'Reaching In'? The Potential for E-Petitions

in Local Government in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This article considers the extent to which petitions and e-petitions might allow citizens to 'reach in' to local authorities in the United Kingdom. It examines how e-petitions sit against wider debates about the use of technology and digital democracy and the extent to which petitions systems might align with traditional approaches to representative democracy. It highlights that, as with many other participative initiatives, digital or otherwise, there are a variety of issues and risks associated with e-petitions, including those associated with broad socio-economic factors, and others that are more specifically related to the use of e-petitions. However, drawing on existing examples of e-petitions systems in the UK, it suggests that, designed well, they may have potential value, not simply in terms of enabling 'voice' and participation, but also in helping educate and inform petitioners about local democracy and decision-making.

While petitions have long been used by people to address politicians and public officials, recent developments in technology and attempts to encourage greater public engagement with and involvement in politics and representative institutions have given new impetus to their use. In the United Kingdom, new petitions systems, drawing particularly on the use of e-petitions, have been developed, notably at the national level and in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. However, while there have long been arguments that local government should be open and accessible to individuals and groups (for example, Boaden, Goldsmith, Hampton and Stringer, 1982; Newman, 2014), the development of petitions systems at the local authority tier has been patchy at best, and they have not been institutionalised to the same extent at that level. In some respects, this is surprising: local government is, geographically at least, the closest form of government to the people, and despite decades of attempts by governments of different political complexions to restructure it and to reduce and alter its role, it remains important as an enabler and provider of services, while local authority areas retain their own characters and identities (Wilson and Game, 2011). However, McKenna (2011) has described the relationship between local government and public participation in the UK as 'dysfunctional' (p. 1182), noting that while in public policy discourse the view that local government 'is in transition between a purely representative form of local democracy and a new hybrid version that enhances representative structures with participative initiatives' (p. 1187) has largely become the orthodox position, there remains significant tension between it and the view that public participation is fundamentally incompatible with representative government. Further, Firmstone and Coleman (2015), focusing on one large council in England, found that the use of different digital tools for engagement was highly fragmented, with

responsibility for different elements lying with a variety of teams within the council, creating challenges for those responsible for encouraging and coordinating public engagement.

This article reflects on experience in the UK to consider the potential for the greater use of e-petitions in allowing citizens to 'reach in' to local authorities. While there is valuable literature on other jurisdictions, and it may be that there are useful lessons that can be learned, this focus allows consideration of a number of systems that operate within a broadly similar political and social context, and where there has been considerable policy transfer and lesson learning. However, while the discussion is restricted to the UK, Pina, Torres and Royo (2009) concluded that, at the time of their research, while across the EU local authorities had 'greatly expanded their presence on the internet' (p. 1158), UK local governments had the highest scores in e-government development. Lessons from the UK may therefore have the potential for informing development elsewhere.

The focus of this article differs significantly from much previous work as its primary concern is not simply with petitions as a means of communicating the views of citizens to policy makers, but with the existence and operation of some form of established *system* within government to receive, process and respond to them, which, it is argued, can help make petitions more meaningful for citizens and for their representatives (see also Hoffman, 2012, on differentiating political communication from political participation).

E-petitions and digital democracy

The development and use of technology has been fundamental in the recent apparent enthusiasm for e-petitions (Wright, 2012), and the appearance of a variety of mechanisms enabling citizens to generate, support, and indeed publicise, petitions online, and representative bodies providing their own platforms to receive and process e-petitions. In that respect, the use of e-petitions can be set against wider debates about the uses of technology and the growth of digital democracy.

For example, Dahlberg (2011) identifies four positions on digital democracy: liberal-individualist, with digital media being an effective means of transmitting ideas from individuals to the representative decision-making process, enabling individuals to have their particular interests realised through liberal political systems; deliberative, with digital media supporting the extension of a deliberative democratic public sphere of communication and public opinion formation; counter-publics, emphasising the role of digital media in political group formation, activism and contestation and enabling currently excluded voices to contest the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere; and autonomist Marxist, with digital communication networks 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. It is possible to identify elements of at least the first three of these in the arguments of many supporters of the development of e-petitions.

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; and 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. E-petitions, depending on the characteristics of individual systems, as discussed later, could variously be depicted as largely a one-way relationship, albeit with the flow from citizens to government, or something more of a two-way relationship, although with governments, as Mackintosh suggests, largely managing the process. However, some systems, as discussed later in this article, do perhaps move more in the direction of Mackintosh's active participation.

On the other hand, as is now widely acknowledged, there are a variety of barriers to e-participation (for example, Lee at al., 2011), many of which are similar to those to more traditional forms of participation (Bochel, Bochel, Somerville and Worley, 2008). They include social complexity, political culture, organisational structures, and technological dependencies (including the myth that technologies alone can resolve participatory problems).

Clearly, there is no consensus on the ways and extent to which digital democracy initiatives can and should relate to more traditional democratic approaches and fora. Equally, from the discussion above, the use of e-petitions could potentially fit into different places in these varying categorisations and debates, 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, as explored below.

Methodology

This article draws substantially on published work on e-petitions systems in the United Kingdom. It also utilises primary research on case studies of petitions systems at the national, devolved and local levels in the UK: the systems in the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, and at the local government level, Renfrewshire Council in Scotland, and Wolverhampton City Council in England. The research collected information on each system through a variety of sources including websites, correspondence and telephone calls, and in-depth interviews with members and clerks of each petitions committee, some of which were repeat interviews over time, in order to provide a more detailed and ongoing understanding of the systems. In addition, there was observation of petitions committee meetings and other elements of the process, as appropriate to each system. Much of the work was carried out between 2009 and 2012, with supplementary research having continued since then. While some of the findings of the research have been published (Bochel, 2012, 2013), this article takes a very different line in seeking to identify what might be learnt in order to inform the future development of e-petitions systems, particularly at the local government level. Finally, the article reflects on and draws lessons from recent and ongoing developments, including the collaborative e-petitions system between the government and Parliament (in reality, the House of Commons) introduced in 2015, and the simultaneous creation of a Petitions Committee in the House of Commons.

Petitions and petitioning in the United Kingdom

The first recorded petitions to Parliament came in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (House of Commons Information Office, 2010) as a means of seeking redress. They were widely used in the nineteenth century, often exceeding 10,000 per session to the House of Commons (House of Commons Information Office, 2010). However, after a long period of decline, it is only over the past decade that they have again begun to assume some real significance, have been actively encouraged by institutions of government, not least because of technological developments, and indeed are one of the most common forms of political participation (Hansard Society, 2010, 2014). Petitions, however, clearly do not fit easily into a division between 'traditional' and 'online' participation (for example, Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga and Shah, 2010).

Recent years have seen the establishment of a number of systems that can be seen as 'formalising' the treatment of petitions in representative bodies. Arguably a number of factors have encouraged this, including: a desire to address the perceived decline in political engagement (for example, Carman, 2014; Hansard Society, 2010, Stoker, 2006; Wright, 2012) and enhance the quality of democracy (Barnes, 1999; Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008; Michels and de Graaf, 2010), including through 'democratic innovation' (Saward, 2003; Smith, 2009), and legitimacy (Johnson, 2015); ideas around the empowerment of individuals (Barnes, Newman and Sullivan, 2007) and the encouragement of citizen participation (Home Office, 2005), including in contributing to and improving policy making (Bochel and Evans, 2007; Bochel et al., 2008) and the development of social capital and citizens' skills

(Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008; Foot, 2009); and the opportunities provided by technology in facilitating interactions between citizens and governments (Cruickshank and Smith, 2009) and more participative forms of democracy (Jungherr and Jurgens, 2010; Newman, 2014). Petitions may have value in these respects, since they can provide 'a mechanism to enable the public to express their views to those in elected representative institutions', and could 'help underpin the legitimacy and functioning of representative institutions' (Bochel, 2012, p. 798) while providing 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).

Since 1997, consecutive governments have emphasised a desire for local government to play a greater role in communicating with citizens, and for citizens and communities to be able to exercise greater influence over local government (for example, Johnson, 2015), although without necessarily giving them the resources to be able to so, and even constraining their already limited powers (Travers, 2015). In addition, the dual impacts of austerity following the 2008 financial crisis, and advances in technology, can in some respects be seen as likely to encourage the development of petitions systems. The Local Government Association (2013) has argued that in the current economic climate the existing model of public services is unsustainable, with demand and costs increasing, but funding falling, and that a transformed and independent local government could make public services efficient, effective and local responsive, and could rebuild democracy, and went on to argue (Local Government Association, 2014) 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 be able to assist in achieving some of these ends, although a good *system*, as outlined in this article, may not be cheap. However, as discussed further below, at the local government level they continue to be used only to a very limited extent.

Here it is helpful to make a distinction between e-petitions (and indeed petitions) in general, those which directly feed into some form of government, and those where there is a system established to process them, with the latter being the focus of this article. The former might include *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. There are also sites such as '38 degrees' in the United Kingdom, and moveon.org in the United States, as well as change.org, which provide the capability for individuals and organisations to register their opinions on policy issues. However, in the UK, at present, these are not linked to official 'systems' and are therefore excluded from this analysis. The latter reflect the more recent development of formal systems, such as in the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament, 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. This distinction is not necessarily entirely straightforward, as, for example, there has long been a very basic 'system' for dealing with paper petitions to the House of Commons,

in that they were received and noted but with no further action (they also normally received a response ('observation') from the relevant government department', but the newer systems considered here arguably seek to deal with and respond to petitions in a very different fashion.

Pratchett, Durose, Lowndes, Smith, Stoker and Wales (2009a, 2009b) distinguish between petitions 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 not straightforward, as much would depend on what is meant by 'a formal institutional response' (2009b, p 116). They note that outside the UK the position can be even more complex, so that there may also be: advisory initiatives, where petitions lead to a popular, but not binding, vote; direct initiatives, where the proposition is placed directly onto a ballot, which if successful is binding; and indirect initiatives, where the position is first considered by the public authority, and, 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 suggest that 'a relationship between the petition and decision making is critical for achieving community empowerment' (2009a, p. 128), and that the most effective means is where a petition is linked to a popular vote. 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: those submitted electronically, but which are otherwise similar to traditional paper petitions; those where the petition text is published on the internet, irrespective of the way it has been submitted, and which may be supplemented with additional information, on the issue, on the procedural steps related to the petition, or on the final decision; and 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 an 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, Askounis, Kokkinakos and Tsitsanis (2012) propose a series of criteria, or 'key performance indicators', against which e-petitions could be evaluated: political, such as contribution to policy, engagement of citizens, engagement of decision makers, and the quality of the content provided; social, including the participation of targeted groups, benefits of participation and barriers to participation; and technical, such as performance, usability, accessibility and sustainability. It is primarily the first two of these that are the concern of this article. Wright (2012) uses a 'democratic goods' approach (Smith, 2009) to assess the Downing Street system, which operated from 2006 to 2010, highlighting different, but broadly comparable themes: inclusiveness, considered judgement, popular control, and transparency. He suggests that: whilst highly successful in terms of the number of participants, 'participation was often highly unequal' (p. 466); the system did not

achieve a high level of considered judgement, with no formal space for debate; it was much more successful with regard to transparency, with all accepted and rejected petitions being published, together with the reasons for any rejection and responses to those petitions that achieved the signature thresholds; and while the system was not intended to allow formal popular control, a small number of petitions did influence policy. Wright also usefully adds efficiency and transferability to the characteristics against which petitions systems might be judged.

Clearly, defining the scope and nature of an 'e-petitions system' is not necessarily straightforward. However, for the purposes of this article, as implied by the preceding discussion, 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 an established process for delivering a response.

It is also worth highlighting that, 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 Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

Understanding e-petitions and petitions systems in the UK

There are a number of formal petitions systems in the United Kingdom. At the national level, alongside the House of Commons paper system and a rarely used facility in the House of Lords, there have been a series of iterations of e-petitions systems. In 2006

the Labour government introduced a Number 10 Downing Street system; that was scrapped by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 and replaced in 2011 with a 'hybrid' e-petitions system, hosted by the government but run jointly with the House of Commons; and most recently, from 2015, a new e-petitions system, again run collaboratively by the government and Parliament (the House of Commons), but which has seen the establishment of a Petitions Committee to look at both e-petitions and paper petitions to the House of Commons. There is also an e-petitions and paper system in the Scottish Parliament, set up in 1999 and 2004 respectively, and an e-petitions and paper system in the National Assembly for Wales, established in 2007 and 2008 respectively.

At the local government level, while most local authorities in the UK are willing to receive petitions from the public (Wright, 2015a), not all accept e-petitions, and far fewer provide platforms for e-petitions or have a system established for dealing with petitions once submitted. Indeed, the number of petitions systems at the 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 e-petitions systems, in 2004 (Hilton, 2006). They were joined by a number of other councils, particularly in England, a development that was given greater impetus when the Labour government (1997 to 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, but which was repealed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in the Localism Act 2011. At least part of the coalition

government's justification for the repeal was that many authorities 'did not adequately describe their procedure for dealing with petitions on their websites' (*Hansard* HL deb., 28 June 2011, col. 1653) (see discussion below), and that such matters should be good practice and not prescribed in legislation, although critics noted that not only would there be no requirement for councils to establish e-petitions systems, but there would now be no obligation on them to respond to petitions (for example, *Hansard* HC deb, 3 March 2011, col. 331).

There is a small, but growing, body of academic work focusing on petitions systems at the national and devolved levels in the UK (see, for example, Bochel, 2012, 2013; Carman, 2006, 2014; Fox, 2012), but there has been relatively little research on e-petitions systems at the local level (see Bochel, 2013; Panagiotopoulos, Moody and Elliman, 2011, 2012). Around the time that the requirement for local government in England to have e-petitions was removed, Panagiotopoulos et al. (2011, 2012), using web content analysis, identified more than 280 e-petition facilities among the 353 English councils, although they suggested that in many little was done to promote them, and in more than one-third of cases they were not easily visible on the authority's website. They also assessed e-petitioning tools in English local government, and 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), argued that in most local authorities the initiative was not advertised or promoted. It is also not apparent how many of these facilities were designed simply to receive petitions, or had established a system for responding to them. With the requirement to implement e-petitioning being removed in 2011, central

pressure for such developments was reduced markedly. In the rest of the UK e-petitions systems are scarce within local government: as at February 2015, only four of Scotland's thirty-two councils had systems with e-petitions facilities (i.e. where petitions could be created and signed online), while in Northern Ireland and Wales no council appears to have such a system.

There are likely to be a number of factors that have contributed to the relatively scarcity of e-petitions systems within local government, including the concerns of councillors about the impact on representative democracy, worries about raising public demands and expectations that cannot be met, and fears of petitions being 'hijacked' by particularly vocal and well-resourced interests. More recently, large reductions in local authority budgets imposed by central government may have led to pressure to focus expenditure on what are seen as key existing services, although even when funding was more generous, as the work of Panagiotopoulos et al. (2011, 2012) highlights, that seemed to have little impact in terms of enabling the use of petitions systems.

Challenges for e-petitions systems

There are a number of other challenges to the effective use of e-petitions systems. Many of these are well known, and are not exclusive to the UK, including those linked to the 'digital divide' and socio-economic factors. Others are perhaps less obvious. This section outlines some of the most significant considerations, many of which are, inevitably, inter-related.

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 Hansard Society, 2011), suggests that many would be excluded from purely online participation, and this is reflected by Carman's work in Scotland (2014), which found lack of access to the internet to be a significant barrier to participation, including because those without access to the internet appeared to be less aware of how they might participate in public life. There is therefore a need to ensure access to petitions systems, and potentially to information about participatory opportunities more broadly, for those who do not have access to the internet.

Socio-economic differences – while other forms of participatory initiative are affected by differential participation by different groups (for example, Barnes et al., 2007; John, 2009; Michels and de Graaf, 2015), there has also long been attention to the 'digital divide' (for example, Norris, 2001; Van Dijk, 2005), and to some extent the 'democratic divide' (Min, 2010; Norris, 2001), in the sense of differential use of the internet for political purposes, and, unsurprisingly, similar concerns can be raised with regard to e-petitions. 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'.

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

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(C2DE) were less likely than those belonging to the higher social grades (ABC1) to be aware of the petition system…' (see also, Carman, 2014), while Escher and Reihm (2016) reported similar findings in Germany, including citizens with university degrees having considerably greater knowledge of the Bundestag's petitions than those without a degree.

These interconnected challenges, relating in large part to differential socio-economic status and access to the internet, clearly reflect key social issues, are to a considerable extent mirrored in other forms of participation (for example, Bochel and Evans, 2007; Bochel et al., 2008; Hansard Society, 2014; Whiteley, 2012; see also Lee, Loutas, Sánchez-Nielsen, Mogulkoc and Lacigiova, 2011, on barriers to e-participation), and are therefore challenges for politics and political institutions as much as for petitions and petition systems. A strong e-petitions system, reflecting the characteristics outlined later, 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.

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

Issues around the number of signatories – leaving aside questions of authentication, the importance that should be attached to simple numbers of signatories is not entirely clear. If a large organisation or a media group is able to marshal 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 e-petitions could be led or hijacked by the media

or large organisations wishing to run campaigns appears to be significant (Procedure Committee, 2014; Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, 2015). Wright (2012), focusing on the Downing Street system, notes the dangers of drawing conclusions from baseline participation statistics, and suggests that participation was often highly unequal. In the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, over 60 per cent of petitions submitted 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, to school groups and societies. While large organisations are able to use their skills and resources to promote the interests of those whom they represent, it might be argued that they 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).

Too easy to sign – to some extent related to the previous point, some have criticised high-volume, low commitment actions, sometimes termed 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism' (for example, Drumbl, 2012), and questioned their value as a genuine indicator of interest in or importance of a particular issue. Yet 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 (and indeed others, such as Christensen (2012) and Escher and Riehm (2016), argue that such accusations are often misguided). Puschmann, Bastos and Schmidt (2016) take these arguments a step further in their analysis of e-petitioners to the Bundestag over a four-and-a-half year period, dividing signatories into 'singletons', who sign only one petition, 'returnees', who sign

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2 to 23 petitions, the 'highly active', who sign 24 to 118 petitions, and 'hyperactive' users, who sign between 119 and 1181 petitions, noting that in Germany the participation of single signers is a better prediction of petition success, and at the same time suggesting that their findings raise issues over the representation of the population through the petitions system. Wright (2015b) highlights the considerable work that some creators did in encouraging the spread of their petitions, including through using older, newer and hybrid media logics. Importantly, however, and regardless of these issues, as noted elsewhere, it is possible to design systems that do not necessarily prioritise the treatment of petitions on the basis of numbers.

One-dimensional communication – e-petitions systems are arguably primarily 'one-dimensional' forms of communication (Hoffman, 2012; Mackintosh, 2004), although rather than flowing from government to citizen the communication is from citizens to government. Some systems, particularly those that are more 'substantive' in nature (Bochel, 2013), move a step further towards a limited form of two-dimensional communication, providing a response to citizens, usually, although not always, on the basis of signature thresholds, and the potential for some petitioners to have their voices heard further if a petition progresses through the system (Bochel, 2012). A small number of systems, including that of the Scottish Parliament, do enable interaction between and among citizens, but the usage appears to be relatively low in terms of both numbers and level of debate.

Number of petitions and moderation – given the intention to improve citizen access to and participation in the political system, e-petitions systems will potentially receive

large numbers of petitions. Unsurprisingly there are concerns over the sheer number of e-petitions that might have to be processed and responded to. There are also risks that creators and signatories of e-petitions might rapidly become disenchanted should their petitions be rejected. The initial moderation of submissions is therefore likely to be of importance, including decisions to reject certain petitions, for example because they may be seen as duplicating others, because they do not fit the remit of the body being petitioned, or because they are offensive or otherwise inappropriate. Sufficient resources are therefore required to allow transparent moderation (for example, Wright, 2012, 2015a). Systems such as those in Scotland and Wales also manage moderation and selection by having clear guidelines on what topics are within their remit, and by not accepting duplicate petitions. The Scottish system also requires petitioners to demonstrate that they have taken steps to resolve the issue raised in their petition elsewhere, for example, by contacting their local Member of Parliament or another 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 (see also Wright, 2012). 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 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)**.** In addition, there are clear linkages with the expectations of the creators, and perhaps to some extent the signatories, of petitions. Wright (2016), for example, suggests that perceptions of success, or otherwise, of the creators of petitions to the Downing Street system frequently reflected their aims, with many such petitions being only one tool as part of a broader campaign, and that in most cases these involved more than having an impact on policy, including increasing publicity or improving access to other areas of the policy process (see also, Bochel, 2012).

From a broader perspective, 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, many of the other challenges noted here are perhaps more particularly and closely linked with e-petitions. However, they can to a considerable extent be met by flexibility in responding to petitions, particularly through the establishment of systems that are relatively clear and transparent. 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 other, arguably more sophisticated forms, such as ensuring that petitioners have sought to use other means of addressing their issues before resorting to an e-petition, as in Scotland. And there has been the use of petitions committees, which, having a range of actions open to them, can provide petitioners with a variety of outcomes. It is also important to recognise that an 'outcome' is not simply petitioners getting what they asked for in their petition (Bochel, 2013), and that 'formal control' (Wright, 2012), in terms of influence on policy, is generally not intended in petitions systems, and is unlikely to be achieved. 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.

Potential models for e-petitions systems

The systems in Scotland and Wales are widely seen as models of good practice, with the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee having seen interest from local authorities in England and Scotland, as well as from other states at both national and regional levels, while the examples of Wolverhampton and Renfrewshire councils demonstrate that it is possible to run meaningful systems within local government. Bochel (2012, 2013) identifies the main features of these systems. They are *open* – anyone can submit a petition as long as it is within the remit of the Parliament, Assembly, or local authorities. The devolved bodies systems have a clear statement of purpose, so that petitioners know what they can and cannot achieve. They also set out a well-defined process, so that anyone submitting a petition knows what they can expect at each stage. All admissible petitions are considered by a petitions committee and receive a response, regardless of the number of signatories. The committees are able to take a range of actions, such as requesting further information from relevant organisations (the most common action), forwarding the petition to another appropriate committee or organisation, holding roundtable evidence sessions, which can include inviting petitioners, commissioning inquiries, questioning ministers, or even requesting a debate as part of the normal business of the Parliament or Assembly. They can also decide to take no further action and close the petition.

Notably, 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 with their elected representatives, alongside, in Scotland and Wales, detailed information including video clips of petitioners talking about their experience of the petitions process, helps to underpin the educative functions of these systems. While a small number of petitions may be seen as having an impact upon policy, the vast majority are not going to receive the outcomes that the creators and signatories have been seeking, even in systems where many receive an official response, but that, in turn, means that petitioners' experience of the system is even more important (Bochel, 2013; Wright, 2012, 2015a).

Wright (2012) views the Number 10 Downing Street system as flawed, in that there was unequal participation, with a number of 'super-posters' who posted on new topics quickly, resulting in subsequent petitions being barred because of the similarity of topics, while there was a long tail of petitions that received only a few signatures. There was not a high level of considered judgement, and there was no formal space to debate or counter a petition. There was no intention to achieve formal popular control, and while a small number of e-petitions did influence policy, the vast majority did not. He concluded that the system was much more successful with regard to transparency, and that e-petitions 'are clearly highly transferable' (p. 466). While the system was cheap compared to other systems, he also suggested that the lack of resources allocated to it both undermined its efficiency and limited the 'democratic goods' that it produced. Similarly, Moss and Coleman (2014) were sceptical of the value of initiatives such as

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the Downing Street e-petitions system, 'when they are confined to individualistic inputs, devoid of any scope for citizens to challenge, refine, or combine one another's ideas' (p. 415), and instead emphasise the desirability of elements of public deliberation.

Arguably, similar conclusions could be drawn about the 'hybrid' system (government was responsible for collecting petitions, while the House of Commons was responsible for deciding which should be debated) that succeeded the Downing Street system. It too attracted large numbers of petitions and signatories, but did little to enable meaningful participation or empowerment (Hansard Society, 2012). For example, petitions that achieved 100,000 signatures were eligible to be considered for a debate in the House of Commons, but not all that reached that threshold saw a debate. From 2015, a new system has been in place, to a considerable extent reflecting practice in Scotland and Wales, including the creation of a Petitions Committee in the House of Commons, and the consideration of new thresholds and mechanisms for dealing with and responding to petitions (http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/petitions-committee/).

Evidence from the systems discussed above suggests that petitions, underpinned by an appropriate system for handling them, 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. They demonstrate that it is possible to use petitions systems in a way that is acceptable and useful for both citizens and elected

representatives, although, as discussed above, the use of petitions is not unproblematic, and there are a number of challenges that need to be considered and addressed.

A 'reaching in' scenario? Characteristics of a strong e-petitions system for local government

Drawing on the discussion above, and the experiences of the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament and a number of local authorities (see Bochel, 2012, 2013), 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; Wright, 2012, 2015a) that would allow citizens to 'reach in' to local authorities, rather than relying on councils to 'reach out' to their publics. These include:

- Transparency, including a clear statement of purpose – so that petitioners know what they can and cannot achieve by submitting a petition;

- Openness and direct access, with petitioners being able to submit a petition without having to go through an elected representative; and, despite the potential benefits of e-petitions, paper petitions retain a role in helping address inequalities of access; similarly, while thresholds are likely to be an important part of any system, they should not simply be about numbers, as relevant issues which fail to garner large numbers of signatures may not get heard;

- The opportunity for petitioners to receive advice and guidance on their petition, perhaps from committee clerks, before it is submitted;

- A mechanism, such as a Petitions Committee, to consider each petition, and to decide on whether and how to progress each petition. This need not, however,

be a dedicated committee, but could be one that also performs one or more other functions, as is the case in Renfrewshire, where it also plays a scrutiny role;

- A 'tracking' system, to enable petitioners to see the progress and outcome of their petition online;

- Specific feedback on the petition topic and any decision or outcome to the signatories of the petition;

- Integration as part of the wider local political decision-making system;

- 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), including to help strengthen considered judgement on the part of petitioners (Wright, 2012). However, there are clearly potential dangers here, and such an approach would need to be tested, monitored and moderated;

- 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.

Conclusions

While the introduction of strong e-petitions systems into local authorities in the United Kingdom may not be without its challenges, there are potentially significant benefits from the use of such a 'device' (Saward, 2003), including in enhancing citizen

participation and engagement, as discussed earlier in this article. The examples from this research, and in particular those from the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament, as well as councils such as Renfrewshire and Wolverhampton, demonstrate that a strong e-petitions system can go a long way towards enabling citizens to 'reach in' to local authorities, including meeting the first two criteria identified by Ergazakis et al. (2012) as performance indicators (engagement of citizens and of decision makers, and enabling participation), and can go beyond Moss and Coleman's (2014) limited model of single-click citizenship by providing good levels of access to the political system for citizens, not dependent upon reaching high numbers thresholds or having access to other significant resources.

Importantly, well-designed and appropriately resourced petitions systems can 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, including by feeding the concerns of citizens into other parts of the political and decision making systems, and leading to a variety of outcomes for petitioners. They can also provide local authorities with the opportunity to use the ideas and information that emerge from such systems to inform the development of policies and provision. Finally, strong petitions systems can potentially provide an educative function that enables petitioners to learn more about the political system with which they are interacting. Indeed, given the concerns about political disengagement that are driving many of the initiatives around participation, including by digital means, such a role may be at least as important as enabling citizen input into decision making.

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