner and signatory to ensure their eligibility for signing a petition. In addition, experience to date in the United Kingdom has not suggested any problems with regard to personal data;

*Tensions with representative democracy* – the relationship with representative democracy is difficult for most forms of participatory initiatives, not least because in almost all cases ultimate power and decision-making remains with the governmental body, and if it does not, it arguably undermines the very purpose of representative democracy. There is therefore almost inevitably a tension between the two approaches. In the case of petitions, however, it is arguably possible to manage this to some extent by seeking to ensure that petitioners’ expectations are realistic, that they are directed to other forms of action (including to elected representatives and other bodies if appropriate), and by having processes that mean that people feel that they have been treated appropriately and fairly. In addition, Pratchett et al. (2009b) argue that ‘there is now a growing consensus that representative democracy needs engagement with participative democracy, and vice versa’ (p. 33) and that in the context of modern government ‘representative democracy cannot simply be reduced to the election of representatives. It involves a commitment to a
continuous dialogue. To be a representative means then to actively engage in seeking the views of those who you seek to represent (p. 33).

Unlike the issues identified around socio-economic factors, access to the Internet and knowledge of the political process, many of the other challenges noted here are perhaps more particularly and closely linked with e-petitions. However, as outlined above, they can to a considerable extent be met by flexibility in responding to petitions. For example, in the systems discussed in this research there has been some use of ‘thresholds’, most notably in terms of the number of signatories required for a particular action, as in the Coalition government’s e-petitions system, with only petitions receiving more than one-hundred thousand signatures being eligible for debate in the House of Commons, but also of another, arguably more sophisticated nature, such as ensuring that petitioners have sought to use other means of addressing their issues before resorting to an e-petition, as in Scotland/Wales. And, taking a rather different approach, there has been the use of petitions committees, which in having a wide range of actions open to them can provide petitioners with a whole variety of outcomes, as discussed earlier in the paper. It is important to recognise that an ‘outcome’ for petitioners is not simply getting what they asked for in their petition. This is important because the vast majority of people who submit a petition are not going to get what they ask for, hence the process by which they are treated is important.

Managing expectations is therefore an important part of any process. If systems have a clear statement of purpose setting out what petitioners can and cannot achieve by submitting a petition, and if they make it clear to petitioners what they can expect in terms of advice and support, then this can help in managing expectations.

Finally, it is important to ensure that potential challenges for e-petitions systems are weighted against the benefits that might derive from the introduction of strong systems that enable the public to have meaningful input into local authorities and through that, inform councils of the concerns of their citizens.

**Conclusions**

While the introduction of strong e-petitions systems into local authorities may not be without its challenges, as discussed throughout this paper, there are potentially significant benefits from the use of such systems. The examples from this research, and in particular those from the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament, demonstrate that a strong e-petition system can go along way towards meeting the first two criteria identified by Ergazakis et al. (2012) (engagement of citizens and of decision makers, and enabling participation), and:

Provide good levels of access to the political system, not dependent upon reaching high numbers thresholds or having access to other significant resources;
Enable varying degrees of input from petitioners and come to decisions that are seen by most petitioners as fair and as having enabled them to have their voices heard, even if they do not get what they initially wished;

Feed the concerns of citizens into other parts of the political and decision making systems and lead to a variety of outcomes;

And, potentially, provide an educative function that enables petitioners to learn more about the political system with which they are interacting.
Bibliography


