AN ANALYSIS OF ePARTICIPATION IN SCOTTISH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

ELIZABETH J. TAIT

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
The Robert Gordon University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

March 2010

Abstract

Consulting the public in policy making is a statutory obligation for Scottish local authorities but 'traditional' forms of public participation such as public meetings are not considered to be effective for engaging a representative range of citizens. Developments in ICT have led to speculation about the impact of technology on citizen involvement in political participation with some arguing that eParticipation could attract a wider range of participants than 'offline' mechanisms. This thesis presents the findings of an exploratory study examining eParticipation initiatives in Scottish Local Authorities. The focus of the research has been to identify the extent to which eParticipation is being used and the benefits and drawbacks of these methods. In addition, the research investigated the enablers and barriers to the development of eParticipation in local authorities. Rather than examining eParticipation as a discrete phenomenon, the research examined the broader consultation strategies of local authorities and what role, if any, eParticipation plays within it. A grounded theory approach was adopted which utilised a combination of qualitative methods. Further, an analytical framework was developed based on Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy to develop a conceptual understanding of how eParticipation is being used in Scottish local authorities. While it was found that Scottish local authorities were using eParticipation tools, their use was rather limited and the vast majority of tools identified and analysed were electronic questionnaires. Respondents reported that they foresaw eParticipation tools being used more extensively in future but in combination with 'offline' forms of participation and most did not report positive opinions on dialogic forms of eParticipation such as online discussions. The research findings show that eParticipation does not overcome many of the problems that lead to lack of public participation in policy making although some members of the public may to prefer to participate electronically for reasons of convenience.

Keywords: eParticipation, local authorities, Scotland, participation, democracy, consultation

Acknowledgments

Firstly I would like to thank my supervisors Peter McLaverty and Darren Halpin for all their help and support throughout the PhD. You have been a constant source of support and guidance and have provided constructive and valuable feedback throughout the PhD. I am so grateful to you for reading drafts of my chapters, providing inspiration and helping me through the inevitable PhD low times. Thanks also to Matt Qvortrup for his help in the early stages of the study, my fellow PhD students and colleagues at RGU (especially my line managers David Gibbons-Wood and Peter Reid) for supporting me doing the study.

I also owe thanks to all of the research participants for agreeing to take part in this study. It really wouldn't have been possible to conduct the research without their agreement to participate. Special thanks to Aberdeen City Council for allowing me access to conduct the case study and to the elected members and officers who participated.

I would also like to thank my friends and family for being so understanding about me not being able to see them as much as I would like to have lately. There are too many to mention individually but special thanks to my Mum, Dad, sister and Granny for their unconditional support not only through this thesis but through my previous years of undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Finally and most importantly I would like to thank my partner Robert for putting up with me (and my enormous piles of books and papers) over the five years that it has taken me to complete the PhD. I know that this has not been an easy time for you either. It is impossible for me to put into words how grateful I am to you for all your love and support and I know that I would not have finished this without you.

Table of Figures

Table of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

Initiatives to increase citizen participation in decision making have become commonplace at local, regional, national and international levels. Well documented examples include: participatory budgeting initiatives in Puerto Alegre in Brazil (Melo and Baiocchi, 2006), Joint Forest Management Initiatives in India (Castro and Nielsen, 2001) and the controversial deliberative democracy initiatives in China (Leib, 2005). While the form, scope and impact of these initiatives vary considerably, the development of citizen participation initiatives are generally viewed as an attempt to overcome the problem of low citizen participation in politics which is believed to be a result of disillusionment with formal political structures (Dalton, 2004). It is argued that citizen participation initiatives can increase the accountability and transparency of government institutions, broaden the base of political participation and create more active and engaged citizens (Smith, 2009).

The heterogeneity of citizen participation initiatives has been highlighted by writers such as Graham Smith. In a report written for the Power inquiry, Smith (2005) highlights 57 democratic initiatives from around the world that have attempted to enhance citizen participation in decision making. These can be grouped into six categories: electoral innovations; consultation innovations; deliberative innovations; co-governance innovations; direct democracy innovations; and e-democracy innovations. The main focus of this thesis is on the final category which Smith (2005) identifies as e-democracy but will be referred to in this thesis as eParticipation.

Some argue that new technologies can reduce the barriers to participation and lead to previously disengaged groups becoming active participants (Mitra, 2001). It is posited that by the creation of these 'new channels of democratic inclusion' (Kearns *et al.*, 2002, p. 13) that political participation can be both broadened and deepened by '…increasing the frequency and enriching the content of dialogue between citizens, elected representatives and all levels of government. ' (Kearns *et al.*,2002, p. 13).

In addition to the claim that eParticipation initiatives may encourage participation from 'hard to reach' groups, it is argued that eParticipation initiatives could encourage more people from all groups to participate simply because eParticipation is considered to be an easier and more convenient form of participation than 'offline' mechanisms such as

public meetings. For example, rather than having to attend a public meeting at a certain time in a certain place, participants can simply turn on their computer and participate at whatever time is convenient for them (Szerszynski and O'Donoghue, 2003). A further cited benefit of the advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is that large amounts of information can now be made available electronically at a low cost thus making it easier for citizens to find out about issues relevant to them and to obtain information and policy documents about changes to service delivery or new policies (Jensen, 2003).

As well as providing the opportunity for government organisations to engage the public in policy making ('top down' participation), eParticipation tools can also be developed to facilitate 'bottom up' participation by providing a mechanism for groups of citizens to get together and discuss local issues, form communities of interest and engage in democratic dialogue with each other which could 'support new forms of participation in local democratic processes' (Horrocks and Bellamy, 1997, p. 381). This thesis does not examine citizen to citizen participation or community activism directly, however and instead focuses on what Smith (2009) refers to as institutionalised participation; participation initiatives organised by government. Specifically, this thesis examines eParticipation initiatives within local authorities.

The rapid development of ICTs has led to new mechanisms for political participation by providing people with new ways to communicate their views and retrieve information on issues that affect or interest them. Studies have demonstrated that people who participate in formal politics tend to be older, more affluent, white and already politically active whereas younger people, people from lower socioeconomic groups, disabled people and people from ethnic minority groups are less well represented (Pattie *et al.*, 2005). 'Traditional' participatory initiatives such as public meetings have been criticised for enforcing rather than overcoming the participation gap by giving those who are inclined to participate more vehicles for doing so while the 'silent majority' continue to be disengaged (Wilson, 1999). These mechanisms are further criticised for having limited appeal and only attracting people who feel strongly about a certain issue (Pratchett, 1999). In order for participatory initiatives to be viewed as a credible mechanism for improving citizen engagement it is important that the responses are based on a sample of participants beyond the 'usual suspects' of politically active citizens and interest groups and instead represent the views of a wide range of people from differing social backgrounds, ethnic groups and ages (Chatterton and Style,

2001). It is also necessary to investigate barriers to participation in order to find out why certain groups are unwilling to participate (Fien and Skoien, 2002).

There has been speculation about a crisis of legitimacy of local authorities with declining public confidence in the institutions of local governance and the changing nature of the role of local authorities in terms of service delivery and policy making. There have been numerous initiatives and projects to develop participatory initiatives in local authorities with one example being the DEMOS project which saw the development and piloting of innovative participatory mechanisms in eight local governments across seven European countries in partnership with academic institutions (Carley, 2004) and included eParticipation initiatives.

eParticipation initiatives may be an attractive mechanism for local authorities to develop as they are often viewed as being cheaper to organise than traditional forms of participation (Kearns *et al.*, 2002). Many of the technologies required for eParticipation already exist in local authorities' web systems such as email and the capacity to upload documents onto websites. On the other hand, organising large postal questionnaires involves printing, posting and often supplying pre-paid envelopes for returning questionnaires. Once the postal questionnaires are returned there are further costs incurred for entering all the data and someone is then required to code the data and analyse results. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, some eParticipation tools negate the need for coding and can perform basic data analysis 'on the fly'.

As previously mentioned in this chapter, the capacity for providing large amounts of information to citizens in an easily accessible electronic format and providing opportunities to participate electronically in decision making may lead to greater transparency and accountability in local government (Baker and Panagopoulos, 2004). Some writers even argue that eParticipation methods could facilitate a radical new relationship between citizens and government because the Internet allows for greater numbers of people to participate and in a faster timescale than traditional forms of consultation allowing for a more direct form of governance (Horrocks and Bellamy, 1997).

This 'cyber-topian' view is not held by all, however, and it is highly improbable that engaging the public in eParticipation will provide a quick fix solution to the problem of the democratic deficit at the local level (Kubicek, 2005). There are concerns that, rather than being more inclusive, eParticipation initiatives may exclude people from less

affluent backgrounds and older people who are regarded as having lower levels of ICT access (Sagle and Vabo 2005; Mehta and Darier, 1998). The relatively low cost of developing eParticipation initiatives also leads to concerns about 'information overload' (Kampen and Snijkers, 2003) and technological determinism whereby officers may develop eParticipation initiatives without having carefully considered what the added value, if any, will be from these initiatives. Further, while is may be simple to set up an online questionnaire or to add a discussion forum to a website, for example, if the participation is not linked to clear outcomes there will be a lack of transparency and accountability. Rather than increase engagement, a poorly conceived or implemented strategy will lead to further disengagement (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001; Coleman, 2004).

Paradoxically, the anonymity of eParticipation which is purported to have a positive impact on encouraging people to participate is also viewed as a potential problem. The anonymity of eParticipation means that it is more difficult to tell if the responses are representative and the global nature of ICT means that people who live outside of the local authority area may be submitting responses (Johnson, 2003). There are also concerns that the initiatives could become dominated by well-organised activist organisations sending in multiple responses to try to skew the results (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003).

There has been a great deal of speculation in the literature about the possible impact of eParticipation on democratic institutions. According to Wright (2006) there are three main schools of thought about the effect of the Internet on democratic politics:

1. The 'revolutionaries' who believe that the Internet will transform the democratic system.
2. A more moderate view that the Internet will re-invigorate representative democracy by providing technical solutions to challenges.
3. Those that believe that politics will normalise the Internet into established structures.

Following initial excitement about the prospects of eParticipation to reinvigorate Athenian style democracy (Kim, 2006), the third school of thought outlined by Wright (2006) of the 'normalisation thesis' has become more widely discussed in the literature on eParticipation and is based on a communications theory that new communications technologies are initially dominated by the elite but then become 'normalised' and usage spreads amongst the wider population (Norris, 2001). With regards to

eParticipation, the term is used to denote that 'ultimately the Internet will lead to a further narrowing of the pool of politically active citizens by reinforcing existing levels of engagement' (Gibson *et al.*, 2005).

Gibson *et al.*'s investigation of the 'normalisation thesis' demonstrated that the impact of the Internet on political behaviour was more complex than the 'normalisation thesis' implied and argued that a contextualised model of Internet use must be used (Gibson *et al.*, 2005). I have adopted a contextualised approach to the study of eParticipation in order to investigate the phenomenon. eParticipation is investigated within the broader participative strategies of local authorities to determine whether or not the new technologies are being used to facilitate citizen participation and what impact (if any) these initiatives have had. In recognition of the fact that technologies are rapidly developing, the thesis also sought the views of local authority officers about the future use of eParticipation.

It is recognised that citizen participation initiatives (both offline and online) are not universally accepted as being a positive phenomenon. It has been argued by some that rather than creating better policies and empowering citizens, that they are a waste of time and resources and lead to poor decision making (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). There are credible arguments against public participation initiatives, however this thesis does not seek to examine the validity of the concept of public participation in general terms but rather takes as it's starting point the fact participatory mechanisms are being used in all levels of government and so it is necessary to study them to determine the effectiveness of these initiatives.

1.2 Outline of the Research Problem

As has been indicated so far in this chapter, the development of eParticipation has led to a great deal of speculation about the implications for political participation. However, very few empirical studies have been undertaken (Schlosberg *et al.*, 2007) and there is a dearth of studies that try to make a meaningful contribution to theoretical developments of eParticipation within the context of public participation theory. Much of the literature on eParticipation examines the phenomenon in terms of the 'e' aspect and focuses on the of the technology rather than attempting to evaluate what role, if any, eParticipation plays in the overall consultation and engagement strategy of a local authority. This thesis fills a gap in the study of eParticipation by putting the primary

focus of the investigation on the participative application of eParticipation. It is believed that by examining the phenomenon of eParticipation within the context that the initiatives are being developed, a better understanding will be reached and a more rigorous approach to evaluating eParticipation initiatives will be possible.

Smith (2009) argues that it is difficult to analyse eParticipation (which he refers to as e-democracy) because the developments in ICTs have been so fragmented that it is difficult to find one system that is representative of democratic innovation. However, it is believed that the approach devised in this thesis which puts a lesser emphasis on the technologies and systems but rather analyses the application to which they are put overcomes the problem of heterogeneity (which will be outlined in Chapter 3) and fills a gap in the literature by contributing to the development of analytical tools for studying eParticipation.

The aims of this research can be summarised as follows:

- To conduct a review of eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local authorities and to develop an evaluative mechanism for analysing the extent to which eParticipation tools are an effective form of participation.

- Identify factors that affect the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities such as statutory requirements, political factors, technological factors and institutional factors.

The approach taken to investigate eParticipation was exploratory in nature; a grounded theory approach was used which allows for a flexible but rigorous research design and an inductive approach to analysis leading to theoretical development from the data.

As well as examining the development of eParticipation, this thesis will also examine the political context that Scottish local authorities operate in. As part of the reforms to local government in the UK, engaging the public using participatory mechanisms is a statutory obligation for local authorities. This has seen the development of a range of initiatives for involving members of the public in policy making ranging from formal consultations on specific policies to wider engagement strategies aimed at strengthening communities and widening the base of participation. The main policy initiatives that have led to the development of these initiatives will be reviewed in Chapter 2.

Scottish local authorities have also faced challenges of funding and a shift towards greater corporatisation and a more managerial approach to governance. In addition, the responsibility for local service delivery extends beyond the traditional actors in local government. There is far greater collaboration with other agencies through joint working and partnership agreements with the private and voluntary sectors. Management philosophies traditionally associated with private sector organisations and a resulting shift in focus towards viewing citizens as consumers or customers of services has led to the development of 'customer satisfaction' philosophy of participation and is a key concept of governance (McLaverty, forthcoming).

Local authorities are also under increased pressure to deliver efficiency savings and to demonstrate Best Value in service delivery. The funding pressures and the drive for customer-focussed public service delivery has coincided with the developments of new technologies that are purported to facilitate the delivery of services that are faster, cheaper and better suit the needs of a changing population. All Scottish local authorities have a website although these have developed at different rates with little standardisation until relatively recently.

Chapter 2 will demonstrate that the development of eGovernment tools in Scottish local authorities has been largely driven by the Efficient Government agenda. Local authorities have been required to develop electronic service delivery and there are national benchmarking exercises conducted to measure and rank these developments. While electronic service delivery is not a participatory mechanism, the development of the technologies and the increased electronic interactions between citizens and governments could act as a catalyst for the development of eParticipation. On the other hand, however, the Efficient Government agenda has specific targets and requirements that local authorities must meet and so because eParticipation is not a statutory obligation for local authorities it may not be being developed as resources are being targeted at other eGovernment initiatives. Whether or not Efficient Government enhances or impedes the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities will be analysed as part of the case study element to this research in Chapter 6.

This thesis does not attempt to make highly technological evaluations of the tools themselves unlike some writers on eParticipation such as Steinmann *et al.* (2005) who examined the use of public participatory geographic information systems to increase citizen input into decision making. Other researchers investigate how open source

technologies could be utilised in the development of eParticipation and some evaluate the back end systems that are required (Boyd, 2008; Wimmer, 2007). Technological robustness is clearly essential for effective eParticipation and technological issues have not been completely overlooked in this study. The technological aspect of eParticipation adds a layer of novelty, provides opportunities for citizens to interact with governments in different ways and has challenges associated that offline methods of consultation do not have. However, it is believed that it is the effectiveness of the participation strategy as a whole and the commitment of the local authority to genuine participation by citizens that is the most important factor of any participative exercise rather than the mechanism through which participation has been facilitated; eParticipation initiatives are no different in this respect.

eParticipation can be studied from either the supply or demand side; in other words, from either the citizen perspective or the governmental perspective. Some studies which focus on the demand side have tried to determine causal links between Internet use and political participation (for example Gibson *et al.*, 2006) and some have speculated about the 'public sphere' that could be created by Internet technologies and whether or not this could increase social capital and facilitate greater political participation (e.g. Kim, 2006). This thesis, however, investigates the 'supply side' of eParticipation with particular focus on the procedural use of eParticipation to determine whether or not local authorities are using eParticipation tools, their beliefs about the positive and negative aspects of eParticipation and the factors that influence the development of eParticipation. The grounded theory approach selected lends itself well to this and it was felt that a quantitative approach that focussed on statistical analysis would be inappropriate because it would limit the richness and theoretical development that can be achieved through an inductive qualitative approach. The methodology adopted for the study has been detailed in Chapter 4.

The review of eParticipation activities consists of more than merely an 'audit' of activities or a descriptive account of the tools that are used. The research also sought to develop analytical tools to assess eParticipation mechanisms. An analytical framework based on Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy was developed and used for analysing findings from data collection. This should not be considered as a strict application of existing theory to a new phenomenon which is heavily criticised by grounded theorists but rather a heuristic tool for providing a theoretical lens on the phenomenon (Kelle, 2005). The criteria were developed to primarily analyse the effectiveness of eParticipation strategies in terms of their participative value rather than

their technological innovation other than analysing if the technology was appropriate and technically sound. For example, no distinction was made between a basic online questionnaire and a highly interactive online questionnaire. All that was important for the purposes of this research was that the questionnaire worked as it was supposed to.

As will be demonstrated in the thesis, the review and analysis of eParticipation activities in Scottish local authorities revealed interesting findings about the extent to which eParticipation tools were used and the integration (or not) of these into the overall participative strategy. It was recognised, however, that in order to get a thorough understanding of why eParticipation has developed in the way that it has in Scottish local authorities would require a more in-depth analysis and therefore one local authority was selected to be studied in a detailed case study. Again, this is in keeping with the grounded theory approach where multiple phases of data collection feed into each other.

1.3 Defining eParticipation and other concepts used.

One of the challenges of conducting this research was determining the boundaries of the study and the lack of standardisation of terminology found in the literature. When this study was commenced in 2005 the term 'eDemocracy' tended to be used in the literature instead of eParticipation along with other terms such as 'teledemocracy', 'cyberdemocracy', 'digital democracy' and 'e-governance' (Riley and Riley, 2003). In fact, the term eParticipation is still not a universally utilised term in the literature on the use of ICT for citizen participation.

Saebø *et al.* (2008) define ePartcipation to mean '…technology-mediated interaction between the civil society sphere and the formal politics sphere and between the civil society sphere and the administration sphere.' (p. 402).

Macintosh and Whyte (2006) take a more specific definition and define eParticipation as:

> … the use of ICTs to support information provision and 'top-down' engagement', i.e. government-led initiatives, or 'ground-up' efforts to empower citizens, civil society organisations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives. (p. 2)

In this thesis eParticipation is defined as being the use of ICTs (primarily but not exclusively web-based technologies) for facilitating engagement and participation in the policy making process. The term eParticipation is most appropriate for this research because it has clear connotations of participative democracy as opposed to the term eDemocracy which has connotations of elective democracy, specifically online voting. This study does not directly examine electronic voting as some authors such as Choi (2006) have done although some research participants did bring this up as a point of discussion in the interviews. The study also does not incorporate the issue of online campaigning for election by political parties such as Marcella and Baxter (1999) or Levine (2003). Further, the research also does not examine the use of eParticipation initiatives to engage interest groups and the NGO sector in decision making with public bodies.

The research also does not seek to study all forms of electronic interactions between citizens and government. The generic term for the use of technologies for government to citizen interactions is *'eGovernment'* which is defined in this thesis to mean 'the delivery of government information and services online through the Internet or other digital means.' (West, 2004, p. 16) The focus of investigation is on participative mechanisms that have been developed rather than examining whether or not citizens can pay their council tax online or report street light faults. These are considered to be transactional or administrative rather than participatory actions. It is recognised that defining exactly what constitutes eParticipation can be difficult but for example, an online form on a local authority's website to report pot holes in the streets would be considered eGovernment. However, an online form for residents to give their views on the road network strategy or how the repairs service could be improved would be considered to be eParticipation.

While eParticipation is being examined as a single concept it is important to remember that a huge variety of tools have been developed to facilitate public participation in policymaking. These tools will be outlined in the review of eParticipation literature in Chapter 4 and include: electronic questionnaires, online discussions, live chats with citizens and elected members and/or officers and ePetitions.

Other terminology used will also be briefly defined as it is recognised for the purpose of clarification:

- **Participatory mechanisms** is used to describe all forms of public participation that contributes either directly into decision making or form part of a wider engagement strategy by government organisations

- **Participative democracy** refers to the involvement of citizens in policy making and the running of government. It often involves a degree of decision making and responsibility being devolved directly to the people and the term *'direct democracy'* is sometimes used as a synonym.

- **Representative democracy** refers to the more traditional model of democracy whereby citizen participation is limited to voting in elections while the main activities of governance are conducted by elected members.

- The term **Consultation** is also used frequently in this thesis and is used in the broad sense to describe either

    > 1.The dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views and, normally, with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action.

    > 2. Where people are offered the opportunity to comment on what is planned, but are not able to develop and input their own ideas or participate in putting plans into action. (Consultation Institute website, 2009a)

- **Engagement** is a less easily defined concept but can be seen as *'Actions and processes taken or undertaken to establish effective relationships with individuals or groups so that more specific interactions can then take place.'* (Consultation Institute, 2009b).

- **Representativeness** is used in this thesis to describe whether or not the respondents to participatory mechanisms constitute a valid sample of the wider population or whether or not certain groups dominate participatory initiatives while others are harder to reach.

1.4 Overview of the thesis

Chapter two will set out the policy context relevant for this research. An overview of the changing role of the local authority in terms of service provision will be provided as well as an analysis of the regional and national level policies that have led to an increase in participative initiative. This chapter will provide an overview of the *Local Government Scotland Act* (2003) which is one of the most important policy affecting Local Government in Scotland in recent years. Specifically this chapter will discuss Best Value, the community planning agenda and Efficient Government. Further, the impact of devolution and the creation of the Scottish Parliament will be discussed. This chapter will present and overview of the arguments as to whether or not the new policies to promote citizen involvement in policy making and the Efficient Government requirements are likely to facilitate the development of eParticipation and whether the increased drive towards citizen participation in local government is aiming to strengthen democratic participation or whether the drive for more participation is in fact promoting a 'customer satisfaction' ethos in participation.

Chapter three provides an overview of the development of eParticipation. The chapter begins by providing a background to the development of the use of ICT for campaigning by activist groups and members of the public and how people are using ICTs in a wide range of social and political uses. The chapter will go on to draw together the main strands of the literature on eParticipation to summarise the theoretical and research arguments about the supposed benefits and drawbacks of eParticipation. This chapter will also demonstrate that a great deal of the literature takes a starting point of examining how eParticipation can be 'better' or 'worse' than other forms of participation rather than studying what place, if any, eParticipation should play within the wider participative strategies of local authorities. The chapter also outlines the notion of power and participation in order to demonstrate that the 'operationalisation' of eParticipation is influenced strongly by the political and organisational context that it is developed in. From the literature a number of points of investigation were identified which helped inform the design of the primary research for the PhD.

Chapter four sets out the methodologies that have been used in this study. Developing an appropriate and rigorous methodology for researching eParticipation was identified as being crucial to the success of the research and as the thesis sought to provide analytical depth to how and why eParticipation tools were being used it was

decided that a predominantly qualitative research design utilising a grounded theory approach would be used in this study. The primary data collection can be divided into two main phases which should be viewed as separate but related with the results of the first phase informing the development of the second phase. The mapping and evaluation of eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local authorities involved an evaluation of all of the websites of the local authorities and telephone interviews with officers involved in participation initiatives. In the second phase of data collection, which sought to develop a more thorough understanding of the enablers and barriers to the development of eParticipation in local authorities, a case study approach was devised. The case study comprised reviewing secondary literature, semi-structured interviews with elected members and officers including several heads of service, participant observation and findings from a questionnaire. Utilising qualitative methods resulted in detailed and rich findings and provided fascinating insights into the realities of eParticipation in local authorities.

Chapter five presents the findings from the first phase of the data collection which was the website analysis and interviews with local authorities. The results of the website benchmarking are presented as a summary because the benchmarking largely served as a prelude to the telephone interviews and facilitated an initial overview of the use of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities. The results of the telephone interviews are then presented under thematic headings. Firstly, the context of the development of participatory initiatives are presented followed by an analysis of respondents' views of eParticipation. The results of the review of actual use of eParticipation tools are then presented and chapter five also provides a demonstration of the evaluative criteria developed using Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy and a critical reflection of the effectiveness of this framework. The results of the first phase of data collection shown in Chapter five gave a general overview of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities but also raised further points of investigation that required a more detailed analysis than could be gained from the website benchmarking and interviews with officers alone. This led to the second round of data collection the results of which will be presented in Chapter 6.

Chapter six presents the findings from the case study of Aberdeen City Council. As indicated, a wider range of stakeholders including elected members, senior officers from service departments, interviews with staff from the ICT department and officers directly involved with community planning and research were interviewed. These interviews were supported by analysis of secondary materials including a recent AUDIT

Scotland report on community planning and Best Value as well as strategy documents. Participant observation was also included as part of the case study which gave me the opportunity to directly observe the creation (or more accurately redevelopment) of an eParticipation tool for the established citizens' panel. The findings from the case study data broken were analysed and presented in thematic categories and the data from the various units of analysis of the case study are presented together where appropriate to demonstrate triangulation of findings and identifies key themes. The findings are also related back to the findings from the first stage of data collection and to the secondary literature. The analytical framework developed for analysing eParticipation initiatives is employed again to analyse the eParticipation tools that Aberdeen City Council had used. The chapter ends with a summary of the findings and an analysis of the generalisability of the findings from the case study.

Chapter seven presents a synthesis of the findings from the empirical data collection and then outlines the theoretical findings from the data collection. These findings are reflected upon in the context of other studies. A critical reflection of the methodologies employed in the study is undertaken followed by an analysis of the original contribution to knowledge that this thesis has made and recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 2: The development of Participation in Local Authorities

2.1 Introduction to Chapter 2

In order to understand the reasons behind the increase in public participation mechanisms in general and eParticipation initiatives specifically in local authorities it is important to analyse the context in which they were developed. This chapter will demonstrate that local authorities have undergone significant reforms to their institutions and working practices which have contributed to the development of these initiatives. A brief overview of the changing structure and reforms of the local authority in the UK will be presented followed by an analysis of the change in the role of the local authority from having an almost exclusive remit for delivering local services to citizens to being a facilitator of customer-oriented service delivery. An overview of policies at the UK and Scottish Government level[1] is provided to highlight the key legislative and policy areas that have contributed to the development of participative initiatives in general and eParticipation specifically. While responsibility for Scottish local authorities is a devolved issue, Westminster policies are still relevant because at least in the early years of devolution there was little significant policy divergence in Scotland from England.

Conducting policy analysis is complex due to the huge amount of policies generated by government institutions, this often leads to seemingly contradictory findings and inconsistencies are revealed. In particular this chapter will discuss the apparent paradox between the drive towards a 'citizen as consumer' approach to service delivery and the statutory requirements that legislate a requirement for citizen participation initiatives to strengthen democratic and community engagement in local government. Before this, the chapter will start with an overview of the theoretical arguments and key literature surrounding public participation in local authorities which is of importance to understanding the development of participative initiatives.

---

[1] Please note that the term 'Scottish Executive' was used to describe the devolved administration until 2007 when the Scottish National Party were elected and changed the name to 'Scottish Government'.

2.2 Why promote public participation in policy making?

The concept of public participation in policy making is not new but the development of participative mechanisms has accelerated over the last few years (McLaverty, 2002). Examples of participative mechanisms include: Citizens' Panels, Citizens' Juries, Community Planning, Planning for Real, Resident's surveys which are used alongside more offline forms of consultation such as public meetings and postal questionnaires (Smith, 2005)

Pratchett (1999) argues that the relatively recent trend towards participatory mechanisms can be attributed to three main factors:

> 1. The citizen-consumer agenda of the 1980s and attempts by public service managers to emulate private sector management techniques
> 2. Organisational politics that emerged when institutions threatened with reorganisation have sought to reassert their legitimacy by demonstrating close links with the communities which they serve
> 3. Initiatives that have emerged through party-political agendas and are associated with ideological predilections. (Pratchett, 1999, p. 617)

It is argued that the greatest advantage to local authorities for engaging the public in participatory initiatives is that if the public are consulted, policies will have greater legitimacy. Participative policies can also be argued to have a role in educating the public and making them aware of the work of the local authority and the issues behind decision-making (Mehta and Darier, 1998). Further, theorists such as John Stuart Mill argued that public participation leads to better government (Hindess, 2000). Some theorists believe that the public will be much more likely to comply with and respect new policies if they are involved in consultations and are allowed to express their views and concerns about new proposals (Dryzek, 2000). It is argued that this is the case even when, ultimately, they disagree with the final policy provided they feel that the consultation was fair and their opinions were listened to (Grimes, 2006). Wilson (1999) disputes this claim, however, and posits that citizens believe that participative initiatives have failed if the decision goes against what they have asked for. Participative policy making is considered to be particularly important for contentious issues such as planning or environmental issues where there is potential for conflict with the public. However, this view is also disputed especially in

the case of environmental policies which may require a reduction in consumption. It is argued that this is inevitably going to be unpopular with people and participatory policy development may not be appropriate because the public are unable to see past selfish concerns to make the lifestyle changes necessary to facilitate sustainable development (Robbins and Rowe, 2002).

As well as having a positive impact on the legitimacy of policies and decision-making it is also argued that public participation may have a positive impact on the policies themselves making them more suitable to the needs of the people. This has been a driver behind the development of community planning initiatives such as 'planning for real' which aims to meet the needs of local people better than policies devised at the local authority level (Smith, 2005). The role of participation is seen as being more than just creating effective policies, however. There is also a broader issue of engagement that is being sought to overcome the problem of the democratic deficit and apathy towards politics within the general public that is perceived to be occurring at the local level in order to make the institutions of government more responsive and legitimate (Chandler, 2000). Participative governance strategies are promoted as being part of the solution to the problem of social exclusion and may broaden the base of participation (Newman, 2005). Of particular concern are the so-called 'hard-to-reach' groups such as young people, ethnic minorities and people from low income households. According to the 2000 Citizens' Audit analysed by Pattie *et al.* to study civic attitudes and engagement in the UK:

> … the political non-participants are more likely to be among the elderly, the poor, those with the fewest number of years full-time education, Asians, and those who watch a great deal of television. By contrast, the politically very active are more likely to be found among the middle-aged, those employed in professional occupations, the religious, those with a household income of £30000 or more per annum, those who remained in full-time education to the age of 19 or beyond, and those who watch no television at all. So political voice is concentrated among those with the greatest resources, defined in terms of those with skills and income (Pattie, Syed and Whitely, 2003, p. 627).

Offline methods of consultation such as public meetings are not perceived to have solved the problem of getting the 'hard to reach' to participate and leads to criticisms that participative initiatives are dominated by politically motivated groups or people who have mobilized over issues that they perceive as having a direct impact on their lives:

'People will mobilize over issues when threatened with a waste tip at the bottom of their garden, when the dustbins are not emptied, or when a bypass is scheduled to cut their village in half..' (Wilson, 1999, p. 256).

Wilson (1999) believes that the widespread lack of interest allows small groups to dominate participatory activities and therefore the outcomes of participation initiatives are easy for politicians to dismiss because the participants are often not representative of the community as a whole.

Verba *et al.* (1993) conducted an analysis looking at the different needs and values of political participants and non-participants and found that they were quite different in their economic status, demographics and levels of benefits that they receive and concluded that the representativeness of the respondents to the wider population is important. Some newer participatory mechanisms such as citizens' panels put greater emphasis on the demographic representativeness of the participants to demonstrate that they are not merely involving the 'usual suspects' and that therefore the results have greater credibility as they attempt to be representative of the wider population (Pratchett, 1999). However, the premise that bringing together different groups of people in such a manner necessarily means that the results can be considered truly representative of the wider community is disputed (Milewa, 2004).

Ensuring that participative initiatives are representative of the local population is, however, very difficult to achieve in practice. For example, Barnes *et al.* (2003) conducted a study examining how public bodies conceptualise the notion of 'the public' and investigated the issue of the representativeness of participants in deliberative initiatives. They found that while officials demonstrated a desire to engage the public in participatory initiatives and they recognised the importance of how representative of the population the participants are, the officers also highlighted political and institutional barriers that affect the implementation of these initiatives.

Further criticisms of participative initiatives are that they can waste time and encourage procrastination in the development and implementation of policies (Shapiro, 2003). In addition, increasing participation leads to questions about the relationship between representative democracy and participative democracy and the extent that decision making should be devolved to the public (Albert and Passmore, 2008). Some argue that participatory initiatives could have negative democratic impacts as power is shifted away from elected representatives who are accountable to the public and that elected

members may be unwilling to become involved in participatory exercises because they see them as a threat (Kiljn and Koppenjan, 2002).

Mechanisms for citizen participation are widely varied and the influence that can be exerted by citizens depends on which mechanism is being employed and the transparency of how the results are incorporated into the policy making process to ensure that the initiatives are having a genuine impact.

Arnstein (1969) identified different levels of participation that can be gained from citizen participation initiatives:

1. Manipulation
2. Therapy
3. Informing
4. Consultation
5. Placation
6. Partnership
7. Delegated Power
8. Citizen Control

The level and impact of the participation increases with each rung of Arnstein's ladder with Citizen Control viewed as being the ultimate form of participation. Citizen participation initiatives vary in terms of the amount of influence that the public can have (although many can be placed on the consultation rung of Arnstein's ladder) and very few involve delegating power or handing over control to citizens. Unlike Arnstein's model this thesis does not argue that direct decision making by citizens is necessarily more valuable than other forms of participation. However, in order for participatory initiatives to be credible it is essential that the people involved know that they are having a genuine impact and that their contributions are valued. The 'rules of the game' of participatory initiatives must be made clear and there must be mutual trust between the participants, politicians and administrators. Citizens must be trusted to put aside selfish concerns and administrators must be willing to listen to these views and ensure that the processes are in place to effect genuine participation (Yang, 2005). A further issue is 'control over the agenda' which means the extent to which the participants are allowed to set the agenda for the topic of the participatory exercise and conversely the extent to which the agenda for debate and participa tion are dictated by the authority. It could be argued that by participating in government initiated top-down participative

exercises citizens are, in fact, subjecting themselves to different kinds of control (Hindess, 2000). Irvin and Stansbury (2004) argue that some participatory initiatives do not offer genuine opportunities for participation in policy making but are more akin to awareness-raising exercises 'where the participation process consists of government representatives guiding citizens towards decisions the administrators would have made in the first place' (p. 57) and it is also argued that administrators only pick up ideas from participatory initiatives that fit with their own agenda (Mayer *et al.*, 2005). Pratchett (2005) identified that in the case of citizens' panels, questions can often reflect the concerns of the public body rather than the concerns of the citizen and Newman (2005) argues that 'Public consultation is focused predominantly on changes at the margins of how public services are delivered, not on the consequences of the withdrawal of services or their shift to other sectors' (Newman, 2005, p. 134).

Public participation initiatives also mean that new administrative procedures for policy development must be developed and institutionalised habits and practices must be changed or authentic participation will not be achieved (King *et al.*, 1998). The drive towards collaborative partnership working between agencies, government and the public also requires developing new internal organisational and institutional processes within and between agencies as well as the commitment of staff in order to promote civic engagement (Sterling, 2005). There are challenges in developing a coordinated strategy for participatory initiatives in local authorities in order to ensure that the mechanisms are appropriate and meet best practice guidelines. Lowndes *et al.* (2001a) conducted a survey of chief executives of local authorities in England in 1998 to examine these issues. One of their findings was that as there are complex structures in local authorities it is difficult to know whether all initiatives were reported as it is not possible for one person to know details of all the initiatives that are being undertaken. They also found that participative initiatives were only one element in decision making and that there was a perception amongst respondents that there was little enthusiasm for enhanced participation in the public especially amongst hard to reach groups. Lowndes *et al.* (2001b) also conducted focus groups with citizens in 11 local authorities and found that people indicated willingness to participate in consultations on the 'issues that matter' and that the biggest deterrent to participation was a perception or experience of Council's lack of responsiveness to consultations.

The motivations behind local authorities engaging in citizen participation initiatives will also be examined in this chapter. Lowndes *et al.* (2001a) found that Best Value was a reason cited for developing participation initiatives in local authorities. While the Best

Value requirements mean that local authorities have a statutory duty to consult with stakeholders, some are critical that the consultation element of Best Value results in excessive consultation which is unnecessary and only done to satisfy the audit requirements (Higgins *et al.*, 2005). Many new mechanisms for public participation have been developed at the national and local level in the UK but there is a lack of effective measurement of the initiatives (Albert and Passmore, 2008) and so it is difficult to determine whether any participatory mechanisms have been successful in engaging a broad range of participants or what impact, if any, the participatory mechanisms have had.

This chapter will also demonstrate that there is a shift in the service delivery philosophy of local authorities to be more managerial and customer focussed. It could be argued that by viewing people as consumers of services rather than democratic citizens (McLaverty, forthcoming) this demonstrates a devaluation of the role of citizenship and represents an erosion of the ideals of public participation. Orr and McAteer (2004), however, dispute the notion that 'citizenship' and 'consumerism' are necessarily mutually exclusive concepts and are also rather dismissive of the dichotomous view of participative and representative democracy arguing that the lines between the two are not as clear as some of the literature implies.

Having outlined the key literature on public participation and given an overview of the debates and conflicting analyses on citizen participation issues, this chapter will now go on to outline the changing structure and role of local authorities and an overview of policies that have influenced the development of citizen participation initiatives in Scottish local authorities.

2.3 The Changing Structure and Role of the Local Authority

In the UK, local authorities supply a large range of services such as education and social care and are responsible for coordinating many separate functions and strategies for developing and maintaining the well-being of a community (Chandler, 2001). Local government in the UK has gone through significant restructuring over the years. The 1972 *Local Government Act* saw major changes to the boundaries of local authorities. In Scotland, the traditional counties were abolished and nine regions were formed (Chandler, 2001). There was further restructuring in 1985 in England and Wales but there was still widespread dissatisfaction and following the fall of Thatcher

there was more significant reforms to come. Local participative initiatives were gaining prominence in the 1980s with the publication of the *Skeffington Report*, the drive towards community development as well as factors such as the increased mobilisation of tenants' groups (Wilson, 1999).

While the boundary reforms of the 1980s did not affect Scotland, there was more change in Scotland in the 1990s. The Secretary of State for Scotland abolished the regions that were created in 1973 and transferred the powers to the existing districts to create a network of unitary authorities that came into power in 1996 (Chandler, 2001).

The Labour government of Tony Blair which came to power in 1997 further reorganised the boundaries of English local authorities (Chandler, 2001) and sought to make sweeping reforms to the public sector in general putting forward proposals for the modernisation of public services and the public sector at all levels. At the same time the concerns about renewing democracy was gaining prominence. Tony Blair authored a paper for the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) in 1998 in which he was critical of the lack of direction of local authorities, variations in the standards of service delivery, lack of transparency in decision making and an unacceptably low turnout at elections (McAteer and Orr, 2003, p. 281).

In 1998 a report by the Department of Local Government Transport and the Regions *Guidance on enhancing Participation in Local Government* recommended the development of new forms of participation such as citizens' panels as well as offline forms of consultation such as public meetings and 'consumerist' approaches of measuring satisfaction with public services. In *Connecting with Communities* (ODPM, 2002) the importance of engaging with local communities in order to strengthen local democracy is stressed. An emphasis is placed on the role of websites and other forms of electronic communications to provide information and encourage a dialogue with local people.

Central to understanding the Labour Government's reforms of the public sector is *Modernising Government* (Cabinet Office,1999) which aimed to modernise and reform the public sector by improving the quality and delivery of public services. There is an emphasis on inclusion and participation by stakeholders in the development and delivery of services, joined up working with other agencies and a focus on electronic services delivery. Public services would be expected to produce evidence of

improvement in the form of Best Value (BV) indicators which are benchmarked and Best Value audits which were conducted in local authorities every three years.

> The government introduced the BV framework into public-sector organisations to achieve both service quality and cost effectiveness. The BV framework encourages public-sector organisations to achieve effective partnerships and innovative approaches in the delivery of a quality service. (Magd and Curry, 2003).

Best Value was criticised for adding excessive bureaucracy to local authorities with the huge range of performance indicators and resulting reporting mechanisms. As a result Best Value was replaced in England and Wales (but not Scotland) with Local Government Performance Indicators which are purported to reduce the burden on local authorities. (DBIS, 2009).

Service provision is not the sole remit of the local authority at the local level in the UK. There are a network of interconnected public and private agencies such as health trusts, the police, business development agencies etc that contribute to service delivery and some authors have observed that the term 'local governance' is more applicable to the UK context rather than simply local government (Chandler, 2001). Since the Labour government came to power there has been increased emphasis on partnership working with the voluntary and private sectors as well as other public sector bodies (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003). This has resulted in the co-production of services which blur the lines between public, private and voluntary sectors (Bovaird, 2007) which aim to create better and more appropriate service delivery but also raise questions about accountability and transparency as power is devolved from the local authority to these unelected bodies.

The focus on joint working was emphasised in a report produced in 2000 by the Performance and Innovation Unit entitled *Wiring it Up* (Cabinet Office, 2000) which aimed to overcome barriers to inter-agency and inter-departmental working for tackling complex policy areas such as drug problems. The report identifies the need for effective consultation with stakeholders as being essential to the development of cross-cutting.

The drive towards greater participation as a means of solving the problems of the democratic deficit has also been influenced by organisations such as the OECD

(Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) who produced a report in 2001 entitled *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-making*, which stressed the importance of building frameworks to promote greater citizen involvement in consultation and active participation in policy making (Malina, 2003).

The development of eParticipation can be seen as being facilitated by the modernisation agenda and the desire to engage people more in politics through participatory mechanisms. Certain groups such as the Hansard Society, members of the All Party Information Technology Group (PITCOM) and some MPs have promoted eParticipation as a possible solution to problems of public disengagement (Parry, 2004). After the 2001 general election there was great concern expressed at the low turnout of younger people who were viewed as a group that could benefit from the development of eParticipation because they are traditionally viewed as being disengaged from politics and are also more likely to be users of ICTs. This was evident in the consultation paper *In the service of democracy* which was published on 16 July 2002 and launched in tandem with the government's e-democracy website. 'It took as its starting point what it perceived to be various '*challenges to democracy*': a low and declining turnout at elections, an increasing tendency for people to pursue their political interests through single interest lobby groups rather than using the traditional institutions of democracy, the rise of the digital society' (Parry, 2004).

Parry (2004) identifies other important initiatives for developing electronic democracy such as The House of Commons Information Committee report in July 2002 entitled *Digital technology: working for Parliament and the public*. An All-Party Parliamentary Group was formed in the summer of 2003 to promote eParticipation in conjunction with the Hansard Society. For the development of The House of Commons Modernisation Committee's report of June 2004 - *Connecting Parliament with the Public* an online consultation exercise was held and the Committee made recommendations and analysis of online consultations. A further development was that The 10 Downing Street website also developed an ePetitioning system where members of the public can start petitions on any issues (Parry, 2004).

In 2002 Kearns *et al.* conducted research to investigate the use of eParticipation in English local authorities. The researchers took a much wider definition of eParticipation than I have in this study which encompasses electronic engagement activities in general including email links. The study found that eParticipation was being under-

utilised and that local authorities should be encouraged by central government to make more use of eParticipation. There have been initiatives set up subsequently by central government to facilitate this. The ODPM provided £4 million pounds of funding for a Local e-Democracy National Project In England and Wales for local authorities to develop eParticipation tools.

The National Project on Local e-Democracy saw a large range of technologies employed to try innovative methods for using ICTs for engaging citizens. Bristol City Council have been heavily involved in the Local eDemocracy National Project and have developed tools such as online consultation finders and have piloted e-petitioning using the system that was developed for the Scottish Parliament. They also claim to be the first to have developed an electronic citizens' panel and have experimented with a deliberative polling tool (Hilton, 2006, p. 416).

However, in an analysis of the Local eDemocracy National Project, Macintosh and Whyte (2006) found that projects tend to be isolated exercises and that there is 'no view of what a coherent, and sustainable participation environment should be like' (p. 15). As well as government funded initiatives there have also been pilot projects funded by external funding such as the DEMOS project which was a European wide initiative to promote renewal of democracy at the local level by encouraging the development of public participation initiatives and involved Aberdeen City Council and Edinburgh City Council (Carley, 2004).

Further to the initiatives outlined about, the Labour government also pursued an agenda of decentralisation of power and devolution of powers promoting the election of local mayors in England, proposed regional assemblies in England and devolution in Scotland and Wales. The responsibility for legislative competence over Scottish local authorities has been devolved to the Scottish Parliament within the limits of its powers.

2.4 The Scottish Context

With the development of the Scottish Parliament and the changing responsibility for local authorities in Scotland it is important to evaluate what the impact of devolution has been for Scottish local authorities and the extent to which the policy divergence (or lack of it) from UK central government has led to differing levels of development of eParticipation.

2.4.1 Founding Principles

The Scottish Parliament has retained the pattern of 32 single tier districts that were introduced in 1996 (Chandler, 2001) however there have been other significant developments in local authorities in the post devolution era. The Scottish Parliament set out to be different from the UK national government and in 1997 the Consultative Steering Group (CSG) was set up to devise the principles and processes that would determine the functions of the Scottish Parliament (McAteer and Bennett, 2005). A set of founding principles for devolved government were established and adopted by the Scottish Parliament:

- the Scottish Parliament should embody and reflect the sharing of power between the people of Scotland, the legislators and the Scottish Executive;
- the Scottish Executive should be accountable to the Scottish Parliament and the Parliament and Executive should be accountable to the people of Scotland;
- the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation;
- the Scottish Parliament in its operation and its appointments should recognise the need to promote equal opportunities for all.

 (Consultative Steering Group, 1998).

The founding principles of the CSG promoted the sharing of power, openness and participation with other agencies and citizens. The principles of openness and transparency set out in the CSG report have put great emphasis on the importance of using new media technologies to facilitate communication and strengthen engagement between the Executive, the Parliament and the people (Ascherson, 2003). All

documents and debates of the parliament are available online. The Scottish Parliament website also allows the direct submission of ePetitions. (Parry, 2004). The founding principles raised expectations that there would be a shift away from highly centralised governance and a change in the relationship with local authorities was anticipated. Significant early reports including The McIntosh Commission (1999) which was set up to review how effective working could be developed between the Scottish Executive, The Scottish Parliament and councils questioned the role of the local authority and recommended that councils review their policies for decision making to ensure transparency. Also, the Renewing Local Democracy Group (The Kerley Group 2000) called for greater engagement of non-traditional actors so that council membership could be more representative of local populaces (McAteer and Orr, 2006).

Advocates of devolution had hoped that the establishment of the Scottish Parliament would bring about a shift in the relations between central and local government and that there would be a more equal relationship between local authorities and the new Executive. McConnell (2006) examined this claim by examining legal and constitutional frameworks, financing and policy parameters in the pre and post devolution periods and found that to a large extent there was little shift in the balance of power. He identified the factors of pervasive influence of the national government, the fact that many of the politicians and civil servants were the same and the 'ongoing self-interest of the centre' (McConnell, 2006). This means that policies and legislation in Scotland continued to be significantly influenced by the UK level government at least up until the completion of data collection for this thesis in 2007 which coincides with when the SNP were elected.

McAteer and Bennett (2005) examined the impact of devolution on Scottish local authorities by conducting interviews with elected members from local authorities and members of local government professional bodies to try to determine to what extent, if any, devolution has facilitated new working practices between the central and local government. With regards to whether the Executive is more open than the former Scottish Office which is one of the founding principles outlined by the CSG they found that:

> When elected councillors were asked if the Executive was more open than the former Scottish Office, almost 53% of the respondents said yes, while only 28% said that it was not… When these issues were raised in the officers' surveys only 39% of SOLACE [Society of Local Authority Chief Executives] respondents

described the Scottish Executive as an open organisation in its relations with local government. However, 75% said that the Executive was more open than the pre-devolution Scottish Office. (McAteer and Bennett, 2005, pp. 294-5).

2.4.2 Devolved legislation for Scottish Local Authorities

In 2002 the Scottish Executive produced *Renewing Local Democracy: The Next Steps* (Scottish Executive, 2002) which stressed the importance of the role of councils for delivering services and setting local priorities. A major change to local democracy was the introduction of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) for local elections in 2007. This saw the introduction of multi-member wards comprising three or four councillors and an electoral system that required voters to rank their choice of candidates in order of preference. This change to the voting system locally was driven by the Liberal Democrat party and is regarded as being Labour's major concession to them to allow the formation of the coalition (Bennie, 2006). The primary data collection for this thesis was mostly conducted prior to the 2007 election and the widely documented problems with the vote for the Scottish Parliament elections which occurred on the same day and have been attributed in part to poor ballot design (Carmen *et al.*, 2008). However, the topic was mentioned by several interviewees and some indicated that preparations were underway for the shift in working practices and there was some uncertainty as to the impact of multi member wards on local governance and participatory mechanisms. This will be discussed further in the analysis of the case study data in Chapter 6.

The issue of local authority financing is a contentious area. McConnell (2006) found that power over local authority financing was effectively transferred from the Scottish Office to the new institutions of Scottish government. There are strict rules on local authority spending and limitations are put on the raising of council tax and the Scottish Government has the power to cap increases in council tax. There have been accusations that some policies such as free personal care for the elderly have increased the costs to local authorities which have not been coupled with an increase in funding from the Executive/Government. This is relevant for the study of eParticipation in Scotland because greater financial pressures may either have a positive impact on eParticipation because (as will be outlined in the next chapter), eParticipation initiatives are sometimes argued to be cheaper to run than offline participatory mechanisms or it could have a negative impact because local authorities

may be focussing scare resources on implementing statutory requirements which do not include eParticipation.

Devolution has also seen a shift in the relationship between government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) which was established in 1975 and represents 31 of the 32 Scottish local authorities. Prior to devolution COSLA was seen as a force for empowering local authorities in Scotland to represent their interests at the national level. In the post devolution period COSLA sought to influence the development of policy as an 'insider' in the new parliament which led to tensions with some local authorities feeling that they had 'sold out' (McConnell, 2004). COSLA has not always been supportive of the Executive, however, in particular in its opposition to PR for local government elections (McConnell, 2004). COSLA is an important actor in Scottish politics and have made contributions to the development of participatory initiatives. For example, in 1998 COSLA produced a report entitled *Focusing on Citizens: A Guide to Approaches and Methods* which encouraged local authorities to develop new ways of engaging and involving the public. The report includes electronic participation strategies describing the advantages as being that:

> This form of participation may be particularly appealing to people who are already used to using new technology but have not had much involvement in democratic practice. It also has potential among people living a long distance away from centres of population, who are housebound or who have other difficulties participating in standard democratic processes. (COSLA, 1998, p. 79)

The Local Government in Scotland Act (2003) is a key piece of legislation for understanding the development of participatory initiatives in Scotland and gives local authorities the primary responsibility for the economic and social well being of their area and individuals within it. This can be interpreted as a desire to devolve power to the local authority level. However, there are limitations to these powers as they cannot interfere with statutory responsibilities or the work of other bodies (McConnell, 2006). Further, some national rules and initiatives remain such as *The Ethical Standards in Public Life etc Scotland Act (2000)* which sets out national rules for the conduct of councillors (Keating *et al.*, 2003). *The Local Government Scotland Act* 2003 put upon local authorities a statutory obligation to engage in community planning activities and also a statutory duty to demonstrate Best Value which replaced the Compulsory Competitive Tendering policy in 1997 (McConnell, 2004).

A significant development in post-devolution Scotland has been the drive for community planning; a core element of *the Local Government Scotland Act 2003* which has required all 32 local authorities to work in partnership with other agencies and the community to integrate and coordinate public services (McAteer and Bennett). The Community Planning Task Force was set up in 2001 to facilitate the development of community planning in Scotland and give advice and guidance to local authorities (Community Planning Taskforce, 2003a). The Task Force directly contributed to the development of community planning and through documents such as *Effective Community Engagement, Community Planning Advice Note 5* (Community Planning Taskforce, 2004), *Community Planning Good Practice* (2002) and *Working and Learning Together to Build Stronger Communities* (Community Planning Taskforce, 2003b) have provided suggestions and strategies for the effective development of community planning in Scotland.

Other projects initiated by the Scottish Executive have included *The Renewing Local Democracy* project which was a two year eParticipation project funded by the Scottish Executive from February 2004 to January 2006. One of the initiatives investigated how ICTs can support Community Councils and involved developing eParticipation mechanisms for Community Councils (Whyte *et al.*, 2006). Whyte *et al.* (2006) conducted an evaluation of the project and found that:

> The project demonstrates that web based tools enable and encourage more people to have their say in local democracy than has previously been the case…It is therefore recommended that local and national government supports community councils to develop web tools to inform and interact with the public. There is a significant public appetite for the opportunities to influence local decision-making that such tools support. They are regarded as a convenient opportunity to have views considered, provided those views are responded to. (Whyte *et al.*, 2006, p. 6)

Whyte *et al.* recommended that local authorities should take a lead role in disseminating eParticipation tools.

While the *Local Government Scotland Act 2003* puts great emphasis on public participation as a means of improving service delivery it does not give specific guidance on the challenges that need to be overcome in order to achieve this (Orr and McAteer, 2004). There were further guidelines published including a *Participation*

Handbook (Scottish Parliament, 2004) and *Consultation Good Practice Guidance* (Scottish Executive, 2004) however as indicated previously in the chapter there remains concerns about a lack of effective measurement and analysis of participatory initiatives (Albert and Passmore, 2008).

When the SNP administration was elected in 2007 there was a Concordat signed between the (newly rebranded) Scottish Government and local authorities. As part of the Concordat package, all 32 local authorities agreed a Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) with the Scottish Government in June 2008, setting out what they will achieve through the services they deliver.

> A number of public sector organisations are statutory partners in Community Planning. These include the local authority, health board, fire, police, enterprise agency and transport partnership. In addition to the statutory partners, Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) typically involve other public, voluntary, community and private sector partners. (Improvement Service website, 2009)

The SOAs are based on the national outcomes and indicators and, under a common framework, local outcomes to take account of local priorities. The SOAs cover all local government services in each local authority area as well as a significant range of the responsibilities of CPPs where local authorities have a significant role to play (Improvement Service, 2009).

2.4.3 Electronic Service Delivery and eParticipation

The Scottish Executive's first Programme for Government *Making it Work together* (1999) emphasised the need to develop modern government and this was restated in *Working together for Scotland* (2001a), the second programme for Government. The document *Information Age Government A Common Framework* (Scottish Executive, 2002b) set out standards for common standards for e-government across public services. While these initiatives are not directly relevant to eParticipation in Scottish local authorities, they do demonstrate that the devolved parliament recognised the importance of ICTs in service delivery.

Macintosh *et al.* (2002) argue that in the post devolution era, the focus on modernisation of procedures has had major implications for the development of ICT use in Scotland. The Digital Scotland Ministerial Task force set up in 1999 sought to promote the use of digital technologies across all aspects of Scottish Life (Macintosh *et al.*, 2002). *The 21ˢᵗ Century Government Action Plan* (2000) which was the Scottish Executive's response to the UK government's Modernising Government agenda emphasised the importance of partnership working as well as placing an importance on electronic service delivery. An Efficient Government fund was created to provide funding to public bodies to promote electronic service delivery. The aim was to get all Scotland's services available online by 2005 and there was recognition that eParticipation should be one of the possible electronic services. 'Intentions are that in moving towards electronic service delivery targets, e-democracy should not be neglected in favor of areas that are considered more traditional local authority services. ' (Macintosh *et al.*, 2002).

In 2003, the Improvement Service was set up as a partnership between the Scottish Executive, COSLA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). (Scottish Government website, 2009). According to the Improvement Service website it '....aims to support continuous improvement by building on the expertise within local authorities and working in partnership with stakeholders in the public, private and voluntary sectors.' (Improvement Service website, 2009)

The Improvement Service assisted in the delivery of the Customer First strategy that was sponsored by the Scottish Executive. The Customer First initiative aims to raise the standards of customer service in Scotland to try to ensure that citizens have their queries answered at the first point of contact whether that is by phone, online, face to face etc. The Customer Service scheme sets out a number of initiatives that are relevant but tangential to the development of eParticipation such as attempts to standardise the 32 websites of Scottish local authorities to have a Standard Navigation Structure and a common A-Z of services. (Improvement Service website, 2009). Prior to these initiatives there was little standardisation of the websites which were developed individually by local authorities and had led to great diversity of web-based services and conformity to best practice guidelines for delivering web-based information. This will be discussed further in the results of the primary data collection for the thesis in Chapter 5.

Public sector reform was also discussed in the 2006 report *Transforming Public Services – The Next Phase of Reform*. The report indicated that the Scottish Executive were working alongside councils and other public bodies to develop 'innovative Scotland-wide but locally responsive ways of improving service quality and efficiency' (p. 23) addressed issues such as the lack of a 'joined up' e-government strategy which had resulted in 'service silos' (p. 25) (in other words technologies are produced for specific projects or services without considering whether a generic application could be created that could be used for more than one service or project)leading to duplication of effort and a lack of a shared strategy for the development of ICT tools. According to a progress report published in 2007 'The dialogue demonstrated substantial support for a collaborative and bottom-up approach to reform, which would harness the energy and ideas of all those involved in delivering public services.' (Scottish Executive, 2007, p. 23)

The problem of 'service silos' or 'technological silos' is relevant to the development of eParticipation because the lack of strategic direction for ICT developments in local authorities may be acting as a barrier to the development of technological innovations including eParticipation. This will be investigated as part of the case study research in Chapter 6.

Planning services have been singled out for having a high potential to benefit from electronic service delivery. An e-Planning group was formed in 2001 to discuss the progress and assist in the technological developments of electronic planning. This represented a significant legal and procedural shift in the way that planning applications were handled as outlined below:

> Until recently, planning law required procedures to be carried out 'in writing' or through paper copies. Most of these restrictions were removed by the Town and Country Planning (Electronic Communications) (Scotland) Order 2004. It is the first Order in Scotland to remove legal barriers to electronic communication, and is made under Section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000 (a UK Act). (Transport Scotland website, 2007)

The development of e-Planning is significant because many of the technologies that are being developed are universal to all forms of electronic participation and the legislative and institutional barriers to the development of e-Planning that need to be overcome will not all be unique to Planning and so will raise awareness of the barriers

to the development of eParticipation in general. If e-Planning is successfully adopted by local authorities it could facilitate the development of eParticipation for other services. However, if ePlanning is not successfully implemented or if the public do not respond positively to it, it could potentially have a negative impact on the development of other eParticipation initiatives. Also, the issue of 'technological silos' highlighted earlier could mean that ePlanning tools are developed in a way that are not transferable to other departments such as those involved in community participation. At the time of the primary data collection for this thesis, ePlanning was still at a relatively early stage but in an interview conducted as part of the case study research, the officer who was project manager for developing ePlanning stated that the technologies were transferable to other departments to utilise for eParticipation. This will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

2.4.4 Digital Inclusion in Scotland

The drive towards electronic service delivery for improving service delivery and promoting democratic engagement through eParticipation mechanisms raises the issue of digital inclusion which, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, is one of the primary concerns about the development of eParticipation. Wide variations in the access to ICT are evident in Scotland and there are concerns about digital exclusion especially amongst low income groups and people living in rural communities who, although they were argued to have a lot to gain from the development of digital technologies for accessing information and services, were poorly served by broadband services (Malina and Ball, 2005). The digital inclusion strategy *Connecting Scotland's People* (2001b) served to overcome these problems. The main themes of the strategy aimed to raise awareness of the opportunities that ICT in particular amongst excluded groups, providing access points for disadvantaged communities, providing technical support and skills training in using ICT providing useful content for people and ensuring the communities are involved in the development of these initiatives.

Malina and Ball (2005) conducted an analysis of the first digital inclusion strategy and found that:

> By early 2000, PCs had been installed in various community centres and halls in Scotland. Voluntary sector content through a web portal was developed to close the perceived digital divide and provide a single gateway to Scotland's

voluntary sector. A three-year 'Digital Champions programme' has supported the goal of inclusive ICT provision in Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs) areas in Scotland … Much effort has been expended in local communities, particularly in deprived neighborhoods, to help close the digital divide. However, the Digital Inclusion Audit (2004) conducted in Scotland's SIP areas points out that while 83% of centers still offered free access to the public, only 50% of facilities offered formal training classes. Moreover, a significant gap was noted between on-line activities and levels of training to support those activities. (Malina and Ball, 2005, p. 69)

In the second digital inclusion strategy, there was an evaluation of the first digital strategy and it was found that while Internet use in Scotland had increased, that older people, people with disabilities and people living in areas of deprivation were still less likely to be using the Internet. It was also found that there was little take up of the Public Access Points which was attributed to lack of awareness.

The goals have been refined and are now:

- No citizen left behind – by 2010 all citizens benefit from trusted, innovative services and easy access for all
- Making efficiency and effectiveness a reality – by 2010 significantly contribute to high user satisfaction, transparency and accountability, a lighter administrative burden and efficiency gains
- Implementing high impact services for citizens and businesses – by 2010 100% of public procurement will be available electronically, with 20% actual usage with agreement on co-operation on further high-impact online services
- Putting key enablers in place – enabling citizens and businesses to benefit by 2010 from convenient, secure and interoperable authentication across Europe to public services
- Strengthening participation and democratic decision making – demonstrating by 2010 tools for effective public debate and participation in democratic decision making

(Scottish Executive, 2006b)

This digital inclusion strategy clearly highlights democracy and participation as being priorities that can benefit from new technologies and, while this may be at the regional level rather than the local level specifically, it further indicates the belief of the Scottish Parliament that eParticpation mechanisms should form part of participatory democracy in Scotland. However, there are still challenges in Scotland with regards to digital inclusion: according to the 2009 statistics for home Internet use, Scotland is still the region with the lowest household Internet access in the UK with 62% having a household Internet connection compared with 80% of people in London (ONS, 2009). Digital exclusion will be examined as part of the primary research for this thesis in chapters 5 and 6.

2.5 What do these initiatives mean for eParticipation in Scottish Local Authorities?

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the changes to local authority working to set the context for the discussion of the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities. The key points and influences have been:

- The drive towards a customer focussed modernisation of services
- The development of electronic service delivery
- The increased emphasis on renewing local democracy

These factors may appear to all lead to the development of eParticipation but there are concerns that the first and third points may actually be in antithesis with each other. The modernisation agenda is seen as promoting the notion of the citizen as a consumer of services and hence promotes private sector ideologies of efficiency, value for money and responsiveness to customer feedback. This 'consumerist' perspective is seen by some as being contradictory to the notion of the citizen being an engaged and politically active member of a society. This apparent paradox will form a part of the analysis of the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities. The thesis will examine the participatory developments that have been developed as part of the community planning agenda which apparently have a remit beyond merely the statutory consultation requirements of Best Value to investigate whether local authorities have implemented genuinely participative solutions or whether these are tokenistic responses to the national guidelines and what place, if any, eParticipation plays in these initiatives. The highly localised focus of community planning could be a barrier to the development of eParticipation because officers may consider face to face

initiatives such as 'Planning for Real' more appropriate and the nature of the delivery of community planning where the initiatives are developed at a micro level may also be a barrier because eParticipation requires a commitment to technological development at the corporate level. This will be explained further in the next chapter.

The drive towards electronic service delivery will be investigated to determine what impact, if any, this has had on the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities. As local authorities operate in an environment where increased efficiency of service delivery is not just encouraged but mandated from national government it could be the case that this would serve as a driver for the implementation of eParticipation. However, the need for cost savings and the large amount of statutory guidance on the development of electronic service delivery that does not have a direct participative mandate could actually act as a barrier to the development of eParticipation as local authorities must target scare resources to meeting the statutory requirements rather than developing eParticipation which (other than in the ePlanning initiative) is not statutory in Scotland.

2.6 Conclusions to Chapter 2

This chapter has given an overview of the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities. As has been demonstrated, the development of eParticipation in general terms has not been a linear process but is rather the result of the changing structure and role of local authorities, attempts to promote social capital and democratic renewal in a response to the perception of the democratic deficit and the modernisation of public services in particular the drive towards electronic service delivery. The impact of devolution and the subsequent changes to the voting system and major pieces of legislation such as the *Local Government Scotland Act 2003* have been discussed as well as the role of bodies such as COSLA and the Improvement Service.

It is important to remember that local authorities are not a homogenous group and while there is a great deal of statutory guidelines that they must follow they are still elected institutions with the power to pursue the priorities that they see as being best for their area within the limits of their responsibility and providing they are in line with the national priorities. Scotland comprises of 32 local authorities which are heterogeneous in nature of rural/urban/island communities, variations in political

control, standards of living, demographics etc which all affect the way that services are delivered, the priorities of the area and the methods used to engage the community in participation. This diversity allows for the study of variations in eParticipation initiatives which are evident and to investigate the barriers and influences of the development of eParticipation.

Chapter 3: Developments in eParticipation

3.1 Introduction to Chapter 3

Chapter 2 has set out the context for the development of public participation initiatives in Scottish local authorities in general and discussed the development and use of ICT for service delivery, providing information to the public and as a means of engaging people in eParticipation initiatives.

This chapter follows on from Chapter 2 by discussing the role that eParticipation specifically can play in engaging the public in policy making and deliberations with government. A brief history of the development of the Internet as a media for online activism will be provided to demonstrate that while there has been a decline in formal political activity, online political activity such as NGO campaigning has increased. While online activism does not constitute 'institutional participation', which is the main focus of this thesis, the increase in online participation by the public has been used as a pro eParticipation argument as demonstrated in Chapter 2.

This chapter will then follow with a discussion of the development of eParticipation and an outline of the scope of the literature that will be included in this chapter. The chapter will go on to outline the main arguments surrounding eParticipation and will demonstrate that there is little consensus in the literature about what impact, if any eParticipation will have on increasing public participation in policy making.

3.2 Scope of the literature outlined in the chapter

The development of eParticipation has been facilitated by the rapid development of communications tools and the adoption and acceptance of Internet technologies (Sanford and Rose, 2007). The academic study of eParticipation examines the use of electronic technologies for facilitating political participation. A challenge in researching eParticipation within the context of citizen participation initiatives is that the eParticipation research field is not simply a subset of the larger field of citizen participation research. eParticipation is a multi-disciplinary research area and has contributions from: political science, public administration, sociology, computer science,

psychology, information science and more. Conducting research in a rapidly developing and emerging field has challenges not least because few methodological or theoretical standards for evaluating eParticipation have been developed (Saebø *et al.* 2008). This research commenced in early 2005 and it was observed that there was little empirical research looking at institutionalised eParticipation from researchers traditionally associated with public participation research. More recently writers such as Graeme Smith who have a strong background in political participation have written on the topic eParticipation but there remains a theoretical void for the study of eParticipation and as Smith (2009) points out, there has still been little empirical work conducted.

Saebø *et al.* (2008) argue that eParticipation research is not new but can be seen as developing and refocusing existing fields of research- eParticipation can be seen as being a related research area to eDemocracy and eGovernment and has only recently emerged as a research area in its own right.

The fragmented nature of the research field has been observed by Sanford and Rose (2007) who attempted to present the 'current state' of the literature on eParticipation. They also observed that there was not a shared theoretical perspective for the discipline. Sanford and Rose (2007) observed that there was a shortage of literature examining the 'supply side' of eParticipation in particular the role of elected members and institutional aspects that affect the development of eParticipation. The academic literature on eParticipation tends to focus on the 'demand side' (see for example Gibson and Ward 2006) either trying to determine causal linkages between the use of technology and increased participation or on speculating about what makes eParticipation different from 'offline'' participation and how that either enhances or inhibits participation depending on the perspective of the author.

As indicted in the introduction, this study examines eParticipation as an evaluation of a participatory initiative and does not make an attempt to offer highly technical evaluations of the ICT solutions themselves. By placing the primary emphasis on the participation rather than the 'e' this study aims to make a contribution to filling the theoretical gap in the study of eParticipation. It would not have been appropriate, however, to completely overlook the literature not directly related to public participation. Relevant literature from Information Science (specifically literature on information seeking, information literacy and digital inclusion) has been included. This is because the way that people interact with information sources is important to consider when

examining the impact of new technologies and is central to some of the debates surrounding eParticipation. Further, relevant literature from the eGovernment literature has also been included to provide an overview of the technological and organisational challenges that affect technological developments in government organisations.

3.3 How has eParticipation developed?

As the Internet has developed as a mass communications medium along with other technologies such as mobile phones, there has been great speculation about the potential for ICT to transform various aspects of social and economic life including optimistic views that these technologies could reinvigorate the public sphere and have a positive impact on democracy (Dahlgren, 2005).

The apparent declining popularity of formal politics evidenced by factors such as the decline in membership of political parties and lower turnout at elections has been regarded as evidence of the erosion of social capital but there is evidence to the contrary. The decline in public participation in formal politics comes at a time when there has been an increase in public participation in informal politics and in particular the rise of *'cyberactivism'* has led some to think that ICTs could be a solution to the problem of disengagement with politics (Anderson, 2003; Berman and Mulligan, 2003).

Activist organisations quickly learned to utilise ICT for communicating with their members, promoting their cause and lobbying governments or other organisations. Auty (2004) argues that 'Setting up protest Web sites with critical, yet reasonable, content is a particularly effective way of attacking an opponent, party or policy.' (p. 219).

The potential for the use of the Internet to draw attention to campaigns and injustices, was recognised early on in the development of the media. In April 1994 the Native Forest Network used the Internet to coordinate an international campaign against the Hydro-Quebec's Great Whale Hydroelectric Project (Zelwietro, 1995). In 1995, before the Internet had become the ubiquitous medium for commerce and communication that it has today in Western countries, Dodson (1995) discussed the potential for the use of email, newsletters, bulletin boards and the world wide web by environmental organisations. Further to this, organisations such as the Association for Progressive

Communication had been hosting online discussion forums on environmental issues for many years (Anderson, 2000).

The rise of cyberactivism has led to a number of high profile online campaigns which can attract a large amount of media attention such as the Make Poverty History Campaign which saw a large amount of people engaged in online activities such as emailing Tony Blair 'votes' for trade justice when he was the UK Prime Minister (Nash, 2008). Some writers, however, question the overall effectiveness of this type of participation. The fact that it is so easy to get a large number of people to engage in online activism raises questions as to whether the participation is truly meaningful (Gural and Logie 2003) and can actually serve to de-legitimise ICT based campaigns (Kreuger, 2002). This is outlined by Chadwick (2006) in the quotation below:

> The 'cheap talk' effects of online campaign activity are rather paradoxical. Legislators are reacting to the increased electronic flow of opinion by dismissing much of it. This is perceived to be a function of the low costs to the citizen in producing a form letter email. High-cost form of communication such as old-fashioned letters are more highly valued (Chadwick, 2006, p. 121).

Despite these reservations about the value of Internet campaigning, it is likely that the Internet will continue to develop as a medium for activist organisations to engage with their members and try to broaden their appeal to other potential members. Chapter 2 demonstrated that the UK government believed that the use of ICT by the public for participating in online activism was evidence that the public would be willing to participate in formal politics using ICT as well. Some argue that by turning to Internet based protests and other forms of activism people are making a decision to 'opt out' of the formal political system (Weissberg, 2003). However, online activism has been demonstrated to be a method that successfully engages the public and has resulted in new ways of lobbying government and led to broader speculation about the possible implications of digital technologies on the democratic process.

3.4 The development of eParticipation in formal politics

In the *early days'* of Internet technology some believed that the Internet had the potential to transform the way that citizens interact with government creating a 21st version of ancient Greek politics (Kim, 2006). Indeed, some argued that there could be a total transformation of democracy itself and that new democratic institutions would emerge with a much greater capacity for citizen involvement in direct decision making and access to the previously inaccessible corridors of power (Chadwick, 2003). However, at the other end of the spectrum some have posited that ICTs will have a negative impact on democracy, reinforce social isolation and point to the dominance of corporate interests on the Internet (Carpini and Keeter, 2003; Rohlinger and Brown, 2009;). There is little consensus in the literature:

> The utopians propose that as more and more people connect to the Internet and engage in political conversation, governments will become more accountable to the people, direct citizen input into the political process will become ubiquitous and viable on-line political communities will form. Conversely, the dystopians fear that such direct democracy will amount to nothing more than mob rule and rash decision making, and that the flood of information provided by the Internet will wash up a large share of outright misinformation that does nothing but obscure sensible political dialogue. (Hill and Hughes, 1998, p.181).

The dichotomous views of the potential of the Internet to either enhance or impede political activity is also observed by Weare (2002):

> Researchers have linked the rise of the Internet to greater citizen empowerment and to the reinforcement of existing divisions of power; to increased social fragmentation and to the rise of new forms of community; to reinvigorated democratic discourse and to Internet road rage that poisons civic engagement; to a new golden age of participatory democracy and to threats of ever greater surveillance and control of individuals; to an interactive age of democracy that overcomes voter apathy and to a commercialization of political life that marginalizes democratic concerns. (Weare, 2002, p. 663)

Some theorists have switched sides as time has passed. For example Barber was initially optimistic about the potential of electronic democracy in *Three Scenarios for the future of Democracy and Strong Democracy* (1999) but in other works such as *A Passion for Democracy* (2000) he has promoted face-to-face deliberation above computer mediated communication.

Chapter 2 demonstrated that the development of eParticipation tools in local authorities has been influenced by a number of factors including greater pressures to consult and engage citizens in policy making and service delivery, the developments of new technologies and increased pressures for local authorities to make efficiency savings. As indicated in Chapter 2 there have been government funded initiatives to encourage the development of local eParticipation initiatives in England and Wales however, although there have been initiatives to promote eParticipation in Scotland. From a review of the literature it was found that local eParticipation initiatives have also been developed outside of the UK.

One of the earliest examples of local eParticipation was developed in Minnesota in the USA by Steven Clift who has been credited for coining the term *'e-democracy'* and has gone on to write extensively about the use of the Internet for enhancing democracy. The Minnesota e-democracy tool included email discussion forums where the public could set the agenda for debate and was found to be very successful (Clift, 2003). Local eParticipation initiatives are also prevalent in Scandinavian countries. For example, Grönlund (2003) conducted 4 case studies in Sweden where there is a great interest in eParticipation at the local level and found that, similarly to the findings from studies of UK eParticipation, there was a great variation in the tools that were developed and that many different models of eParticipation were evident. Jensen (2003) reviewed an online public sphere of democratic dialogue called Nordpol.dk that was launched by the county council of Nordjylland in Denmark prior to the regional elections of 2001.

Chappalet and Kilchenmann (2005) describe eParticipation initiatives in Switzerland that aim to enhance electoral choice. Switzerland prides itself on having a tradition of direct democracy but some are concerned that the interactive tools undermine real political debate. Also, South Korea was ranked sixth in terms of the e-participation index constructed by the United Nations in 2004 and has been promoting eParticipation initiatives with the use of online policy forums in many public agencies. (Kim and Holzer, 2006). As eParticipation initiatives become more commonly used for facilitating

participation not only in the well established democracies but also in newer democracies (Choi 2006; Kim 2006), the need to develop evaluative mechanisms for studying these initiatives has become more pronounced in order to determine to what extent eParticipation offers genuine opportunities for citizens to participate in a meaningful way.

Grönlund (2003) draws attention to problems of evaluating eParticipation because many initiatives are part of pilot projects and argues that while projects are still at the early stage of development it is hard to find any with 'flourishing participation' or that have radically changed relationships between citizens and decision makers. Grönlund (2003) argues that measurable results will take a long time to show and so it is very difficult to tell whether or not they are successful at achieving the aims of increased participation and a more open and responsive government.

These criticisms notwithstanding, it is recognised that they provide valuable insights into how the technologies work in practice although it should be recognised that projects initiated with independent funding will likely face problems with integrating them with the overall participation strategy after the project is ended. Lack of funding and/or technical or advisory support to keep the initiative going can be a barrier to the sustainability of pilot initiatives. As Coleman and Norris (2005) point out:

> The problem of endless experimentation is the wheels tend to be recreated and sustainable projects are scarce... more coherent evaluations of experiments are needed and should be shared internationally. A distinction needs to be made between short-term pilots and ongoing experimentation, designed to learn appropriate lessons as they develop… one-off exercises will always run the risk of being seen as tokenistic or politically marginal. Sustainable e-democracy requires strong buy-in from political and administrative actors (p. 81).

 In May 2004 there was a meeting at the Oxford Internet Institute. The group discussed the challenges and barriers to adopting eParticipation initiatives and attempted to gain an understanding of their impact. Their synopsis of findings pointed to an inevitable increase in eParticipation in governance as demonstrated in the following quotation:

> … the most forceful message from the forum was that e-democratic trends are emerging whether particular actora (politicians, bureaucrats, citizens) want them or not. The choice is not between governing in the age of the internet or

not, but how contemporary governance can utilize and be in step with the digital opportunities that surround them and the digital expectations of an increasingly online generation. The debate is about adaptation rather than ideals. (Coleman and Norris, 2004, p. 81)

It is evident from the analysis of the influences of the development of eParticipation that the trend is likely to continue and that eParticipation will become increasingly common at all levels of government, including local authorities. As has been demonstrated in the literature review there are wildly varying claims and counter-claims about eParticipation.

Despite the increased use of technology by government organisations described in Chapter 2, the digital revolution anticipated by some writers has not happened and the literature on the use of ICTs for participation and democracy has become rather more reserved in its ambitions and aspirations for the impact of ICTs on political processes. Coleman and Norris (2005) describe this as the transition from 'speculative futurology to piecemeal experimentation and embryonic policy' (p. 70). As indicated in the introduction, Wright (2006) highlights three schools of thought about the effect of the Internet on democratic politics: revolutionaries who believe that the Internet will transform the democratic system, a middle view that ICTs could re-invigorate representative democracy by providing technical solutions and 'normalisation' which contends that Internet technologies will simply become another part of the established political system.

3.5 Objectives of eParticipation

With so many claims and counterclaims about what impact, if any, developments in ICT have on participation, the importance of conducting research to investigate these issues is clear. It is therefore important to set out what the main objectives of eParticipation are in order to critically evaluate the claims that eParticipation is an effective form of public participation.

Ann Macintosh who is one of the most prolific academic writers in the field of eParticipation argued in 2004 that the overall objectives of eParticipation are:

- reach a wider audience to enable broader participation

- support participation through a range of technologies to cater for the diverse technical and communicative skills of citizens
- provide relevant information in a format that is both more accessible and more understandable to the target audience to enable more informed contributions
- engage with a wider audience to enable deeper contributions and support deliberative debate.

This chapter will now present a summary of the main arguments surrounding these objectives of eParticipation.

3.5.1 Does eParticipation improve participation by improving information provision?

It is argued that eParticipation initiatives could be more effective than offline forms of participation because citizens have access to more information on which to base their decisions and come to an enlightened understanding (Jensen, 2003) and that in turn administrators can use the information gathered to create better policies (Chadwick, 2003). Web technologies allow for large amounts of information to be made available at a relatively insignificant cost compared with distributing information in hard copy which could facilitate citizens to scrutinise and monitor the authorities to hold them to greater accountability (Äström, 2004). Further, developments in technologies such as RSS feeds, email alerts etc are allowing users to access the information that they desire (Scott, 2006). However, the view that making large amounts of information available will have an instant impact on accountability and empowerment of citizens makes certain incorrect assumptions about the way that people seek information.

A large literature on the way people seek information is available within the Information Science literature. It is not necessary to go into this in great detail in this thesis but a key point from this literature is that 'information seeking' is costly for individuals in terms of time and therefore people are selective about the information that they seek and do not choose to be informed about everything (Ferejohn, 1990). Further, people tend to utilise information sources that are easy to access (Bates, 2005) rather than always seeking the 'best' source of information and so may not turn to their local authority website as a first point of contact for information. Models of information seeking and technology acceptance highlight the importance of educating people about the availability of new sources of information because 'People will stick to their habits of

using traditional channels unless they happen to learn of a better alternative' (van Dijk, *et al.*, 2008).

The nature of web based information means that people have to be actively seeking the information in order to find it and therefore some argue that, rather than acting as an equalising force for improving information access amongst citizens, it may increase the gap between the information haves and have nots (Cornfield, 2003). While the Internet does potentially provide much greater access for citizens to find information, this assumes that they are interested in obtaining the information and that they have the skills to be able to interpret it (Polat, 2005; Wallis, 2005). It could be argued that it is unlikely that many members of the public will have the time or inclination to browse through the information and documents available on local authority websites to scrutinise them. Some writers also question the assumption that access to information is really *'empowering'* at all (Galusky, 2003).

Baker and Panagopoulos (2004) also argue that '...local government policymakers have recognized that websites only become viable alternatives for service delivery, or communication, when the number of users reaches a significant threshold to be *'*politically viable*'* offsetting the costs of implementing another channel of communication' (p.100).

This demonstrates the paradox that local authorities may not regard web based information resources as a priority for investment until there are more users, and the public may not be inclined to move to online information seeking unless it is considered to be a better alternative to their traditional sources. In Scotland, this point is moot to a certain extent because providing information online and developing online service delivery is a statutory requirement. However, Kampen and Snijkers (2003) highlight the problem of *'*information overload*'* which also detracts from the argument that providing large amounts of information electronically will necessarily lead to benefits for citizens. People can be suspicious of the credibility of information they find on the Internet especially when information sources tend to appear and disappear very quickly (Hollis and Jobe, 1999). It is therefore essential that the *'*currency*'* of the information provided is good so that users do not have to sift through irrelevant or out of date information and that the information is presented in a user-friendly and accessible manner.

These criticisms notwithstanding, some empirical research has been conducted to analyse the impact of online information seeking that gives grounds for optimism about

the impact of web based information sources on participation. Shah *et al.* (2005), analysed data from a national panel survey conducted in February 1999, June 2000 and November 2000 in the USA and found that:

> …informational use encouraging citizen communication, which in turn spurs community engagement….Online information seeking and interactive messaging- uses of the Web as a resource and a forum- both strongly influence civic engagement, often more so than do traditional print and broadcast media and face-to-face communication (p. 551).

From analysing the literature surrounding the argument that eParticipation may have a beneficial impact on citizens' knowledge and understanding and therefore facilitate a more 'enlightened understanding' it would appear that this is a credible possibility and one that distinguishes eParticipation from 'offline' participation where it is simply not possible to provide the same amount of information in hard copy. However, it must not be assumed that simply making information available is enough. The information must be easily accessible and in a user-friendly format to allow for different skill levels and information literacy levels of users. As has been indicated in Chapter 2, all Scottish local authorities have a website and there are statutory guidelines to provide information and services online. These websites have been critically analysed and 'benchmarked' as part of the primary data collection element of this thesis and the results are presented in Chapter 5.

3.5.2 Does eParticipation increase the base of participation?

Some believe that eParticipation opens up the possibility for more people to participate by allowing people to participate at a time convenient for them and eliminating the problem of having to travel to a particular location. For example, a person can participate in most online participative activities at any time whereas public meetings are organised at specific times which may not be convenient for everyone such as those who have caring responsibilities or night shift workers (Rethemeyer, 2007). The Internet is also credited with providing an anonymous and non confrontational environment to express views, concerns and opinions (Ward *et al.*, 2003) which may encourage people to participate who are intimidated by public meetings.

The perception that ICTs could be an effective way of broadening the base of participation has been cited for many years. Kurland and Egan (1996) claimed that the Internet will foster democratic participation because 'The Net is blind to gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other demographic characteristics. All persons have equal standing' (p. 390).It is suggested that eParticipation can broaden the appeal of political participation by engaging 'hard to reach' groups such as people from ethnic minorities and young people (Gibson *et al.* 2005, Macintosh *et al.* 2003, Chatterton and Style, 2001) and that the Internet provides a potential for giving marginalised people a real voice in government policy making (Eggers, 2005). Stanley and Weare (2004) conducted analysis of a Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) discussion in the USA and found that the Internet discussions attracted more people who were previously politically inactive and that a greater diversity of participants were involved. Page (2005) also found that while people from ethnic minority backgrounds were less likely to participate in formal politics they are likely to participate in online campaigning. Further, Eggers (2005) argues that as the Internet has enabled physically disabled people to conduct activities from home such as online shopping and renewing library books that eParticipation also holds the potential to involve and empower physically disabled people who are often disengaged. This view was not based on empirical findings but rather on speculation that as physically disabled people are less able to travel to public meetings and other 'offline' public participation mechanisms, that eParticipation would provide a more easily accessible form of participation for these people.

It has been argued that young people may be amongst the 'winners' of eParticipation initiatives because they are more likely to utilise new technologies and, as they are also a group which has a traditionally low level of participation and are disengaged with formal politics (O'Toole *et al.* 2003), they have been the focus of many studies of eParticipation. Gibson *et al.* (2005) analysed data from a national opinion poll survey from the UK in 2002 and found that the claim that Internet use may have an impact on engaging young people may have some credence because while only 10% of young people participated in offline political activity, 30% of 15-24 year olds have engaged in online political activity. However, in their analysis, Gibson *et al.* (2005) point out that younger people tend to embrace new innovations but then abandon them and so it is too early to tell if the trend for digital participation will continue. Further, in an analysis of public participation in online and offline contexts in the UK using Oxford Internet Institute survey data from 2003 and 2005, Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006) found that

younger people are more likely to seek political information online but also that they are not likely to use the Internet to contact public officials.

It is also important not to regard 'young people' as a homogenous group. Livingstone *et al.* (2005) conducted analysis of the UK Children Go Online survey. They found that:

> … boys, middle-class children and older teenagers are more likely than girls, working-class children and younger teenagers to engage in online communication, information-seeking and peer-to-peer connection. There are some exceptions, however, most notably that girls are more likely than boys to visit civil/political sites and use email... (p. 295).

Livingstone *et al.* found that younger children and those from a lower socio-economic background were more likely to be disengaged and argue that there are complex reasons behind take up of participative opportunities by young people.

Research conducted in Bristol as part of the Local e-Democracy National Project, conducted interviews and peer sessions with 196 young people, project coordinators and national stakeholder groups. They found that a key benefit of eParticipation is that it enables the engagement of people who do not like to participate in face to face discussions. They also found that there is a potential to overcome geographical distance and rural isolation. However, they found that the design and publicity of the initiatives is key to their success and that schools should play a role in introducing and encouraging young people to participate in the initiatives (RBA Research, 2005). This demonstrates that simply providing eParticipation tools will not be enough to overcome barriers to participation and that there must be a combination of online and offline methods.

 In investigating the 'normalisation thesis' that posits that internet use will follow expected patterns for participation and therefore lead to a narrowing of those who participate rather than an increase in participation, Gibson *et al.* (2005) analysed the results of a national opinion poll survey of 1972 people in Britain aged 15 and up conducted in 2002 and found that only 17% of respondents engaged in any form of online participation as opposed to 66% who engaged in offline political activity. They argued, however, that both offline and online variables should be taken into account and challenged the 'normalisation thesis' arguing instead that a contextualised

approach should be taken for determining the impact of Internet use on political participation:

> … UK citizens engaging in online participation are significantly different from citizens engaging in existing and more traditional forms of politics such as contacting politicians and officials, discussing politics and being involved in organisational activities. In particular, while female citizens and those from poorer backgrounds are less likely to do more activist politics offline or contact organisations online, they are equally likely to engage in online participation in general as men and higher social status individuals, once existing levels of political involvement and experience on the Internet are taken into account. (Gibson *et al.*, 2005, p. 578)

However, in an a subsequent study Lusoli, Ward and Gibson (2006) analysed the results of data from another national opinion poll survey of 1932 people in the UK conducted in 2004 found that:

> The results of the survey certainly provide a sobering antidote to the hype that often surrounds the role of the internet in the political world. Not only are those engaging via e-channels few in numbers, but they largely resemble traditional political participants and activists. The danger remains that e-politics will simply exacerbate existing participation and engagement gaps by amplifying those voices that are already prominent in the parliamentary system. Simply adding new electronic channels of communication to pre-existing structures or putting information online will not automatically produce a democratic nirvana (pp. 39-40).

The claim that the Internet can give a better voice to those who are marginalised from traditional political activity is unproven but it seems unlikely that simply creating a new medium for participation will change the traditional patterns of access to power and decision making (Rethemeyer, 2007). Some studies have tried to isolate the impact of the Internet on civic engagement usually by multivariate analysis of quantitative data. Fairly early studies of the use of the Internet for communicating with politicians was conducted by Bimber (1999) who found that the changes in technology had a very small impact on overall citizen communication with government. Bimber (1999) also found that a gender gap existed with women being less inclined to use the internet for communication than men. Gibson *et al.* (2006) found that the impact of the Internet on

civic engagement was ambiguous but that there was no evidence that the Internet was transforming politically inactive people into active citizens.

It should also be remembered that technology adoption varies depending on cultural and social factors. Coco and Short (2004) examined a local government program in Queensland, Australia and found that there were established local patterns of interaction and communication that had positive and negative impacts on the adoption of eParticipation. This means that making broad generalisations about eParticipation facilitating greater participation simply because it is more convenient for people are simplistic and that existing patterns and norms of communication should be accounted for and that initiatives must be designed with the needs of the community in mind (Chadwick, 2006).

Further to the earlier concerns about the information seeking skills required to gain an 'enlightened understanding' there is also great concern that the level of information literacy required to participate in electronic participation schemes and differing attitudes towards the technology may exclude certain demographic groups and lead to disempowerment (Shelley *et al.*, 2004). Older people and people from lower socio-economic groups are often used as examples of possible 'losers' of eParticipation (Sagle and Vabo, 2005; Mehta and Darier, 1998).

While this thesis does not dwell too heavily on the technical side of eParticipation, issues such as design of interfaces and usability cannot be overlooked. It is therefore important to conduct end user testing with groups of citizens and training should be provided for staff in how to engage with people through the tools (Gunter, 2006). Taylor and Burt (2005) recommend that government organisations can draw on the expertise of voluntary sector organisations for assistance in developing eParticipation. These organisations are perceived as having good links with the politically disengaged and excluded groups and who can have higher levels of trust than government. Saglie and Vabo (2005) argue that while many citizens will be excluded from participating in ICT-based initiatives it is necessary to have opportunities to participate in non-electronic forms as well. The view is in keeping with the argument of this thesis that eParticipation should be a part of an overall strategy for participation rather than a distinct form of participation.

It is clear from the analysis of the literature on the potential impact of eParticipation on the characteristics of those participating that there are predicted winners and losers

from eParticipation. Those who predict that eParticipation will broaden the base of participation mainly point to reasons of convenience, the anonymity of the medium and assumptions about the way that people use technology- for example that because young people are more technologically astute that eParticipation will automatically appeal to them. Studies to determine whether this is the case or not have demonstrated that the problem of political disengagement is complex and viewing eParticipation as being a 'solution' in itself is dangerously simplistic and suggests that some writers' expectations of the impact of technology could be disproportionate (Kubicek, 2005). It could be argued, for example, that the reason people are not participating in politics is not through lack of opportunities but simply because it is not a primary concern in their lives (Mechling, 2002). If people do not wish to participate in local politics offline, there is little evidence to suggest that they will participate in local politics online either (Saglie and Vabo, 2005).

As the primary research element of this thesis examines the supply side of eParticipation rather than the demand side, it does not directly examine the link between Internet use and local political participation. However, the thesis does try to determine the reasons given for non-participation by local authority officers, to examine whether increasing participation is cited as a reason for local authorities to develop eParticipation and whether or not they can demonstrate evidence that eParticipation has attracted a more diverse range of participants.

3.5.3. Does eParticipation support participation through a range of technologies to cater for the diverse technical and communicative skills of citizens?

The thesis so far has largely discussed eParticipation as a single phenomenon. However, the development of eParticipation has evolved through a combination of several factors and has been largely experimental in nature. As a consequence a multitude of tools and ideas for their implementation have emerged which some claim offer the possibility of strengthening participation:

> By reducing the barriers to civic engagement and widening the opportunities for
> political debate, the Internet can enhance civic participation in a myriad of ways,
> from e-advocacy and online consultation forums to electronic town hall

meetings, political information sites, and other new electronic capabilities. (Eggers, 2005, p. 144)

Anderson (2002) argues that the very nature of interactivity on the Internet is leading to speculation about its potential for facilitating more civic interactions. However as Ferber *et al.* (2005) indicate 'It is easy to see a link between Web site interactivity and increased participation, at least when interactivity is used as a positive-sounding but ill-defined concept' (p. 86). Ferber *et al.* argue that the medium has been defined more by the promise rather than what it actually delivers.

There have been so many experiments and different tools and mechanisms created for eParticipation that a comprehensive analysis of all the different types of eParticipation is impossible and analysis of the different sub-types of eParticipation is rather sparse in the literature. However, the main eParticipation tools will now be outlined briefly.

Some eParticipation tools such as basic electronic questionnaires are essentially the direct electronic equivalent of paper based surveys which are a very widely used tool for public participation. The use of questionnaires by local authorities are primarily associated with consultations on a specific issue or a 'user satisfaction' style survey to gain views on service provision (Berntzen and Winsvold, 2005).

It is argued that online questionnaires are cheaper to administer (Berntzen and Winsvold, 2005) and may elicit more considered participation than offline questionnaires because of the possibilities for communicating more information electronically than is available on paper. For example, in addition to the questionnaire, local authorities could post policy documents etc in the same part of the website. This point relates back to the first benefit of eParticipation claimed by MacIntosh (2004) and as has already been discussed, the premise that increased information will necessarily lead to a more 'enlightened understanding' by citizens is contested.

Miller *et al.* (2002) conducted an experiment comparing the results of electronic and postal surveys in the USA. They found that response rates of the Web surveys were lower but that the responses themselves were not hugely varied from the postal surveys. More research is required to investigate the way that citizens answer online and offline questionnaires is needed to determine what impact, if any, the medium of communication has on response rates, demographic representation of responses and the way that people complete online and offline questionnaires. There are also

concerns about the representativeness of online questionnaires, especially if they are anonymous. In a study of internet vs paper based responses to an online questionnaire Rowe *et al.* (2006) found that respondents to the web survey were more likely to be male, younger and from more affluent parts of the country than respondents of paper based surveys.

While simple electronic questionnaires can be viewed as being fairly similar to their offline equivalent, interactive tools or 'games' require more sophisticated software tools to develop and administer. An example of an interactive tool could be a virtual planning game where participants could give ideas on the development of a public space. In an analysis of eParticipation initiatives to engage young people in Bristol, Watson (2005) found that 'interactive features' such as games were very popular with young people and suggested that there is scope for further utilising these tools to engage young people.

Robbins *et al.* (2008) developed an interactive web-based survey that provided a tool for citizens that visually represented tax and fiscal spending and allowed residents to see the impact on their tax bill. The researchers believed that this tool improves on existing surveys because of the graphical element and that the tool could be used for a formal consultation and as a public engagement mechanism.

With Interactive tools or 'games' similar issues arise of representativeness and validity of responses that have been highlighted about electronic questionnaires and the greater the interactivity, the greater the potential problem of digital exclusion unless the tools are very user friendly and intuitive. There is also a degree of ambiguity as to how the results would be used in the policy making process and, if they are just a 'public engagement mechanism' there is an implication that they do not have a direct impact on decision making in which case citizens may be disinclined to participate.

There is a tendency to equate eParticipation solely with the Internet but non-web forms of eParticipation have also been developed. SMS texting, for example, has been purported to facilitate greater engagement (Griffin *et al.* , 2006). SMS texting can be used in many ways such as getting results of short polls or providing the opportunity to set an agenda for discussion. Griffin *et al.*'s study in 2006 examined the use of SMS texting to promote youth engagement. The results were not encouraging; it was found that there was a low response rate, that participants were concerned with the relevance of the topics and that the 'instant' nature of texting raised expectations that results will

be analysed and actions taken swiftly which is not necessarily the case.

Once again, there are issues with ensuring that the responses are representative (especially if the results are anonymous), issues with exclusion of people who do not have access to mobile phones and whether or not the people are expected to pay for the text which may be a barrier to responses. There are further issues with the amount of information that can be meaningfully communicated in a text to ensure that there was adequate understanding of the issue.

As well as providing opportunities to collect views from individual citizens, eParticipation tools can also be created to facilitate dialogues. For example discussion forums can be set up for a specific issue or strategy or can be 'open' to allow citizens to set the agenda for discussion. They can be conducted between citizens and elected members and officers or could be developed to encourage dialogues between citizens (Kim and Holzer, 2006). The data from discussion forums is difficult to analyse and getting definitive conclusions by aggregating responses is much harder than with quantitative responses to a questionnaire (Kakabadse *et al.* 2003). The purpose of the discussion and the way that the results will be used must be clearly defined so that participants are aware the extent to which their contributions will impact on policymaking.

Online discussion forums require moderation which can be time intensive and has cost implications. Further, there is the question of whether or not participants should be required to register to participate. Registration has the advantage of being able to alert people to the discussions that they are contributing to and provide feedback of how the results are used but may deter people from participating. If participants are allowed to contribute without providing any personal details questions could be raised about the representativeness of responses. Papacharissi (2004) examined the way individuals interacted on Usenet in order to determine whether the issue of anonymity made people more aggressive and less mindful of others and found that most discussions remained 'calm and mild'. However, he also stated that it is important not to overestimate the public sphere potential of such online discussions.

There are also concerns about the quality of online discussions and whether or not they facilitate genuine participation. Ferber *et al.* (2006), examined public discussion as found on NJ.com and its public forums. They found that there was a large amount of

political dialogue and that politicians seemed to be participating but that the quality of the debate was poor.

eParticipation initiatives can also include 'live chats' with administrators and/or elected officials (Breindl and Francq, 2008). For example, these may take the form of online question and answer sessions arranged at specific times. Webchats can be difficult to manage and the 'rules' must be established prior to the event such as whether the public can ask follow up questions or whether they are a straight question and answer session. As well as the participating elected member(s) or officer(s) there are also support teams required to assist with the technical side of managing the web chat. As with online discussion forums there are questions over whether the participants should remain anonymous or whether they should be verified to make sure that they are eligible to participate and to ensure against the domination of activists.

Webchats can be seen as facilitating a more personal form of communication than online discussions and newer developments in technologies allow for the opportunity for using voice and video communication in addition to typing text. Webchats allow elected members and officers a direct form of communication with participants than some other forms of eParticipation. Analysis of the discussions is difficult, however, and it is difficult to determine whether or not participants are contributing to a policy process. There is also the danger that politicians can see webchats as being a marketing or PR exercise rather than a genuine attempt to engage the public in a dialogue.

The final tool that will be reviewed in this overview of eParticipation is ePetitions. ePetitioning has been used in the Scottish Parliament since 2000 and more recently the Number 10 website introduced ePetitions in 2006. In order for an ePetition strategy to have credence there must be a commitment on the part of the government organisation to take into account petitions that meet a certain number of responses. This does not necessarily mean that new policies will be created as a direct result of the citizens but would demonstrate a willingness to devolve some degree of influence to the citizens. However, this raises questions of accountability. The parameters as to what can be included in an ePetition must be set, for example someone could set up an ePetition to abolish council tax which, while it may be popular, is not a feasible option. There have been high profile examples of ePetition strategies backfiring, most recently with the ePetitioning initiative on the Number 10 website where some 2 million people signed up for a petition protesting against the government's road pricing

initiative which revealed a lack of transparency in how the results of the ePetitions were being used and a negative response in the media (Miller, 2008)

There is also a concern amongst some that due to the ease that ePetitions can be signed up for and the impact of 'virtual chain letters' where requests to sign up for petitions can be passed around by email to potentially thousands or even millions of people, that respondents may not have carefully considered all the issues but have just 'signed' because they were asked to.

ePetitions have been used as part of a pilot initiative for the local eDemocracy national project in Kingston upon Thames from 2004. Macintosh and Whyte (2006) found the initiative to be transparent because it established a process for publishing decisions and had strong political support but that it lacked integration with the wider consultative process and did not produce clear outcomes.

The diversity of tools available complicates research into eParticipation. As has been mentioned earlier Smith (2009) argues that there is such little standardisation that analysing the effectiveness of eParticipation as a public engagement mechanism is extremely difficult. It is believed, however, that the methodology devised for this study (detailed in Chapter 4) will overcome the problem of heterogeneity of the tools.

3.5.4 Does eParticipation allow for the engagement of a wider audience to enable deeper contributions and support deliberative debate?

Some argue that web technologies could help reverse the erosion of social capital defined and observed by the likes of Putman (1995). As has been demonstrated in the previous section, eParticipation tools vary widely from electronic versions of consultation such as electronic questionnaires to more direct decision making such as ePetitions. These different tools have different purposes and not all modes of Internet use facilitate political participation (Kim, 2006). For example Kim (2006) found that engagement in social networking did not have a positive impact on political engagement but that Internet deliberation did.

Deliberative solutions have long been seen as a more effective form of participation than many other participative mechanisms and are purported to lead to decisions that

are considered more legitimate and justified by participants and that the process of engaging in deliberation transforms the preferences of participants (Melo and Baiocchi, 2006). Chadwick (2006) highlights that 'While consultative e-democracy mostly stresses the vertical flows of government- citizen communication, deliberative models conceive of a more complex horizontal and multi-directional interactivity' (Chadwick, 2006, p. 100).

The potential for the Internet to facilitate genuine deliberation is contested. Wilhelm (2000) points out that with asynchronous deliberative mechanisms a person is unlikely to get a response to a posting straight away and that the deliberative potential of online discussions is limited because:

> It is unlikely that individuals in a political forum who simply provide messages and neither 'listen' nor respond to the viewpoints of others will change their opinions and preferences. They are interested mainly in vocalizing their individual or private interests and care little for adapting the position of another through persuasion, negotiation and compromise (Wilhelm, 2000, p. 44).

Government initiated online deliberation usually has a top-down perspective rather than encouraging members of the public to set the agenda for debate (Dahlgren, 2005) but 'while interaction is relatively constricted, it can still at times serve as a sector of the public sphere' (Dahlgren, 2005). Albrect (2006) conducted an analysis of a deliberative policy making tool that was created as part of the DEMOS project in Hamburg, He found that the level of quality of debate was high and close to the rational-critical ideal of deliberative theory and that there was not excessive problems of 'flaming' (when participants become abusive to one another) although the forum that was advertised was visibly moderated which has resource implications.

Further, the premise of the Internet being a vehicle for social capital is disputed. Just because people have access to the Internet it does not mean that they will use it for political participation. Wellman *et al.* (2001) argue that internet users use electronic media in addition to and not instead of offline communications media and therefore the impact of the Internet can only be seen as supplementary to social capital. Ulsaner (2004) argues that the Internet is not an untapped 'reservoir of social capital' (p. 239) and that most people do not go onto the Internet looking to build a sense of community. The notion that the Internet by its very nature can facilitate engagement and have a positive effect on democracy is disputed (Salter, 2004) and it should be remembered

that the Internet is a communications medium and is therefore neither 'positive' nor 'negative' in itself (Agre, 2002). Vandenberg (2000) discusses the phenomenon of 'cybercitizenship' and states that the decisions made may be open to influence by powerful organisations, that people may make ill-informed opinions based on inaccurate media reports and warns that digital democracy may result in populist mob rule.

So far this chapter has critically evaluated the literature on eParticipation that predominantly focuses on 'demand side' issues relating to the particular qualities of eParticipation that distinguish it from other forms of participation and the debates as to whether or not this will increase public participation and engagement. The chapter will now go on to evaluate the literature surrounding the debate on the impact of eParticipation on the 'supply side' of government institutions.

3.5.5 Does eParticipation promote transparency and efficiency in Government?

This section will relate primarily on the internal processes of local authorities that need to be developed to ensure that eParticipation strategies represent genuine opportunities for the public to participate. The issue of transparency of outcome is important to all participative initiatives. It is argued that eParticipation can facilitate transparency of governance and make government organizations more responsive to public preferences (Baker and Panagopoulos, 2004). Chadwick (2003) argues that developments in ICT could mean that 'Government becomes a 'learning organization' able to respond to the needs of its citizens, who are in turn able to influence public bureaucracies by rapid, aggregative feedback mechanisms such as e-mail and interactive web sites' Chadwick, 2003, p. 447).

However, as with any participative initiative, it will only succeed if it offers genuine opportunities for participation. The eParticipation initiatives must have clear objectives, processes for incorporating the results into the policy process so that the participants know that their participation will be worthwhile (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001; Coleman, 2004). This is particularly true given the climate of mistrust in government institutions where citizens feel disengaged. In order to build trust between citizens and governments, officers and administrators must demonstrate that citizens' views are genuinely being listened to and that power is being distributed (Yang, 2005).

It is argued the eParticipation may reduce the costs of consultation to the local authorities (Weare, 2002) and so may be seen as preferable to other forms of consultation. However, if eParticipation initiatives are just seen as a 'cheap and quick' way of ticking the consultation box to satisfy the statutory requirements of Best Value and community planning then this would not represent a genuine shift to more participative governance. Further, eParticipation is not 'cost free'. For example, online questionnaires can be created which reduce the costs of printing and sending out paper based questionnaires and data entry and some electronic analysis tools have been developed which analyse quantitative data 'on the fly' (Rowe *et al.*, 2006) thus reducing the costs of paying for statistical analysis of data. However, new systems have to be developed or purchased which will have cost implications. Once the systems are in place there needs to be monitoring for improper use and there must be new processes in place for collecting, collating and analysing the data produced (Baker and Panagopoulos, 2004, Kampen and Srijikers, 2003) and producing clear and transparent outcomes. For example, it is relatively easy to add in a discussion forum function onto a website. However, if this discussion is to be used as part of a policy-making process, the data retrieved from the forums would require qualitative analysis either by researchers or through software tools that must also be purchased and integrated into the systems.

Kakabase *et al.* (2003) argue that 'A poor choice of what to purchase, a badly conceived contract, or inadequately trained staff, for example, can lead to problems such as a restricted ability to communicate degraded performance, or excessive costs.'(Kakabadse *et al.* 2003, p. 52)

In a survey of ICT based participation initiatives in 31 European Cities, Kinder (2002) found that 84% of local authorities expect that they will have to significantly change their working practices and that 45% believed that there would have to be radical adjustments to their internal processes in order to be able to effectively incorporate eParticipation into decision making with greater staff time being required to effect the changes being cited as a primary area of concern rather than technological concerns. There are also organisational culture issues that may act as a barrier to eParticipation in government organisations. In order for any organisation, whether in the public or private sector to effectively integrate e-solutions into their organisation their must be both the technological capability and the support of the members of staff (Levy, 2001; Sterling, 2005). As was indicated in the review of the policies affecting the development

of eParticipation in Chapter 2, the majority of government IT spending is focused on the administrative process more associated with e-government rather than on democratic or participative uses of technology (Mahrer and Krimmer, 2005).

When eParticipation tools are developed they must not be seen as an 'add on' or as a way for a government organisation to appear more innovative and progressive or they will be doomed to failure. If people get the impression that their views are not taken into account (or at least acknowledged) then it will simply serve to further reinforce the perceptions of mistrust that the public have in government (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001). Further, as was highlighted earlier in this chapter, the perceived 'cheapness' of eParticipation may make it less highly valued than other forms of communication by administrators and elected members (Chadwick, 2006) and be less inclined to take the results of an eParticipation initiative into account in decision making. Clift (2002) states that eParticipation solutions should be incorporated into the official democratic processes in order to be effective which supports the argument advanced in this thesis that viewing eParticipation as being 'different' from other kinds of participation leads to a fragmented participation policy and inhibits the development of genuine participation.

3.5.6 Power and eParticipation

This issue of the extent to which a participatory exercise devolves decision making is important with all participatory initiatives, as has been indicted in the last chapter Irvin and Stansbury (2004) argue that some participatory initiatives do not offer genuine opportunities for participation but rather are awareness-raising exercises where citizens are guided towards 'making decisions administrators would have made anyway' and it is also argued that administrators only pick up ideas from participatory initiatives that fit with their own agenda (Mayer *et al.*, 2005). This section will primarily demonstrate that the institutional context that eParticipation tools are developed will have a bearing on how much control is devolved to the public and will also highlight some of the issues surrounding representative democracy and participative democracy with eParticipation initiatives.

Despite the views held by some that eParticipation would devolve more power to the public than offline methods of consultation. Parvez (2008) found that eParticipation strategies tend to be implemented from the top down, that the design of the tools tend to reflect existing practices for engagement and that there is little integration with online

consultations and the traditional offline exercises. Further, the institutional context within which the initiatives are developed will strongly influence the way that the eParticipation tools are developed and provide the norms and procedures surrounding their use (Parvez and Ahmed, 2006). Studies have shown that government websites are the product of technical, political and other choices and that the technical design of websites also has an impact on the level of participation by the public. For example, the design of online discussion forums has an impact on the deliberative quality of the debate (Wright and Street, 2007).

While some envisaged that eParticipation will have a transformational impact on government (Chadwick, 2003), the notion that eParticipation can affect institutional changes to the structures of government is also disputed as Gascó (2003) illustrates:

> Which direction … depend[s] on the mental models of the actors, which, in turn, results from the incentives structure within the public sector. Thus, the decisions those actors make are influenced by those designs, understandings, and used. But not only that, as a result, the new information and communication technologies that give rise to electronic government projects, themselves, are transformed in the process of being designed and used- path dependence. (Gascó, 2003, p. 12).

Gascó concludes that the way that Electronic government projects (which includes eParticipation) are implemented depends on a number of institutional factors and concludes that:

- Electronic government projects are being implemented considering the type of institution they are inserted into, that is the current formal and informal rules and incentives systems embedded in the governmental structures.
- Electronic government projects do not necessarily alter that type of institution for greater efficiency and transparency or lead to culture and actors' mental models transformations.
- Electronic government projects will cause institutional change when they give rise to the adjustment of the whole set of technological, managerial, and political variables affected by ICTs implementation.
- Electronic government projects do not determine whether institutional change, when occurring, takes a positive or negative direction, for the incrementalism

theory explanations do not totally avoid error in decision-making processes. (Gascó, 2003, p. 12)

Blake (1999) argues that in order to effect genuine change in terms of citizen engagement that it is necessary to create genuinely democratic new institutional arrangements rather than merely replace existing exclusionist institutions with different equally exclusionist ones. Democratic institutions tend to innovate within the established structures of political control and well-established organisational routes. Institutions do not seek to render themselves obsolete (Raab and Bellamy, 2004; Needham, 2004).

Although the idea of engaging the public in more participation to enhance the legitimacy of political institutions sounds appealing, it potentially creates the paradox of de-legitimising the institutions that it seeks to enhance. Power may be devolved from the elected representatives and more authority placed in the hands of the administrative side of government who are largely responsible for initiating eParticipation initiatives (Chadwick, 2003). Technologies can be either adopted to reproduce and reinforce existing patters of power and control or to change them. Officers and civil servants may gain more power by gaining control over the information flows between citizens and elected members because they largely control the ICT resources and so can influence the agenda in more overt ways than with traditional offline consultations (Clift 2002; Parvez and Ahmed, 2006). Applbaum argues that:

What information technology will do, in ways that are difficult to predict, is create new powerful gatekeepers, increase the ease of political organization and participation for some (but not all) citizens, and give politicians much more sophisticated tools for political analysis and communication. (Applbaum, 2002, p. 31).

This problem is further compounded by the issue of anonymity in eParticipation initiatives. The anonymity of Internet communication is cited as being an advantage in promoting democratic deliberation as it may make people that are reticent about face to face consultation more likely to participate (Cornfield, 2003), but there is also the possibility for deception or malicious use. It has already become evident that certain well organized campaign groups have altered campaign tactics to influence public discussion forums (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003). A further issue with the anonymous nature

of internet communication and the fact that the Internet has global reach is that individuals who do not live in that local authority have the potential to influence decision making in that area (Johnson, 2003, p13). It is therefore important that the greater the impact on policy-making that the eParticipation initiative has, the more important it is that the technology is robust (Kubicek, 2005).

Mahrer (2005) discussed findings from a survey of parliamentarians across Europe and found that politicians feel that they are more qualified to participate in decision making than ordinary citizens, that they fear a loss of power from eParticipation and a 'fear of change'. These findings also add credence to the notion that the drive for eParticipation is largely coming from the administration side of local authorities and that elected members were not playing a part in the development (Clift, 2002). Parvez (2008) conducted case study research in three local authorities within the West Midlands Region of the UK (Birmingham City Council, Wolverhampton City Council and Telford & Wrekin Council). Efforts to develop e-government were well underway in all these three local authorities at that time. One of the findings was that the ICT Acceptable Use Policy for elected members is acting as a barrier to the development of eParticipation because elected members are not allowed to use local authority ICT resources for political purposes which had led to confusion as to what was allowed. Parvez (2008) also found that initiatives such as online consultations and discussion forums were created to provide support to and enhance representative democracy rather than being an attempt to devolve responsibility to citizens.

This chapter has identified that there have been concerns expressed in the literature about the erosion of representative democracy by participative mechanisms and that their is potential for eParticipation to 'dangerously overextend the sphere of democratic decision making into what should be the sphere of individual or corporate decision making because the institutional constraints that have been developed in 'analogue democracy' do not exist in the digital setting.'(Kakabadse *et al.* 2003, p. 51). However, as has also been identified, it must be borne in mind that members of the local populace may not want more input into decision making than they already have and that citizens may be happy for elected members to take on the majority of governing responsibility:

> The e-topians' logic- that because technology lets us vote faster and more easily, we should vote more often- is fundamentally flawed. Whether to vote more often is fundamentally a political, not a technological issue, and there is

nothing in polling data or in recent elections to suggest that the busy public is clamouring to abrogate the role of their representatives (Eggers, 2005, p. 156).

From a review of the literature in this section it is clear there are issues of power and accountability and that, rather than devolving more power to the public, eParticipation tools may be devolving more power to administrators at the expense of elected members who can be disengaged from the development of eParticipation. While it could be argued that eParticipation could facilitate easier and more extensive devolution of power to citizens, the issue of whether the citizens actually want to shift the balance of representative and participative democracy is highly questionable. The institutional context that eParticipation tools are developed in clearly have a bearing on the selection of tools and their use and will be examined as part of the case study in Chapter 6. Further, the role of the elected members in terms of the development of participative strategies in general, and eParticipation tools in particular will also be examined throughout the primary research of the thesis in Chapters 5 and 6.

3.6 Conclusions to Chapter 3

The findings from the literature review indicate a number of points of debate surrounding eParticipation strategies which are taken forward as points of investigation in the primary data collection stage. These include:

- What influences the development of participation in general terms and eParticipation in particular in local authorities? The strategic decisions behind the adoption of these initiatives will have a profound influence on the impact and design of the initiatives and so it is important to understand these.
- Are offline forms of participation effectively engaging people in local authorities' participative initiatives? If not, what are the reasons behind this and can eParticipation overcome some of these barriers to participation?
- What 'added value' does eParticipation initiatives bring in terms of the technological capacity that other forms of participation do not?
- What are the drawbacks unique to eParticipation as opposed to other forms of participation?
- To what extent are eParticipation initiatives embedded within the broader participation strategy and are they contributing significantly to the policy making process?

- How have participative strategies, in particular eParticipation strategies affected the relationship between representative and participative democracy in local authorities.

Having outlined the context of the development of eParticipation and provided an account of the debates surrounding eParticipation the methodological approach that was adopted to investigate eParticipation in Scottish local authorities will be outlined.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction to Chapter 4

This chapter will outline and critically evaluate the methodology that was adopted for the thesis. The search strategy and sources for the literature review will be described and evaluated. It will be demonstrated that the methods selected for primary data collection are appropriate for meeting the aims and objectives of this research and methods of analysis will be detailed. In addition. the theoretical and philosophical contexts of the research will be detailed along with critical reflections on the methodology presented.

. As indicated in the Introduction the aims of this study are:

- To analyse eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local authorities and to develop an evaluative mechanism for analysing the extent to which eParticipation tools are an effective form of participation.

- Identify factors that affect the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities such as statutory requirements, political factors, technological factors and institutional factors.

4.2 Qualitative research

When conducting a research study it is important to outline the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher as this has a profound influence on the research design and overall philosophical position taken for the research. This research has been conducted from an interpretivist epistemological position. Whereas a positivist 'looks for causal relationships, tends to prefer quantitative analysis and wants to produce 'objective' and generalisable findings. A researcher from within the interpretivist tradition is concerned with understanding, not explanation, focuses on the meaning that actions have for agents, tends to use qualitative evidence and offers their

results as one intertpretation of the relationship between the social phenomenon studied.' (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, p. 25)

The interpretivist position is anti-foundationalist in ontological terms believing that the focus of research should be on 'interpreting discourses or traditions and establishing the interpretations and meanings they attach to social phenomena' (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, p. 26). The development of the interpretivist tradition is linked to the writing of Kant who argued that 'knowing and knowledge transcend basic empirical enquiry' (Spencer and Snape, 2003).

When developing a methodology for a study it is important to consider the range of methods available and select those that are most appropriate to meet the aims and objectives of the research. As indicated, the research was conducted from an interpretivist position and did not seek to chart the relationship between variables such as the work of Gibson *et al.* (2006) who tried to identify causality between internet use and political participation. Rather, the research sought to contribute to the theoretical understanding of how eParticipation is being used as well as contributing to the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon and therefore qualitative methods are most appropriate for the study.

Qualitative research tends to work with a relatively small number of cases compared with quantitative methods and researchers are prepared to make the trade off between scope and detail (Silverman, 2005). The distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods can be somewhat blurred, however, as quantitative studies often have some element of qualitative methods and vice versa (Silverman, 2005). Ritchie (2003) argues that both qualitative and quantitative methods should be seen as part of a researchers 'toolkit' and should not be seen as competing and contradictory. Further, qualitative research can take a variety of forms that have distinct research traditions and methodologies (Bryman, 2004).

This research will draw on several of these methods which will be outlined in more detail later on in this chapter. This is because multiple methods were required to gather all the data to meet the aims and objectives of the thesis and also to provide triangulation of the data. Triangulation 'involves the use of different methods and sources to check the integrity of, or extend, inferences drawn from the data' (Ritchie 2003, p. 43). Qualitative research is often criticised by quantitative researchers for being subjective, difficult to replicate, not generalisable to the wider population and

76

having a lack of transparency (Bryman, 2004) however this can be countered with an effective and rigorous research design which takes into account the limitations of the qualitative methods.

4.3 Grounded Theory

The *'discovery'* of grounded theory in the 1960s by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss aimed to demonstrate a systematic method of analysis that would allow social scientists to develop methodologies for conducting qualitative research. Their text *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) broke new ground with its challenge to the hypothetico-deductive approach and argued that rather than developing hypothesis from existing theories and testing them, that instead theories could be developed from the data itself (Kelle, 2005). Glaser and Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* at a time when qualitative research methods in sociology and other social sciences had dwindled in popularity and reputation following the behavioural revolution that saw positivist approaches to research in particular those with an emphasis on statistical methods gaining prominence (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser and Strauss sought to challenge the prevailing negative views of qualitative research being unsystematic and only effective as a 'precursor' to quantitative research and also the views that qualitative methods could not generate theory and the separation of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Further, Glaser and Strauss highlighted the problem of researchers trying to apply *'grand theory'* which were developed by theorists to their data sometimes without considering whether they were appropriate or fully understood by the researcher (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) rather than trying to devise new theories themselves.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define grounded theory as 'theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another.' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

A full explanation of the history of grounded theory is unnecessary for this chapter but a key point to mention is the schism that occurred in the discipline between Glaser and Strauss. Glaser maintained the view that a very *'open'* process of coding should be followed so that theory can emerge *'uncontaminated'* from the data and that even the

research question should not be strictly defined before the research is commenced. Strauss on the other hand focussed on the development of a 'coding paradigm' which gave researchers formal processes for coding and analysing the data to ensure rigour. Glaser argues that this approach was too prescriptive and 'forces' categories onto the data (Bryman, 2004). I do not believe that that it is useful to engage too heavily with the controversies or dogma of grounded theory. As Charmaz (2006) points out, grounded theory was originally conceived to be applied flexibly depending on the circumstances and topic of investigation and 'can complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis, rather than stand in opposition to them' (p9). It is worth noting, however, that grounded theory is a contested methodology and there is controversy as to what constitutes 'real' grounded theory (Bryman, 2004; Hodkinson, 2008).

The main tools utilised in grounded theory are:

- Theoretical Sampling
- Coding
- Theoretical saturation
- Constant comparison

(Bryman, 2004)

In addition to these tools the application of which will be outlined later in the chapter, grounded theorists also aid their analysis and theory development with the creation of memos which are essentially research notes created during the research process. These memos serve as reminders of how terms have been used and assist when it comes to reflection on findings (Bryman, 2004). Memos and notes have been very useful throughout the research process and these were revisited throughout my data collection and analysis and informed the theoretical development.

The issue of the use of literature in this study is important to outline. Classic grounded theory advocated delaying utilising any literature until after the theory had been developed from the data to avoid contaminating the categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A criticism of the strict adherence to not consulting previous literature by some grounded theorists is that completely cutting oneself off from the literature is undesirable and that researchers build on the work of others and that it is impossible for research to be conducted with a *tabula rasa* as researchers cannot completely set aside previous knowledge of theories and concepts in their domain (Bryman, 2004).

Further, the realities of conducting research do not fit with this 'ideal'. When conducting a PhD, for example, the student is expected to submit a research proposal to be approved for registration and a further transfer report to progress from being an MPhil to a PhD student. These must outline the main literature in one's chosen field and give indications of the area of investigation.

The notion that theory should emerge 'uncontaminated' by previous work is simply not feasible when conducting any research study. However, unlike in many research studies, when adopting a grounded theory approach, there is no need to conduct an exhaustive literature review prior to the commencement of the study. As there was very little empirical literature on the topic of eParticipation at the start of this study, there was understandably very little to consult. However, in order to familiarise myself with the topic of investigation relevant literature was sourced and consulted. Data collection, analysis and literature reviewing was conducted concurrently throughout the research process with data collection being commenced at an early stage and subsequent rounds of data collection were conducted while an ongoing process of literature collection and review was conducted throughout.

The concept of 'emerging theory' is very important to address at this stage. Kelle (2005) argues that grounded theory has always suffered from an 'inductivist self misunderstanding' from its inception which can cause great anxiety amongst researchers. Kelle (2005) goes on to demonstrate flexible approaches to grounded theory that stay true to the principle of not 'forcing' inappropriate concepts and frameworks onto data while rejecting the notion that theoretical development has to solely emerge from the data. Kelle (2005) makes the point that the principles of grounded theory were themselves influenced by ontological and epistemological principles of sociological research and therefore rejects the notion that the grounded theory approach has to allow theory to 'emerge' from the data. Kelle gives a number of examples of how the principles of grounded theory can be combined effectively with other approaches to research in ways that strengthen rather than degrade the theoretical developments from the research. Two of these approaches were used in this research namely 'abductive inferences' and 'heuristic tools'.

> In making abductive inferences, researchers depend on previous knowledge that provide them with the necessary categorical framework for the interpretation, description and explanation of the empirical world under study. If an innovative research process should be successful this framework must not

work as a Procrustean bed into which empirical facts are forced. Instead, the framework which guides empirical investigations should be modified, rebuilt and reshaped on the basis of empirical material. (Kelle, 2005).

The principles of abductive theory developed proved to be an appropriate mechanism for the theoretical analysis of the primary data collection findings. Firstly, theoretical points of investigation were developed from the inductive analysis of the data but were related to findings and theories of eParticipation identified from the secondary literature. These findings are outlined in Chapter 7.

Kelle (2005) also notes that heuristic frameworks can be applied in grounded theory studies provided they are used with care and sensitivity:

> Theoretical concepts with low empirical content, however, can play an extremely useful role if the goal of empirical research is not the testing of predefined hypotheses but the empirically grounded generation of theories, since they do not force data into a Procrustean bed—their lack of empirical content gives them flexibility so that a variety of empirical phenomena can be described with their help. Although such concepts cannot be 'tested' empirically, they may be used as heuristic concepts which represent 'lenses' through which researchers perceive facts and phenomena in their research field. (Kelle, 2005)

In this thesis, a 'theoretical lens' was developed based on Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy. As will be outlined in more detail later on in the chapter, this was not a rigid set of tests to be applied to the data but provided a starting point for evaluation of eParticipation initiatives.

The methodological approach taken therefore can be seen as holding true to the grounded theory principles of an exploratory study which starts out with identifying a fairly broad area of investigation rather than developing a set of hypotheses to be tested. Also, the iterative approach to data collection with data collection starting at a very early time with little influence from the extant literature was used. A flexible research design was employed with multiple rounds of data collection which built on each other and utilised 'theoretical sampling' in order to investigate further the emerging concepts that had been observed. In terms of the data analysis, tools of 'open coding', 'theoretical coding' and 'axial coding' were used to the point of 'theoretical saturation' although without the use of a strict coding paradigm. However,

as will be outlined during this chapter and in subsequent chapters, a heuristic tool or 'theoretical lens' based on Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy, was employed to evaluate eParticipation mechanisms and the theoretical contribution developed in Chapter 7 includes discussions of previous literature and theories. It is believed that this approach combines the strengths of the grounded theory approach in terms of examining the phenomenon of eParticipation in an exploratory approach which was not dependent on 'grand theory' but also overcomes the weaknesses of the approach by rejecting the notion that the theoretical developments should be entirely separated from the work of other researchers.

4.4 Methodology for literature search

eParticipation is an interdisciplinary emerging research field which made searching literature and identifying the boundaries of the study one of the challenges of this research. There are no dedicated journals to eParticipation and as previously discussed, the term 'eParticipation' is relatively new and was not in wide usage at the start of this PhD study in 2005 and has still not become standardised across the field with some writers still referring to eDemocracy and eGovernance as will be evident in some quotations in the literature review.

The interdisciplinary nature of the research means that researchers are studying eParticipation from a number of perspectives: the actual systems that are developed, accessibility issues, policy developments, service provision, democratic theory, theories of participation, organisational change (Sanford and Rose, 2008) and although this research was primarily concerned with studying eParticipation as a subset of participatory initiatives in general, the literature review incorporated literature from some other fields to present the main arguments in the discipline.

The primary method of searching for literature was using bibliographic databases. A number of journal databases were searched including: DIALOG, Science Direct, Web of Science, SOSIG, Emerald and Ingenta. In addition, relevant books and articles were found by citation chaining - investigating the bibliographies of articles found from the initial literature search. The library databases at Robert Gordon University (RGU) and Aberdeen University were also consulted and some additional material was found by using advanced search functions on search engines such as Google Scholar and Yahoo on the Internet. Citation alerts were set up using ZETOC to stay up to date with

literature and the search process was repeated at various points during the study to ensure that the literature review was kept up to date.

Further sources were consulted including searching for government reports and other grey literature including policy documents from local authority websites, COSLA reports, reports and research conducted by the Scottish and UK governments, OECD documents and EU documents were all retrieved. There is also a growing practitioner body for the study of eParticipation and an associated literature. Some research on eParticipation is conducted through knowledge transfer networks and large-scale projects involving lots of countries. Throughout the research I participated in some of these networking and research networks including DEMOS, DEMO-Net and Democracies Online which was very useful for making contacts with other researchers involved in the study of eParticipation, identifying conferences and events to attend or to get papers from and to stay abreast of developments in the field.

4.5 Development of the Methodology

Following an initial literature review it was decided that there would be two phases of primary data collection that would form the basis of the primary data collection. The exploratory approach adopted was not only desirable in terms of theoretical development but also necessary for gathering the appropriate amount of empirical data. To date there is still no standardised methods for evaluating eParticipation and one of the objectives of this research project is to make a contribution to the development of evaluative criteria through the use of the heuristic tool which will be outlined later in the chapter.

The methodology developed has been designed to meet the aims and objectives of the PhD and as has already been stated is primarily focussed on qualitative methods. The research is mostly focussed from the local authority perspective: mapping initiatives, policy developments, evaluations of initiatives, drivers and barriers and trying to gain an understanding of the organisational and political factors that impact a local authority's decision to adopt eParticipation as well as gaining perspectives from officers about their own experiences of trying to engage the public in consultations and whether or not new ICT tools can really help to solve the problem of lack of participation.

4.6 Selection of sample group

eParticipation initiatives in local authorities were selected as the focus of analysis for the research rather than national initiatives because there have been a number of large-scale initiatives to improve participation at the local level due to the low confidence in local authorities that are reported and stagnated electoral turnout. It was decided to choose Scottish local authorities as it was known that there were new policy initiatives coming from the Scottish Executive/Government to encourage participation as well as increasing the use of ICTs as part of the Efficient Government agenda. Scotland comprises of 32 local authorities which are heterogeneous in nature of rural/urban/island communities, variations in political control, standards of living, demographics etc. This diversity allows for the study of variations in eParticipation initiatives across a small country and made an interesting study.

4.7 The 'Theoretical Lens' for Evaluating eParticipation tools

While the overall aim of the research was focussed on researching eParticipation as a general phenomenon, an important part of the evaluation was developing evaluative criteria for analysing eParticipation tools where identified.   The framework was developed using Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy which are outlined below:

- *Effective participation:*
- *Equality in voting*
- *Gaining Enlightened Understanding*
- *Exercising final control over the agenda*
- *Inclusion of adults*

(Dahl, 1998, p. 38)

These criteria have been selected as they lend themselves well to the development of a heuristic framework to develop a 'theoretical lens' for evaluating eParticipation tools. Previous research studies have utilised the Dahl criteria for ideal democracy when examining citizen participation initiatives. Torpe and Nielsen (2004) argue that Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy can provide valid concepts for evaluating the effectiveness

of eParticipation initiatives in particular the principles of enlightened understanding and effective participation:

> The Internet can be regarded as one such new opportunity structure, able to support both of the principles forwarded by Dahl, firstly in terms of information about politics and transparency in the political process which can support 'enlightened understanding' and secondly in terms of two-way communication between local authorities and the citizens that can support effective participation. p. 233

The analytical framework used by Torpe and Nielsen (2004) only used two of the five criteria of Dahl. Some of their metrics that were used were relevant to this study and were modified appropriately as part of the evaluation of Scottish Local Authority websites that was undertaken as part of the mapping exercise of eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local authorities. However, as the framework was designed for Danish municipalities which differ quite significantly from Scottish local authorities they were not all appropriate. The evaluation that was undertaken for this study incorporated metrics devised from Dahl's other three criteria for ideal democracy to provide a more developed evaluative mechanism.

Using Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy as a means of evaluating participation has been used by other writers such as McLaverty (forthcoming) who utilised these criteria for evaluating deliberative initiatives.

Graham Smith (2009) also created a set of criteria for analysing citizen participation efforts. These were inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, transparency, efficiency and transferability. Smith argues that the first four criteria can be considered to be reflective of Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy and the final two criteria are additional variables to evaluate the initiatives.

The adapted criteria for ideal democracy was used in different ways in the benchmarking exercise, evaluation of eParticipation initiatives and the case study. However, a study that solely examined the individual eParticipation tools alone was considered to be insufficient to develop an understanding of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities. The observations made based on the evaluation of the tools are considered in terms of the context of the development of participatory initiatives in Scotland and seeks to examine why eParticipation has developed in the way that it has

as opposed to just analysing the 'end products' of the initiatives themselves. This chapter will now go on to describe the development of the methodology selected.

4.8 Evaluating eParticipation strategies

Although research into the evaluation of eParticipation was very limited at the beginning of this study and empirical studies remains scarce, several writers have presented potential frameworks of analysis eParticipation. For example. Anttirioko (2003) suggests that the four elements in evaluating eParticipation initiatives should be:

- *Institutions.* To what extent are the ICT-based citizen-centered solutions and applications integrated in the practices of existing political institutions and how do they affect actual decision-making processes?

- *Influence.* Are the e-democracy experiments or practices such that people involved may truly influence the issues of interest?

- *Integration.* Is the potential of technology used optimally in integrating the basic elements of the entire e-democratic process, including agenda-setting, planning, preparation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and control?

- *Interaction.* Is the potential of technology in disseminating information, facilitating interaction, and conducting political transactions used so as to increase the transparency, efficiency, flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and inclusiveness of a democratic system?

(p. 125)

Subsequently to the research design and data collection for this PhD study, Ann Macintosh (2008) has produced her view of evaluation criteria for eParticipation. She argues that evaluation of eParticipation should have three components:

- The democratic perspective considers the overarching democratic criteria that the eParticipation initiative is addressing. Here one of the most difficult aspects is to understand to what extent the eParticipation affects policy.

- The project perspective looks in detail at the specific aims and objectives of the eParticipation initiative as set by the project stakeholders.

- The socio-technical perspective considers to what extent the design of the ICTs directly affects the outcomes. Established frameworks from the software engineering and information systems fields can be used to assess issues such as usability and accessibility. (Macintosh, 2008, p. 5)

It was recognised early in the study that evaluating the phenomenon of eParticipation requires a mutli-layered approach as there are many elements to be studied.

The approach taken was to study eParticipation within the context of the broader participation strategy of local authorities, the internal political and organisational factors that affect how public participation is used in local authorities which are also affected by external policies such as statutory requirements from national level policies. The data collection methods that were selected to achieve the aims and objectives of the project are outlined below. The final selection of methods was deemed to be appropriate for an in depth understanding of eParticipation to be achieved. For example, at the initial stages of research design, it was considered that a questionnaire survey could be issued to the 32 local authorities in Scotland rather than conducting interviews but this was ruled out because the level of details required for the study would be too limiting in terms of the level of detail that could be gained.

As can be seen a mixed methodology of qualitative methods were selected in order to examine the different facets of the research, it is common in grounded theory studies for a range of data collection tools to be utilised in order to provide triangulation of results and to allow for emerging issues to be studied in more depth at subsequent stages of the data collection process.

- A benchmarking study of the 32 local authority websites in Scotland followed by telephone interviews with local authority officers whose role incorporates citizen participation initiatives.

- A case study of one of the participating local authorities comprising in-depth interviews with officers and councillors, participant observation, analysis of documents and policies and a questionnaire issued through the citizens' panel.

The table below outlines how the methods for data collection match up with the research objectives of the PhD study.

Table 1: Research Objectives and data collection methods

Research Objective	*Method(s) of Data Collection*
(1) To map and evaluate the use of eParticipation tools in Scottish local authorities	Benchmarking study and telephone interviews
(2) To understand how eParticipation 'fits' within the broader participative strategies of local authorities, if at all.	Benchmarking study Telephone interviews Case study
(3) To investigate the barriers and enablers to the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities.	Case study Telephone Interviews
(4) To develop an evaluative framework for analysing eParticipation initiatives	Literature Benchmarking Telephone interviews
(5) To contribute to the theoretical understanding of eParticipation.	All methods

As has been indicated, the two phases of data collection addressed different but related research objectives. By starting with a relatively wide scope mapping and evaluating eParticipation initiatives across Scotland and then narrowing the focus to examine eParticipation within one local authority it was possible to examine eParticipation from a macro and micro level and to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

4.9 Data collection tools

The chapter will now go on to outline in greater detail the data collection tools utilised in this study along with details of the methods of analysis that were employed and a critical evaluation of the methods.

4.9.1 Benchmarking Study of Scottish Local Authority Websites

The first phase of data collection involved an analysis of websites of Scottish local authorities. This acted as a starting point for the other stages of data collection and represents a preliminary investigation of (web-based) eParticipation initiatives in Scotland. The aims of the website analysis were:

- To investigate whether or not any Scottish local authorities had evidence of the use of eParticipation and, if so, which tools were being used.
- To investigate the overall quality of the websites of Scottish local authorities to find out whether they correspond to best practice guidelines for website development especially in terms of accessibility.
- To find contacts for the interview stage of the research project.

The website analysis was conducted by devising a benchmarking study in order to ensure that the study was conducted using a standardised process. Benchmarking has become an accepted method for quality management and organisational improvement. Camp (1989) defined benchmarking as the search for industry best practices that lead to superior performance. When an organisation undertakes a benchmarking exercise, they do so to investigate best practices of other organisations in order to integrate these into their own operations (Misic and Johnson, 1999).

Early benchmarking exercises were motivated by a desire to regain competitive advantage by reverse engineering or 'competitive benchmarking' (Kyrö, 2003). However, the concept has evolved into a more collaborative and non-competitive theory. Although much of the literature on benchmarking focuses on management strategies for Total Quality Management within industry groups, benchmarking is also applicable for website analysis.

Regardless of the purpose of a web site there are certain guidelines that are universally applicable to web design such as ease of navigation, site structure, search facilities, consistent layout, use of images and suitability and relevance of content. These are factors that can be studied comparatively with a clear set of criteria using a functional benchmarking study.

According to Carpinetti and de Melo (2002), functional benchmarking is 'Specific function comparison with best practice. It is an application of process benchmarking that compares a particular business function in two or more organisations in the same industry'.

Benchmarking can also be used to research new ideas that could be applied to the proposed website (Misic and Johnson, 1999). Thus the exercise moves beyond a comparative study for academic or organisational research and becomes an opportunity for exchange of ideas.

The websites of the 32 local authorities were evaluated against a framework devised by an implicit use of the theoretical lens of Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy in particular examining eParticipation tools that constitute 'effective participation' and investigating 'inclusion of adults' by including best practice guidelines for website design and eParticipation tools. These were refined into a 'benchmarking grid' (see appendix 1) from which the websites were rated. If a website was evaluated as having a satisfactory score on a criteria they were given a grade of 2 and if there was some evidence of a feature but the information was very limited or basic they were assigned a score of 1. These scores do not represent a quantitative analysis but rather a way of distinguishing between councils that had gone further than others in a certain criteria.

Figure 1: Screenshot of benchmarking grid

Local Authority websites	Western Isles Council	Angus Council	Argyll and Bute Council	City of Edinburgh Council
Department email	2	2	2	2
Debates on specific issues	0	0	0	0
Free debates	0	0	0	0
Webchats	0	0	0	0
Online questionnaires	0	0	0	0
Information on consultation	2	2	1	2
community group info	0	2	0	2
Feedback on previous cons	0	2	0	2
Explanation of process	0	2	0	1
Electronic Petitioning	0	0	0	0
Blogs by councillors	0	0	0	0
Snap polls	0	0	0	0
Decision making games	0	0	0	0
Chat room	1	0	0	0
E-panels	0	0	0	0
Virtual communities	0	0	0	0
Alert services	0	0	0	0
FAQ on political issues	0	0	0	0
Inclusion				
Site Map / Browse / Directo	0	2	2	2
Effective search function	0	2	2	2
Home page links	2	2	2	2
Scrolling	2	2	2	2
Help	0	0	0	2
Language Support	0	0	0	2
adaptible for visually impair	0	0	0	0
FAQ	0	0	0	2
Use of Plug ins	2	2	2	2
Glossary	0	0	1	0
Navigation Elements	1	2	2	2
Navigation Placement	1	2	2	2
Consistent Layout	1	2	2	2
Images	2	2	2	2
structure	2	2	2	2

The figure above shows a snapshot of the benchmarking results sheet.

This stage of data collection was determined to be necessary in order to evaluate every local authority website in Scotland and to inform the development of subsequent stages of data collection. The websites were all accessed over a three month period in 2005 and were evaluated one by one against the criteria that were developed. The benchmarking study was conducted prior to new guidelines from the Scottish Executive that attempted to standardise the navigation of local authority websites in Scotland.

In addition to the results recorded in the grid, I took extensive notes to accompany the analysis which contained observations about the websites for example further details about interesting features or problematic aspects of browsing or searching for information. These notes were revisited at various points of the data analysis and writing stages of the thesis.

The benchmarking analysis had obvious limitations. For example, local authorities may have been utilising eParticipation tools but they were not in use when the benchmarking exercise was being conducted or that the facilities may be in development and are soon to be launched. It is also recognised that not all eParticipation tools are web-based and so would not be picked up from the website benchmarking study. These limitations notwithstanding, however, the benchmarking exercise provided a useful snapshot or insight into the state of eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local Authorities to provide a basis for taking forward into the interview stages and informed the design of the telephone interview study. Further, through the benchmarking exercise a number of contacts were identified for the telephone interviews.

4.9.2 Telephone Interviews

The next stage of data collection that was undertaken was interviews with officers involved with the use of ICT in developing consultations in the 32 Scottish local authorities. It was decided that every local authority in Scotland would be invited to participate in the telephone interview stage even though some did not appear to have developed any eParticipation initiatives. From the benchmarking exercise it was evident that there were great variations in the quality and functionality of the website of Scottish local authorities and by interviewing those authorities that did not have eParticipation strategies it would be possible to further identify why some engage in these activities while others had not. As previously stated, this thesis studied eParticipation from the perspective of the public participation side and not the technological side and sought to determine what place, if any, eParticipation played or could play in an overall consultation and engagement strategy of a local authority.

One of the biggest problems encountered in the primary research phase was identifying potential interviewees to invite to participate in the research. Some contacts were identified through the benchmarking exercise but these did not always turn out to

be accurate which in itself was an interesting finding because it is indicative that the currency of information of local authority websites was poor in some cases. Further contacts were established through telephone calls to local authorities and some through secondary sources such as a COSLA document. In the case of three of the local authorities a message was sent to a general 'contact' address or feedback form which then resulted in an officer getting in contact to assist me in finding the appropriate person to interview.

Once all contacts were identified an email invitation was sent out to invite officers to participate in the research which contained an introduction to the research. In some cases it was necessary to send follow up emails and make phone calls to confirm the interview dates and times.

The majority of the interviewees selected were involved in the general sphere of consultation and/or engagement, a finding at this stage was that very often consultations are conducted on a departmental basis and so it would not be possible to fully understand all participatory mechanisms in the local authorities through this method.

In total, 30 local authorities participated in this stage of data collection. Although repeated contact was made with the other two local authorities it was not been possible to arrange interviews. Nevertheless, the total interview sample represents 94 per cent of local authorities in Scotland and so a clear picture of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities will be gained.

 Due to time constraints and resource limitations it was decided that the interviews would be conducted by telephone rather than face to face. Telephone interviews reduce the costs and time involved in data collection (Oppenheim, 1992). This ensured that island communities such as Orkney, Western Isles and Argyll and Bute councils could which would not have been practical to travel to in order to conduct face to face interviews. Telephone interviewing has a number or disadvantages over face to face interviews; the interviewer has less access to cues such as body language although tone and intonation are still available (Opdenakker, 2006) and the nature of telephone interviewing means that it is harder for the researcher to standardise the setting for the interview (Opdenakker, 2006). For example, during a couple of the interviews the interviewee had to answer a question from colleagues which disrupted the interview.

Telephone interviews are also more difficult for a researcher to establish a rapport with the interviewee (Oppenheim, 1992) and it is argued that telephone interviews are more challenging than face to face interviews for researchers to ensure that the conversation is 'natural' while keeping the interviewee on topic (Fielding and Thomas, 2008).

In keeping with the grounded theory approach taken during this study, interviews were not heavily structured although a topic guide was used to provide points of discussion. Semi-structured interviewing was most appropriate for these interviews because there were key issues to be addressed but a degree of flexibility was allowed for to let the interviewee expand on ideas and speak more widely on issues (Denscome, 2007). As is good practice, the interviews were preceded by an informal discussion with respondents explaining the nature of the research and asking about the interviewees' role. This allowed for a rapport to be created between the researcher and the interviewee and created a more relaxed tone for the interview (Yates, 2004).

Examples of topics covered in the interview included:

- the coordination of participative strategies within local authorities
- internal and external factors influencing the development of participative strategies.
- Whether or not the local authorities have used electronic participation methods
- If electronic methods are used which tools are used and how these feed into the policy process.
- Local authority officers' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of electronic participation.

It is important to note that the term eParticipation was not used during the interviews as it was considered to be too jargonistic and lacked a formal definition and so may have caused confusion (Yates, 2004). Care was taken to explain the scope and purpose of the research to ensure the validity of findings from the research.

In order to ensure that an accurate account of the interviews and to allow for sufficient depth of analysis, the interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the respondents in line with ethical guidelines (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). All recordings were stored securely and only I have had access to both the recordings and transcripts. In addition to recording the interviews, notes were taken during the course

of the interviews of the key points and relevant affective responses to questions by respondents for example instances when respondents responded defensively to questions or seemed uncomfortable with a particular line of questioning.

Conducting the inductive analysis of the telephone interviews

The analysis of the telephone interviews was conducted over a series of steps. Firstly the transcripts were read through and the first stage of 'open coding' was commenced by identifying concepts or points of interest through the transcript and noting these. The telephone interviews were then analysed using the CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) NVIVO. Using CAQDAS tools in qualitative data analysis remains quite a controversial point because it is argued by some that CAQDAS abstracts the researcher away from their data, fragments the data too much and so it loses context and attempts to apply inappropriate pseudo-quantitative methods to qualitative data analysis (Denscome, 2007). It is recognised the 'code and retrieve' nature of many packages means that a researcher can lose sight of their role in data analysis thinking that the software package is effectively 'doing their analysis' in the same way that SPSS runs statistical texts and provides researchers with outputs that can be inserted into a research report or thesis.

These concerns are valid and must be borne in mind when devising the qualitative data analysis strategy. However, CAQDAS tools also have great advantages and assist the storage, coding and retrieval of data and subsequent interrogation of coded passages (Lewins, 2008).

The 'open codes' were translated into a coding structure which in NVIVO are called 'nodes'. The coding structure was tested on 3 transcripts initially and then refined slightly with some 'nodes' expanded into two and some 'collapsed' into one 'node'. As coding progressed more concepts were identified and more 'nodes' created. Following the changes to the coding structure all the coding repeated.

As the coding progressed ultimately each transcript was coded individually until it was felt that coding was exhausted. The data was then further categorised by means of 'axial coding', sorted into themes and then evaluated and synthesised into thematic categories to allow for interpretation and reflection on the data. The results are presented in Chapter 5

4.9.3 Case Study

The first phase of data collection revealed a great deal of interesting information about the extent to which eParticipation was being used in Scottish local authorities, the tools that were being used, opinions of officers etc. However, in order to achieve a better understanding of the factors that affect the development of eParticipation a more in depth study was required. Case studies are a widely used method in social sciences and allow for a detailed study of phenomenon in their real-life context. Yin (1994) indicates that a case study should be used when the researcher deliberately wants to investigate contextual conditions of a phenomenon because these might be highly pertinent.

According to Yin (1994) case studies are one of four types depending on whether they are a single or multiple case study design and on what level of analysis they employ. It is considered that this study represents a Single Embedded Case study as only one case is being examined but there are multiple units of analysis which allows for the study of different views and provides a more complete and rigorous study that only analysing one unit of analysis. In this case study design the main units of analysis were: elected members, senior officers and officers. Within these, further aspects to bear in mind are the department of the officers and senior officers and the political party of the elected member. This will be outlined further in the case studies findings chapter.

It is important, however with case study research to bear in mind a holistic understanding and not to overly fragment the case study findings. For this reason, the findings were presented thematically rather than by unit of analysis in most cases although it was sometimes more appropriate to focus on one unit of analysis (e.g. elected members) in certain sections.

4.9.3.1 Selection of Case study

The local authority selected for the case study was Aberdeen City Council. Following the website analysis and through informal discussions with individuals involved in citizen participation, it was discovered that Aberdeen City Council had developed a number of citizen participation mechanisms including utilising eParticipation tools.

Aberdeen City Council were an early adopter of community planning, had a well established community planning partnership and had gone through a total restructuring in part to increase engagement and participation. Although there was little evidence that Aberdeen City Council was utilising eParticipation to a great extent and it was known that there had been a number of problems with the development of eParticipation tools, it was discovered that they had utilised a number of different mechanisms for eParticipation and in the absence of any local authority which appeared to have 'flourishing' eParticipation, Aberdeen City Council were the appropriate local authority to select for the case study.

The findings of case studies are often criticised for not being generalisable to the wider population (Yin 1994, Creswell 2007, Bryman 2004) and a single case study as was adopted in this study could be particularly open to criticism. Criticisms of the lack of generalisablity misunderstand the nature of case study research, however. Case studies may not be 'statistically generalisable' but are 'analytically generalisable' (Yin, 2004). The case study employed in this study is 'exemplifying'. As Bryman (2004) explains: 'Cases are often chosen not because they are extreme or unusual in some way but because they will provide a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered.' (Bryman, 2004 p. 51).

Due to the fact that Scotland's local authorities all vary in terms of structure, geographical area, socio-economic profile, political orientation etc it would never have been possible to select one local authority that would be considered 'representative' of the others. A multiple case study approach would perhaps have been appropriate if one council was found to have been particularly successful in adopting eParticipation as they could have been compared but as none were found to have this it was not considered to have been appropriate and the time and resource limitations would have led to less in depth studies being conducted (Creswell, 2007).

4.9.3.2 Case study data collection methods

This case study involved a number of points of data collection including:
- Analysis of secondary materials
- Semi-Structured interviews
- Participant observation

These will now be outlined briefly

Analysis of Secondary materials

Secondary documentary information is almost always used in case study research (Yin, 1994) and are used to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources. In this case study documents which were available for analysis included:

- Publicly available reports and strategies
- Internal administrative documents such as progress reports and briefing papers
- Minutes and reports of meetings
- Other published studies commissioned to evaluate the community planning partnership

The document analysis provided useful insights into the strategic priorities for community planning and provided points of triangulation for the primary data collection of this study but it is important when conducting document analysis to bear in mind that documents have been written for a purpose and may not be the 'unmitigated truth' (Yin, 1994).

Semi-Structured interviews

The main data collection for the case study was from interviews with elected members, senior officers and officers. The sample group selected for the interviews was devised through an initial interview with an officer at the Telephone Interview stages and from examining the organisational structure of Aberdeen City Council to determine key individuals involved in the development of the participation strategy and consultations. Also from the analysis of the telephone interviews it was found that only interviewing officers involved in citizen participation initiatives was not sufficient. A 'theoretical sampling' approach was taken by identifying other stakeholder groups that should be interviewed. This groups included councillors from each political party represented in Aberdeen City Council including the lead councillors of Labour, Liberal Democrats and Conservative parties although unfortunately the leader of the SNP did not respond to interview invitations and council officers working in various departments of the Council. It was determined that while there is a coordinated consultation strategy in Aberdeen City Council departments still conduct their own consultations independently and some such as Planning were highlighted as utilising progressive strategies. Aberdeen City Council have developed a community planning strategy including the Police and

Aberdeen Council for Voluntary Organisations and so these organisations also impact onto the overall consultation and participation strategies and so they were also invited to participate.

In total 25 key individuals were invited to participate in the research. An issue that arose at this stage was that several potential interviewees referred me back to the officer who I interviewed at the previous stage of data collection and were unwilling to participate themselves. After some follow up phone calls 19 accepted the invitation for interview.

The final sample group comprised of:

- Councillors from each political party and the Council Leader
- The Chief Executive
- A senior officer from the ICT department
- An officer and a senior officer from community planning
- Officers from Strategic Research and Information
- An officer from Resources Management
- A senior officer from Planning
- An officer from Planning responsible for ePlanning
- A senior officer from Democratic Services
- A representative of the community planning partnership from Grampian Police
- A representative of the community planning partnership ACVO

As the interviews were all conducted within the same local authority it was possible to conduct the interviews face to face. This was desirable because the setting of the interviews were all conducted in private meeting rooms or in a quiet area of the office. Also, some interviewees brought documents to show to me to support what they were saying which would not have been possible in a telephone interview and (as indicated in the section on telephone interviews) it is easier to establish a rapport with an interviewee in face to face interviews.

The interviews were taped with the permission of the interviewee and transcribed in full.

An interesting research note was that while NVIVO was appropriate for the analysis of the telephone interview data, it was decided that it would not be used to analyse the case study interview data. While the case study interviews were semi-structured with a topic guide being used which was broadly similar to the telephone interviews and an inductive approach was taken for the analysis, the telephone interviews followed a broadly similar pattern and were analysed comparatively while the case study interviews were far less 'standard' given the diversity of interviewees and the fact that different areas of eParticipation were being investigated further depending on the role of the interviewee. For example, the ICT officers were able to provide a great deal of information about the ICT strategy while the elected members were able to provide insights into their perspective on eParticipation. It was found that analysing the transcripts without NVIVO was preferential. This is not to say that the approach was not methodical; transcripts were read through many times, key themes were identified and then 'axial coding' (Cresswell, 2007) was used to link themes together and create a coding structure. A coding sheet was constructed using Microsoft Excel and then key sections were copied and pasted in from which the theoretical analysis was further developed and the results presented in Chapter 6 with supporting evidence from the other findings from the case study research.

Participant observation

A portion of the research that was conducted consisted of participant observation. This was agreed early in the case study design and provided valuable insights into the phenomenon of eParticipation in the participating local authority. The participant observation element was largely focussed on the development of an online citizens' panel. I attended meetings between officers from the strategic research department and ICT department as well as a meeting with other community planning partners. Further, I developed some questionnaire questions for inclusion in one of the citizens' panel questionnaires and provided an analysis of the technical evaluation of the pilot initiative to develop an online citizens' panel.

Yin (2004) indicates that the major problem relating to participant observation is that the researcher is no longer an impartial observer but is instead influencing events. This was found to be the case in the participant observation element of this research. As an 'expert' in eParticipation I was often asked to contribute to these meetings and in particular to act as a 'translator' between the ICT officers and the research officers who had very little technical knowledge.

4.10 Ethical considerations for the research

The research was at all times conducted in accordance with the Robert Gordon University's Research Ethics Policy. A full copy of the ethics procedure can be found at:

http://www.rgu.ac.uk/files/ACF8027.pdf

Individual participants have at all times remained anonymous through the use of codenames both within the final report and within data storage. Where appropriate and where information is in the public domain such as data gathered from the benchmarking exercise, local authorities have been named.

The research participants were fully informed about the background and aims and objectives of the study and so informed consent was achieved from all participants. The interviews with local authority officers were conducted by telephone and tape recorded with the consent of research participants in accordance with the law. Data was stored securely and anonymously and was only used by me for the purposes of this research project.

All interviews were recorded but the permission of the individuals was sought prior to switching on recording devices and the audio files were stored securely.

One area of ethics that should be highlighted is that as a research assistant at RGU I conducted consultancy work with Aberdeen City Council to analyse the data from their Citizens' Panel. This meant that some of the interviewees were officers who I had a working relationship with. In order to overcome any potential conflict of interest or bias of responses, the interviewees were provided with details about the scope and purpose of the study and understood that the study was completely independent of any paid consultancy work that I had previously undertaken.

4.11 Limitations of the methodology

Due to the fact that local authorities are very large institutions and the lack of coordinated strategies for consultation and engagement within them, it is possible that eParticipation initiatives were missed and that the mapping exercise was incomplete. However, through the combination of the benchmarking and the interview data collection techniques this has been kept to a minimum.

Ideally, the interviews with the officers from the 30 local authorities would have been conducted face to face but due to limited resources for conducting the study and the fact that the research was undertaken on a part-time basis meant that they had to be conducted on the telephone with follow up emails when necessary.

Ensuring that the interviewees were the *'correct'* people to talk to was also not easy. At the case study stage it was hoped that more heads of service would have agreed to be interviewed but with any research project there are inevitable problems getting participants and through the combination of interviews and analysis of policy documents this problem was overcome.

Chapter 5: Results of Mapping and Evaluation of eParticipation in Scottish Local Authorities

5.1 Introduction to Chapter

The previous chapters have set the background of the research to map and evaluate eParticipation in Scottish local authorities. Given the diversity of factors that contribute to the development of eParticipation identified in Chapters 2 and 3 it was likely that the development of eParticipation in Scotland would be more pronounced in some local authorities than in others.

The research aimed to map eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local authorities to identify the extent to which eParticipation is being used for policy making in Scottish local authorities. Where initiatives were identified, an analysis was conducted to identify the tools that were being used, how the eParticipation contributed to the overall participation and engagement strategy and whether or not the results contributed to the policy making process. The research sought to find out about how successful the initiatives have been as well as the policy, legislative and organisational motivations and barriers for the development. Although the main focus of the research is on eParticipation initiatives, this was examined within the context of broader participative strategies and policies for enhancing citizen participation and engagement. This research did not set out with a bias that eParticipation strategies are the silver bullet for solving the problem of the democratic deficit or citizen disengagement. Rather, the literature suggests that eParticipation strategies could be a useful tool for local authorities to use as part of a broader range of consultation and engagement strategies and the research examines the added value, if any, that may be achieved from developing these methods.

As well as identifying initiatives, the research also aimed to develop an evaluative mechanism for analysing what constituted effective eParticipation based on Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy as outlined in a previous chapter. The initiatives that were identified were critically evaluated against these criteria.

As indicated in the methodology, the mapping and evaluation comprised two points of data collection:

- A benchmarking study of the 32 local authority websites in Scotland

- Telephone interviews with Local Authority officers.

Firstly, this chapter will outline the findings of the website analysis before going on to provide the analysis of the participative strategies of the local authorities in general then eParticipation specifically. This is in keeping with the research objectives to study eParticipation within the broader context of citizen participation initiatives.

5.2 Website Analysis

The benchmarking study was conducted prior to new guidelines from the Scottish Government that attempted to standardise the navigation of local authority websites in Scotland and it was found that there was huge variations in websites between local authorities. While the actual technical details of the design of the websites are not directly related to citizen participation, the findings from the literature in Chapter 3 demonstrate that in order for eParticipation initiatives to be successful it is essential that the medium through which they are communicated (websites for example) are effective. A poorly designed website which is not user-friendly will impede the development of effective participation and also act as a barrier to enlightened understanding and the inclusion of all adults. Some of the Local Authority websites had a very 'corporate' look and feel and were user-friendly whilst others looked rather amateurish and dated and took a long time to analyse because the website design and information structure were so poor.

Figure 2: Screenshot from Falkirk Council website taken in Feb '06

Figure 2 shows a screenshot from Falkirk Council's website which had a poorly constructed frameset, inconsistent navigation, generally unprofessional appearance and rather poor information provision.

Figure 3: Screenshot of Glasgow City Council website feb '06
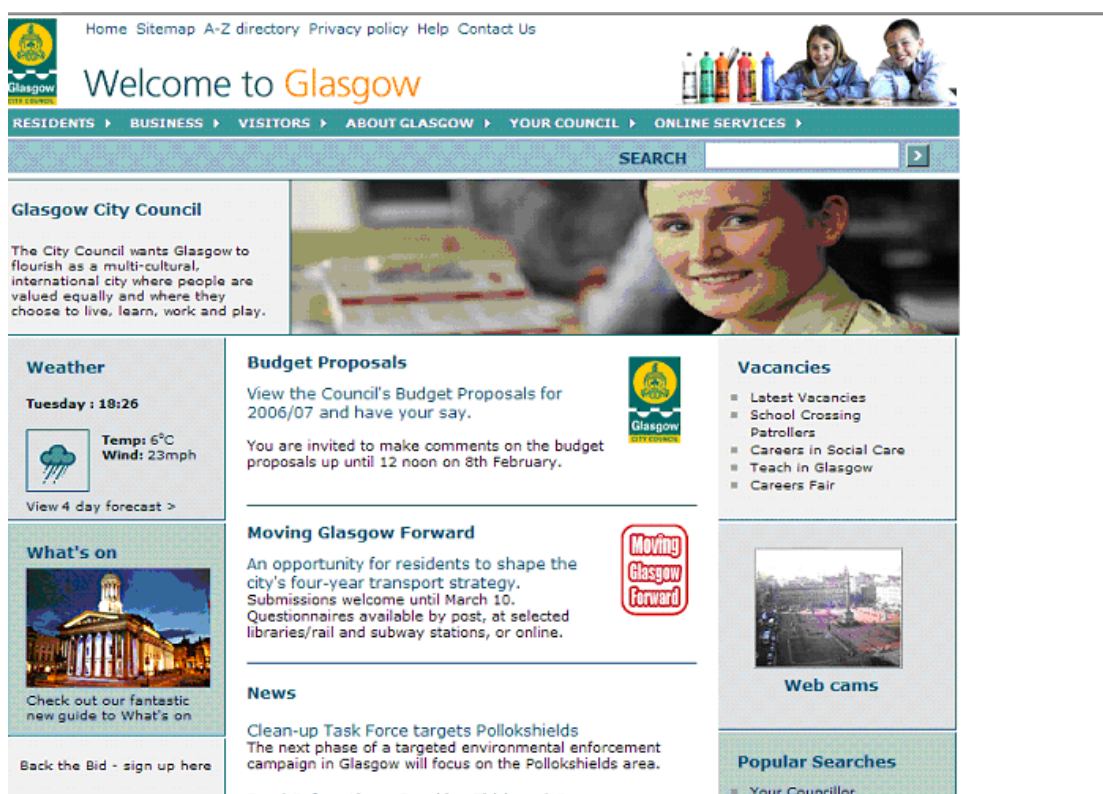
On the other hand websites such as Glasgow City Council (shows in Figure 3) which had a much more 'corporate' design and looked more professional and well organised with better navigation and site design.

The benchmarking exercise generated a large amount of data which will not all be presented in this chapter. This chapter will provide an analysis of the findings and discussion of the implications for the thesis. The analysis will be presented under the headings of Information Provision, eParticipation tools and Usability and Inclusion.

5.2.1 Information Provision

It is argued that access to political information may contribute to an enlightened understanding and thereby help facilitate political engagement and so the 32 websites were analysed to determine what political information, if any, was available regarding the elected members, information about the corporate departmental structure and relevant local information about the local plan etc. Information provision was hugely

varied between the local authorities; although nearly all of the websites had information about the committee structures and membership as well as publishing agendas of meetings, most did not have the minutes of the meetings. Most of the websites had information about the council budget and all had information about the Local Plan with many websites having copies of the plan that are available to download. Many websites had councillor profile pages with contact details and most had information about elections. Information about public meetings was less widely available with only half having a regularly updated section for public meetings. Most of the websites analysed had links to other government agencies and/or community organisations.

All local authorities had information about the services that are available but in the case of three this was very limited. All local authorities had information about the performance of the Council and some included Best Value audit information or other information about key performance indicators. Further, all local authorities had at least some policy documents available although in some cases this was very limited.

5.2.2 Usability and Inclusion

The second point of analysis that will be presented was to determine whether the local authority websites met standards for best practice design which would facilitate the inclusion of all adults. As has already been highlighted, there was great variation between the websites of the 32 local authorities in terms of design standards. Most had appropriate use of fonts, colours and images but several were very hard to read which is a barrier to accessibility for people with visual impairments. Around one third of the websites provided additional support for people with visual impairments and a few had additional language support for people who did not speak English. The most frequently occurring problem was one of structure and navigation- local authority websites generally have a great deal of information and so a well developed structure and navigation is essential. It was the structural issues that raised the most concerns about inclusion. In many cases it was so difficult to find the information that was being sought (and the search functions were often not helpful) that I had to resort to advanced google searching to search the websites. This is a major barrier to inclusion as having large amounts of information available is of no use if it is not easy to find.

5.2.3 eParticipation tools

This section sought to analyse the electronic participation initiatives that were available in the local authorities. The first three of these sought to determine the contact made by email. Although email is not considered to be a 'true' form of eParticipation it could be argued that by starting providing email addresses, the local authority is taking steps towards developing electronic dialogues with citizens. All but one local authority had a general contact email for people to use and all but one provided email addresses for elected members. Most of the local authority websites had contact details for council departments.

The most frequently found method of eParticipation discovered from the benchmarking study was electronic questionnaires. 12 of the local authorities had an online questionnaire although in the case of six of the local authorities this was either a very basic 'poll of the day' question that was not policy related, or a document that could be printed and sent back and therefore not possible to submit electronically.

Use of more deliberative forms of eParticipation was not found to be extensively used. The use of online discussion forums was very limited with only three out of the 32 local authorities having an online discussion on specific topics. Only one local authority provided a 'free' discussion space where people could set the agenda for discussion. Three of the local authorities' websites had evidence of using webchats with either elected members or senior officers.

5.3 Interview data analysis

The benchmarking study provided an opportunity to conduct an assessment of the websites of 32 Scottish local authorities. The study had limitations- it was only possible to analyse the state of eParticipation facilities at that moment in time and so it is possible that some were missed. The benchmarking study revealed that there was evidence of the use of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities and some of these were fairly well developed but that there was little standardisation of approaches and in most cases the tools found were simple electronic questionnaires with very little interactive functionality. There was no evidence found to suggest that eParticipation was forming a major part of any of the local authorities' websites or evidence to suggest that the websites were being used to invigorate a public sphere with

deliberative mechanisms. Additionally, the benchmarking study also revealed that some of the websites of Scottish local authorities were very crude and did not meet best practice standards for website accessibility, had poor structure and/or navigation and in some cases appeared very unprofessional. From the analysis of the websites it was determined that the websites were created as corporate tools providing information not only to citizens but to businesses and serving as a 'promotional tool' to attract tourists as well. The information to citizens is mainly service related and appeared to have more of the citizen consumer ethos rather than acting as tools to facilitate engagement and political participation in decision making. The benchmarking study provided a useful starting point for mapping and evaluation of eParticipation and the points raised will be further investigated in the analysis of the telephone interview data.

The chapter will now go on to outline the findings from the telephone interviews which are presented under thematic headings.

5.3.1 Participation Strategies

The Best Value policies under the *Local Government Scotland Act 2003* have imposed statutory duties on local authorities to consult with citizens. However the methods and tools for the consultations were not specifically prescribed and therefore this research took as its starting point to investigate the way that participation strategies were conducted in local authorities. Further, whether individual local authorities coordinated their consultation and engagement strategies centrally or whether responsibility was devolved to individual departments was investigated. All of the interviewees were asked whether there was a coordinated strategy for consultation initiatives within their local authority. It was discovered that 12 local authorities had a coordinated strategy and a further six were developing a strategy. 12 indicated that they did not have a coordinated strategy but some of these indicated that there were best practice guidelines that had been developed. One respondent indicated that the structure of their council was deliberately decentralised and so it was not possible to implement a coordinated strategy. While a significant number of respondents indicated that there were coordinated strategies in the local authority, most indicated that there was a degree of variation between council departments and that sometimes departments 'did their own thing' and did not always go through the correct channels which can sometimes lead to duplication of consultations between the departments. One respondent commented that:

> …the framework is designed to give that strategic overview. I think we'll still have significant challenges in coordinating consultation because we still find two different services asking the same questions, often at the same time of the same people which I could imagine could be slightly irritating if you happened to be out there… (Respondent 20)

This finding is significant because it firstly demonstrates that participative mechanisms are not standardised within the local authorities and are generally conducted on an ad hoc basis by service departments. This also acts as a potential barrier to eParticipation development because, as demonstrated in the literature review, the nature of eParticipation requires the development of electronic tools which are beyond the role of service departments and so if there is no coordinated strategy to oversee these developments, eParticipation tools are less likely to be developed.

One method for ensuring that there is not repetition of effort for participative mechanisms and preventing 'consultation overload' is for local authorities to develop a consultation database. In total eight respondents indicated that they had created a consultation database and several others indicated that they were planning to develop a database to log consultations. Some respondents indicated, however, that there were problems with ensuring that the database was kept up to date and that departments logged their consultations using the correct procedures. A consultation database is not itself an eParticipation mechanism as it is an internal tool for use within a local authority. However, the limited use of consultation databases is further evidence of a lack of 'joined up working' which is a barrier to the development of an effective participation strategy. This is also indicative of a lack of knowledge and information management tools within local authorities which are a necessary predecessor for the development of effective eParticipation.

5.3.2 Participative Methods

Participants were asked to give examples of public participation methods and their use in their local authority. Due to the fact that many local authorities lack a coordinated strategy it was impossible for respondents to detail all initiatives and methods. A full analysis of the consultation methods used was not necessary for the research although it was interesting to find out about different tools that were being used. For example, 22

out of the 30 respondents indicated that they had a citizens' panel. Some of the respondents who indicated that they did not have a citizens' panel were very negative about the supposed benefits of citizens' panels as an effective way of engaging people.

Further, one respondent discussed the fact that there tends to be:

> … a trend in consultation that the Scottish Executive decides the flavour of the month for consultation, a number of years ago where they were really keen on having citizens' panels so everyone got citizens' panels but were not really sure what to do with them in the long term… so they were a bit of a 'one day wonder'…(Respondent 24)

This finding demonstrates that while there are no statutory requirements to develop specific tools for participation, local authorities are still strongly influenced from guidance from the national level which makes certain methods more likely to be developed than others.

Other examples of methods used included:
- Questionnaires
- Focus Groups
- Neighbourhood community planning
- Communities of interest/equalities forums
- Resident's surveys
- Community Forums
- Public Meetings
- Workshops
- Open Days
- Area Forums
- Local groups such as tenant's associations and neighbourhood groups
- Citizens' Juries
- Street Theatre
- Participatory appraisals
- Appreciative enquiry
- Community Mapping
- Community profiling
- Round Table discussions

- Community photography/ video consultation
- Customer forums

The plethora of methods used is in keeping with the previous findings that individual local authorities are largely left to devise their own strategies for public participation. Many respondents indicated that the methods selected would depend on the purpose of the participative initiative and the citizens who were at the focus.

> It varies really depending on what the exercise is and who's carrying it out whether it's just using a basic consultation document that we send out with questions relating to it, whether it's one to one interviews, focus groups, a lot of it will depend on the client group and also what it is exactly we're consulting on. (Respondent 25)

It became evident that there was some degree of nomenclatural ambiguity amongst respondents about methods that constituted engagement activities and those that represented 'true' consultation. Some respondents used the terms interchangeable while others were keen to emphasise the difference. Several emphasised the difference between 'corporate' consultation which tends to be statutory consultations and 'customer service' style satisfaction research and the community planning initiatives that had the broader remit of engaging the public with the local authority and developing community links. When discussing these issues one respondent said:

> The other side of it [is] the involvement and the engagement because that tends to be more continuous and customer satisfaction things that sometimes can evolve into consultation and so one of the issues that we've had is when is it research, when is it consultation, when's it involvement, when's it engagement? And therefore what procedures do you need to follow for each of those different categories? So some things will start off as engagement and they'll start working with a community group and it'll work it's way through maybe a service delivery part of the council and it'll eventually evolve into something that's far more formal. It might have a research stage that they would go through and eventually come through to a policy stage and it'll have more of a consultation angle [but] because they've been working on it and they haven't necessarily recognised it as a consultation or research exercise originally it doesn't necessarily go through the same channels. (Respondent 14)

111

The ambiguity between the terms consultation and engagement could in some cases be a simple issue of semantics but I believe that this is evidence of the broader issue of whether citizen participation initiatives are devised as part of a drive towards a public sector consumerist ethos or if they serve the function of enhancing local democracy. The confusion behind the purpose of participative exercises and the fact that there is often multiple departments involved and different 'phases' of public participation which may or may not lead into policy development leads to a lack of transparency of outcome and lack of standardisation of procedures for public participation. This will be explored further in the case study analysis in Chapter 6.

5.3.3 External factors influencing participation strategy

The participants were asked about external factors that contributed to the development of their public participation strategy. Although many of the local authorities had previously indicated that there was no coordinated strategy throughout the whole council it was hypothesised that external factors, in particular the statutory guidance, would have had an influence on the participation strategies of local authorities. Some local authorities indicated that they developed their guidelines in house with one indicating that they did not believe that the national guidelines were appropriate for their particular local authority.

It was clear from the interviews that the community planning agenda which is a statutory requirement in Scotland had a strong influence- 21 participants referred to community planning in response to the questions on consultation strategy with many discussing the formation of community planning partnerships and coordinating consultation with other public sector agencies.11 of the respondents specifically mentioned Best Value during the interview which is unsurprising as they are required to provide evidence of consulting with citizens to meet the Best Value requirements. 10 local authorities indicated that they had developed their strategies or guidelines on the basis of the national standards for community engagement and a further 5 cited Communities Scotland (which was an agency created by the Scottish Executive with a remit to tackle community issues such as housing, homelessness and regeneration. It was abolished in April 2008) as a source of guidance. One local authority identified a toolkit that was produced by COSLA and a further participant indicated that their research had formed the basis of the COSLA guidelines. Other external influences

cited by respondents included guidance from IDEA (Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government), the Local Government Association, the local government Improvement Service and the Consultation Institute which is an organisation that facilitates practitioner networking and acts as a forum for the exchange of ideas on best practice for consultation and engagement activities.

As well as finding out about legislative influences on the development of the participative strategies it was also deemed appropriate to find out about other external influences that have impacted on the development of participative strategies in local authorities.

16 local authorities indicated that they had undertaken benchmarking exercises of other local authorities in order to determine best practice for undertaking consultation, community planning etc. Some indicated that this was done through the Consultation Institute or the Improvement Service. Others indicated that the benchmarking was more informal:

> …we do a lot of research and look on other local authorities' websites to see what they're doing and also you make informal contacts at conferences and there's also by the Consultation Institute where you get together and compare but there's nothing formal in place. (Respondent 4)

One of the participants indicated that there should be better coordination of benchmarking so that local authorities could more easily access the information that they require:

> … to be honest if every local authority did that for everything there would be a lot of duplication there so I think increasingly we will be seeking support from the local government improvement service to create tools around knowledge management so that we're not all chasing the same information so we can just go to one place and find out what everyone is doing elsewhere. (Respondent 21)

One of the participants indicated that they had identified Bristol City Council as being a particularly useful local authority to refer to for best practice examples because they are considered to be very progressive with regards to eParticipation.

13 of the local authorities indicated that they participated in knowledge sharing networks with officers in other local authorities to compare best practice. Most of these were informal networks but one respondent indicated that they had access to more formal networking arrangements through the Consultation Institute.

Seven of the participants indicated that they used consultancy firms such as Mori for conducting some or a large proportion of their consultation, this was not a specific point of questioning during the interviews and so it is possible that more of the local authorities use consultants. This was an interesting finding because it is possible that, the consultants had an influence over the consultation process in terms of the methods used. Outsourcing work to consultants is also an indication of the greater corporatisation of local authorities.

A few of the participants indicated that they had been in contact with academic institutions to assist in the development of their participative strategies. One local authority had worked with The Robert Gordon University, one had worked with Napier University and one had worked with Herriot Watt University as part of the DEMOS project. The DEMOS project was cited as having an influence on the consultation strategy of one local authority as they became aware of initiatives in Utrecht and Antwerp which focussed on early involvement of citizens and also resulted in the development of eParticipation tools within the local authority.

These findings indicate that despite the statutory nature of participative initiatives, local authorities are largely left to develop their strategies autonomously although most take into account the guidance from the Scottish Executive. Many local authorities also conduct their own research through benchmarking and knowledge sharing networks although again this appears to be done on an ad hoc basis rather than as part of a formal strategy. These findings also explain the diversity of participative initiatives in general, and eParticipation in particular within Scottish local authorities.

5.3.4 The role of elected members in Public Participation

As indicated in the literature on citizen participation, the increased drive for citizen participation initiatives which are largely coordinated by service departments in local authorities raises questions about the relationship between representative and participative democracy in local authorities and whether the role of elected members

has changed as a result of the new mechanisms for citizen participation. It has been argued that increased citizen participation in decision making may undermine the role of elected members and could erode rather than enhance democratic legitimacy. Interviewees were asked about the role of elected members in terms of citizen participation initiatives- even though participants were assured that their responses would be treated with confidentiality some declined to comment on this question. 20 respondents indicated that the elected members were supportive of citizen participation initiatives. Some indicated that elected members were directly involved in designing consultation strategies and/or were driving the use of innovative techniques. One respondent from an island-based local authority indicated that elected members were becoming increasingly supportive of electronic tools including the development of eParticipation because they were aware that many of the constituents were very reliant on online activities. Most indicated that the support for participatory initiatives from elected members had grown in recent years but some commented that they are statutory requirements and so elected members have no choice but to accept them. However, one respondent commented that '…one elected member has partnership in her portfolio and so she's obviously blazing the trail and is pushing officers quite hard to improve consultation generally.' (Respondent 20)

Some respondents indicated that elected members were not always supportive of citizen participation initiatives. One respondent indicated that it was challenging to get 'buy in' from elected members and senior management for improving consultation processes. Another respondent commented that elected members still see themselves as having a 'traditional' role of responding to individual inquiries in surgeries etc and so were not keen to get involved with wider strategic consultations.

Several respondents commented on the changing role of the elected member:

> …there's an obvious tension because local elected members are there and are seen as advocates for local areas but in some ways by asking communities you can be seen to be bypassing that democratic link so we have to be careful in the sense of what we're talking about is a customer/service provider relationship and that's why we're trying to foster, leaving the political relationship between the elected members and their ward members not quite so fragile. (Respondent 8)

Another respondent commented:

> …some of them are extremely protective of their own positions and like to think that they know the opinions of their wards so they're pretty distrustful of consultations… I mean obviously there are statutory ones that we have to do… some of them will turn up at a public meeting or area forum and will participate through that but obviously when it comes to decision making, they're the decision makers so their views get taken into account that way. I would have said probably on balance they're more suspicious of them than supportive… obviously they come with a particular political bias for a start and that might not reflect the views of supporters in their area… (Respondent 22)

The findings of this set of questions revealed that there was evidence of tensions and uncertainty regarding the role of elected members and the role of the management and administration with regards to citizen participation initiatives in local authorities. One respondent commented that most of the work handled by the local authority and associated statutory consultations were conducted independently of elected members. There was also further evidence of the paradox with the democratic side of citizen participation and the customer service philosophy within local authorities. Some of the responses to this question indicated a 'them and us' mentality between officers and elected members and also some respondents revealed that they thought elected members were distrustful and suspicious about citizen participation initiatives. As only one officer was interviewed from each local authority it was not possible to examine these issues in great depth during the telephone interviews.

The case study findings in Chapter 6 will include a more detailed analysis of these issues.

5.3.5 Participation, Representativeness and 'Hard to Reach' Groups

As indicated in the literature, citizen participation initiatives are often criticised for not being representative of the local population which undermines their legitimacy. All of the interviewees stated that it was difficult to get a representative response to consultations although many were keen to emphasise that their citizens' panels were representative and that they made use of equalities forums etc to engage with ethnic

minorities, disabled people etc. Some local authorities, however, argued that it is impossible to get 'true' representation from a statutory consultation.

> I don't think you can ever make consultations representative. I think that you can perhaps make them demographically representative but you can never make them representative in terms of attitudinal surveys. I think the trick is not just having one thing… I think that all consultations give you a snapshot of how people are feeling at the time and I think they need to be used collectively so that you get a balanced view. (Respondent 17)

The respondent above was discussing the problem that responses to participative initiatives tend to be personal opinions based on the participants' own experience and therefore trying to aggregate responses together to get a 'truly representative' conclusion is very difficult.

Many respondents indicated that those who participate tended to be the 'usual suspects' of campaign groups or members of the public who were already politically active. Groups that were identified by respondents as being particularly 'hard to reach' were

- Young People
- Black and Minority Ethnic Groups
- People from lower socio economic groups
- People with disabilities
- LGBT groups

Some respondents argued that everyone is 'hard to reach' because people only tend to give their views if they are opposed to a proposal being consulted upon or if they are a community activist. This is in keeping with findings from the literature. Several respondents commented that community councils (which are locally elected community bodies with a remit to address issues of priority to local communities. They are required by law in all Scottish local authorities) are often required to be involved in consultations but that these are generally not representative of the community as a whole either as they are generally composed of people who are already politically engaged. Some respondents pointed out that they had processes in place for engaging with hard to reach groups some even argued that:

it's probably skewed in favour of hard to reach groups because we have the community learning people and we have links with community councils and voluntary organisations and so on and they have people we can approach and there's quite well developed relationships for disability groups… hard to reach groups, ironically, are easier to reach than the general public because we can actually get in touch with them through one source or another directly… (Respondent 14)

Respondents were then asked what the main barriers to getting people involved in citizen participation were and what they believed would encourage more people to participate. Some respondents indicated that they believe eParticipation methods would be useful which will be discussed further in the next section. One of the main barriers to involvement was relevance; half of the interviewees indicated that if people do not see the issue as being directly relevant to them they will be unwilling to get involved. One interviewee commented that people have their own priorities with what they wish to get involved with and so may wish to focus their energy on particular issues rather than getting involved with participative initiatives in general. This backs up findings from the literature that people will mobilise over issues that impact on their lives but are less willing to do so on strategic decisions.

One of the difficulties I think is that there are statutory areas that we just have to do and that's not necessarily the most interesting thing for local people- they might have a particular thing that they think is more interesting and that's their issue and a lot of the time if we ask somebody to… for example helping people to stop smoking is a really important issue for local authorities but for local people it may not be the most important thing… so we have a tension of what's important to us and what's important to them and never the twain shall meet! (Respondent 30)

More than one third of respondents commented on the importance of tempering the expectations of the participants and making it very clear what the scope and limitations of the participative exercise are. For example, they drew attention to the statutory legislation from the Scottish Executive on spending and the fact that participative exercises are rarely conducted in ways that the results directly translate into policies but must be balanced with the views of other stakeholder groups. One respondent commented on an infamous consultation exercise in Bristol whereby citizens voted for a very low level of council tax and there was a drastic cut in services which resulted in

very negative press attention and criticisms that citizens were not fully aware of the implications of their decisions.

Around two thirds of interviewees commented that people must feel that their views are being listened to and that the consultation is meaningful or they will not be inclined to participate:

> I think the only way is over a period of time demonstrating that we're being open and inclusive and honest and transparent in everything we do and if people see that they are contributing to a change and that they're explained why or why not their views have or haven't been taken into account those type of actions will tend to engender a greater level of trust. It's a time thing I don't think it's ever going to happen overnight. (Respondent 3)

Further, some respondents indicated that the unwillingness of people to participate in consultations is indicative of a more general disengagement with government organisations and public bodies. A number of respondents indicated that advertising consultations effectively including providing information to consultees is a factor in encouraging greater respondents but some also drew attention to the fact that advertising in the press and radio can be very expensive.

22 respondents indicated that feeding back the results of the participative exercise and what impact that has had on policy is important. Many respondents commented that this is part of the national standards for community engagement and is built into their own guidelines for best practice. In particular a number drew attention to reporting mechanisms for their citizens' panel members. Several respondents, however, commented that feedback is not always given to participants and that in some cases results are not reported back effectively. They believed that this was contributing to the feeling of participants that their views have not been taken into account and also that the volume of statutory consultations was leading to best practice guidelines not being followed.

Around one third of interviewees highlighted the problems of consultation overload or consultation fatigue as a barrier to participation:

> …I think there is so much pressure on different parts of local authorities on different services… to do various forms of consultation, they are going on all

over the place and we're trying to coordinate that wherever possible in terms of the community planning framework but it makes it very difficult because certain services are obliged to undertake consultations in certain ways and to achieve certain results which limits the amount of coordination that can take place so I think that's probably the biggest issue is people wanting to take part. I don't know how much they feel their input is valued- consultation fatigue, everyone speaks about that these days. (Respondent 1)

Some respondents commented that the statutory requirements for consultation mandated by the Scottish Executive was causing problems and it was also commented that funding pressures and the resulting impact on staffing levels meant that officers did not have time to ensure that consultations were being conducted effectively:

…as you can imagine council budgets are tight, staffing, there's a lot of vacancies quite often it's done as an add on and it's not really built into people's core jobs or writing a strategy for example. 'oh oh we'll have to consult on that' so it's a change of attitude but nobody should underestimate the effort that needs to be gone to to get it right. (Respondent 20)

The findings from this set of questions indicate that the method of participation that is employed is only one part of the reason for disengagement and lack of willingness to get involved. The primary reason given for lack of involvement were relevance of the issue and demonstrating to people who have been involved that their views have been listened to. Respondents demonstrated that, while certain groups were considered to be 'particularly hard to reach' that in fact it is difficult to engage any local people beyond those who are community activists and those whose lives are directly impacted by the decision. The issue of the high number of statutory consultations from the Scottish Executive was highlighted as contributing to the problem of consultation overload and that in some cases consulting with citizens is a 'box to be ticked' rather than a genuine effort to engage with people. However, as indicated some respondents did highlight the method of participation as a potential issue for encouraging more public participation and mentioned eParticipation as a possible way of overcoming this. This will be investigated further in the next section.

5.4 Responses to questions about eParticipation

Having discussed the overall participation strategies of local authorities and the external and internal factors that have influenced their development, this chapter will now go on to discuss the interviewees' perceptions of eParticipation initiatives specifically. Firstly the attitudes and perceptions of eParticipation will be discussed and then the chapter will go on to map and evaluate the actual use of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities.

5.4.1 Benefits of eParticipation

All respondents were asked what they considered the benefits of eParticipation. The main findings are summarised under thematic headings:

Increasing response rates

The questions about representativeness and response to consultations revealed that this was a great problem for Scottish local authorities. From the literature it has been hypothesised that eParticipation may help overcome this problem and so the interviewees were asked whether they thought that eParticipation would have an impact on responses. 12 of the interviewees indicated that they believed that eParticipation tools could increase the response rate of participative initiatives, particularly with hard to reach groups such as younger people who are less willing to participate in 'offline' participative mechanisms such as public meetings. One respondent indicated that they thought people with disabilities may benefit from eParticipation stating that: '…in some cases you would go to a forum maybe representing people with a disability but there are a whole load of people with disabilities who don't go to a meeting who we could make sure that their views and the forum's views are similar so I think it's maybe using it as a way of providing checks and balances.' (Respondent 16)

The respondent's comment above also demonstrates a point about equalities forums that emerged from the literature that 'hard to reach' groups should not be regarded as homogenous and so equalities forums do not necessarily represent the views of all disabled/bme/young people etc.

A number of respondents singled out young people as a particular group who may be more inclined to participate online rather than in 'offline' participative mechanisms.

> …one of the obvious benefits is that young people seem to be a hard audience to get to and just like the government, again using an election parallel here, think that using electronic voting would be a way to encourage young people to become involved in the election process it may be a way of councils getting a better response from young people to more general service consultations. It certainly would be worth trying. (Respondent 7)

Many respondents also provided anecdotal information about non-local authority eParticipation initiatives involving young people run through Dialogue Youth, Young Scot and the community planning partnership generally which they believed had been successful in encouraging young people to participate. One respondent, however, disputed the assumption that eParticipation would encourage more young people to become involved in public participation initiatives: 'There is a certain assumption that young people would be more likely to respond in that way because they are more comfortable with the technology but I don't know if anyone has proof of that. I think that's the main factor to be aware of.' (Respondent 5)

As has been demonstrated, eParticipation tools are not always web based and one respondent commented that using digital television may be a particularly effective way of increasing responses:

> …if we could have something involving digital television and I think some local authorities in England have gone down that route… because everybody obviously has a television, if you could integrate that with a local magazine news programme and say 'here's an e-survey', you could do a news programme that's very straight and to the point and say 'here are the options' , I think that would probably be a really good way of doing it. Respondent 14

Convenience for respondents

A related point to increasing responses that interviewees drew attention to was that eParticipation is more convenient for many people as they can participate at a time that suits them and that they would not have to attend meetings at a certain time or post a survey form back to the local authority.

…I think you have to make it really easy for people to do, going along to a village hall at night, most people don't have the time. People who are computer literate and have access, they're probably going to have a shot at it online particularly if they've got a point they want to raise with the council. (Respondent 18)

Some respondents from rural and island local authorities indicated that for people in rural areas the benefits of participating online were particularly significant:

As our population of online users increases it becomes an easier and easier way to reach more people without too much difficulty, especially with us being a rural area we're really well dispersed so postal questionnaires and online are perhaps the best way of reaching all the people, you can't feasibly go out doorstep interviewing a population and if you're doing focus groups it's difficult to bring people together especially if you have island communities… and we do tend to find that the more remote communities tend to be further ahead in terms of their reliance on the internet. (Respondent 1)

Scotland has areas which have very dispersed rural populations which causes logistical problems for organising public meetings etc and so eParticipation tools could potentially overcome some of these problems. In keeping with the quotation above, many respondents from rural and island local authorities highlighted the fact that remote communities can benefit from the development of ICTs for a variety of purposes such as online shopping and accessing information that is not available locally.

Anonymity of participation improving quality of responses

One of the benefits of eParticipation highlighted in the literature is that it affords greater anonymity to participants. This factor was highlighted by several interviewees who indicated that greater anonymity may encourage people to respond more honestly:

… people are more comfortable if they think they're anonymous and they're much more honest in their responses. If you really want to find out what people think of a service you're providing people will be much happier to do this if they think they're anonymous. (Respondent 1)

Another respondent commented that this was particularly true if dealing with a sensitive issue:

> ….if you don't want to have to speak to somebody if it's a sensitive issue that you want to bring up or you don't want to go in and collect a form or have your name and address… I guess the Internet is the most anonymous way of doing that so I could see that being an advantage for some people. (Respondent 15)

Two respondents from island communities indicated that eParticipation could be beneficial for conducting anonymous consultation activities with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) groups because sexual orientation was a social stigma in some communities and they believed that more people would be more likely to respond if the results were anonymous. One officer, however, indicated that a youth engagement website developed in conjunction with youth groups had been extremely controversial amongst some of the councillors and members of the public in their area because it contained information about sexual health and invited young people to email questions. The respondent indicated that they had been under pressure from some members of the local community to take the information down.

Reducing the time spent for data collection and analysis

As well as drawing attention to benefits of eParticipation to the local people, some interviewees also indicated that they believed that eParticipation would bring benefits to local authority officers. 11 respondents commented that eParticipation strategies could provide the local authority with results more quickly than offline participative mechanisms. This is both in terms of collecting the data: '…certainly with the experience we've had with the packages we've piloted you actually get at least the top line results back sort of pretty quickly so you can start to see patterns very quickly after you've put the questionnaires out so that's one of the benefits.' (Respondent 24). And also analysing the data once it comes in: '…it saves you an awful lot of time in terms of your analysis and so on, you don't have to type your responses into the computer again, they're automatically collected and you can automatically analyse them.' (Respondent 22)

Some respondents made reference to software packages that automatically conducts basic analysis of questionnaire data which can also save time for the researcher.

Cost of eParticipation vs offline forms of participation

Nine respondents commented that they believed that eParticipation strategies were less expensive than offline participative mechanisms. Cost is clearly very important when local authorities are expected to make efficiency savings but at the same time to undertake an increasing number of consultations. 'The constant challenge is how to get people's views in an affordable way that we can actually manage to resource.' (Respondent 10)

One respondent commented that they had conducted an analysis of the costs of computerised customer contact versus face to face contact:

> 'Clearly as with any online thing it's low cost, obviously. What I should say in the background is we have a broad customer contact strategy in place which has been rolling out over the last few years… as part of that customer contact strategy we understand that the cost of processing enquiries… the cheapest form of processing enquiries is direct computer access so the clear benefit is one of cost… and that's got to be the number one. ' (Respondent 23)

Another respondent said:

> It perhaps reaches… an audience without us having to necessarily put a major investment into commissioning a company to structure a survey and send it out to people and chase people up and the like. It's quite a cheap way of doing things that we can structure the survey ourselves and it can be analysed by the software in one go… (Respondent 9)

One respondent commented that eParticipation could allow local authorities to reach the 'usual suspects' in a cost effective way so that they could devote more time and resources to engage and get the views of 'hard to reach' groups.

Further benefits cited were environmental benefits from reducing the amount of paper send out, the potential for using innovative mechanisms and that eParticipation allows more information to be provided to participants than offline participative mechanisms do.

5.4.2 Drawbacks and limitations of eParticipation

Respondents were also asked what they thought the disadvantages of eParticipation were. The results are again presented under thematic categories

Digital Exclusion

The biggest concern amongst respondents was that eParticipation could exclude certain demographic groups from participating because of digital exclusion. This is in keeping with findings from the literature that suggest that a barrier to the development of eParticipation is that some members of the public would not be able to participate due to lack of access to ICTs or because they do not have the skills to participate. Some areas of Scotland have high levels of deprivation and some respondents commented that there were concerns about excluding people from low income households.

> … potentially it could be excluding a number of groups, there's significant pockets of deprivation in this area and you can't assume that people have internet access so you couldn't do a major consultation solely online I don't think you would have to supplement it with other methods. (Respondent 20)

Some respondents commented that despite digital inclusion strategies such as providing internet access in public buildings there was still likely to be people excluded:

> …it wouldn't be enough to do it on it's own I don't think because you are still only getting people who have access to the internet; although the council does offer free access to the internet in all it's libraries and we chose an evening where the libraries were open late and advertised it there so we had the staff ready to help people out who weren't familiar with the internet but wanted to take part but nevertheless… although the numbers with access to the internet at home are growing they're not as high… so in that respect we know we're not getting everybody. (Respondent 12)

Some respondents commented that because Scotland has an ageing population, there are particular concerns about digital exclusion of older people who are less likely to

have Internet access. However, this view was contradicted by other respondents who thought that this was an incorrect assumption to make about older people because of the increased number of 'silver surfers' with many older people embracing new technologies. Other interviewees expressed concerns that people with visual impairments may also be excluded from eParticipation. However, many respondents commented that this would not necessarily be a reason for not using eParticipation tools at all. A key finding from this research was that respondents discussed using eParticipation tools as forming part of a wider participative strategy rather than a method in isolation. While respondents expressed concerns about digital exclusion most went on to comment that it would not be the sole method that they would use and that a range of methods is the best way to increase participation:

> … the obvious one is that not everyone's got access to a PC, but it is definitely something that we would use and are using increasingly. The benefits outweigh the drawbacks, and I think as long as you don't rely solely on one method of consultation and I think as long as you view each consultation exercise as a separate and bespoke activity and you look at "who is my target audience here, are my target audience likely to have access to a PC, is that the way that they are most likely to respond to the council?" If we were doing consultation with our elderly people who used our home care services we wouldn't use online consultation, we would possibly use a focus group, we would possibly train up their home helps, their home carer to actually carry out a survey on our behalf so that they were being interviewed by someone they knew and were familiar with and trusted. We use different methods depending on our participants and even then we tailor the methods to most suit the needs of our participants. (Respondent 29)

Representativeness and Validity of responses

While many interviewees indicated that they believed that eParticipation could facilitate more representative responses to participative exercises, a few commented that they were concerned that the results would be less representative than offline forms of consultation. Two respondents commented that online questionnaires tended to be completed by activists and the 'usual suspects' rather than members of the public because they are the only ones who actively seek out consultations on the Internet.

Another respondent added that they felt there was a greater danger of respondents to eParticipation initiatives being self selecting and that the results would be skewed and inaccurate. However, some respondents indicated that they did not feel that the representativeness issue was always important in participative exercises and should therefore not be considered a barrier to the development of eParticipation:

> With certain types of things you're really wanting to get a representative view… with other things you want to get a view from people who have an interest in the subject… the other thing is I think you could still set up online surveys to give you the information you need without getting people's identity. You can get them to respond to questions about age. (Respondent 10)

The respondent above was referring to requesting for basic demographic information to check the representativeness of the responses while maintaining the anonymity of respondents..

Several respondents commented that they were concerned about issues of security and validity of responses. One respondent commented that in an eParticipation exercise that they had been involved with had multiple responses from an individual or activist group (the respondent said that they were aware that this was the case because the same text was entered many times in the responses). Another respondent commented that:

> Myself and the manager have concerns about online consultation in terms of the validation and things like that but I think it's got a purpose for certain areas but I don't think it's necessarily the best tool for every type of consultation that you want to do… you might get the same people filling it in half a dozen times and you wouldn't know so I think if it's a broad picture that you're after. (Respondent 11)

Some respondents indicated that they were distrustful of the anonymity of eParticipation and that there was the possibility of people responding to a local consultation when they do not live in the area concerned:

> …it's much less controllable because you've got no idea if people are lying to you, if somebody fills out they could have come from Australia. If you do a face to face interview the interviewer has some idea if the person is middle aged,

male, female, ethnic minority or whatever, if you're filling stuff in electronically you could be anyone. I think most people are trustworthy and they're not doing that but there is always a slight suspicion that it's maybe not representative. (Respondent 22)

There are technological solutions to these problems such as having cookies (mentioned by 2 respondents) and required fields that had to be completed.
However, a respondent indicated that they could not have 'required' fields that had to be completed by the participants or the survey would not submit because of accessibility guidelines and disability discrimination. The respondent also added that they could not have respondents register in advance to participate in eParticipation initiatives because it contravened data protection laws.

ICT issues

Several respondents expressed concern that they would have or have had ICT problems using eParticipation; two respondents indicated that they had had functionality problems with online questionnaires and others said that it was important to ensure that the system was robust:

> …you have to ensure that the system capability is there and it doesn't pack up on you, the functionality and everything otherwise people feel quite miffed about having started giving their response and then something packs up on the technology side… (Respondent 23)

The concerns about ensuring that the systems that are used are reliable and appropriate are important. As has been demonstrated in the literature, an eParticipation strategy will not be successful in increasing citizen participation if the systems developed are not reliable.

Appropriateness of eParticipation tools to the purpose and scope of consultation

While many respondents indicated that they were positive about eParticipation. Some respondents commented that they did not believe that eParticipation was always the most appropriate method to use to gain citizens' views. For example, several indicated

that they did not believe that eParticipation was an effective way to gain qualitative information and that they should only be used for short quantitative surveys: '…I think if it's a broad picture that you're after then it's a good quick way and it's cost effective but if it's a sensitive issue and you want to dig a bit deeper and get qualitative information then I don't think it's the best tool to use.' (Respondent 11)

Further, several respondents commented that eParticipation was a rather impersonal medium and so was not effective for engaging people in a deliberative process:

> …people aren't always informed enough and when you engage with them and they say something that isn't correct you can challenge that, you can put that information over to them so that they learn from that… I think electronic stuff has its place but I think face to face engagement is far more meaningful because you can inform and help peoples' learning and information about what's going on so they can make a far more informed comment. (Respondent 30)

Another respondent commented that:

> …as with any remote methodology you're going to be confined to words to responses to questions, you can't ask follow up questions and that's what you get with a focus group and so if it's more about yes/no questions then that's fine and to some extent you can ask open ended questions about why and what do you think and whatever… you don't get the body language either… (Respondent 11)

5.4.3 Analysis of respondents' beliefs about eParticipation

The main benefits of eParticipation cited by respondents were ones of convenience-both to the members of the public in terms of time and effort spent and for the local authorities themselves in terms of cost and the time taken to enter and analyse the results. Some believed that eParticipation could appeal to a broader base of participants. Some also indicated that eParticipation may appeal more to hard to reach groups such as young people but this was rarely based on evidence but on

assumptions that because young people are more inclined to use technology eParticipation would appeal to them.

The emphasis on costs and convenience reflect pragmatic concerns about conducting consultations in local authorities. Many respondents commented that the number of statutory consultations was increasing and so there were resource implications for conducting consultations. The perception of eParticipation being 'quick and cheap' for local authorities to undertake is valid but does not reflect the 'ideals' of eParticipation of fostering new relationships between citizens and government or devolving decision making to members of the public. Nor indeed was there any evidence to suggest a widespread use of online tools for deliberation- in fact many respondents were very negative about discussion forums indicating that they would be resource intensive to moderate and would not lead to a high quality of debate.

From the summary of drawbacks to eParticipation it is clear that there is great concern about digital exclusion as well as concerns about security, technology and representativeness of the responses. However, as has been demonstrated, interviewees did not see these problems as insurmountable and most indicated that eParticipation could form a part of a broader participative strategy or that it could be used to consult with specific user groups if appropriate. Interviewees in most cases did not see eParticipation as being a distinct phenomenon from other forms of participation but rather saw eParticipation tools as being another option in the 'toolbox' that could be used where necessary.

The barriers to participation that were identified in the first section of the interviews indicated that relevance of the issue being consulted upon was a primary reason for the lack of participation. It is difficult to see how e-solutions will solve this problem as local authorities have a statutory duty to consult on certain issues.

5.5 Use of eParticipation in Scottish Local Authorities

Having discussed the results of the interviews that investigated the perceptions of eParticipation by local authority officers, this chapter will now go on to map and analyse the use of eParticipation tools in Scottish local authorities.

5.5.1 Overview of eParticipation initiatives in Scottish Local Authorities.

In the second part of the interview, respondents were asked about their experiences with eParticipation. The aim of these questions was to establish how many local authorities had used eParticipation tools, how successful they felt these were, whether the methods were part of the overall participation strategy or whether they were pilot initiatives or part of an external project and what the overall drawbacks and benefits of eParticipation are. Respondents who indicated that they had not used eParticipation tools were asked whether they planned to use to tools in future and if so which tools and what they saw as being the benefits and drawbacks of eParticipation are.

In total 25 out of the 30 respondents were aware of at least one instance of eParticipation being used in their local authority. This was significantly more than had been anticipated from the benchmarking study which could be for a number of reasons:

- The development of eParticipation has been rapid in recent years with the eGovernment agenda and the statutory requirements for community planning and other consultations and so in the time between conducting the benchmarking and undertaking the interviews more local authorities had developed eParticipation tools.
- The initiatives were not running or had not in development but not 'live' during the benchmarking study, for example they may not have had an online questionnaire or discussion forum when the benchmarking study was being undertaken
- The initiatives were missed during the benchmarking study- although the websites were analysed thoroughly using a rigorous process, it is possible that due to the vast scale of some of the local authority websites, there may have been some initiatives that were missed.

Further, the total figure indicated masks the fact that some local authorities were undertaking eParticipation initiatives that were not online and therefore would have not been picked up in the benchmarking study, these are still valid for the purposes of this study as eParticipation is not exclusively an online phenomenon.

The figure indicates whether respondents indicated that they had used eParticipation at all and with any of the methods; there was great variation in the extent the eParticipation initiatives were used and whether or not they were integrated into the policy process- some respondents indicated that they had used eParticipation initiatives to a very limited extent while others had well developed and integrated eParticipation initiatives, these will be discussed further in the next section.

5.5.2 Examples and use of eParticipation tools in Scottish Local Authorities.

Table 2: eParticipation tools

EParticipation tool	Yes
	Count
Online Questionnaires	24
Discussion Forums	4
Webchats	2
Texting	3
Digital TV	1
Emailing responses	9
ePetitions	
Interactive voting	3
Opinion Meters	2

The table above shows the breakdown of eParticipation initiatives reported by respondents. As with the offline methods discussed in the previous section, some respondents indicated that due to the fact that different departments were responsible for undertaking consultation, it is possible that other initiatives were being undertaken

that they were unaware of. It is possible, therefore, that there is under-reporting of eParticipation initiatives in local authorities.

Online Questionnaires

The table indicates that the most widely used method for eParticipation is online questionnaires which were reported by 24 respondents. Some respondents also indicated that they had used electronic questionnaires for internal staff surveys which were not counted in the figures above because members of the public could not participate but it does indicate that they have the functionality and experience to conduct eParticipation initiatives. Others indicated that they had been involved with eParticipation initiatives that were not organised through the local authority. These were most frequently cited as being targeted at young people through Young Scot, Dialogue Youth or the Scottish Youth Parliament. Again these were not counted in the figures above because they are not organised through the local authority and so could not have an impact on policy but respondents indicated that this had made them aware of eParticipation as a potential method for consulting with members of the public.

The scope and usage of these questionnaires varied markedly between local authorities and no local authorities indicated that this was a key part of their participation strategy for gaining the views of the general public. For example, one indicated that they only put up one or two general questions for gaining a snapshot view of issues that did not contribute to the policy process. Another respondent indicated that they put questionnaires online but they had to be printed off and sent back through the post, this was counted because the questionnaire was available online. Two respondents indicated that they had used online questionnaires but that they had serious technical problems with the software and so had suspended their use.

Most respondents who indicated that they used online questionnaires stated that they were not the sole method for participation available for consultation that they were always conducted alongside other methods such as paper based questionnaires. For example, two councils indicated that they made their Household Surveys available online so that people had the opportunity to complete electronically rather than the paper based version that was posted out. One local authority officer said that they put the citizens' panel surveys online so that people could fill them out and then also invited them to become members of the citizens' panel. It was unclear whether the

results were actually contributing to the policy process or whether the online panel was simply a marketing strategy to encourage people to join the citizens' panel.

One interviewee indicated that they had used an online questionnaire for a specific user group where they knew email addresses and so could send the link out directly to them but that the survey was not open to the general public.

Some of the respondents indicated that their online questionnaires got very low response rates and indicated that they believed that there was a lack of awareness amongst members of the public of the initiatives. Respondents were not able to give details about the demographic characteristics of respondents to be able to say whether or not they were attracting a more or less representative sample of the population.

Respondents were asked whether the responses to online questionnaires differed from offline equivalents both in terms of overall results and whether people completed all the questions or missed qualitative responses. No respondents were able to provide these types of details.

Discussion Forums

Four of the respondents indicated that they used online discussion forums to engage the public; two of these were fairly informal arrangements- one set up for a specific project to encourage children who were being bullied to talk about their problems and one was not used formally for consultation:

> It's not for consultation but it gives people the chance to ask questions and if there are any questions that are pertinent to the departments they are signposted to the departments to respond to so it's more a means of communication than means of consultation as such and I don't think we would use it as consultation I don't think the way it's set up would make sense. (Respondent 10)

The local authority with the most well developed online discussion system was the Highland Council Thinknet project which is a discussion facility for people to engage in debates about a whole host of different issues. It is externally moderated and the consultants provide reports on summaries of discussions and suggestions for how

these should be fed into policy. However, while the officer interviewed about the Thinknet project indicated that the results were considered, they were unable to give examples of when the discussions influenced policy making directly but indicated that they were considered in conjunction with other forms of participation.

Some of the literature on eParticipation claims that online discussions could facilitate deliberation both between members of the public and between the public and the local authority but the majority of respondents who commented about discussion forums in this study were sceptical about their worth:

> I'm probably unconvinced that that would work very well. From discussion forums that I've seen for workers I haven't been very impressed with them as a way of having good debate. It tends to be question and answer things. I think you would have to try and set it up in some way, you just wouldn't set it up and hope that people would come to there, you'd have to put some kind of preparation that got folk thinking about it and involved and then going to discussion forums. (Respondent 3)

As well as concerns about the benefits that online discussions could bring, some respondents also commented that having such facilities were very resource intensive in terms of moderating and reporting the findings: 'The problem with discussion forums is obviously the moderation and picking up the results and feeding them back to the required people.' (Respondent 14)

Webchats

Two of the respondents indicated that their local authority had used webchats, one between members of the public and senior managers and one between the public and senior managers and elected members. These took the form of question and answer sessions which were posted in real time and the interviewees indicated that they were used as part of the policy process. However, as with the Thinknet project, exactly how and to what extent the results had an influence was very unclear and the respondents were unable to give specific examples.

One respondent commented that:

> …up until last year all the budget consultations were done trailing around village halls and things like that and very very low turnout and the same people each year- people who are already engaged with the council, on a community council, they're in some other group that have an interest. This year what they've done is video conferencing over the internet and that worked and got in a completely different group of people actually and probably a better standard of interaction really if the truth be told! (Respondent 18)

This respondent was very positive that the webchat allowed people who do not normally attend public meetings to come forward (although they were not able to provide specific details of which groups were more likely to participate) and that the standard of interaction was higher.

The other respondent also commented that

> We have we've used three [web chats], one was to do with parks when we were revising the parks and open spaces strategy which is probably a very good example of a very big consultation strategy that was paper, leaflets, radio adverts and online discussion. We did it for that for school closures, I think it was the primary school closures and the most recent one was for the council budget. (Respondent 12)

Both respondents were very positive about the experience and indicated that they would be used more in future but indicated that lot of work was involved to set up and moderate the web chats and that the ICT team played a significant role in terms of organising the chats.

SMS Texting

Three of the respondents indicated that they had been involved with eParticipation initiatives that involved SMS messaging.

One of these was to set the agenda of a public participation event to select the topic for discussion. The initiative had just been launched at the time of the interview and so the respondent did not have further details about the response rate. Another was initiated

by the youth services section of the local authority and involved engaging young people with text messaging to try to get them to participate in a branding strategy for the local authority. The respondent had not been directly involved in the initiative and so was unable to provide a huge amount of detail about the initiative.

The other respondent indicted that again the initiative was set up to try to engage young people but that:

> …what they've found was that they got loads of mobile phone numbers and they would text loads of people but the young people wouldn't find it important enough to waste 5p or 3p on their texts to send stuff back and so that was an issue that didn't get very far although it had limited success…. (Respondent 30)

Several other respondents indicated that they were aware of text message eParticipation initiatives conducted by other community planning partners or by Young Scot etc. 3 other respondents indicated that they thought that using text messaging was a potential way to encourage greater participation.

Digital TV

One respondent indicated that they had been part of a Scottish Executive pilot project to use Digital TV for facilitating public participation where people could 'vote' to indicate their concerns. The respondent indicated that response rates were low for the initiative and that the system was not user friendly:

> We did some focus groups to see how easy it was to navigate and it was quite difficult and that wasn't our fault it was the way that it was developed but … we put out leaflets of how to navigate it… these are things that would have to be changed quite frequently, you would have to change the key messages or the consultation issue quite frequently because people aren't going to go into it more than once otherwise. (Respondent 17)

Two other respondents indicated that they thought that digital television may be a potential mechanism for facilitating public participation in decisions making because of the almost universal access to digital television in Scotland.

Interactive voting handsets in meetings

Two respondents reported that they had used interactive voting handsets in public meetings to make them more participative and encourage people to get involved. Both respondents were very positive about the handsets indicating that it encouraged people to get involved without having to stand up and ask questions in front of everyone and that it provided instant feedback to the facilitators at the meeting.

One respondent commented that: '…it was instant feedback and it was really good fun and… it was very participative and it broke up the meeting.' (Respondent 26)

Electronic Opinion Meters in public buildings

Two of the respondents reported that their local authority made use of electronic 'opinion meters' in public buildings to gain the views of customers. The respondents indicated that these were small terminals and respondents were only expected to answer one or two closed questions to give a snapshot of customer satisfaction but that they had been successful and that they had been popular with both younger and older people who had used the opinion meters.

5.5.1 Analysis of methods used

The mapping exercise revealed that eParticipation initiatives are being used in Scottish local authorities but that there is no standardisation between local authorities of either the eParticipation tools that are used or the extent to which the results are used in the policy process. In total 17 out of the 25 local authorities who used eParticipation tools indicated that the results were used in the policy process but some were very unclear about how this was actually done, especially with the webchats and discussion forums which indicates a lack of transparency of eParticipation initiatives and also a lack of impact of eParticipation on policy making.

Some respondents were aware of the eParticipation initiatives through internal reporting but did not have a large amount of detail about them. This is further evidence

of the lack of standardisation and coordinationion of consultation in local authorities and may be a barrier to the development of eParticipation.

Many of the respondents indicated that they did not rely on the eParticipation method as the sole method for consultation but that it was one of the tools that were available to them. The findings indicate that eParticipation in Scottish local authorities is still at an experimental stage and has not been fully embraced as a method for gaining the views of the general public on a regular basis. Many indicated that they had made electronic questionnaires available to 'see what happened' or because 'the functionality was there' which indicated technological determinism rather than a clear strategic decision to embrace eParticipation. Some local authorities were more progressive than others and indicated that their initiatives were fed into the policy process (in particular some of the electronic questionnaires were combined with results from offline questionnaires) and were keen to further develop these initiatives but invariably they stated that they would not rely solely on 'e' methods for consultation.

Respondents who indicated that there were eParticipation methods used were asked if they knew how the strategy was initiated. Many did not know and said that they were either already in place when they took their posts or that it was initiated by another service department. However, three respondents indicated that they were driven by the IT department, one by the leader of the council and some indicated that they became engaged in the initiatives through projects such as DEMOS and Scottish Executive funded projects. Once again this is indicative of a lack of strategic focus for the development of eParticipation in most local authorities.

5.6 Evaluation of eParticipation initiatives using Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy

As well as mapping the use of eParticipation initiatives in Scotland, this research also aims to make a contribution to developing evaluation criteria for analysing eParticipation initiatives. As eParticipation is still an emerging research field, few methodological or theoretical standards for evaluating eParticipation have been developed (Saebø *et al.* 2008, p. 402).

Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy are a set of five criteria which Dahl (1998) established to determine whether democratic systems are 'ideal'. These criteria are:

- *Effective participation:*
- *Equality in voting*
- *Gaining Enlightened Understanding*
- *Exercising final control over the agenda*
- *Inclusion of adults*

(Dahl, 1998, p. 38)

It was felt that while these criteria were not designed to analyse participatory exercises, that an interpretation of these could provide a useful heuristic to contribute to the understanding of eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local authorities.

The criteria were interpreted as follows:

Effective Participation- are the electronic methods used appropriate for facilitating public participation (e.g. do they provide the opportunity for people to submit their views and are they technically sound)?

Enlightened understanding- is information provided about the purpose of the consultation and/or additional materials such as policy documents provided for respondents.

Equality in Voting- for the purposes of this analysis, the criteria of 'equality in voting' was used to analyse whether or not the results from eParticipation mechanisms were fed into the policy process.

Control of the agenda- do participants have the opportunity to influence the agenda for the participatory exercise or is this solely determined by the local authority?

Inclusion of Adults- what efforts are made to promote the project to include as many participants as possible and are there checks to ensure results are representative?

eParticipation initiatives that were discussed by participants were evaluated one by one against these criteria and some of these are presented in a table below. It is recognised that details are based on self reporting by participants because it was not

possible to get the required information through any other means. The criteria do not attempt to give an indication of the significance of the impact of the initiatives because this would be purely speculative and trying to measure the 'real' impact of any participatory initiative is deeply problematic, especially if there are multiple components to the initiative. In some cases the participants did not provide enough details to even allow for a basic evaluation and so these have not been included. The table below demonstrates how the analysis was conducted.

Table 3: examples of analysis of eParticipation tool using Dahl

Local Authority initiative	Effective Participation	Enlightened understanding	Equality in Voting	Control of the Agenda	Inclusion of adults
Local Authority 21. Dedicated online discussion forum website	Yes- online discussion	Yes- information was provided	Yes although ambiguous.	Yes	Yes- debates are advertised and participants register to allow analysis of responses.
Local Authority 14- regular electronic questionnaires	Yes- electronic questionnaires	Yes- additional information is provided	Yes- results are used in the policy process	No	Unsure- questionnaires are advertised but demographic information is not collected
Local Authority 12- webchat with elected members and senior officers	Yes- online webchat	Yes- additional information was available	Yes- results fed into policy	Limited- agenda was set but some people went off topic	Yes- initiative widely promoted and libraries were involved to assist people in participating.
Local Authority 29- electronic	Yes- electronic	Unclear	Yes	No- yes/no options set	Yes- easy to use and

access points to gauge customer satisfaction	access points.			by council. No opportunity for qualitative responses.	available in public locations.
Local Authority 5- text messaging for setting the agenda for a public meeting	Yes- text messages	Not directly although information may be provided in promotional materials along with the SMS number	Not directly although meeting would	Yes	Unclear
Local Authority 18- electronic questionnaire on a specific issue	No- poor online questionnaire	Unclear	No	No	No
Local Authority 13- public participation through digital television	No- system was very difficult to use	Yes	Unclear- pilot initiative	No	Unclear

The evaluation of the initiatives has limitations and attempts to simplify the presentation of the results masks complex issues but it goes some way to contributing to the development of evaluative criteria for eParticipation to allow for initiatives to be analysed to determine how effective they are.

As can be seen most of the initiatives that were analysed met the criteria for 'effective participation' although one participant indicated that technological limitations meant that their online questionnaire was poorly constructed and not user friendly and the participant who indicated that they had been involved in a project using digital

television indicated that the system was not 'user friendly' and therefore these could not be considered effective tools for participation.

Most of the initiatives met the criteria for 'enlightened understanding' because the respondents indicated that additional information was available to the public although this was not always provided electronically. For example, one participant indicated that they put an advert in a local paper providing the background to the consultation followed by a URL for the online questionnaire. This demonstrates that online and offline methods of consultation can be combined effectively.

Most of the initiatives indicated above are linked in to the policy process and therefore met the criteria for equality in voting. In most cases the online questionnaires were aggregated with offline responses and counted in the same way and so they can be considered 'as equal' as offline forms of participation. The webchats and discussion forum results were reported to committees although there was a degree of ambiguity about how this was done, in particular with the online discussion forum which was interpreted by consultants before being sent to policy makers. As has been indicated however, the impact of these results is impossible to determine because it is very rare that a participative exercise has a direct policy outcome. As has been demonstrated in this chapter, transparency of outcome and questions over whether or not engaging the public in participatory initiatives are merely paying lip service to statutory guidance means that there are still questions of the genuine impact of the results.

Very few of the eParticipation initiatives allow the public to exercise 'control over the agenda'. In most cases the questions or topics for debate were set by the local authority although in the case of the discussion forum participants could start debates of their own. Once again this could be attributed to the large amount of statutory consultations which have to be on certain topics regardless of whether or not they are of interest to the general public. As has also been indicated in this research, however, it is also the case that interactive eParticipation features require a greater degree of technological development and are also resource intensive to moderate and analyse results to feed into policy making.

The criteria for 'inclusion of adults' was usually met because the initiatives were coupled with offline equivalents and so the 'e' method was not the only way of participating. Most respondents indicated that the initiatives were promoted offline and in the case of the webchats the respondents indicated that there were processes in

place to assist people who were having difficulties with the technology. However, respondents were unable to provide details about the demographics of responses and so it is impossible to tell if they are socially skewed. The respondents involved in the webchats seemed confident that they attracted people who do not normally participate.

From the evaluation it became evident that eParticipation in Scottish local authorities can be grouped into three main categories:

Assistive eParticipation- this is when the electronic tools are used to enhance or compliment a participatory initiative rather than being the primary source for gathering views. For example, the use of interactive voting systems in public meetings or the use of text messaging to develop the agenda for a meeting.

Alternate eParticipation- this is the use of online questionnaires or electronic opinion meters which are used in the same way as offline equivalents such as postal questionnaires or customer comment cards. This was by far the most commonly found method and are used in a *'customer service'* opinion aggregating way rather than trying to engage people in a dialogue with the local authority. In nearly all cases the electronic means were supplementary rather than being the main method for data collection hence why these methods have been labelled *'alternate'*.

Dialogic eParticipation- this is the label given to the eParticipation methods which have attempted to encourage a debate and or interactive dialogue between members of the public and/or elected representatives such as the webchats with senior officials used and the online discussion forum system. These were very few in number and indeed, mention of deliberative mechanisms both online and offline were scarce in the data collection.

This analysis has its limitations and the criteria were deliberately flexible in an attempt to evaluate the heterogenous methods that had been identified using one set of criteria. This was why the table contains qualitative information rather than being a simple yes/no rating or an attempt to rate the initiatives on a scale. By assessing the eParticipation initiatives in this way it was not possible to get an assessment of impact as this data was not available but it did lead to the categories indicated above which provide a contribution to the conceptual understanding of how eParticipation is being used in Scottish local authorities albeit in a limited way.

5.7 Future developments of eParticipation

A commonly occurring theme with the interview data was that respondents indicated that they foresaw eParticipation mechanisms being used more extensively in the future for public consultation. When asked about why they thought this many responded that it was 'the way of the future'. Respondents often indicated that their local authorities' websites were becoming increasingly 'transactional' so that residents could access services online and indicated that they believed this was a precursor to interactive features becoming available for conducting eParticipation. One respondent indicated that the management team at their local authority had developed a paper on electronic methods for increasing public participation and that this had been passed to the e-government team to implement. Despite the belief that eParticipation would form a larger part of participative strategies in future, many respondents were keen to emphasise that eParticipation would always form only a part of a broader participation strategy and that they would never rely on solely electronic methods for consultation and engagement. One respondent described how they envisaged the future role of eParticipation:

> …think we'd probably start with questionnaires because that's what people are more comfortable with but yeah, discussion forums and blogs, these are definitely ways forward and you get a lot more out of that open forum than you do from pre-set questionnaires although it's a heck of a lot harder to process… it's quite often what we do is start with questionnaires and the results of those would inform areas that we might want to dig deeper and that's an ideal way to get a discussion forum or even pull away from the online completely and get focus groups and so on. (Respondent 1)

This is an interesting finding about how local authorities see eParticipation developing in future but the respondent above's quotation also demonstrates how difficult it is to measure the impact of any single participative mechanism because multiple methods of both online and offline tools could be used for a single issue.

Another respondent commented that they believed that elected members would be affected:

I think the role of an elected councillor will change in the respect that a lot more business will have to be transacted electronically than even it is at the moment and therefore I think as an organisation we'll have to devote time and effort into IT training for councillors and they'll have to devote the commitment to it as well. Respondent 3

5.8 Conclusions to Chapter

This chapter has presented the findings from the primary research to map and evaluate eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local authorities. In the first part of the chapter the overall participative strategies of local authorities were analysed and the external factors that contributed to their development were investigated. It was discovered that the statutory guidance on community planning and Best Value had significantly influenced the development of participative mechanisms and that many of the interviewees indicated that the increased pressure to consult and engage with citizens was leading to consultation overload and that there are problems with ensuring that results are reported back to the public. It was also discovered that there was little internal coordination of participative initiatives in local authorities with individual service departments often undertaking their own consultations etc. It is believed that the combination of the lack of coordination and having to target resources to meet statutory guidance which do not include electronic tools is impeding the development of eParticipation. There was evidence to suggest that rather than embracing participative mechanisms to enhance local democracy and devolve power to citizens, that the main driver for developing these mechanisms was to 'tick the box' of consulting with citizens from a consumerist perspective to meet the statutory guidelines which is indicative that the participative initiatives of local authorities in general are not meeting the ideals of participative democracy. The findings also revealed evidence of a dominance of the administrative side of the local authority in terms of the development of participative initiatives which could be seen as shifting power from local elected members. Interviewees indicated that ensuring that participative initiatives are representative is a major challenge and that certain groups are especially hard to reach. The findings also revealed that relevance of the participative initiative is believed to be the most significant barrier to participation although some respondents indicated that the methods used also had an impact and many interviewees mentioned that they believed eParticipation could overcome some of these barriers to participation

The chapter then went on to present the findings of the perceptions of eParticipation of local authority officers in order to evaluate what place, if any, interviewees believed that eParticipation could play in terms of increasing public participation. The main benefits of eParticipation identified by respondents was the eParticipation could encourage more people to participate because it offers a more convenient way for people to respond to consultations and could increase response rates particularly amongst young people. Interviewees also indicated that they believe eParticipation could be quicker and cheaper to run than offline participatory mechanisms. This reflects pragmatic concerns about resources and efficiency rather than a genuine desire to increase citizen participation in decision making. Respondents identified drawbacks with eParticipation such as digital exclusion, concerns about representativeness of the responses and security and technical concerns. Respondents were also negative about the use of eParticipation mechanisms to get qualitative information and were generally not supportive about online deliberative mechanisms such as discussion forums as they believed that these would be resource intensive to moderate and that the quality of debate would not be good.

The findings of the mapping of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities show that eParticipation methods are being used in Scottish local authorities but to a very limited extent and that in the vast majority of cases eParticipation does not form part of the overall participative strategies at the time of the research but was largely experimental. The most commonly used method identified was online questionnaires but in most cases these are not used regularly and in some cases do not feed into the policymaking process. Other methods in particular deliberative mechanisms were used even less frequently. The findings show that eParticipation does not form a significant part of the consultation strategy in Scottish local authorities and is always used in conjunction with other methods.

Finally this chapter outlined the development of criteria to evaluate eParticipation methods. An evaluative system was developed from an interpretation of Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy in order to analyse initiatives identified from the interviews and benchmarking studies. The evaluation provides a contribution to the conceptual understanding of how eParticipation is being used in Scottish local authorities.

This chapter has met the research objective to map and evaluate eParticipation in Scottish local authorities but has revealed a much more fundamental issue with

participative initiatives in general. It has been found that there are fundamental issues with lack of transparency of participative initiatives and evidence that the motivations to engage the public in participation is driven by the need to meet statutory obligations rather than a genuine desire to promote democratic renewal. This issue overshadows the debate on eParticipation because if participative initiatives are not being conducted effectively and the results not contributing meaningfully to policy making it does not matter whether the methods used are electronic, public meetings, doorstep interviews or any other method .

Chapter 6: Enablers and Barriers to the development of eParticipation

6.1 Introduction to Chapter 6

The mapping and evaluation exercise in Chapter 5 demonstrated that, while there is evidence of eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local authorities, the application of new technologies for engaging citizens is limited to *alternate* eParticipation mainly in the form of online questionnaires that duplicate paper based questionnaires or one-off initiatives and pilot exercises. Given the obligation for local authorities to deliver e-services and the drive towards increasing participation through the community planning agenda, it was interesting to find that local authorities were not using eParticipation initiatives more extensively.

The data collected from the benchmarking study and telephone interviews provided insights into the (limited) use of eParticipation tools and the way that these tools were being used but was not sufficient to determine why eParticipation had developed (or not) in the way that it has in Scotland. A number of points for further investigation were identified including:

- Whether the lack of coordinated strategies for public participation in local authorities was having a negative impact on the development of eParticipation. eParticipation by its nature usually requires input from the ICT department to develop the functionality required. There was a general lack of knowledge about technological development amongst officers which may be a barrier and the combination of this factor with the issue of lack of coordinated consultation may further restrict the development of eParticipation.
- The ambiguities of the role of elected members in the participation strategies may reflect wider issues with representative and participative democracy in local authorities which may be having an impact on the development of participation in general as well as eParticipation
- A related point to the above was the ambiguity of whether participation initiatives were being conducted as a *customer service* initiative or to deepen citizen participation in decision making.

- Many of the interviewees mentioned community planning and in particular neighbourhood community planning as a priority for citizen participation. It is possible that the emphasis on the 'sub local' community planning agenda may have been a barrier to the development of eParticipation initiatives as methods such as 'planning for real' events etc were prioritised.

- From the benchmarking exercise and interview data there was evidence that local authority websites are regarded as a 'corporate' tool rather than an engagement or participation mechanism.

In order to investigate these issues, it was decided that a case study of one of the Scottish local authorities would be undertaken.

The local authority that was selected for the case study was Aberdeen City Council which had utilised eParticipation mechanisms in the past and the officer interviewed as part of the mapping and evaluation exercise expressed positive views about eParticipation in principle. For example:

- Aberdeen City Council had introduced eParticipation strategies as part of their involvement in DEMOS but these were not sustained after the end of the project due to technical and organisational issues.

- A number of technology-related projects were underway at the time of the research including public access points (known as ikiosks) and a major website redevelopment and it was felt that it would be interesting to investigate what, if any, link these had to public participation initiatives.

- Aberdeen City Council had undergone a major restructuring to facilitate the delivery of services at a neighbourhood level, part of the ethos of this restructuring was to create better community participation.

- A number of participatory initiatives were identified in the telephone interview that had been developed by the community planning partnership (The Aberdeen City Alliance or TACA) which included: a 'citizens' panel', a 'civic forum' and a 'city assembly' and it was decided that it would be interesting to investigate what role, if any, eParticipation played in these initiatives.

This chapter presents the findings of the case study research of the analysis of the operationalisation of eParticipation in Aberdeen City Council. The research sought to

examine the enablers and barriers to the development of eParticipation in Aberdeen City Council. These included the rationale for the development of participatory mechanisms in general and eParticipation in particular. The research also included an analysis of the organisational structures for public participation and whether these were enhancing or impeding the development of genuinely participative policy making and in particular eParticipation. Further, the role of elected members in terms of public participation was examined as well as an analysis of how technological developments for facilitating the development of e-government services were being developed and what place, if any, eParticipation played within these.

The data collected was mostly qualitative from interviews with key actors involved in the work of Aberdeen City Council such as councillors and officers, analysis of policy documents and participant observation.

6.2 Foreword to Case Study

As has been indicated Aberdeen City Council were selected for investigation in the case study. The research was conducted over the period from late 2006 until just after the local elections and Scottish Parliament elections in 2007. There was a change in administration during the course of the research. From 2003-2007 the ruling coalition of Aberdeen City Council was comprised of Liberal Democrats and Conservatives but following the election in May 2007 the coalition became SNP and Liberal Democrat. This election was the first time that proportional representation was used in Scottish Local elections and the research came at a time when there was a degree of uncertainty about what the impact of this would be both in terms of political workings of the council and the impact on the council as a whole with the introduction of multi-member wards and was referred to by a number of participants.

It should be noted that following the completion of the case study research in 2008, a massive financial crisis was uncovered in Aberdeen City Council. The crisis led to millions of pounds of budget cuts which had an impact on service provision. The reasons behind the crisis have been attributed to a variety of political and management issues which would make a very interesting research study in themselves but cannot be outlined in full in this thesis. The key points worthy of mention, however, are: Douglas Paterson who had been the Chief Executive for 12 years took early retirement in May 2008 and independent experts were called in to try to resolve the crisis. Poor

leadership partially blamed on the organisational structure and financial mismanagement were singled out by the Audit Commission as well as poor staff morale and failures in terms of the governance arrangements including training of elected members (AUDIT Scotland, 2008).

6.3 Council Structure and Community Planning

In order to understand the context that Aberdeen City Council operates under, a brief outline of the council structure and community planning partnership will be outlined as well as some background information about the area.

Aberdeen is the third largest city in Scotland with a population of approximately 210000 people. The economy of the city has been boosted considerably by the North Sea oil and gas industry and has contributed to Aberdeen having a very low unemployment rate and a higher than average wage rate for Scotland (Aberdeen City Council, 2009). The high rate of prosperity overall masks the fact that there are areas of deprivation within the city (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2009). PC ownership and access to broadband is higher than the Scottish Average according to the Scottish Household Survey results for 2005/2006 (ACSEF, 2008).

Aberdeen City Council was established in 1996 as part of widespread reforms created by the *Local Government Scotland Act (1994)* which saw the dissolution of the regional councils and the creation of 32 unitary authorities in Scotland. From the creation of the new unitary authority under the leadership of Douglas Paterson, there have been a number of restructuring activities in order to *'modernise'* and streamline services and to design services around the needs of local people (AUDIT Scotland, 2008).

Following a consultation process in 1999 (*Imagine Aberdeen*), the first community plan for Aberdeen was created and published in 2001 by the community planning working group which set out the vision and strategy for community planning in the city. The Community Plan (2001) entitled *aberdeenfutures: A social, Economic and Environmental Design for our City* sets out the 14 community planning priorities for the community planning partnership that were selected by people who participated in the Imagine Aberdeen consultation as well as setting the targets for the creation of the new institutions for community planning in Aberdeen: The name of the new community

planning partnership is The Aberdeen City Alliance (TACA) which was established in 2002 and comprises of:

- Aberdeen City Council (lead partner)
- Aberdeen City Centre Association
- Aberdeen Civic Forum
- Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce
- Aberdeen College
- Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Organisations
- Aberdeen Harbour Board
- Aberdeen Trades Council
- Aberdeen University
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Grampian Fire and Rescue Service
- Grampian Police
- NESTRANS
- NHS Grampian
- Robert Gordon University
- Scottish Enterprise
- The Regional Ecumenical Team

Aberdeenfutures (2001) details the plans for the restructuring of Aberdeen City Council to reform the way that services are delivered. Subsequently, Aberdeen City Council went through a total restructuring with the development of neighbourhood service delivery- the city was divided into 37 neighbourhoods that were created to represent the 'natural' community boundaries as opposed to the arbitrary lines of the wards which were believed to cross over these boundaries. It was hoped that that this would strengthen community engagement and allow service delivery to be tailored to the specific needs of these communities. These neighbourhoods are overseen by six main service departments- Neighbourhood Services North, South and Central, Resources Management, Continuous Improvement and Strategic Leadership.

As would be expected the respondents discussed the restructuring of the Council to facilitate neighbourhood service delivery. Several respondents indicated that they saw this as being a highly progressive and innovative strategy that would tailor council services more closely to the needs of neighbourhoods and promote community

engagement. It was established that the move to neighbourhood service delivery predated that legislation from the Scottish Executive on community planning and that Aberdeen City Council contributed to the development of the *Local Government Scotland Act* and Best Value guidance because they were early adopters of community planning.

It was clear, however, that the restructuring and major organisational changes that had resulted from this were not without problems. The restructuring had been a controversial decision and was not universally supported. Indeed, the reasons behind the selection of that particular structure was never made particularly clear by interviewees. The move towards neighbourhood governance had become more common in English local authorities and Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) highlight the reasons for this the desire to reconnect with the public and deliver tailored and joined up services A senior officer indicated that the restructuring had taken far longer than had been initially anticipated and that 'The problem we've had is just how slow it is to get innovation through in Aberdeen. I'm not sure if it's a local thing or a council thing or both but we should be further than we are' (SO1)

According to the AUDIT Scotland report of 2008 the pace of change and constant restructuring had resulted in *'change fatigue'* and low morale amongst staff. Senior managers identified a culture of *'non-compliance'* amongst staff although this was disputed by the investigators. The AUDIT Scotland report also identified challenges with the modernisation and restructuring in terms of democratic accountability:

> At the time of the audit visit the revised management structure, with responsibility for strategic leadership and overall service planning separated from responsibility for service delivery, was giving rise to a lack of clarity about strategic and area-based accountabilities and responsibilities among elected members and staff. The confusion was compounded by the lack of alignment at that time between political and managerial structures. (AUDIT Scotland, 2008, p. 18)

These problems of leadership, staff morale and lack of accountability had a significant impact on all aspects of Aberdeen City Council's working practices and will be returned to throughout this chapter. Understanding the prevailing organisational cultural issues as well as identifying problems of the resistance of the staff *'on the ground'* to change are important when studying the implementation of eParticipation. It should be noted

that following the financial crisis and the appointment of a new chief executive, the neighbourhood and area structure is being abandoned to a structure more akin to what existed before the restructuring in order to improve communications and leadership.

6.4 Participatory initiatives for Community Planning

The Strengthening Local Democracy Strategy (2002) was created in response to the community planning consultation where citizens and community groups identified a need for more participation and involvement by citizens in the running of the city (Aberdeen City Council, 2002). The strategy:

> …is based on the premise that an active and informed concern about issues that affect us and our neighbours is a good thing because it promotes engaged communities and effective government… there are two complementary parts to this strategy. The first aims to encourage individuals and enable communities to focus on local needs whilst the second aims to make public authorities more receptive and responsive to the views of citizens and community organisations. (Aberdeen City Council, 2002, p. 2).

The Strengthening Local Democracy Strategy creates a framework to coordinate the development of the community planning process and the aberdeenfutures partnership The Aberdeen City Alliance (TACA) are responsible for monitoring these developments.

The main community planning activities for members of the public to participate in decision making developed by TACA were:

- **Community Councils**- The local government acts of 1973 and 2003 set out a legal framework for all Scottish local authorities to establish Community Councils. These are elected bodies which aim to establish community level priorities on a variety of local issues including: environmental issues, planning applications, neighbourhood action plans, community activities etc (Aberdeen City Council, 2008)

- **Civic Forum**- this was set up in 2002 to help communities within the city to have a say in community planning. The Civic Forum brings together

representatives from each area of Aberdeen and from the various 'communities of interest' such as women, older people, those with disabilities, etc. The Civic Forum aims to bring these different communities together to identify issues of common concern and to influence the agenda for community planning.

- **Challenge Forums** draw their membership from the participating partners within The Aberdeen City Alliance and from associated services, voluntary organisations and community groups. Forums each work to their own action plan to make an impact on the big changes which the Community Plan aspires to. Three members of the Civic Forum sit on each of the Challenge Forums, offering a community perspective and fulfilling a community monitoring role. (Aberdeen City Council, 2008)

- **City Assembly**- this was an annual event conducted in Aberdeen City which was open to any members of the public to attend, hear presentations from speakers and discuss issues such as regeneration in 'break out groups'. The City Assembly was not continued after 2006 when the meeting was poorly attended despite being widely promoted. This will be discussed further in the chapter.

- **Neighbourhood Community Planning**- as indicated the 37 neighbourhoods created under the new council structure were required to hold events such as planning for real initiatives to develop neighbourhood community action plans to identify neighbourhood-specific initiatives

- **The Citizens' Panel**- this is a broadly representative sample of around 1000 local people who answer questionnaires approximately three times a year on issues surrounding service delivery and community planning. It was developed as part of the DEMOS project but was continued after the completion of the project in 2004.

The 2010 vision for Aberdeen City Council which was published in *Aberdeenfutures* (2002) and also summarised on posters and internal notice boards within Council buildings set out a number of targets including one about developing 'a more engaged citizenry' which has connotations of greater community involvement in decision making and democratic citizenship. Interviewees were asked how they thought that this could be achieved and what impact measures were in place to identify whether or not the target was met. Many of the interviewees were not aware of the 2010 vision and asked

where I had heard of it. This included some of the elected members and senior officers which is perhaps indicative that the vision was a corporate 'mission statement' as opposed to a formal strategy. Some interviewees indicated that they believe more people voting would be an indication of a more engaged citizenry and others indicated that broader participation in community planning and statutory consultations would be a sign of a more engaged citizenry. None of the interviewees including the lead officers who were heavily involved in community planning were able to identify how engagement could be measured and how they would tell if the target was achieved.

Further, while the council restructuring and policies was heavily focussed on community planning, there is no coordinated strategy for conducting statutory consultations. The officers who worked in the strategic research department indicted that they were regularly asked to provide assistance from other services but that this was done on an ad hoc basis and was usually for practical advice such as how to develop a questionnaire or how to identify a sample group. Interviewees indicated that this lack of coordination contributes to consultation overload and a lack of quality control processes for ensuring that consultations are being conducted properly, that the results are taken into account and citizens who participated receive feedback.

In a related point, when a senior officer was asked about eParticipation in the council, they replied that the council had a deliberately de-aggregated structure and so they would not know about that and referred me to another officer. Several officers (including heads of service) who were invited to be interviewed declined and recommended that I speak to one particular senior officer who had already been interviewed. Many of the interviewees also referred me to the same officer to discuss participatory initiatives indicating that this person 'was the best person to speak to'. It was clear that the primary responsibility for community engagement was rested with one particular senior officer who, while strongly committed to community planning principles, did not see eParticipation as being a priority area and considered other local participatory mechanisms such as planning for real to be more effective forms of local participation.

6.5 Has Community Planning been effective in facilitating public participation?

In a review of TACA, Carley (2005) identified that the organisation lacked a sense of purpose and that it was being dominated by the Council and had become politicised. Carley (2005) identified the fact that in order to be successful in community planning, councils effectively have to 'work themselves out of a job' and lead a partnership to the point that they are equal rather than a dominant partner in community planning. It is understandable that a new institution such as TACA which is effectively a coalition of diverse agencies with differing agendas will take time to become established. Carley (2005) indicates that there was a degree of suspicion amongst some elected members about community planning and criticisms of a lack of democratic accountability of TACA.

A further issue of the prevailing influence of the Council is evident from Carley's report on p. 19 where he mentions that the style and content of TACA meetings are too similar to the traditional committee-style meeting of the council. The report makes extensive recommendations about how the institutions of TACA could be reformed to be more independent of the Council including the formation of an Executive group and rotation of leadership between the community planning partners. The report also indicates that 'The Citizens Panel and the Virtual Panel could make an increasingly important contribution to strategic planning and decision-making by TACA.' (Carley, 2005, p. 24)

Similar issues were uncovered in an internal study of the community planning framework undertaken by Dr Pamela Tosh in 2005. Tosh indicated that the problem of being too 'council-oriented' was being addressed by making distinct branding for TACA and that considerations should be given to developing better processes for decision making and the agenda for debate of TACA and that:

> …developmental work should be undertaken to tease out the reporting and accountability relationships between TACA and Committees, and between TACA and other partners' internal policy making structures, to assist the policy and decision making process of the Alliance. (Tosh, 2005, p. 17)

Both the Tosh and Carley reports were generally positive about the community planning processes that had been developed and recognised that the new institutions

would take time to 'find their feet' and credited Aberdeen City Council with being progressive in terms of their community planning development. The Tosh report was rather sycophantic in tone in places and seemed apologetic of criticism of the council which could be a consequence that the report was conducted by a council employee rather than an independent study.

6.6 Views of Officers and Elected Members about the effectiveness of Participatory Strategies.

According to the interviewees the creation of TACA (the community planning partnership) has led to changes in working practices for all community planning partners including the Police and NHS as well as for the lead Council partner. However, some interviewees indicated that the outcomes of participatory initiatives are only taken on board if they are in agreement with council policy and that officers are unwilling to take responsibility for seeing that the results are used effectively. One officer indicated that there was no way of tracing the impact of a participatory initiative (she had tried to do so in the past but found that staff turnover within departments and the complexities of policy development had meant that determining what the impact had been of specific public participation mechanisms was impossible) and that there has to be a shift in attitudes in the council to more meaningful participation. Further, it was indicated that officers usually set the agenda for consultations and control the methods that are used to influence the outcomes.

A senior officer indicated that there should be more training provided for members of the public who sit on the challenge forums and council committees because:

> …those people need all the support and help that they can get because we are asking a lot more of them and for them to compete equally or to argue equally in that kind of environment … and that's really unfair because it makes it an uneven playing field. They may be in a working group that's got people from the police, from NHS Grampian, councillors, council officers. And then you have community reps and my experience of those kind of meetings is that it takes a very long time for the community reps to feel empowered enough to speak… And it's that difference between the agencies and officers who know how to behave, the councillors who are in that elected member role so they're position is very secure but what's the community rep? And they get a kind of question

160

'who do you represent?' and 'what are you doing?' Well our view is well they're not representing anyone because they're not pretending to be elected. (SO2)

Other officers indicated that the inclusion of community representatives is tokenistic and that they are not taken seriously. However, officers also indicated that having community representatives present at the meeting changes the dynamic and alters the behaviour of officers and elected members and so even if their contributions are not taken on board they are affecting change:

I am confident… that they have had some impact I think actually by their very existence and by their presence at Alliance meetings and by their presence at challenge forum meetings they have an immediate, they make an immediate difference to how things are discussed and how representatives from other bodies and how officials behave and think and talk to one another. Even if the eventual outcome isn't different, the way people are interacting is different, the process is different and one would imagine if the process is different sometimes the outcome is different as well so there presence is I think constantly reminding agencies and officials of the need to be thinking about and hopefully consulting and listening to but at the very least asking themselves what do the user of this service think in a way that they… did so less before. Their presence at the table keeps that question on the table I think. (LAO7)

Interviewees were asked about their perceptions of the concept of participative initiatives in general terms and almost without exception they expressed positive views about consultation and engagement. Some interviewees also said that engaging people in dialogue with service providers will lead to stronger communities, help raise awareness of the work of the Council thus playing a role in educating the public and will also have a positive impact on policy making because the public can contribute local knowledge that officers may not have been aware of. Some interviewees indicated that they believed representative and participatory democracy were complimentary and that effective participation could have a knock on effect on voting levels and turnout in elections may increase. However, this view was not shared by all, some officers indicated that the participatory initiatives served a role of long term engagement rather than 'one off' actions such as voting every four years and therefore should not be seen as having a direct link to representative democracy and elections

Many interviewees pointed out that as consultation and community planning are statutory requirements that there is no choice but to develop participatory initiatives and so even if elected members and officers do not agree with participatory democracy they must be seen to be supportive of them. It is recognised that this may have influenced the answers that interviewees gave to these questions and one officer pointed out that if there were elected members or officers who were opposed to community planning or participatory initiative, they must keep this opinion to themselves.

Elected members that were interviewed expressed positive views about public participation in principle often commenting that involving people in policy making had a positive impact on their engagement with the Council. However, some expressed concerns that the volume of statutory consultations that are being undertaken are leading to 'consultation overload' and that consultations are sometimes regarded as being a 'tick box exercise' rather than being meaningful attempts to involve the public in policy development. Some of the elected members indicated that the public can have unrealistic views of what can happen as a result of a participatory exercise and that they view it to have been a failure if their views do not prevail. Further, while none of the elected members directly indicated that they do not support participatory initiatives, when asked whether the role of an elected member had changed due to the increase in participatory initiatives, many were keen to point out that they still had the final say in decision making and that sometimes elected members have to make tough decisions that may be unpopular. One elected member indicated that they felt that some consultations, in particular those involving the 'rationalisation' of services such as the closure of a school, should not be undertaken at all:

> Elected members are in a no win situation because [there may be] something that I know is going to happen within the next 2 years. It costs money; it's your money, it's my money and it's going to be 1% on your council tax. Don't you think you elect people to do a job and take hard decisions? The hard decision is you need to change how you work to provide the service in a different way to keep the costs down, so why would you conduct a consultation there? (CLLR4)

Another councillor indicated that they believed that it is important that people have realistic expectations of the outcome of a consultation and that people must understand the financial restrictions that local authorities operate within:

I think people should be able to aspire for their city and for Aberdeen and I want to aspire for Aberdeen but at the end of the day there is only so much money that you can spend with any given project so we have to temper expectations in that regard. (CLLR6)

Two of the councillors also argued that while consultation should be conducted, big strategic decisions should be taken by the full council rather than as a direct result of a participative process and another councillor described consultation as being positive to 'keep people informed' (CLLR1) which is indicative of viewing public participation as a means of getting people to agree with council policies rather than involving them in the decision making itself.

The AUDIT Scotland report of 2008 identified problems with elected members being disengaged with the community planning process:

Only 12 elected members (28 per cent) who responded to our survey felt that they were sufficiently involved in community planning and only three (seven per cent) felt they received sufficient information about the community planning partnership and its activities. This suggests that members were not taking a key leadership role within the community planning process. (AUDIT Scotland, 2008, p. 21)

Of the six elected members who were interviewed, only two appeared to have been directly involved in community planning initiatives. One explained that she had been involved in the DEMOS project to develop the citizens' panel but that she had only become involved because she knew how to use SPSS and not because of her role as an elected member. The elected member was part of the editorial board for the citizens' panel but she rarely attended meetings and did not appear to take an active role in the running of the citizens' panel.

Some officers echoed the view that the statutory nature of participatory initiatives is what is driving the increase in consultations and community planning initiatives and some questioned whether there was a genuine commitment throughout the Council as a whole to the ideals of community engagement and participation. One officer said that:

> …there is a core group of people… at the front in the neighbourhoods that genuinely believe in consultation and understand it and see the benefits of it. I think for everybody else in the council it's very much a tick box approach. Probably because they don't understand it, they don't see the benefits of it, it's never been explained to them and they have pressure from above, I think, very much to have shown that they have consulted with the public particularly for this point in time for Best Value. (LAO6)

These findings demonstrate an ideological and implementation gap in the adoption of the participative mechanisms in Aberdeen City Council. While there are obligations regarding involving the public in consultations and community planning in general, the lack of centrally coordinated procedures about exactly how council departments should conduct these activities and a lack of quality and reporting mechanisms about the impact of the initiatives has resulted in a lack of standardisation and, while participation is mandatory, elected members still see themselves as the ones who should set the agenda and make the big decisions.

6.7 Who is participating?

There was a view amongst all interviewees that participatory initiatives tend to only appeal to members of the public who are either politically active or those with a specific local concern. The view held was that this was the case regardless of the methods that were used to try to engage people. There was acknowledgement from the officers involved in community planning that people who participated in the community councils, Civic Forum, Citizens' Panel and City Assembly tended to be those who were already active and that it was very difficult to get 'normal' people to participate. One senior officer cited the example of the Imagine Aberdeen consultation exercise that involved a very large amount of money spent on advertising, roadshows and other public events but received less than 1200 responses.

The reasons cited for this apparent unwillingness to participate were similar to those indicated by respondents to the telephone interviews and the reasons for lack of participation evident in the literature on political participation. These were: that people do not see consultations as being relevant to them, that they do not feel that their views are listened to and that people have other things to do with their time than to participate in local authority consultations. Young people and people who work full time were

identified as being particularly 'hard to reach' along with non-native English speakers and transient groups. Some respondents indicated that they felt that the 'offline' methods of consultation such as public meetings contributed to the lack of participation because they tend to be a 'free for all' dominated by people with 'axes to grind'. One councillor added that in addition to these issues that these events tend to be very male-dominated and so the views of women do not get taken into account.

Some interviewees indicated that they believe that eParticipation methods could help to overcome some of the barriers to participation identified above because (in similar findings to the telephone interviews) electronic methods allow people to participate at a time and place that is convenient for them rather than having to turn up at a specific place for a meeting. However, one senior officer expressed the view that it will never be possible to get all citizens to participate:

> …apathy is a kind of judgemental word… people have no direct interest in. I mean interest in the sense of the issues are not going to affect their lives directly in the near futures and therefore I've kind of come round to accept that it's legitimate for them not to get involved and that you shouldn't put a huge amount of effort and energy into almost forcing them to become involved. I think you've got to open up the systems of government as much as you can, as often as you can to as many people as you can but I think there's issues about knowing when to stop. (SO1)

Several of the officers involved in community planning also expressed frustration that people who participate in public participation events such as 'Planning for Real' tend to focus on relatively easily identifiable environmental issues such as green spaces and dog fouling and that it is much more difficult to get participants to engage with the bigger issues such as education, diversity and equalities issues and the local economy.

So far the review of the community planning structures and formal mechanisms for public participation has identified that despite the creation of TACA and the statutory obligations governing participation, the impact of these in terms of facilitating a genuinely participative governance ethos is ambiguous at best. While interviewees expressed positive opinions about the need for consultation and community engagement this seemed to be within the context of supporting representative democracy or 'engagement' in terms of getting support from the public for Council decisions. There is very little evidence that greater power and decision making is being

devolved to local people despite the creation of these new mechanisms for citizen participation. Elected members still very much saw decision making as being their role and there was evidence of disengagement of elected members from the community planning process. Where opportunities do exist for citizens to participate such as on 'challenge forums' and Council committees it was found that the impact of their involvement is ambiguous and that the structures were very similar to previous council committee based structures which puts elected members and officers at a greater advantage in terms of influence on the forums. Further, the terms of participation were set by the local authority and constrained the citizens in terms of the influence that they could have on policy making. For example, in the most recent citizens' panel survey for TACA, there were questions relating to moving to fortnightly waste collection but the questions were framed around asking panellists about their concerns so that Aberdeen City Council could appease them rather than asking whether panellists actually wanted to move from weekly to fortnightly bin collection which was pointed out by a significant number of panellists in an open comments section (Aberdeen City Voice, 2010).

There is a lack of standardisation for how community planning and participation should be conducted and a lack of standardisation between departments or across the three neighbourhood areas. For example, an officer whose role involved facilitating neighbourhood community planning in one of the areas indicated that there was not effective communication between the neighbourhood community planning officers and so ideas and best practice was not being shared as well as he believed that it could be.

6.8 Analysis of eParticipation tools in Aberdeen City Council

There is little mention of utilising electronic methods of consultation in the *Strengthening Local Democracy Strategy* (2002) other than mentioning the development of an online citizens' panel and a link to a youth participation website. This was developed as part of the DEMOS project that Aberdeen City Council participated in 2003-2004. DEMOS was a large European-funded project that saw the development and piloting of initiatives in several European cities to strengthen local democracy. The DEMOS project is mentioned in many key policy documents regarding community planning as well as being cited many times by interviewees in my research and so clearly had a major influence on the community planning policies. For the online citizens' panel (the Virtual Voice), the Citizens' Panel questionnaire was divided

into sections and placed on the Council website for any person to fill out. This will be discussed further below. The youth participation website (known as the 'cyber quines and loons' initiative' which is Aberdonian dialect for girls and boys) was created as a participatory tool for young people who developed and maintained the website under supervision of officers. At the end of the DEMOS project the website was discontinued and the initiative was subsumed by the young scot websites and was no longer the responsibility of TACA.

Interviewees were asked about their experiences with using eParticipation tools. As has already been indicated, there is no formal strategic drive towards using eParticipation although there is mention of using ICT for community engagement in some of the policy documents for community planning.

The main eParticipation initiatives identified will be briefly outlined and analysed using the framework developed for analysing eParticipation in Chapter 4.

It was established that the use of eParticipation tools for statutory or strategic level consultations had been used. One of the senior officers indicated that eParticipation tools are used for strategic or macro-level participatory initiatives rather than neighbourhood or community level participatory initiatives but it that it had not been used 'as much as they would want to'. (SO1). The senior officer was unclear on the reasons behind the lack of use of eParticipation. Another senior officer gave an example of a transport consultation that was available online for people to send in comments and an officer from the planning department indicated that they also posted consultation documents on the Council website and invited in comments but was unable to provide details about how many responses they got from this method. In fact, the officer indicated that they had not conducted any analysis of the most effective methods for public participation in planning exercises at all and so did not know which ones were particularly effective or ineffective which was also indicated by officers in other departments.

An officer from the strategic research department indicated that they had tried to use an eParticipation method for a consultation several years before but that it was not successful. The officer indicated that they were using a software tool called Pinpoint which embedded a 'submittable' questionnaire in an email but that this involved the participants opening an executable file which was often either blocked by anti-virus software or raised concerns of potential respondents who did not want to run the

programme. This led to a very poor response rate and discouraged the team from using the software in future.

The Virtual Voice was developed as part of the DEMOS project, according to a senior officer the Virtual Voice was created to test whether the responses to the main citizens' panel questionnaires, which was a representative sample of the local population, varied from those where anyone could fill out the questionnaires. The senior officer indicated that the responses to the Virtual Voice questionnaires did not deviate significantly from those of the main Citizens' Panel although the results were never used in the policy process. The Virtual Voice questionnaires were developed using software purchased from the SPSS company and the system was extremely unreliable and time consuming to operate. The Virtual Voice questionnaires were suspended after the DEMOS project was over because of the technical difficulties and a relatively low response rate.

An 'i-texting' system was set up before the city assembly in 2007 to encourage members of the public to set the agenda for the City Assembly meeting. The community planning officer indicated that they advertised the i-text system as an X-factor style system hoping that it would encourage young people to participate. However:

> We got a really poor response to the i-texting system because it was a pilot and it was the first time it had been used in Aberdeen. We were hoping to engage a lot of young people but it didn't work, even though we advertised it really well we must have got about 20 responses but if you don't try it you don't know if it's going to be any use but …we paid £1700 for the i-texting system for 3 months and as I say 20 responses. (CPP2)

The officer went on to discuss how the City Assembly which was effectively an open public meeting where members of the public are invited to come and discuss local issues and make suggestions about service delivery was not successful in general and that only 70 people came and these were people who either worked for TACA or were community activists. This was despite getting high profile speakers and advertising the event widely. The officer also mentioned that there was an interactive voting system used in the City Assembly but the technology did not work in the meeting and so it had to be abandoned.

Prior to the website redevelopment, the Aberdeen City Council website used to have 'snap polls' on the homepage which encouraged visitors to the website to 'vote' on an issue of the day but these were abandoned because:

> …it was never anything that was actually meaningful and we were criticised for that but we couldn't do the meaningful stuff because there wasn't the buy in from the organisation. So if we asked about parking charges, for instance, the council were never in a position to change council policy right across the board to meet citizen expectation…. You'll have a green vote that says 'ban all cars from the city centre' or whatever and you'll have those who live and work in the city centre who think parking should be free and we should bring as many cars in as we can. And it's reconciling that is part of what the council does so it becomes really difficult I think to have meaningful interactions with the citizen in that way. I'm not saying it can't be done but you've got to be prepared as an organisation to respond to what you've asked them about. (SO3)

The community planning website which is a shared resource for all the community planning partners and is maintained by ACVO has a number of eParticipation features. The person in charge of maintaining the website indicated that they had utilised online discussion forums and electronic questionnaires. The administrator indicated that they had hosted a successful online chat between members of the public and voluntary organisations and community planning partners on the community arts strategy. The officer indicated that this was successful and approximately 75 people participated but was unclear about how many of these were members of the public. Other interviewees indicated that the community planning website was mostly used by practitioners rather than members of the public and the way that the chat was organised (through an e-bulletin and advertised on the website itself) raises suspicions further that it was not likely to have been supported widely amongst members of the public.

6.8.1 eParticipation initiatives in Aberdeen City Council Review using Dahl

The table below presents an evaluation of the eParticipation initiatives uncovered using the adaptation of Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy.

Table 4: Analysis of eParticipation tools in Aberdeen City Council using Dahl criteria

Initiative	Effective Participation	Enlightened understanding	Equality in Voting	Control of the Agenda	Inclusion of adults
Virtual Voice questionnaires	No- system unreliable	No- little additional information provided	No- results not used in policy process	No- predefined questionnaires, no open questions	Limited- initiative not widely advertised and response rates low
Email questionnaires	No- unsuitable system	Unclear	Unclear	Unclear	No
Snap polls	No- feature was to enhance website not for participation	No	No	No	Yes- anyone could fill out questionnaires
Itexting	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	Yes
Online discussion on community planning website	Yes	Yes	Unclear	Unclear	Unclear
Posting policy documents online and inviting comments	Limited- forms were not submittable online	Yes	Yes	No	Unclear
Interactive voting in public meeting	No- system did not work on the day	N/A	N/A	No	N/A

As demonstrated in the table above, none of the eParticipation initiatives that were identified meet all the criteria for 'ideal' eParticipation. In many cases the technology was ineffective, there was often little information provided to participants to enhance their understanding, the results were not always used in the policy process, there were

few instances where participants had control over the agenda and none of the initiatives were reported to be very successful at attracting a large number of responses.

6.9 Interviewees' views of eParticipation

Despite the fact that the eParticipation initiatives that had been conducted in the past had not been particularly successful, many of the interviewees still expressed positive views about the potential for eParticipation mechanisms in the future. Some interviewees indicated that they believe that eParticipation methods could help to overcome some of the barriers to participation identified earlier in the chapter because (in similar findings to the telephone interviews) electronic methods allow people to participate at a time and place that is convenient for them rather than having to turn up at a specific place for a meeting. Many respondents indicated that they felt that young people and professionals would be more likely to participate in an eParticipation initiative than 'offline' forms of consultation. One councillor commented that they believed that eParticipation could be viewed as a gimmick but that sometimes utilising tools that have a novelty value may stimulate interest amongst the general public and so should not be viewed negatively. The councillors who were interviewed had very little experience of participating in eParticipation initiatives and many discussed their experiences of getting emails from constituents (which is not really eParticipation) when asked about electronic participation. Interestingly, while four of the councillors that were interviewed indicated that they received a large amount of email communication from their constituents, two indicated that they rarely received email from constituents. The councillors who did receive large amounts of email indicated that they felt this demonstrated a shift in people's preferences for communication although one indicated that it was the 'usual suspects' who communicated with him by email rather than the hard to reach groups. One high profile councillor indicated that she had noticed an increase in abusive communication via email and believed that this was because of the instant nature of email whereby someone can send an abusive email on a spur of the moment decision.

Many of the councillors indicated that they would be interested in participating in eParticipation initiatives and mentioned in particular webchats with constituents, using social networking tools, electronic questionnaires and discussion forums. There was a lack of awareness, however, about the technological resources that were available

within the council and how an eParticipation initiative could be set up. There was further concern about whether or not using eParticipation tools or developing more website communication such as blogs would contravene the acceptable use policy for ICT which precludes councillors from using ICT for political campaigning. This concern was also echoed by a senior officer but indicated that the Council were keen to investigate ways of improving ICT services for councillors. One of the councillors indicated that they felt that webchats may be used for conducting ʻvirtual surgeriesʼ but added that:

> …the Council's and the wider community involvement structure is still mired in a kind of committee mindset where you know you meet at location X with group Y and have a conversation across a table rather than any attempt at more remote, fluid options which would definitely make life easier.' (CLLR5)

There were further concerns expressed about what would happen if a member of the public from another ward participated in an eParticipation initiative:

> …obviously we have the problem where we are councillors for a specific ward now, if I go on say to a webchat or whatever I could get people from other wards writing in to me and that then causes problems because some councillors might take umbrage at the fact that I am there talking to their constituents when their constituents should be talking to them so there's issues about that as well but I'm sure that's all stuff that could be overcome with careful planning and consultation among the elected members about what's happening. (CLLR6)

One councillor also indicated that they felt that councillors needed to have additional training in the use of eParticipation technologies because at present some of the councillors are still not comfortable with using email despite all councillors being issued with blackberries and so they would definitely not have the ICT skills necessary to participate in eParticipation initiatives. As has been indicated two of the councillors indicated that they thought that social networking tools could be used to facilitate eParticipation but one expressed concerns that if elected members were using such tools they would get negative press attention for ʻwastingʼ public resources and that social networking websites are currently blocked by Aberdeen City Council's firewall and so they would not be able to use them.

The elected members' responses to the questions on eParticipation demonstrate a belief that there are organisational culture issues acting as a barrier to the development of eParticipation as well as confusion about the role of ICTs and a worry that using new technologies may contravene acceptable use or cause problems with other councillors or be viewed negatively by the press or the public. There were further issues with a lack of awareness amongst elected members about the resources and tools available for eParticipation.

A senior officer indicated that they had participated in an internal web chat with members of staff but that it did not get a good level of interest. He also indicated that they were concerned about eParticipation initiatives increasing workload:

> The risk for me with the public, just knowing the amount of stuff I process anyway, would be the ability to keep up with it if it caught on and we've got folk out there who are serial letter writers and so on. If you up that to the immediacy of things like emails and web chats and so on I could be sitting at the computer all day getting involved in conversations who've got a particular area of interest, axe to grind or whatever. But I'm maybe showing my age. (SO1)

In keeping with the findings from the telephone interview data, respondents were most likely to indicate that they would be supportive of online questionnaires rather than more interactive forms of eParticipation such as discussion forums. Participants indicated that they believed that eParticipation may encourage those who are less inclined to participate in offline methods:

> I think you are missing out a whole bunch of people… you're missing an opportunity that's just sitting there waiting for you to consult with people. And you're not thrusting it at them, if people want to respond they'll respond…Also I think because it saves paper and I'm a big fan of that, I think it saves hassle and ideally I'd like something that sends reminders as well automatically and I think if you can get something that does that it saves a lot of person time to spend more time on other things…. (LAO6)

As indicated above, participants also indicated that they believe that eParticipation initiatives could deliver efficiency savings and reduce the volume of paper that is used for paper based questionnaires. Another interviewee also mentioned that electronic

questionnaires do not require the additional step of data entry which also saves money and time.

Respondents also indicated that they believed that eParticipation strategies would form part of the wider participation strategy in the future but that they would never rely solely on electronic methods because not everyone has access. One officer commented that certain types of consultation would not be suitable for eParticipation such as if the council needed to contact service users of drug addiction facilities but that:

> as time develops and as we get more adept with using the technology services would come to us with a proposal for a questionnaire and we could probably direct them to the web team and say 'maybe you want to consider doing it this way' it'll save you time, it'll save you money but of course it would mean they would have to know the email addresses of the people they want to sample and they're not going to know that so I suppose the other way is just to put it on the council website rather than email it directly to people but then I mean that would work ok if it was a general survey of Aberdeen residents it probably wouldn't work so well if it was…antisocial behaviour in a street in the Bridge of Don. I don't think that would work…. So doing it using a postal survey… you can get the addresses and you can write to people at these 100-200 addresses as opposed to having it on the website and hope that these people log on. (LAO8)

There were also concerns expressed that eParticipation would appeal more to those already engaged and that it may become dominated by activist groups. One of the councillors cited a negative experience with an ePetition where councillors received large numbers of emails and some felt intimidated. In general, interviewees expressed very negative views about ePetitions with some indicating that people sign up to them on a whim and are not genuinely concerned about the issue and others indicated that there was the risk of them becoming internet jokes. One senior officer indicated that they believed that there were certain well organised groups in the city who may dominate ePetitions. Another cited an example from Utrecht that they had heard of through a European initiative where an ePetitioning system had been introduced and it resulted in a vast increase in workload for the administrators.

The community planning partner who was responsible for administering the online discussions on the community planning website indicated that they had never experienced an activist group 'flooding' the postings although they did indicate that they

had problems with SPAM and that all posts were moderated before being allowed on to the discussion board.

Not all officers were supportive of the premise of eParticipation. When asked whether eParticipation could be used in the context of the Civic Forum the officer who coordinates the Civic Forum was rather negative about the idea and said that:

> Well I would remind you of the age profile of this organisation, it's all very well for people of your age to talk about online discussion forums but it's likely to be less accessible or less taken up by an older generation… I've never done it…and I've never been on the community planning one, I don't know what it looks like when I get there and I don't know who's participating and who's contributing. (LAO7)

There were also concerns expressed about digital exclusion. Respondents commented that older people and socially disadvantaged people may be excluded:

> I think that because a big part of our focus in terms of community engagement is in the less affluent areas where there would be less computer ownership and less habit of using websites for that kind of purpose then it's not that high on our radar at the moment but yes I think that is something that will come and we don't particularly want to hold back it's just not our top priority. (LAO1)

The above quotation was also reflected by the officer who lead the development of community planning in Aberdeen City Council. The officer indicated that community planning was tied in with development work on community regeneration and working with disadvantaged communities on education, training and employment issues and therefore face to face mechanisms for engagement were more appropriate than eParticipation which they saw as being more associated with richer communities who were less of a high priority than the areas of deprivation in terms of resource allocation.

The view that eParticipation is a less effective means of engagement than face to face participation initiatives such as planning for real exercises was shared amongst several of the officers. There were also concerns expressed about digital exclusion. Respondents commented that older people and socially disadvantaged people may be excluded:

I don't think filling in an online questionnaire brings you any closer to the council, probably getting something in the mail would because somebody's taken the time to find my address and they sent it to me, someone has actually put this in the post whereas an online questionnaire is a bit more impersonal but you could always end it by saying if you found this of interest and you want to find out more about the topic you could leave your email details and we can get back to you so there is… an easy way of maybe…(LAO8)

6.10 Modernisation of service delivery

As well as the statutory requirements to consult with citizens and engage in community planning, Local Authorities are also under pressure to modernise the delivery of services and make efficiency savings. Aberdeenfutures (2001) also indicated a commitment to modernising service delivery by detailing that Aberdeen City had been awarded £2 million from the Scottish Executive to help with this. The grant award was received to develop a number of initiatives to improve service delivery including website redevelopment. There is specific mention of developing website functionality to facilitate eParticipation for consultations on page 39 of the document. There was also recognition of the need to provide information to the public in an accessible format using a range of media. The report indicated that a network of information points would be developed and that joint website development projects with the community planning partners would be undertaken. The report set targets of a 200% increase in the number of hits to public sector websites by 2005 and that every citizen in Aberdeen should have access to the web by 2006 (the figure for Internet access was cited to be 40% at the time of the report publication (Aberdeenfutures, 2001, p14). According to the Community Planning Annual report (2003) these targets were met within the first year of the establishment of the community planning partnership. A community planning website was set up in 2004 (Aberdeenfutures, 2005) which is shared between the community planning partners and managed by Aberdeen Council for Voluntary Organisations (ACVO). The website provides an information resource for citizens and community planning partners about the various initiatives that are being undertaken in Aberdeen.

In Aberdeen City Council the modernisation of service delivery is focussed on the development of the Council website, the ikiosks (touch screen terminals in various

locations in Aberdeen), the creation of customer access points and a telephone contact centre (AUDIT Scotland, 2008). The e-government agenda is prominent but according to a senior officer, it was felt that expanding the provision of face to face contact with citizens was also important. Interviewees stressed the funding pressures that the Council was facing and one officer indicated that the move towards electronic service delivery was going to continue despite the fact that, if asked, most people would prefer face to face communication because:

> …the vice is closing and it's inexorably closing over a period of time and there's no way out of that for councils other than they have to respond to doing what they do differently in order to generate those efficiencies that mean they can deliver those services cheaper so they can live without that amount of central government support. (LAO4)

Officers also reported that there was demand from citizens to access services outside of regular office hours as well as the demands that are made from central government. It is interesting to note that ICT solutions are always cited more prominently in the context of service delivery and customer satisfaction rather than the community planning and public engagement documents. This distinction between the citizens as consumers' and 'citizens as democratic participants' is also made in the AUDIT Scotland report on Best Value and community planning which has a separate section for 'customer satisfaction' and appears to represent a dichotomous view of the nature of citizenry with ICT firmly falling under the 'service' rather than 'democracy' side. Interestingly, however, the citizens' panel initiative is mentioned under both of these headings in the AUDIT Scotland report.

6.10.1 Factors influencing the development of ICT

The officers involved in ICT initiatives discussed how the role of the ICT department has fundamentally altered in recent years and that they have gone from being an autonomous and rather peripheral department to being a core part of the service delivery of the Council. Officers discussed national initiatives such as the modernisation agenda and national standards for service delivery that they are responsible for implementing as well as specific website initiatives such as the Standard Navigation Structure and A-Z of web services that have also been put in place. The web team indicated that a Society of IT Managers (SOCITM) analysis of

local authority websites which is the main government benchmarking analysis conducted on all local authority websites in the UK ranked Aberdeen City Council as being the 5th most popular in terms of hits per head of local population in the whole of the UK. The officers involved in ICT indicated that they faced challenges in terms of responding to multiple stakeholder groups including the public, the national statutory requirements, the elected members and officers from other departments:

> It's having the buy in to this and the support at as high a level as you can within the council so it's not seen as some niche thing about IT which it isn't it's actually seen as being core council business. It's moving the website into being a kind of central way that we deliver services rather than some add on and that takes a lot of change within the organisation in order to achieve that, so we're getting there. (SO3)

The senior officer from the web team expressed concerns about resourcing eParticipation initiatives and that the team was already under staffing pressures trying to meet the statutory obligations and so they did not have the resources to develop extra interactivity such as discussion forums or web chats:

> Again it's one of these things where we're looking for the services to take a lead on it. If somebody wanted it… to do it… then we would look at a way of doing it... we've never had any demand for it that I'm aware of either from a councillor for instance or from a member of the public. (SO3)

There was an indication that elected members did not take an active role in dictating the web policy and that they had a 'sign off' role. The perception that there was not a demand for eParticipation initiatives was contradicted by some of the officers who indicated that they had approached the web team for assistance in developing online questionnaires but did not find that they were supportive of their requests. Some officers and councillors were critical of the Council website in general and did not believe that it was user-friendly or making the best use of interactive tools. Further, the officers from the ICT department reported that they did not conduct user requirement assessments with members of the public in terms of what features or information they would like to see in the website. It was reported that they commissioned a company to conduct end user testing with members of the public following the website redevelopment but the decisions regarding functionality and content were already made by this point.

It was reported that ikiosks were also developed to be part of the customer service strategy and terminals with touch screens where the public can access information and the Internet are placed at various locations around Aberdeen. At the time of the research they were not particularly interactive although the officer in charge of the management of the ikiosks project was very keen to point out that they could be developed significantly further and that in cities such as Sheffield they were used for consultations and even suggested that they could be used for electronic voting. The ikiosks were not seen by officers involved in community planning to be an element of the community engagement strategy although the officer in charge of the ikiosks reported that they had been used in a community engagement initiative in the Torry area of the city. The fact that none of the community planning officers who were interviewed were aware of this is further evidence of the lack of communication between officers even in related areas of work of community planning and engagement. Several officers mentioned that a cut down version of the citizens' panel questionnaire could be put on the ikiosks and that they may be a useful tool for consulting on an immediate area-specific issue. The ikiosks were not seen in a positive light by all interviewees, however with one officer commenting that they thought people only used them for looking up mundane information such as bus timetables and another commenting that they were rather like a TV because you can get information out but not put anything back in. The community planning partners suggested that they could be used for promoting consultation events, however, and that they were a good way of accessing citizens. Interestingly, in the ikiosk marketing literature there was a line that said 'if enough people vote, politicians will listen'. This seemed somewhat challenging and a call for protest rather than participation. When asked about this the officer commented:

> …it could be used as a protest vote but I don't think that's too bad a thing I think politicians should be strong enough to listen. It doesn't mean just because so many people have touched that it's actually going to happen because that raises the question of… this would be a constant referendum on the council. I think there would be enough politicians to support that because they would know that in the end they can't force them from office. It can give them some valuable background noise but… this is another method of both giving and receiving information and the receiving might not be what they want to hear but nonetheless it gives them a vocal noise with which to perhaps take a thought on what they're voting for or doing and adjusting so I… can understand about

some reticence but …I think the more enlightened politicians will manage the technology. (LAO4)

It should be noted that this view was not shared by other officers (some of whom commented that this officer was pursuing an individual agenda with the ikiosks) but is further indicative of the different perceptions of the role of technology and community participation that came through from the interviews.

A highly significant point that emerged from the discussions with the officers involved in the website and ikiosk development was that the neighbourhood service delivery model did not translate at all well to e-service delivery as the website was created as a corporate tool for the whole city rather than for individual neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood model meant that, for example, if a person living in the Central area of the city had an enquiry about education services it would need to be directed to a different person than a person making an enquiry about education services in the North of the city. Data from customer feedback (mainly conducted through the Citizens' Panel) suggested that people in Aberdeen were still rather confused about the neighbourhood structures and so self-filtering mechanisms (e.g. selecting a particular area or neighbourhood on the website) would not work. A senior officer indicated that this was a barrier to the effective development of e-services and that there would have to be investment to overcome this issue. This issue was mentioned to another senior officer who said that they were not aware of the problem and that this was an unintended consequence of the new structure that had to be investigated further.

Several interviewees referred to the ePlanning project during the course of the interviews. As indicated in chapter 2 ePlanning has become a statutory obligation for local authorities to undertake but the projects were still at the development stage during the course of the interviews and so were not included in the review of eParticipation interviews earlier in the chapter.

According to the officer in charge of the ePlanning project the system will be highly interactive and will have functionality such as interactive policy documents which the public could annotate the documents with comments. The officer indicated that these interactive features would be beneficial for the public who would like to comment on planning proposals by giving them easier access and also generate efficiency savings for Council officers.

Officers commented that they believe that the ePlanning system may well result in a larger volume of public participation in the planning process and therefore while the system aims to deliver efficiencies, they were keen to point out that this may not necessarily mean cheaper delivery of the service. The distinction between cost effectiveness and cost reduction in e-government projects in general is highlighted in the literature. The officer indicated that library staff could play a role in assisting people who are not comfortable using the technologies. Other officers also indicated that libraries have a role to play in digital inclusion more widely.

The ePlanning initiative was discussed in Chapter 2 and it was speculated that as many of the necessary technological developments could also be used for other service departments and community planning for public engagement. The ePlanning project is being delivered specifically for planning applications but the lead officer involved in the development of ePlanning believed that the technologies that were being developed could be applicable to other service departments as well and believed that if the system was shown to deliver efficiency savings it would be likely to be adopted for more widespread use. The issues of identifying users and guarding against SPAM and other forms of abuse are being investigated for the ePlanning project which are also applicable. There was little evidence that ePlanning was actually being integrated into a wider strategy, however. This may be in part because the project was at an early stage of development and that the officer in charge worked for both Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils. However, the lack of 'joined up working' for the development of ePlanning was evidence of the 'technological silos' that were observed by the Scottish Government regarding ICT developments in Scotland in general. In other words, technological development is conducted on a service specific basis rather than as part of an overall strategy for customer service or citizen engagement.

There appeared to be a rather confused and contradictory message about the role of ICT in customer service and public participation. According to the 2008 AUDIT Scotland report 'While the council recognised the role ICT can play in supporting service modernisation, and the effective management of council performance, at the time of the audit visit in early 2007 the council had yet to agree an ICT strategy.' (AUDIT Scotland, 2008, p. 35). The fact that the ICT team had gone from being a peripheral support team to being a core part of service delivery seemed to have occurred without the development of proper processes for translating this vision into action and was incompatible with the neighbourhood service provision strategy. There

appeared to be a lack of strategic direction for the use of ICTs for enhancing citizen participation with nearly all interviewees being supportive in broad terms of the potential use of eParticipation as a participative mechanism but they were not able to identify how this could be achieved. The ICT team are effectively the gatekeepers of the technologies and are generally not taking a proactive role in promoting the use of technologies for citizen participation.

6.11 Participant observation of Pilot project to re-establish the Virtual Voice

Having outlined the role of participation, ICT and the various unsuccessful attempts to utilise eParticipation in Aberdeen City Council, this chapter will now go on to present the results of the participant observation of the attempt to re-establish the virtual voice. As has been indicated previously in this thesis, the Virtual Voice panel was abandoned following major technical problems which were compounded by a change of role by the member of staff responsible for administering the Virtual Voice. There was also a lack of clarity of purpose for the Virtual Voice because the results were not fed into the policy process and so there were no real benefits for citizens to participate other than to see the kinds of questions that were asked in the Citizens' Panel and therefore make a decision about whether they wanted to join as a member. However, the officers seeking to re-establish the Virtual Voice saw the proposed development as a means for existing panellists to complete the citizens' panel questionnaires online rather than completing the paper based versions (alternate eParticipation) in response to a number of requests from panellists to be able to submit their questionnaires electronically as well as allowing non-panellists to complete the questionnaires to gain further views (the members of staff indicated that the results could also be considered in the analysis even if they were not from 'official' panellists) and to encourage people to join the Citizens' Panel.

6.11.1 Results of Citizens' Panel questionnaires to establish viability of virtual voice

Members of the Editorial Board of the Citizens' Panel (comprised mainly of TACA members) decided that in order to establish the viability of creating an electronic version of the citizens' panel, the existing panellists should be consulted to determine demand. Questions were developed by me with assistance from the Editorial Board to

determine whether or not panellists wanted to be consulted electronically. The results are presented in the 8th Aberdeen City Voice questionnaire report (Aberdeen City Voice, 2006). The key findings were that it was found that 55% of respondents would be willing to participate in electronic consultations. There was wide variation when the results were broken down by the age of respondents. Out of panellists in the 25-34 age bracket, 82% were willing to take part in an online questionnaire as compared to 23% in the age 65 and over age bracket.

Panellists were asked which eParticipation tools they would be willing to use. 279 panellists would be willing to participate in an online questionnaire, 210 would be willing to email about a specific issue, 143 would take part in an online discussion forum and 60 would participate in a web chat with a Councillor/Head of Service.

A question was asked to determine the concerns that the panellists may have about eParticipation. This showed that panellists are not overly concerned about any of the factors that were listed. Approximately 17% indicated that they would prefer to talk face to face (40% of over 65s indicated this) and approximately 16% indicated that they were concerned that the system would be expensive to implement.

Panellists were asked if they had any further comments relating to eParticipation. Some panellists expressed positive views about eParticipation indicating that meetings are often not arranged at times or places convenient for them but that most people have computers and so can participate from home at a time of their choosing. Others indicated that eParticipation is quicker to set up and that people would be more likely to give honest views because of greater anonymity in an online environment. Some respondents indicated that eParticipation would be cost effective to administer compared with offline participation. Some respondents indicated that eParticipation is the 'way of the future' and so it makes sense to utilise the technology. One respondent commented that the ikiosks should be used for area-specific questionnaires.

A number of panellists commented that eParticipation may exclude certain groups in particular older people and that not everyone has a computer. There were also concerns about the representativeness of the responses and that this may have an impact on the validity of the findings. Further, several panellists expressed negative views about completing questionnaires etc online; some panellists indicated that they prefer to read questionnaires in hard copy to give time to consider responses which they did not think would be achievable with an online questionnaire. Other respondents

indicated that online or email questionnaires can be difficult to read and that as the Citizens' Panel questionnaires tend to be long that it would be a health hazard to complete them online. Some also expressed views that online communication was impersonal and that they believed that this may lead to the opinion that eParticipation is just a 'tick box exercise' rather than a genuine attempt to get views and opinions. Some respondents also expressed concerns that email addresses may be passed on and others indicated that they may miss out on opportunities to participate if they did not regularly check the website for new questionnaires etc. There were also concerns about the costs of setting up eParticipation initiatives and that 'duplicating provision' (i.e. having online and paper based versions of questionnaire) was a waste of resources.

These results have been included because they provide a 'citizen perspective' on the development of eParticipation in Aberdeen albeit from those who are already engaged in participatory mechanisms. Some of the comments also reflected broader concerns about citizen participation in Aberdeen City Council with some indicating that they did not feel that participatory exercises were genuine. This could be in part related to the fact that at the time that the questionnaire was conducted there had been a scandal over a public consultation for a new bypass- Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (AWPR) for Aberdeen City. The consultation had been conducted to determine the route of the bypass and six routes were proposed. Following intervention from the Scottish Executive, however, a seventh route was selected which was not included in the consultation exercise. This caused a large amount of controversy and received negative press attention as well as cynicism from the pubic about the value of participating in consultations.

6.11.2 Development of the Virtual Voice Pilot initiative

Having established that there was a demand for eParticipation amongst panellists (albeit not universally and with some caveats) and several panellists had previously expressed a desire to submit their questionnaires electronically rather than returning paper questionnaires it was decided to try to re-establish the Virtual Voice to run concurrently with the offline paper based questionnaire. Members of the Editorial Board saw this as primarily being for the benefit of panellists who indicated that it would be more convenient for them to complete the questionnaires online and hence it was thought that providing an electronic form would increase response rates. Further, the

Editorial Board also saw benefits in terms of reducing costs (for the production of paper questionnaires and postal costs as well as the costs and time delays that were associated with entering the data). Officers were also influenced by networking with other local authorities (specifically at Barnsley Council in England) who had developed electronic Citizens' Panels.

After agreement was reached at the Editorial Board, a meeting was set up with two officers involved in the community planning partnership, two officers from Aberdeen City Council's IT department and I were invited to act in an advisory capacity and to observe the discussions for this research.

At the meeting, options were discussed for trying to reinstate the original system which used a tool developed by SPSS and was purchased for the original Virtual Voice but the IT representatives expressed concerns about the resources required to support the system and the previous technical difficulties that had been encountered with the software. The representatives from the Editorial Board enquired as to whether the existing web systems could be used to develop the online questionnaires. Once again the IT representatives expressed concerns about resources and drew attention to the length of the questionnaires and the amount of staff time that would be required to develop the web-based questionnaires. As a final suggestion the representatives from the Editorial Board suggested that a different external software system could be purchased and used instead of the SPSS system. The IT representatives were also negative about this idea and again raised the issue of resources required to support the software and system compatibility.

The data from the participant observation of the attempts to establish the virtual voice adds to the previously documented findings about the challenges and barriers to the development of eParticipation in Aberdeen City Council. it was clear that there was a lack of formal processes for the officers to request that the IT department host and develop the questionnaires and they had no means of compelling the IT department to assist them. Further, it was clear from the meeting that the IT department were already over-stretched and that they believed that this was not part of their job and so they were unwilling to assist. The lack of technical awareness of the officers from the editorial board also meant that there was a professional barrier between them and the ICT staff which inhibited them from defending their interest in the meeting. The meeting provided a valuable insight into how innovation is stifled by institutional factors that inhibit the development of eParticipation in local authorities. IT resources are controlled

centrally and the statutory obligations that they have from the Efficient Government agenda means that the development of eParticipation is viewed as being 'extra' on top of an already high workload and so they were understandably unwilling to get involved. The community planning officers did not refer the matter to more senior officers or councillors and did not appear to have any means of compelling the ICT officers to conduct the web development work or any way of raising the issue at a higher level.

The officers from the Editorial Board were disheartened by what they saw as being a lack of willingness on the part of the IT department to assist in the development of the Virtual Voice and so it was decided to rethink how the online questionnaires would be developed. A meeting was set up with another community planning partner from ACVO who indicated that they had a system in place for conducting online questionnaires and were willing to host the next questionnaire online as a pilot initiate. It was decided that this was a preferable solution because ACVO run the community planning website and so the branding of the online questionnaire would reflect the fact that it is a community planning initiative which would be utilised by all the community planning partners rather than solely being an Aberdeen City Council initiative.

The online questionnaire was developed and piloted online. At this point the technical limitations of the system were evident- the questionnaire was all on one page and due to the length of the questionnaire this meant that a lot of scrolling was required, further the appearance of the questionnaire was quite basic and the form was not saveable by panellists which meant that the questionnaires had to be completed in one session. There were concerns that respondents may be discouraged from completing the questionnaires but it was decided that as this was a pilot initiative these concerns could be addressed at a later date if necessary.

The editorial board of the Citizens' Panel decided that two versions of the questionnaire would be made available: one for panellists to complete and one for anyone to complete. The panellists' version required the entry of the unique panellist identification number so that duplicates could be identified and so that non-panellists could not submit a questionnaire. Panellists who had expressed a desire to complete the questionnaire online and who had provided an email address were sent a link to the questionnaire by email and invited to complete the questionnaire online. The non-panellist version was accessible from a hyperlink from the community planning homepage but was not widely advertised.

Once the deadline for submission of questionnaires was passed, the paper based questionnaires were entered by the typists using the interface of the online questionnaire. When the officer from ACVO tried to download the data set it was discovered that there was so much data to download from all the questionnaires that the system 'timed out' before the results could be downloaded. ACVO contacted their software providers and (after a lengthy delay) the results were downloaded and sent for analysis. At this point it was discovered that all the data from the open questions of the questionnaire had been lost. I was asked to investigate the cause of the problems as the officers from Aberdeen City Council and the representative from ACVO felt that they had insufficient technical knowledge to do so. The software providers were initially unwilling to accept that there had been a data loss but eventually admitted that the data set that they had sent was incomplete. The possible technical reasons for the data loss were either that there was an error in the form submission and so the data was not being submitted to the database or that the data was lost subsequently to the form submission. It was discovered that the software providers did not keep server back ups (which should be standard practice) and so there was no way of recovering the lost data. All of the data from the open questions had to be re-entered from emails that were automatically generated with the results when a questionnaire was submitted and had been kept by an officer at Aberdeen City Council. A temp. had to be hired to re-enter the missing data and the results of the questionnaire were delayed in being issued to panellists.

An analysis of the failure of the pilot project concluded that technical difficulties from an ineffective system were to blame. The fact that an external company (who denied responsibility for the loss of data) were involved meant that a systems analysis was not possible. It was decided that the Virtual Voice project would be discontinued until a more reliable system was available because the pilot project incurred significant costs and time delays with the production of the report.

6.12 Conclusions and summary of the analysis of the development of eParticipation in Aberdeen City Council

The case study element of this thesis was challenging for a number of reasons not least that the organisational structure of Aberdeen City Council meant that it was very difficult to clearly define who had responsibility for what and trying to determine lines of accountability and the 'correct' people to talk to was tremendously difficult. This,

however, turned out to be one of the main findings for the reasons for the limited development of eParticipation.

The restructuring of Aberdeen City Council was influenced primarily by a few key actors driving forward an agenda of change based on their ideas of best practice. It was evident that although the changes were being driven from the most senior levels in the council that changing the organisation's culture was taking longer and was more difficult than had been envisaged. For example, despite creating new institutions for community planning in the form of TACA, analysis of these institutions found that they are still very 'council driven' and follow a similar structure to the old institutions. Further, the council officers and councillors who participated in the design and running of these institutions bring their own norms and values to the institutions which was evident from some of the interviewees describing how community representatives have a low level of influence and respect at TACA meetings. There was very little evidence to suggest that the redesign of the institutions had led to an increase in power to the citizenry. If anything, the 'winners' in terms of power were the administrative side of the Council at the expense of elected members who indicated signs of disengagement from the community planning process.

Also, while Aberdeen City Council made a strategic commitment to community planning and redesigned the whole structure of the organisation under the premise of strengthening communities, some interviewees indicated that they believed that there has not been a widespread shift in attitudes of staff towards the importance of participatory mechanisms for influencing policy-making and that some members of staff treated consulting with the public as a 'tick box exercise' that had to be done but was not viewed as being particularly valuable an exercise.

The redesigning of the institutions for decision making and service delivery led to a classic case of unintended consequences in many ways. The problems identified in this research of lack of accountability, disagreggation of decision making to the point that single officers had seemingly sole responsibility for key strategic decisions at the expense of any joined up working have led not only to the lack of development of eParticipation but a failure to make the necessary cultural changes to effect a participative culture in decision making. Further, the multiple attempts at restructuring had led to poor staff morale and 'change fatigue' which would further compound problems of efficiency and generated negative working conditions. While this may seem tangential to the issue of eParticipation, the prevailing organisational culture

would have had a negative impact on all aspects of working life and was identified by AUDIT Scotland as one of the reasons for the crisis of 2008. While there had been a great many participatory initiatives created and a number of officers who were clearly committed to the concept of community planning, there was little clarity at any level of how the community planning activities fitted into decision making, it at all.

The way that web services are delivered conflict with the notion of participatory engagement as part of the community planning agenda. The website was delivered as a corporate tool for the whole council and the informal ICT strategy (which as has been previously indicated was not formalised until after this research was completed) was very much focussed on 'customer service' and the ICT team were obliged to fulfil the large amount of statutory obligations from the Efficient Government and modernisation agendas. The institutional design has led to the isolation of the ICT department from the officers involved in community planning and the elected members and therefore the ICT department have become the gatekeepers of the technological resources and do not view public participation as being part of their remit to develop. The ICT department officers did express enthusiasm for the idea of eParticipation but with the caveats that it would be resource dependent and would have to be driven by the officers or elected members. However, when attempts were made by officers to develop eParticipation they were not supported by the ICT department. The officers who wanted to develop eParticipation saw it as a means of reaching people who did not respond through the 'offline' channels but very much as an 'alternate' form of the paper based questionnaire rather than as a means of increasing the influence of citizen participation in decision making. This may be why, while the officers expressed frustration about not getting support internally for developing eParticipation, they did not pursue the matter with more senior officers or elected members as the eParticipation tools were seen as being an added bonus rather than forming a central part of citizen participation.

As has been indicated there was further evidence of barriers to the use of eParticipation from elected members who were concerned that using ICTs for engaging citizens may contravene the ICT acceptable use policy, that it conflicted with the accepted standards for engaging with constituents and concerns that utilising ICTs for their role may attract negative attention and be seen as a 'waste of resources'. Elected members were doubly disengaged with eParticipation as they appear to have little influence over either the design and implementation of the participation strategies or of ICT resources. This disconnection of the elected members and the administration was

not unique to these areas but reflected a broader governance problem in Aberdeen City Council which was highlighted in the AUDIT Scotland report of 2008.

Officers were in general quite positive about eParticipation in particular officers who were involved directly with the community planning initiatives. This was evidenced by the desire of the officers to re-establish the virtual voice but following the problems encountered with the pilot initiative the plans were suspended.

6.13 Transferability of the Case Study

The findings from the case study provided a degree of insight into why eParticipation was not operationalised effectively in Aberdeen City Council. To an extent, the failure of eParticipation can be seen as a relatively trivial issue in light of the crisis that ensued in the year following the data collection for the case study. However, the institutional failures that were identified from this case study, in particular the problems caused by the neighbourhood service delivery and the ambiguity in the role of elected members, were problems identified by AUDIT Scotland as a very significant problem in general with the council.

These issues call into question how transferable the findings of the case study data are to other local authorities in Scotland. As indicated in the methodology, the findings from case studies will never be 'statistically generalisabe' and that one of the trade offs of conducting a case study is that the results are more rich but that the generalisability of the findings is much lower compared with other data collection methods. Lowndes *et al.* (2006) urge that investigations into locality have to be careful in trying to generalise the findings to the wider population.

The selection criteria for examining Aberdeen City Council as opposed to another local authority was largely based on the creation of the new institutions for community planning and the apparent commitment to putting citizen participation at the heart of decision making. Further, Aberdeen City Council had used a number of eParticipation tools and in the absence of a local authority that demonstrated flourishing eParticipation they appeared to be a valid selection.

When taken into consideration with the results of the telephone interview data a number of theoretical hypothesis can be generated that can be tested empirically in future studies.

The final chapter will present a synthesis of the findings of the primary data collection.

Chapter 7: Synthesis of Findings and Conclusions

7.1 Introduction to Chapter 7

The research set out to with the aims of, firstly, to conduct a review of eParticipation initiatives in Scottish local authorities and develop an evaluative mechanism for analysing the tools that were identified. Secondly, the research aimed to identify factors that affect the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities such as statutory requirements, political factors, technological factors and institutional factors.

The primary data collection resulted in a large amount of data being generated from: a benchmarking analysis of 32 Scottish Local Authorities' websites, telephone interviews with 30 local authority officers and the case study which comprised 19 interviews, participant observation and analysis of secondary materials. The telephone interviews and case study was analysed using a grounded theory process and supported by other qualitative data to add understanding and provide supporting evidence for the theoretical development.

The findings from the review and analysis of eParticipation revealed that eParticipation was not being used to a great extent in local authorities and where initiatives were identified some were of poor quality and did not meet guidelines for 'effective participation' or were ambiguous in terms of 'equality in voting' as it was unclear how they were fed into the policy making process. As indicated in previous chapters, most of the tools being utilised were electronic questionnaires which in nearly all cases can just be described as an alternative format to paper based questionnaires.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the limited use of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities, the research found that eParticipation has not been reported to have had a significant impact on increasing participation in Scottish local authorities as 'cyberoptimists' may hope for. This finding itself is interesting but the analysis of barriers and enablers to the development of eParticipation (which included analysis of the statutory requirements for local authorities to undertake consultation) revealed further insights into the reasons for the lack of use of eParticipation. The analysis of local authority officers' experiences of public participation and an in-depth case study examining the operationalisation of eParticipation revealed that the lack of 'flourishing'

eParticipation is only one of many issues with the implementation of participative mechanisms in Scottish local authorities.

This chapter will now discuss the emerging theory from the analysis and discuss how this relates to the retrieved literature on eParticipation and public participation. As has been emphasised, the evolving nature of the field of eParticipation and the methodology employed in the study meant that the literature review was conducted simultaneously with data collection. A grounded theory approach is useful for developing theory with minimal influence or 'forcing' of inappropriate theoretical concepts onto the data but it was considered appropriate to link the theoretical findings to the wider body of knowledge on eParticipation.

The chapter will go on to outline this thesis' original contributions to knowledge and possible future research areas. The thesis has made both empirical contributions by taking Scottish local authorities as a unit of analysis which has not been previously studied and in particular analysing the 'supply side' of eParticipation adds a further contribution of originality. The combination of the benchmarking analysis and interviews with officers from nearly all of the Scottish local authorities meant that a comprehensive overview of the state of eParticipation in Scotland was possible. The thesis also made methodological contributions to the study of eParticipation with the development of the analytical tool for studying eParticipation and also contributes to the literature by challenging certain assumptions held regarding eParticipation and contributing to the theoretical understanding of eParticipation

7.2 Existing problems with participation still exist with eParticipation

The review of secondary literature in Chapter 3 demonstrates that eParticipation is purported to have a number of advantages over 'offline' forms of participation including:
- reach a wider audience to enable broader participation
- support participation through a range of technologies to cater for the diverse technical and communicative skills of citizens
- provide relevant information in a format that is both more accessible and more understandable to the target audience to enable more informed contributions
- engage with a wider audience to enable deeper contributions and support deliberative debate. (Macintosh, 2004)

As it has been established from the literature that there is a belief that 'offline' participatory mechanisms are not successful at engaging a representative sample of the local population, the biggest 'selling point' of eParticipation would be if more people from a greater variety of backgrounds than the 'usual suspects' participated. To investigate these claims an analysis of the broader participative strategies of Scottish Local Authorities was conducted in order to understand whether or not 'offline' participation mechanisms were successful at engaging a representative response from the local populace and, if they were not, to investigate what the reasons given by respondents for this were and whether or not eParticipation tools can overcome these problems.

Respondents indicated that participative exercises had a wider objective beyond consulting the public to validate policy decisions and also sought to foster more 'engaged' communities in order to broaden involvement, achieve community capacity building and tackling social exclusion. However, despite an apparent commitment to broadening public involvement, it was almost universally reported by respondents that it was very difficult to ensure that participatory initiatives are representative of the wider population and that 'hard to reach' groups such as minority ethnic groups and young people were particularly under-represented in participatory initiatives. These findings are consistent with findings from the literature (see for example Lowndes *et al.*, 2001a). Barnes *et al.* (2003) noted that local authority officers tend to express positive views about the principals of public participation but that they also have to show pragmatism about the realities of conducting public participation exercise. In this study it was also found that respondents reported that they believed that trying to get involvement beyond the 'usual suspects' of community activists and the already engaged is important, but they also indicated that this is extremely difficult to achieve in practice. Respondents from the telephone interviews and from the case study interviews indicated that getting 'normal' people to participate is extremely challenging.

A key finding from this study was that respondents indicated that the primary barrier to public involvement in participatory mechanisms is that the issues being consulted upon were not of interest to the public as a whole. Respondents indicated that some of the work conducted by local authorities could be considered rather mundane and others stated that people's primary local concerns were in their immediate environment and so they were unwilling to get involved in strategic level consultations. Some respondents stated that they believed that a lot of members of the public simply do not want to

participate in local authority policy making and therefore developing innovative mechanisms such as eParticipation will not transform the inactive into active citizens. This is the most important finding of the thesis as it demonstrates that, despite eParticipation providing 'new channels of democratic inclusion' (Kearns *et al.*, 2002, p. 13) that simply making more opportunities to participate available will not overcome the problems of disengagement with public participation.

Some respondents did, however, indicate that they thought eParticipation mechanisms could broaden the base of participation amongst certain groups in particular with young people and people who work or have family commitments that prevent them from being able to attend offline participatory activities. The rationale for this belief was that respondents believed that these groups (in particular young people) would be more inclined to participate in eParticipation initiatives rather than 'offline' participation activities. However, when these views were investigated further it was found that they were based on assumptions about how these groups use technology rather than on evidence about which methods work better for engaging certain groups. In fact, there was little evidence that respondents had conducted any analysis of the effectiveness of participative mechanisms in general, nor had they analysed whether different mechanisms engaged different groups of people. No respondents were able to give details of the demographic characteristics of those who participated in eParticipation initiatives and so the claim by some that eParticipation was more likely to appeal to certain groups did not appear to be based on evidence.

The analysis of eParticipation took into account the diversity of Scottish communities which include densely populated urban areas and remote communities and sought to investigate whether there were differences in the perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of eParticipation amongst officers in rural and urban local authorities. Several of the respondents from rural and island communities indicated that they believed that eParticipation could benefit their isolated and dispersed communities because ICTs overcome problems of geographical isolation. Respondents from these local authorities indicated that people in remote communities are increasingly using ICT for activities such as online shopping and that the communities were becoming increasingly technically adept. However, several of these respondents also drew attention to the fact that digital exclusion affects rural communities more extensively than people in urban communities and indicated that this may be a barrier to the use of eParticipation mechanisms in these communities. It was also found in the website analysis that the more rural local authorities tended to have poorer quality websites

with Shetland, Highland and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's local authority websites being particularly poorly designed and not user-friendly which compounds problems of information accessibility and usability. Some of the respondents from urban local authorities also commented that their local authority had areas of multiple deprivation where ICT access was low and therefore they were concerned that eParticipation may exclude groups from these areas.

As well as calling into question the claims that eParticipation will necessarily increase the base of participation, this research found that there was scepticism amongst respondents about whether eParticipation is as effective a mechanism as 'offline' participation. Some respondents indicated that they believed that eParticipation was impersonal and, further, that eParticipation was more likely to elicit responses from the 'usual suspects' of the already politically active rather than from those who do not participate in 'offline' consultations. The findings from the questionnaire distributed via Aberdeen City Council's citizens' panel also revealed concerns amongst some respondents who indicated that eParticipation would not be viewed as a genuine attempt to involve the public but that it would be seen as a way of 'ticking the box' of consultation. Further, there were concerns expressed by officers and elected members that eParticipation may be 'hijacked' by activist groups who may seek to distort the responses by submitting multiple responses.

An interesting finding discussed by many respondents was that they saw eParticipation tools as being useful for certain participatory activities but not others and that they believed eParticipation should play a part in the broader participation strategy as a potential tool in the 'consultation toolbox' along with other mechanisms such as postal questionnaires or meetings. Respondents highlighted the issue of sampling and that while a self-selecting convenience sample could be appropriate for some types of participation such as seeking general views on council strategy, for example, a very specific study of, for example, clients of drug treatment centres or people living in particular geographical areas would need to be approached differently. As one respondent indicated, it is important to select 'horses for courses' and to utilise a mechanism that is appropriate for the type of participation being undertaken. Some respondents indicated that eParticipation would be most appropriate for macro-level consultation on strategic issues but almost always indicated that there would need to be offline alternatives available (e.g. paper based questionnaires) as well so that people who did not have access to ICTs were not excluded.

The discussion of eParticipation in the literature often depicts eParticipation as being on a scale not dissimilar to Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969). Chadwick (2003) for example writes: 'This type of e-democracy encompasses a continuum of consultation, stretching from low-level information gathering and aggregation toward a fuller quasi-deliberative level of interaction.' (Chadwick, 2003, p448). Ann MacIntosh (2004), Graeme Smith (2009) and others also depict either implicitly or explicitly that there is a continuum of eParticipation tools with online deliberations being discussed in the literature as a more 'advanced' form of eParticipation than online questionnaires. However, as indicated previously in this thesis, the use of eParticipation tools reported by Scottish local authorities was largely limited to 'alternate' eParticipation. This largely consisted of questionnaires made available in an electronic format to compliment a paper based questionnaire.

The findings from this study indicate that respondents do not view eParticipation as being an effective mechanism for facilitating discussions and so the speculation of an evolution of eParticipation mechanisms from online questionnaires to online discussions and deliberations appears unlikely, at least with currently available technologies. Some respondents indicated that eParticipation could be used in conjunction with offline mechanisms such as face to face deliberative focus groups. Considering the views expressed by some about eParticipation being an impersonal medium which is not as 'engaging' as face to face communication and that online deliberations and discussions in particular were not widely discussed in positive terms by respondents, indications of a theory emerges about the perception of local authority officers and citizens that eParticipation is less highly valued than offline forms of participation. Respondents primarily discussed eParticipation as a means of 'topping up' or complimenting offline participation.

When the findings about the expected use and intentions of eParticipation are considered they do not appear to show any great expectations from officers and elected members of the impact of eParticipation on local democracy and, revisiting Wright' s (2006) classification of the theories of the impact of eParticipation, certainly do not show any indications of a 'transformation' of democratic services nor of any significant 'reinvigoration' (largely due to the fact already highlighted that eParticipation mechanisms do not overcome the barriers to participation suffered by offline participation) which puts the assessment of the impact of eParticipation into the 'normalisation' category. In fact, eParticipation was at such an early stage of development in Scottish Local Authorities that it could not really even be considered

'normalised' as many respondents indicated that it was still at an experimental stage or infrequently used.

This study provided evidence that, while eParticipation is not liable to facilitate a transformation of democracy like the cyberoptimists had predicted, if the trend progresses that eParticipation tools continue to serve as 'alternate' forms of participation to supplement other forms of participation rather than becoming the sole mechanism for citizen participation it is also unlikely that eParticipation will lead to the base of participation being narrowed (as is a concern of some writers of the 'normalisation thesis'). A tentative conclusion is that the base of participation could ultimately be widened to include those who would be willing to participate but are either not sufficiently inclined to invest the time in 'offline participation' or are unable to do so for reasons such as childcare or geographical location. However, there has been no evidence found that eParticipation would be effective in engaging those who do not want to participate or who feel that their contributions are not valued or that the topic of consultation is not relevant to them. More data would be required to investigate whether or not eParticipation actually increases the diversity of participants (i.e. whether or not more responses are received from young people) as some respondents suggested.

One of the key findings of this research was that, not only is the impact of eParticipation very ambiguous, but that there are also ambiguities of the impact of participation mechanisms in general. It was regularly reported by officers that the eParticipation mechanisms were taken into account 'in the same way' as other participative mechanisms but as the research progressed it became evident that the impact of participative mechanisms in general is unclear. From the case study research it was found that despite the creation of many new participative mechanisms and an apparent commitment to both neighbourhood community planning and also involving citizens in strategic decision making that there was no evidence of large-scale shifting of power to citizens.

The evidence found from this research points towards a consumerist 'customer satisfaction' ethos as being a motivating factor behind the development of public participation. Despite the apparent commitment of officers and elected members to the idea of public involvement, the impact of these initiatives is highly ambiguous and no evidence was found of genuine devolution of decision making to citizens. This raises some very serious questions about the transparency of public participation initiatives

and exactly what impact, if any, the plethora of new mechanisms both online and offline are having. With this in mind it is believed that the debate about eParticipation vs 'offline' participation is framed in such a way that it ignores these fundamental issues with public participation in local authority decision making. In order to effect genuine participation there should be an emphasis on quality over quantity of consultation and when public participation mechanisms are employed they should be conducted with clear indications of how the results will be used to ensure that participants have an impact. This should be the case whether the mechanism is eParticipation, citizens' panels, deliberative mechanisms or any other type of mechanism.

It is also recognised however, that this ideal is difficult to implement in reality. Policy making in local authorities is constrained by costs and statutory obligations and decision making often has to take into account the views of a diverse range of stakeholders. Many respondents commented that it was important to 'manage the expectations' of participants so that they understand that the public participation exercise is one factor that contributes to policy making.

So far this chapter has outlined that eParticipation is unlikely to resolve the problems inherent in public participation as these extend beyond issues of access and convenience. From the interviews and case study it was established that there a number of factors that had contributed to the problems with public participation in Scottish Local Authorities. These will now be outlined in the following section.

7.3 External and internal factors have affected the development of Public Participation in Scottish Local Authorities.

Chapter 2 outlined the theoretical and policy contexts surrounding the development of public participation and eParticipation in particular. The primary research for the thesis revealed that the drive towards increased public participation in Scottish Local Authorities was profoundly influenced by the statutory requirements mandated by the Scottish Executive in particular the *Local Government Scotland Act 2003* which was outlined in Chapter 2. Respondents in both the telephone interviews and case study interviews referred to the community planning and Best Value requirements and indicated that this had led to the development of participatory mechanisms such as citizens' panels and community planning partnerships as well as service specific consultations on issues. Of course, public consultation and participatory mechanisms

have been utilised by local authorities for many years and as was demonstrated in the case study research, some local authorities had developed community planning partnerships and public participation mechanisms such as citizens' panels before the introduction of the statutory guidelines. It was found from the data collection that local authorities also utilised formal and informal networks for benchmarking best practice and developing their consultation and engagement mechanisms and that some had been involved in pilot projects to develop participatory mechanisms including eParticipation tools. Further, while there was evidence from the case study element of the research that the *Local Government Scotland Act 2003* was developed in conjunction with local authorities and that Aberdeen City Council in particular influenced the development because they had already established community planning guidelines.

Although there are statutory requirements to undertake public participation it was found that there was little standardisation between Scottish local authorities in terms of which participatory tools were used with respondents reporting utilising a range of mechanisms. This could be explained in part by the lack of prescriptive guidance or may be an indication that some tools are considered more appropriate for certain local authorities. Further, unlike in England, it was discovered that there has been no significant drive from the Scottish Government to encourage local authorities to develop eParticipation mechanisms and that instead there has been a focus on developing community planning partnerships and sub-local community participation initiatives. There was evidence found from the case study that the focus on developing neighbourhood level initiatives had led to a concentration of resources on these activities which may be a barrier to the development of eParticipation in Scotland.

Respondents also indicated that it should be recognised that consultation is not the sole remit of officers with community planning roles and that, in accordance with Best Value guidelines, service-specific consultations are conducted by individual service departments. Many of the local authority officers indicated that there was no internal coordination of consultations and that even when there was an official coordination strategy, officers expressed concerns that best practice guidelines are not always followed. Lack of internal coordination leads to duplication of consultations and 'consultation overload' which has a negative impact on response rates as well as a lack of rigour for conducting public participation. Some respondents believed that officers in service departments do not have a deep understanding of public participation and that it is 'tacked on' to their roles on top of other duties and therefore they view consultation

as a 'box ticking exercise' for validating their proposals rather than meaningful attempts to incorporate the views of the public into policy-making. These findings are consistent with those of Lowndes *et al.* 2001a and Higgens *et al.* (2005). Findings from this study also concurred with the negative views of the impact of public participation initiatives expressed in some of the literature that many participative exercises are simply validating decisions or raising awareness of policy making rather than devolving any real decision making to members of the public (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Mayer *et al.*, 2005; Newman, 2005) and that even the relatively new participatory mechanisms such as citizens' panels tend to be top down exercises where the agenda for debate is set by administrators rather than the public (Pratchett, 2005).

7.4 The Scottish Government emphasis is on councils developing eGovernment tools rather than eParticipation

As indicated in Chapter 1 this thesis also investigated the drive towards electronic service delivery from the Scottish Government to investigate whether this was acting as a barrier or an enabler to the development of eParticipation. The findings regarding the lack of provision for officers involved in participation to instigate the development of eParticipation in local authorities demonstrated in Chapter 6 is indicative of the fact that the primary focus of local authority ICT departments in Scotland is on meeting the statutory requirements of the Scottish Government whose focus is on electronic service delivery rather than on developing eParticipation. From the case study findings it was found that the ICT strategy was primarily influenced by these statutory guidelines, that the team had to concentrate resources on meeting these statutory guidelines and so did not have any spare capacity for developing non-statutory functionality such as eParticipation and that elected members had a 'sign off' role rather than actively influencing developments.

The benchmarking analysis of local authority websites revealed that the websites of Scottish local authorities serve multiple functions- from providing tourist information for prospective visitors to information for the business community as well as providing information for citizens. ICT departments are also tasked with maintaining internal communications such as intranets and developing systems for internal business processes in local authorities. The rapid shift of the role of ICT departments to being at the core of much of the business of local authorities has clearly had an impact on

resources and puts pressure on departments which was expressed by respondents in the case study.

The ICT service is described as being part of the 'customer service' strategy in Aberdeen City Council and was not linked in with the citizen participation or community planning departments. There was evidence also that initiatives such as ePlanning were being developed in isolation rather than being part of a broader strategy which could include eParticipation mechanisms as many of the technologies requited are similar. It is believed that this is enforcing the problem of 'technological silos' highlighted by the Scottish Executive as outlined in Chapter 2.

7.5 The cost paradox of eParticipation

The potential benefits of eParticipation cited by respondents of the telephone interviews seemed muted in terms of the democratic potential for ICT to empower citizens. Most of the cited benefits were of cost and respondents indicated that they believed eParticipation mechanisms would be cheaper to run than offline participation especially in the case of questionnaires. These concerns reflect the realities of local authority work which is constrained by funding and as the volume of statutory consultations increase it is unsurprising that local authority officers are under pressure to conduct consultations as cheaply as possible. Viewing eParticipation as a 'cheap alternative' does not, however, reflect the ideals espoused by proponents of eParticipation whose views on the benefits of eParticipation extend beyond convenience and costs. Further, when the issue of costs was explored further in the case study it was discovered that the cost issue was more complex and somewhat paradoxical.

While eParticipation is argued by some in the literature to be an efficient way of conducting participation and therefore may reduce the costs of consultation to the local authorities (Weare, 2002), the findings from this study show that eParticipation is not cost free. While some respondents indicated that conducting questionnaire-based consultations online would represent an efficiency saving because postage and data entry costs would be minimised (which was also the findings of Rowe *et al.,* 2006), conducting online discussions or more 'interactive' forms of eParticipation was considered to be costly in terms of staff time for moderating and organising the discussions and also internal processes have to be developed for collating and

analysing the data (these issues have also been identified by Baker and Panagopoulos, 2004, Kampen and Srijikers, 2003). Some elected members and officers also indicated that they feared that eParticipation could greatly increase the amount of communication that they received from members of the public and hence more of their time would be taken up answering emails or participating in online discussions. One of the respondents from the case study emphasised that there was a difference between cost reduction and cost effectiveness and that he believed that while some eParticipation tools may be a cost effective way of increasing responses from the public, that it is unlikely to result in overall reduction of cost to the local authority due to the increased number of enquiries that they will receive.

Further, if the trend continues that eParticipation mechanisms are used as well as rather than instead of offline public participation mechanisms, the cost savings will be reduced as local authorities will still have to produce offline equivalents.

7.6 Internal coordination of ICT resources is required for the development of eParticipation

Even the measured expectations for the future development of eParticipation will likely require changes to current working practices in local authorities as evidence from the findings indicate that (in keeping with findings from other studies outlined in Chapter 3) the majority of the ICT resources are being focussed on the development of e-services rather than tools for participation.

Several writers have commented that it is the administration side of local authorities that control the resources for ICT (Clift, 2002; Parvez and Ahmed, 2006) however the findings from this study indicate that the portrayal of the administration as a homogonous groups is overlooking a further problem with the development of eParticipation. From the findings it appears that officers from outside the IT department have little access for the development of new technologies. The findings from the research indicate that in order to develop eParticipation mechanisms it is necessary to break down professional barriers between the ICT teams who may not view public participation as part of their job and the officers involved in public participation. Findings from the case study research indicate that these barriers contributed to the failure of eParticipation initiatives in Aberdeen City Council and from the telephone interviews it was evident that there was a lack of awareness amongst officers involved

in public participation in other local authorities of how technological developments to facilitate eParticipation can be achieved more generally.

This is not to say that there is no joined up working-some of the respondents from the telephone interviews indicated that either elected members or members from the ICT department were working with officers involved in public participation to develop eParticipation in particular the officers who described the web chats and another officer indicated that they were aware of the e-government strategy including eParticipation although it was still at a proposal stage.

The lack of strategic direction for citizen participation and coordination of consultation and engagement activities are compounding the problem. If there was better coordination at a strategic level it would be possible to examine which participatory mechanisms were most appropriate including eParticipation tools and then take the request to the senior management to request resources to be allocated for the ICT department to develop the systems required.

Many of the interviewees indicated the belief that eParticipation would be used more extensively in local authority decision making in the future but this belief was largely based on their own expectations of technological development. Some respondents reflected on their own experiences of using e-services more and pointed out that local authority websites were becoming more transactional. Respondents considered the next logical step to be 'interactivity' with citizens but many indicated that this would, at least initially be largely making more questionnaires available online as well as in paper based forms rather than dialogic forms of eParticipation such as online discussion forums or web chats. Proponents of eParticipation may see the caution expressed by officers about utilising dialogic eParticipation as a failure to employ eParticipation tools to their full potential. However, I believe that simply creating new eParticipation mechanisms for public participation because the technologies are available would be technological determinism which would not necessarily add value to participative policy making.

7.7 Elected members are disengaged from public participation mechanisms and ICT developments

Respondents from the telephone interviews indicated that elected members are largely supportive of participative initiatives and some indicated that elected members were also not only supportive but also actively promoting participation and eParticipation. There were, however, suggestions by some respondents that given the statutory obligation to consult and to engage in community planning that elected members really had no choice but to be supportive. Some respondents also indicated that in some local authorities elected members viewed public participation with suspicion and that they believe that decision making is their role.

In the case study research the views of elected members were sought and it was found that while they all indicated that they were supportive of public participation, when asked further about how this works in practice, it became clear that they took a rather narrow view of public participation and viewed it as more gaining views and legitimising Council decisions rather than devolving decision making. The elected members pointed out that sometimes unpopular decisions had to be made and that it was unlikely that the public would support these if given the opportunity in a consultation. They also indicated that strategic decisions should be taken by elected members rather than allowing the public to set strategic priorities. Elected members interviewed as part of the case study were not actively engaged in participatory activities and seemed to have a limited knowledge of activities that were being undertaken in the local authority. Elected members also had very limited knowledge of the role of ICT in local authorities and were concerned about engaging in eParticipation activities which may contravene the acceptable use policy for ICT and also that eParticipation may not work with their current practice of engaging with constituents. These findings are consistent with Mahrer (2005) and Parvez (2008) who also found that elected officials were disengaged from eParticipation. However, unlike Mahrer's findings there was no evidence found that the councillors were blocking developments in eParticipation but rather that they were disengaged from both public participation and ICT developments and are hence 'doubly disengaged' from eParticipation.

From the data collection there was no evidence to suggest that there had been any major shifting of power from elected members to members of the public even in local authorities who had adopted extensive new participatory mechanisms. An interesting finding from the telephone interviews, however was that the administrative side of the

council were responsible for setting much of the agenda for participation and that they did not view elected members as being a part of that process. From the case study analysis and further evidence from the AUDIT Scotland report on Best Value and Community Planning (2008) in Aberdeen City Council, there was evidence of governance problems with elected members becoming disconnected from the administrative side of the council and while Aberdeen City Council had particular problems that were not directly generalisable to other local authorities, the issue of policy development and governance in Scottish local authorities is an area that should be researched further as there are indications of a democratic deficit.

7.8 Recent developments in eParticipation

With the rapidly evolving nature of technology, it was decided that a quick review of a sample of the websites of Scottish local authorities would be undertaken to see if the state of eParticipation had changed significantly since the collection of the data. It was found that all of the local authorities identified as having particularly poor websites in the benchmarking study (such as Falkirk, Shetland Islands Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar) which did not meet basic accessibility guidelines had been redeveloped and had adopted the standard navigation guidelines and A-Z of services mandated by the Scottish Government. In the case of Highland Council it was also found that there are examples of online questionnaires available for local people to complete.

From the brief review it was not found that there was a noticeable increase in the development of eParticipation tools in Scottish local authorities but there were a few interesting points of note. It was found that Aberdeen City Council now have links to online consultations on the homepage of their website but that these use the surveymonkey tool rather than linking to an internally developed and hosted questionnaire. This is an interesting development as the number of available online questionnaire services have increased greatly in recent years and using these services removes the problem of having to get the questionnaires developed and hosted internally by the ICT department. It was also discovered that Highland Council are now offering 'webcasting' of public meetings 'to make the decision making process as open and transparent as possible' (Highland Council, 2010), This is a uni-directional form of communication process and therefore not counted as eParticipation but the example reflects further developments in the use of web services in local authorities.

Social networking tools such as Facebook have also developed rapidly in recent years and offer possibilities for officers and elected members to interact with the public. East Renfrewshire council were the first local authority in the UK to use Facebook to publicise Council services by creating a group to publicise its library and sports services (MacLeod, 2008) and are now also using Twitter. It would not be useful to speculate at this time what the possible implications would be of these new technologies in terms of eParticipation both because this would be a return to the 'speculative futurology' condemned by Coleman and Norris (2005) but it is possible that Web 2.0 technologies and beyond will provide new ways for citizens to interact with government.

7.9 Policy Recommendations

It has been established that while eParticipation will not be the 'silver bullet' to solving the problem of disengagement with local politics but that officers and elected members believe that eParticipation could be a contributing factor in increasing response rates to consultations by providing people with a more convenient mechanisms for participation. In order to move eParticipation beyond the 'experimental' stage into a mechanism that is an available tool in the 'consultation toolbox' a number of policy recommendations based on the findings of the thesis have been developed:

- The Scottish Government should make funding available for the development of eParticipation in Scottish local authorities because ICT teams are facing resource constraints to meet the statutory obligations and therefore need additional support for creating eParticipation tools.
- The Scottish Government should review the recommendations for community planning and best value to facilitate better quality consultation as opposed to simply creating more consultations resulting in consultation overload.
- Local authorities should have internal public participation guidelines and quality monitoring procedures to ensure that best practice guidelines are followed. This would reduce duplicate consultations and also help to ensure standardisation of procedures and allow for better coordination and understanding of which public participation mechanisms (including eParticipation) are the most effective by allowing officers an overview of all consultation and engagement activities.
- Local authorities should conduct research with groups of citizens to investigate barriers to participation and to identify with citizens if using new mechanisms

such as eParticipation would encourage them to participate. This is obviously challenging for the obvious reasons of trying to engage the 'hard to reach'.

- Internal working groups involving elected members, ICT officers and officers involved in public participation in local authorities should be set up to review how ICTs should be used to engage the public and feed into the wider e-government strategies.

7.10 Original contribution to knowledge

Conducting research in an emerging but rapidly evolving area is challenging but also brings the opportunity to study something genuinely new. Very few empirical research studies analysing eParticipation had been undertaken when this study was commenced in 2005 and no studies had been conducted examining eParticipation across Scottish local authorities. Studying the policy context within which eParticipation has evolved in Scottish local authorities has provided valuable insights into the reasons behind why eParticipation (and public participation mechanisms more generally) have developed in the way that they have.

The research has filled a gap in the literature by studying eParticipation from the 'supply side' gaining an understanding of the views of officers and elected members on the use and potential of eParticipation mechanisms for engaging the public in policy making. Further, the research design which involved several methods of data collection and policy analysis allowed for both an overview of eParticipation in nearly all Scottish local authorities to be gained (with the caveat that the lack of coordination of participatory mechanisms in local authorities means that some may have been missed) as well as an in-depth study of the operationalisation of eParticipation in one local authority.

While the primary focus of the PhD was from the political science perspective, the approach taken for data collection and reviewing of secondary literature also had an information science element (particularly evident in the discussions of website usability and information seeking). This allowed for a more rounded study of eParticipation and contributed to the theoretical developments outlined in this chapter.

A grounded theory approach was deemed appropriate so that the research design was flexible and allowed for an inductive approach to allow for theoretical development.

There were no methodological standards for eParticipation prior to the commencement of this study and this research has contributed to an understanding of how to research eParticipation. The combination of website benchmarking and interviews along with policy analysis allowed for triangulation of findings to strengthen the conclusions that were reached.

By placing the emphasis on the analysis of eParticipation as a participatory mechanism rather than studying the technologies themselves the research revealed the wider challenges with engaging citizens in participative mechanisms many of which are shared with eParticipation mechanisms. This allowed for a contextualised study as opposed to many studies of eParticipation which isolate eParticipation as a distinct form of participation from 'offline' mechanisms such as public meetings and postal questionnaires.

A further original contribution to knowledge was the development of an evaluative system based on an interpretation of Dahl's criteria for ideal democracy in order to analyse initiatives identified from the mapping exercise and case study. The evaluation provides a contribution to the conceptual understanding of how eParticipation is being used in Scottish local authorities. The analytical tool was heuristic in nature and a qualitative approach was devised rather than attempting to create 'metrics' to evaluate eParticipation. This allowed for more details of the criteria to be included in the analysis.

7.11 Suggestions for Future research

As ICT is a rapidly evolving area it is inevitable that there will be more developments in the future. While eParticipation was not found to be 'flourishing' in Scottish local authorities when the primary research for this study was conducted, it does not mean to say that there will not be more use of eParticipation in the future. This is particularly likely given respondents' views that they believe eParticipation will become more widely used. It is recommended that this research could provide a starting point for a longitudinal study in future studies- in particular the benchmarking results could be used as the basis of a comparative analysis.

A comparative study of Scottish local authorities and other local authorities in the UK or from Europe could be undertaken to investigate similarities and differences of the operationslisation of eParticipation in different countries.

The focus of study of research from the 'supply side' of eParticipation has led to new perspectives on eParticipation being developed but future studies could also incorporate more of a 'demand side' perspective. A finding from the case study was that the public have not been widely consulted about how they would like to participate and the barriers to participation were gained from officers' beliefs. A study of people who do not participate in public participation initiatives would be interesting to determine in more detail what the barriers to participation are and whether or not eParticipation mechanisms would make them more likely to participate. This would be extremely challenging as participants would need to be recruited. It is recommended that voluntary organisations working with 'hard to reach' groups could assist in the identification of participants.

While this study has made steps towards developing evaluative mechanisms for studying eParticipation by using the criteria for ideal democracy, it was not possible to evaluate the impact on policy making that the initiatives actually had. In the case of some initiatives it was clear that there was no impact but some officers reported that results were fed into the policy making process. A very interesting study would be to try to develop impact indicators and ways of analysing if and to what extent public participation mechanisms in general (not just eParticipation) make a meaningful contribution to policy making to ensure that participative initiatives are transparent.

Smith (2009) wrote that he believed more research was required to analyse whether online deliberative debates differed from those in the offline context. I believe that this would be beneficial but suggest that it should be broadened to examine whether or not responses to other alternate forms of ePartcipation differ from their offline equivalents. For example, it would be interesting to see if responses to online questionnaires are comparable to those of paper based questionnaires.

References

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL, 2009-last update, aberdeen- our city. [online] Aberdeen: Aberdeen City Council. Available: http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/EqualityDiversity/eqd_OurCity.asp [last accessed 16/10/10].

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL, 2008. *Community Plan update 2008 and Single Outcome agreement 2008-2011.[online] Aberdeen: Aberdeen City Council.* Aberdeen: Aberdeen City Council. *Available:* http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/web/files/CommunityAdvice/combined_cp_soa_23072 008.pdf [last accessed 16/01/10].

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL, 2002. *Strengthening Local Democracy Strategy.*[online] Aberdeen: Aberdeen City Council. Available: http://www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk/web/FILES/TACA/SLDStrategy.pdf [last accessed 16/01/10].

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL, 2001. *Aberdeenfutures A social, economic and environmental design for our city.* [online] Aberdeen: Aberdeen City Council.. Available:http://www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk/web/FILES/CommunityPlana ndAnnualReports/communityplan.pdf [accessed 07/01/10].

ABERDEEN CITY VOICE, 2006. *Aberdeen Citizens' Panel report on the 8th questionnaire.*[online] Aberdeen: Aberdeen City Voice. Available at: http://www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk/web/FILES/CityVoice/CitizensReport8. pdf [last accessed 07/03/10].

ABERDEEN CITY VOICE, 2010. *Aberdeen Citizens' Panel report on the 18th questionnaire.*[online] Aberdeen: Aberdeen City Voice. Available at: http://www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk/web/FILES/CityVoice/Report18.pdf [last accessed 07/03/10]

ABERDEEN FUTURES*,* 2003*.* Our *Community Plan*: *Annual Report* 2001-03. [online] Aberdeen: Aberdeenfutures Available: http://www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk/web/FILES/CommunityPlanandAnnual Reports/OurCommunityPlan.pdf [accessed 07/01/10]

ABERDEEN FUTURES,*,* 2005*. Community Planning in Aberdeen: Annual Report 2003 – 2005.* [online] Aberdeen: Aberdeenfutures. Available: http://www.communityplanningaberdeen.org.uk/web/FILES/CommunityPlanandAnnual Reports/Community_Planning_in_Aberdeen_2003-05.pdf [last accessed 07/03/10]

ABERDEEN CITY AND SHIRE ECONOMIC FORUM, 2008-last update, *aberdeen city council internet access households- 2005/2006.* [online] Aberdeen: ACSEF Available: http://www.acsef.co.uk/uploads/reports/6/ACSEF%20Internet%20Access%20- %20Household%20Use%202005-2006%20%28Apr%2008%291.pdf [last accessed 16/01/10, 2009].

AGRE, P.E., 2002. Real-Time Politics: The Internet and the Political Process. *The Information Society,* **18**, pp. 311-331.

ALBERT, A. and PASSMORE, E., 2008. *Public Value and Participation: A Literature Review for the Scottish Government.[online]* The Work Foundation. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/03/17090301/0 [last accessed 17/01/10].

ALBRECT, S., 2006. Whose Voice is Heard in Online Deliberation? A study of participation and representation in political debates on the Internet. *Information, Communication and Society,* **9**(1), pp. 62-82.

ALEXANDER, G., 2000. Information-based tools for building community and sustainability. *Futures,* **32**(3-4), pp. 317-37.

ANDERSON, D., M., 2002. Cautious Optimism about Online Politics and Citizenship. In: D. ANDERSON M. and M. CORNFELD, eds, *The Civic Web.* Maryland and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, pp. 19-34.

ANTTIROIKO, A., 2003. Building Strong E-Democracy- The Role of Technology in Developing Democracy for the Information Age. *Communications of the ACM,* **46**(9), pp. 121-128.

APPLBAUM, A.I., 2002. Failure in the Cybermarketplace of Ideas. In: E.C. KAMARCK and J.S. NYE, eds, *Governance.com Democracy in the information age.* Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 17-31.

ARNSTEIN, S.R., 1969. A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners.* **35**(4), pp. 216-24.

ASCHERSON, N., 2003. Designing Virtual Citizens: Some Scottish Experiments with Electronic Democracy. *Scottish Affairs,* **43** (Spring).

ÄSTRÖM, J., 2004. Digital democracy: ideas, intentions and initiatives in Swedish local government. *Routledge ECPR Studies in European Political Science,* pp. 96-115.

AUDIT SCOTLAND, 2008. *The Audit of Best Value and Community Planning. Aberdeen City Council.* The Accounts Commission. [online] Available:http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2008/bv_080529_aberdeen_city.pdf [last accessed 16/01/10]

AUTY, C., 2005. UK elected Members and their Weblogs. *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives,* **57**(4), pp. 338-355.

BAKER, PAUL M.A. AND PANAGOPOULOS, COSTAS, 2004. Political Implications of Digital (e-) Government In: A. PAVLICHEV and D.G. GARSON, eds, *Digital Government: Principles and Best Practices.* Hershey, PA: Idea Group Publishing, pp. 78-96

BARBER, B., 2000. *A Passion for Democracy.* Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

BARBER, B.,1999. Three Scenarios for the Future of Technology and Strong Democracy. *Political Science Quarterly,* **113**(4), pp. 573-589.

BARNES, M., NEWMAN, J., KNOPS, A. and SULLIVAN, H., 2003. Constituting 'the public' in public participation. *Public Administration,* **81**(2), pp. 379-99.

BATES, M., 2005. An Introduction to Metatheories, Theories, and Models. In: K.E. FISHER, S. ERDELEZ and L. MCKECHNIE, eds, *Theories of Information Behavior.* New Jersey: Information Today for the American Society of Information Science and Technology, pp. 1-24.

BENNIE, L., 2006. Transition to STV: Scottish Local Government Elections 2007. *Representation,* **42**(4), pp. 273-87.

BERMAN, J. and MULLIGAN, D.K., 2003. Digital Grass Roots, Issue Advocacy in the Age of the Internet. In: ANDERSON, DAVID M. AND CORNFIELD, MICHAEL, eds, *The Civic Web.* Maryland and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc. pp. 77-96.

BERNTZEN, L. and WINSVOLD, M., 2005. Web-Based Tools for Policy Evaluation. In: E-Government: Towards Electronic Democracy, Proceedings, vol. 3416, pp. 13-24.

BIMBER, B., 1999. The Internet and Citizen Communication with Government: Does the Medium Matter? *Political Communication,* **16**(4), pp. 409-428.

BLAKE, J., 1999. Overcoming the 'Value-Action Gap' in Environmental policy: tensions between national policy and local experience. *Local Environment,* **4**(3), pp. 257-78.

BOVAIRD, T., 2007. *Strategic Management in the Public Sector.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BOYD, O.P., 2008. Differences in eDemocracy parties' eParticipation systems. *Information Polity,* **13**(4), pp. 167-188.

BREINDL, Y. and FRANCQ, P., 2008. Can Web 2.0 applications save e-democracy? A study of how new internet applications may enhance citizen participation in the political process online. *International Journal of Electronic Democracy,* **1**, pp.14 - 31.

BRYMAN, J., 2004. *Social Research Methods.* 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CAMP, R.C., 1989. Benchmarking: the search for industry best practices that lead to superior performance. Milwaukee, Wisconsin.: ASQC Quality Press.

CARLEY, M., 2005. *Assessment of options for the Aberdeen City Allianca (TACA).*

CARLEY, M., 2004. *Citizens, Innovation and Governance ... A 21st Century Approach,* Edinburgh: Demos Project.

CARMAN, C., MITCHELL, J. and JOHNS, R., 2008. The unfortunate natural experiment in ballot design: The Scottish Parliamentary elections of 2007. *Electoral Studies,* **27**(3), pp. 442-459.

CARPINETTI, L. and DE MELO, A.M., 2002. What to benchmark: a systematic approach and cases. *Benchmarking: An International Journal,* **9**(3), pp.244-55.

CARPINI, M.D. and KEETER, S., 2003. The Internet and an Informed Citizenry. In: D.M. ANDERSON and M. CORNFIELD, eds, *The Civic Web.* Oxford and Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, pp. 129-156.

CASTRO, A.P. and NIELSEN, E., 2001. Indigenous people and co-management: implications for conflict management. *Environmental Science and Policy,* **4**, pp.229 - 239.

CHADWICK, A., 2006. *Internet Politics: States, Citizens and New Communication Technologies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

CHADWICK, A., 2003. Bringing E-Democracy Back In: Why It Matters for Future Research on E-Governance. *Social Science Computer Review,* **21**(4), pp. 443-455.

CHANDLER, J.A., 2001. *Local Government Today*. 3rd edn. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

CHAPPALET, J. AND KILCHENMANN, P., 2005. Interactive Tools for e-Democracy: Examples from Switzerland. *Lecture Notes in Computer Science,* **3416**, pp. 36-47.

CHARMAZ, K., 2006. Constructing grounded theory : a practical guide through qualitative analysis. London: Sage.

CHARMAZ, K., 2006. Constructing Grounded Theory a Practical Guide Through Qualitative Data Analysis. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage.

CHATTERTON, P. AND STYLE, S., 2001. Putting Sustainable Development into Practice? The role of local policy partnership networks. *Local Environment,* **6**(4), pp. 439-52.

CHOI, J., 2006. Deliberative Democracy, rational participation and e-Voting in South Korea. *Asian Journal of Political Science,* **14**(1), pp 64-81.

CLIFT, S., 2003. E-Democracy: Lessons from Minnesota. In: D.M. ANDERSON and M. CORNFIELD, eds, *The Civic Web.* Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield publishers Inc., .

CLIFT, S., 2002-last update, *the future of E-democracy - the 50 year plan.* [online] Available: http://www.publicus.net/articles/future.html [last accessed 25/11/09].

COCO, A. and SHORT, P., 2004. History and Habit in the Mobilization of ICT Resources. *The Information Society,* **20**, pp. 39-51.

COLEMAN, S., 2004. Whose Conversation? Engaging the Public in Authentic Polylogue. *The Political Quarterly,* **75**(2), pp. 112-120.

COLEMAN, S. and GØTZE, J., 2001. *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation.*[online]. London: Hansard Society. Available: http://www.bowlingtogether.net/bowlingtogether.pdf [last accessed 16/01/10]

COLEMAN, S. and NORRIS, D., 2005. A New Agenda for E-Democracy. *International Journal of Electronic Government Research,* **1**(3), 69-82.

COMMUNITY PLANNING TASKFORCE, 2004. *Effective Community Engagement, Community Planning Advice Note.* [online]. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/04/19167/35261 [last accessed 21/11/09].

COMMUNITY PLANNING TASKFORCE, 2003b. *Working and Learning Together to Build Stronger Communities.* [online]. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47021/0025615.pdf [accessed 21/11/09]

COMMUNITY PLANNING TASKFORCE, 2003a. *Final Report on the Community Planning Taskforce.* [online]. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47095/0026414.pdf [accessed 21/11/09]

COMMUNITY PLANNING TASKFORCE, 2002. *Community Planning Good Practice: Final Report.* Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

CONSULTATION INSTITUTE, 2009a, Glossary. [online]. available: http://www.consultationinstitute.org/resources/glossary/glossary-c/ [last accessed 15/10/10]

CONSULTATION INSTITUTE, 2009b, Glossary. [online]. available: http://www.consultationinstitute.org/resources/glossary/glossary-e/ [last accessed 15/10/10]

CONSULTATIVE STEERING GROUP, 1998. *Shaping Scotland's Parliament.* [online]. Edinburgh: The Stationery Office. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library/documents-w5/rcsg-00.htm [last accessed accessed 20/11/09]

CORNFIELD, M., 2003. Adding in the Net: Making Citizenship Count in the Digital Age. In: D. ANDERSON M. and M. CORNFIELD, eds, *The Civic Web.* Maryland and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc. pp. 97-119.

CRESWELL, J.W., 2007. *Qualitative inquiry and research design : choosing among five approaches*, 2nd edition. London and Thousand Oaks: Sage.

DAHL, R., 2000. *On Democracy*, New edition. Yale: Yale University Press.

DAHLGREN, P., 2005. The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation. *Political Communication,* **22**(2), pp. 147-162.

DALTON, R., 2004. *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

DENSCOMBE, M., 2007. *The Good Research Guide: for small-scale social research. 3rd edition.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS INNOVATION AND SKILLS. 2009, Local government performance indicators. [online]. London: Stationery Office. Available: http://www.berr.gov.uk/whatwedo/bre/inspection-enforcement/implementing-principles/performance-indicators/page44058.html[last accessed 19/11/09].

DI GENNARO, C. and DUTTON, W., 2006. The Internet and the Public: Online and Offline Political Participation in the United Kingdom. *Parliamentary Affairs,* **59**(2), pp. 219-313.

DLTR, 1998. *Guidance on Enhancing Public Participation in Local Government.* London: Stationery Office.

DRYZEK, J., 2000. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestants.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

EGGERS, W.D., 2005. *Government 2.0 Using Technology to Improve Education, Cut Red Tape, Reduce Gridlock, and Enhance Democracy.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

FERBER, P., FOLTZ, F. and PUGLIESE, R., 2005. The Internet and Public Participation: State Legislature Web Sites and the Many Definitions of Interactivity. *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society,* **25**(1), pp. 85-93.

FEREJOHN, J.A., 1990. Information and the Electoral Process. In: J.A. FEREJOHN and J.H. KUKLINSKI, eds, *Information and Democratic Processes.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. pp. 1-19

FIELDING, N. and THOMAS, H., 2008. Qualitative Interviewing. In: N. GILBERT, ed, *Researching Social Life.* 3rd edn. London: Sage.

FIEN, J. AND SKOIEN, P., 2002. 'I'm Learning… How You Go about Stirring Things Up- in a Consultative Manner': social capital and action competence in two community catchment groups. *Local Environment,* **7**(3), pp. 269-82.

FUNG, A. and WRIGHT, E.O., 2001. Deepening Democracy. Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance. *Politics and Society,* **29**(1), pp. 5-41.

GALUSKY, W., 2003. Indentifying with information: Citizen empowerment, the Internet, and the environmental anti-toxins movement. In: M. MCCAUGHEY and M.D. AYERS, eds, *Cyberactivism: Online activism in theory and practice.* New York: Routledge. pp. 195-208

GASCO, M., 2003. New Technologies and Institutional Change in Public Administration. *Social Science Computer Review,* **21**(1), pp. 6-14.

GIBSON, R.K., LUSOLI, W. and WARD, S., 2005. Online Participation in the UK: Testing a 'Contextualised' Model of Internet Effects. *British Journal of Political and International Relations,* **7**(4), pp. 561-583.

GILBERT., N., 2008. *Researching Social Life.* 3rd edition. London: Sage.

GLASER, B.G. and STRAUSS, A.L., 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory:* Strategies for Qualitative Research. Chicago: Aldine Publisher Co.

GRIFFIN, D., TREVORROW, P. and HALPIN, E., 2006. Using SMS Texting to Encourage Democratic Participation by Youth Citizens: a Case Study of a Project in an English Local Authority. *The Electronic Journal of e-Government,* **4**(2), pp. 63-70.

GRIMES, M., 2006. Organizing consent: The Role of procedural fairness in political trust and compliance. *European Journal of Political Research,* **45**, pp. 285-315.

GRÖNLUND, Å., 2003. Emerging Democratic Components. *Social Science Computer Review,* **21**(1), pp. 55-72.

GUNTER, B., 2006. Advances in e-democracy: overview. *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives,* **58**(5), pp. 361-370.

GURAK, L.J. and LOGIE, J., 2003. Internet Protests, from Text to Web. In: M. MCCAUGHEY and M.D. AYERS, eds, *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* London and New York: Routledge. pp. 25-46.

HIGGINS, P., JAMES, P. and ROPER, I., 2005. An investigation into the compatibility of consultation and performance comparison in the UK's policy of Best Value. *International Journal of Consumer Studies,* **29**(2), pp. 148–158.

HIGHLAND COUNCIL., 2010, Webcasting of Public Meetings [online] Inverness: Highland Council. Available at:http://www.highland.public-i.tv/site/ [accessed 03/03/10]

HILL, K.A. and HUGHES, J.E., 1998. *Cyberpolitics, Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet.* Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.

HILTON, S., 2006. Developing local e-democracy in Bristol: From information to consultation to participation and beyond. *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives,* **58**(5), pp. 416 - 428.

HINDESS, B., 2000. Representative Government and Participatory Democracy. In: A. VANDENBERG, ed, *Citizenship and Democracy in a Global Era.* Hounsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: MacMillan Press Ltd. pp. 33-50

HODKINSON, P., 2008. Grounded Theory and Inductive Research. In: N. GILBERT, ed, *Researching Social Life.* 3rd edition. London: Sage.

HOLLIS, D.R.J., M.M, 1999. Publishing on the Web: Creating a local reference tool . *Library Hi Tech,* **17**(1), pp. 63-74.

HORROCKS, I. and BELLAMY, C., 1997. Telematics and community governance: issues for policy and practice. *International Journal of Public Sector Management,* **10**(5), pp. 377-387.

IMPROVEMENT SERVICE, April 2009-last update, *about the improvement service* [online] Available: http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/the-improvement-service/[last accessed 20/11/09].

IMPROVEMENT SERVICE, 2009-last update, *single outcome agreements.* [online] Available: http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/single-outcome-agreements/[last accessed 22/11/09].

IRVINE, R. and STANSBURY, J., 2004. Citizen Participation in Decision Making: Is It Worth the Effort? *Public Administration Review,* **64**(1), pp. 55-65.

JENSEN, J.L., 2003. Virtual democratic dialogue? Bringing together citizens and politicians. *Information Polity,* **8**, pp. 29-47.

JOHNSON, D.G., 2003. Reflections on Campaign Politics, the Internet, and Ethics. In: D.M. ANDERSON and M. CORNFIELD, eds, *The Civic Web.* Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc. pp. 9-18.

KAKABADSE, A., KAKABADSE, N.K. and KOUZIM, A., 2003. Reinventing the Democratic Governance Project through Information Technology? A Growing Agenda for Debate. *Public Administration Review,* **63**(1), pp. 44-60.

KAMPEN, J.K. and SNIJIIKERS, K., 2003. E-Democracy. A Critical Evaluation of the Ultimate E-Dream. *Social Science Computer Review,* **21**(4), pp. 491-496.

KEARNES, I., BEND, J. and STERN, B., *e-participation in local government.* [online] London: IPPR. Available: http://www.ippr.org.uk/members/download.asp?f=%2Fecomm%2Ffiles%2Fe_participation_in_local_government.pdf [last accessed 15/01/10]

KEATING, M., STEVENSON, L., CAIRNEY, P. and TAYLOR, K., 2003. Does Devolution Make a Difference? Legislative Output and Policy Divergence in Scotland. *The Journal of Legislative Studies,* **9**(3), pp. 1-30.

KELLE, U., 2005. ʻEmergenceʼ vs. ʻForcingʼ of Empirical Data? A Crucial Problem of ʻGrounded Theoryʼ Reconsidered. *Qualitative Social Research [On-line Journal],* **6**(2),.

KERLEY, R., 2000. *Report of the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group.* Edinburgh: Tacita Solutions.

KIM, C. and HOLZER, M., 2006. Public Administrators' Acceptance of the Practice of Digital Democracy: A Model Explaining the Utilization of Online Policy Forums in South Korea. *International Journal of Electronic Government Research,* **2**(2), pp. 22-48.

KIM, J., 2006. The impact of Internet use patterns on political engagement: A focus on online deliberation and virtual social capital. *Information Polity,* **11**(1), pp. 35-49.

KINDER, T., 2002. Vote Early, Vote Often? Tele-Democracy in European Cities. *Public Administration,* **80**(3), pp. 557-582.

KING, C.S., FELTEY, K.M. and SUSEL, B.O.N., 1998. The question of participation: Toward authentic public participation in public administration. *Public Administration Review,* **58**(4), pp. 317-326.

KLIJN, E. and KOPPENJAN, J.F.M., 2002. Rediscovering the Citizen: New Roles for Politicians in Interactive Policy Making. In: MCLAVERTY, P., ed, *Public Participation and Innovations in Community Governance.* Burlington: Ashgate. pp.141-163

KOMITO, L., 2005. e-Participation and Governance: Widening the net. *The Electronic Journal of e-government,* **3**(1), pp. 39-48.

KREUGER, B.S., 2002. Assessing the Potential of Internet Political Participation in the United States: A Resources Approach. *American Politics Research,* **30**(5), pp. 476-498.

KUBICEK, H., 2005. Scenarios for Future Use of E-Democracy Tools in Europe. *International Journal of Electronic Government Research,* **1**(3), pp. 33-50.

KURLAND, N.B. and EGAN, T.D., 1996. Participation via the Net: Access, Voice and Dialogue *The Information Society,* **12**(4), pp. 387-406.

KYRO, P., 2003. Revising the concept and forms of benchmarking. *Benchmarking: An International Journal,* **10**(3), pp. 210-25.

LEIB, E., 2005. The Chinese Communist Party and Deliberative Democracy. *Journal of Public Deliberation,* [online] **1**(1).

LEVINE, P., 2003. Online Campaigning and the Public Interest. In: D. ANDERSON and M. CORNFELD, eds, *The Civic Web.* Maryland and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc. pp.47-62

LEVY, M., 2001. E-Volve-Or-Die.com: Thriving in the Internet Age Through E-Commerce Management. Indianapolis: New Riders.

LEWINS, , 2008. Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS). In: N. GILBERT, ed, *Researching Social Life.* 3rd edition edn. London: Sage.

LIVINGSTONE, S., BOBER, M. and HELSPER, E.J., 2005. Active Participation or Just more Information? Young people's take-up of opportunities to act and interact on the Internet. *Information, Communication and Society,* **8**(3), pp. 287- 314.

LOWNDES, V. AND SULLIVAN, H., 2008. How low can you go? Rationales and challenges for neighbourhood governance. *Public Administration,* **86**(1), pp. 1-22.

LOWNDES, V. AND WILSON, D., 2003. Balancing revisability and robustness? A new institutionalist perspective on local government modernisation. *Public Administration,* **81**(2), pp. 275-298.

LOWNDES, V., PRATCHETT, L. and STOKER, G., 2006. Local political participation: the impact of rules-in-use. *Public Administration,* **84**(3), pp. 539-561.

LOWNDES, V., PRATCHETT, L.P. and STOKER, G., 2001b. Trends in Public Participation: Part 2 - Citizens' Perspectives. *Public Administration,* **79**(2), pp. 445-55.

LOWNDES, V., PRATCHETT, L. and STOKER, G., 2001a. Trends in Public Participation: Part 1- Local Government Perspectives. *Public Administration,* **79**(1), pp. 205-222.

LUSOLI, W., WARD, S. and GIBSON, R., 2006. (Re)connecting Politics? Parliament, the Public and the Internet. *Parliamentary Affairs,* **59**(1), pp. 24-42.

MACINTOSH, A. and WHYTE, A., 2008. Towards an evaluation framework for eParticipation. *Transforming Government: People, Process & Policy,* **2**(1), pp. 16-30.

MACINTOSH, A., ROBSON, E., SMITH, E. and WHYTE, A., 2003. Electronic Democracy and Young People. *Social Science Computer Review,* **21**(1), pp. 43-54.

MACINTOSH, A., 2004. Characterizing e-participation in policy-making, *System Sciences, Proceedings of the 37th Annual Hawaii International Conference,* 5- 8 Jan. 2004.

MACINTOSH, A., MALINA, A. and WHYTE, A., 2002. Designing E-Democracy in Scotland. *Communication,* **27**, pp. 261-278.

MACINTOSH, A. and WHYTE, A., 2006. Evaluating how eParticipation changes Local Democracy, *eGovernment Workshop '06 (eGov 06)* [online], September 11 2006.

MACLEOD, F., 2008. East Renfrewshire uses Facebook to boost its libraries and sports centres, *news.scotsman* [online], 31 January. Available at http://news.scotsman.com/scotland/East-Renfrewshire-uses-Facebook-to.3728528.jp [accessed 3/03/10].

MAGD, H. and CURRY, A., 2003. Benchmarking: Achieving Best Value in UK Public Services. *Benchmarking: An International Journal,* **10**(3), pp. 261-286.

MAHRER, H. and KRIMMER, R., 2005. Towards the enhancement of e-democracy: identifying the notion of the 'middleman paradox'. *Information Systems Journal,* **15**(1), pp. 27-42.

MALINA, A. and BALL, I., 2005. ICTs and community and suggestions for further research in Scotland. *The Journal of Community Informatics,* **1**(3), pp. 66-82.

MALINA, A., 2003. E-Transforming democracy in the UK. Consideration of developments and suggestions for empirical research. *Communications,* **28**, pp. 135-155.

MARCELLA, R. and BAXTER, G., 1999. A national survey of the citizenship information needs of the general public. *Aslib Proceedings,* **51**(4), pp. 115-121.

MARSH, D. AND FURLONG, P., 2002. Ontology and Epistemology. In: D. MARSH and G. STOKER, eds, *Theory and Methods in Political Science.* Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 17-44.

MAYER, I., EDELENBOS, J. and MONNIKHOF, R., 2005. Interactive Policy Development: Undermining or Sustaining Democracy? *Public Administration,* **83**(1), pp.179-199.

MCATEER, M. and BENNETT, M., 2005. Devolution and Local Government: Evidence from Scotland. *Local Government Studies,* **31**(3), pp. 285-306.

MCATEER, M. and ORR, K., 2006. Public Participation in Scottish Local Government: Strategic and Corporate Confusions. *Public Money and Management,* **April**, pp.131-138.

MCCONNELL, A., 2006. Central–local government relations in Scotland. *International Review of Administrative Sciences,* **72**(1), pp. 73-84.

MCCONNELL, A., 2004. *Scottish Local Government.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

MCINTOSH, N., 1999. *Report of the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament.* London: The Stationery Office.

MCLAVERTY, P., forthcoming. Participation. In: M. BEVIR, ed, *Handbook of Governance.* London: Sage.

MCLAVERTY, P., 2002. Is Public Participation a Good Thing? In: MCLAVERTY, P., ed, *Public Participation and Innovations in Community Governance.* Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. pp.185-198.

MECHLING, J., 2002. Information Age Governance; Just the start of Something Big? In: E.C. KAMARCK and J.S. NYE, eds, *Governance.com: Democracy in the Information Age.* Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press. pp. 141-160.

MEHTA M. D. and DARIER E., 1998. Virtual Control and Disciplining on the Internet: Electronic Governmentality in the New Wired World. *The Information Society,* **14**(2), pp. 107-116.

MELO, M.A. and BAIOCCHI, G., 2006. Deliberative Democracy and Local Governance: Towards a New Agenda. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research,* **30**(3), pp. 587-600.

MILEWA, T., 2004. Local Participatory Democracy in Britain's Health Service: Innovation or Fragmentation of a Universal Citizenship. *Social Policy & Administration,* **38**(3), pp. 240-252.

MILLER, L., 2008. e-Petitions at Westminster: The Way forward for Democracy? *Parliamentary Affairs,* **62**, pp. 162-177.

MILLER, T.I., KOBAYASHI, M.M., CALDWELL, E., THURSTON, S. and COLLETT, B., 2002. Citizen Surveys on the Web *General Population Surveys of Community Opinion*. *Social Science Computer Review,* **20**(2), pp. 124-136.

MISIC, MARK.M. AND JOHNSON, KELSEY L., 1999. Benchmarking: a tool for Web site evaluation and improvement . *Internet Research: Electronic Networking Applications and Policy,* **9**(5), pp. 383- 392.

MITRA, A., Marginal Voices in Cyberspace. *New Media and Society,* **3**(1), pp. 29-48.

MUSSO, J., WEARE, C. and HALE, M., 2000. Designing Web Technologies for Local Governance Reform: Good Management or Good Democracy? *Political Communication,* **17**(1), pp. 1-19.

NEEDHAM, C., 2004. The citizen as consumer: E-government in the United Kingdom and the United States. In: R.K. GIBSON, A. RÖMMELE and S.J. WARD, eds, *Electronic Democracy.* London: Routledge . pp. 43-69.

NEWMAN, J., 2005. Participative governance and the remaking of the public sphere. In: J. NEWMAN, ed, *Remaking Governance, Peoples, Politics and the Public Sphere.* University of Bristol: The Policy Press. pp.119-138.

NORRIS, P., 2001. *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

OECD, 2001. *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making,* [online] OECD Publishing. Available: http://www.soros.org.mn/files/pblsh/pblsh_citizensaspartners.pdf [last accessed 19/11/09]

OFFICE OF NATIONAL STATISTICS, 28/11/09, 2009-last update, internet access households and individuals. [online] London: Stationery Office. Available: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/iahi0809.pdf. (accessed 19/11/09)

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, 2002. *Connecting With Communities: Improving Communications in Local Government.* London: Stationery Office.

OPDENAKKER, R., 2006. Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Interview Techniques in Qualitative Research. [online] Qualitative Research. Available at: http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/viewArticle/175/391 [last accessed 19/11/09].

OPPENHEIM, A.M., 1992. Questionnaire *design, interviews and attitude measuring.* London: Pinter.

ORR, K. and MCATEER, M., 2004. The Modernisation of Local Decision Making: Public Participation and Scottish Local Government. *Local Government Studies,* **30**(2), pp.131 – 155.

O'TOOLE, T., MARSH, D. and JONES, S., 2003. Political Literacy Cuts Both Ways: The Politics of Non-participation among Young People. *Political Quarterly,* **74**(3), pp. 349-360

PAGE, B., 2005. The future of Political Parties. *Parliamentary Affairs,* **58**(3), pp. 600-610.

PAPACHARISSI, Z., 2004. Democracy online: civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media and Society,* **6**(2), pp. 259-283

PARRY, K., 2004. *e-democracy Standard Note.* London: House of Commons Library.

PARVEZ, Z., 2008. E-Democracy from the Perspective of Local Elected Members. *International Journal of Electronic Government Research,* **4**(3), pp. 20-35.

PARVEZ, Z., 2006. Informatization of local democracy: A structuration perspective. *Information Polity,* **11**, pp. 67-83.

PARVEZ, Z. and AHMED, P., 2006. Towards Building An Integrated Perspective of e-Democracy in Practice. *Information, Communication and Society,* **9**(5), pp. 612–632.

PATTIE, C., SEYD, P. and WHITELEY, P., 2003. Civic Attitudes and Engagement in Modern Britain. *Parliamentary Affairs,* **56**, pp. 616-633.

PERFORMANCE AND INNOVATION UNIT (PIU) (2000) *Wiring It Up.* Whitehall's Management of Cross-cutting Policies and Services. London: Cabinet Office, Performance and Innovation Unit.

POLAT, R.K., 2005. The Internet and Political Participation. Exploring the Explanatory Links. *European Journal of Communication,* **20**(4), pp. 435-459.

PRATCHETT, L., 1999. New Fashions in Public Participation: Towards Greater Democracy? *Parliamentary Affairs,* **52**(4), pp. 616-633.

PUTNAM, R., 1995. *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. Journal of Democracy,* **6**(1), pp. 65-78.

RAAB, C.D. and BELLAMY, C., 2004. Electronic democracy and the 'mixed polity'. In: R.K. GIBSON, A. RÖMMELE and S.J. WARD, eds, *Electronic Democracy.* London: Routledge, . pp.17–42.

RBA RESEARCH, August 2005. *Democracy, what does that mean? Young people's views of democracy on and off line.* Bristol: Local e-Democracy National Project.

RETHEMEYER, R.K., 2007. The Empires Strike Back: Is the Internet Corporatizing Rather than Democratizing Policy Processes? *Public Administration Review,* **67**(2), pp. 199-215.

RILEY, T.B. and RILEY, C.G., 2003. *E-governance to E-democracy examining the evolution. International Tracking Survey Report '03* 5. Canada.

RITCHIE, J., 2003. The Applications of Qualitative Methods in Social Policy Research. In: J. RITCHIE and J. LEWIS, eds, *Qualitative research practice : a guide for social science students and researchers.* London: Sage. pp. 24-46.

ROBBINS, M.D., SIMONSEN, B. and FELDMAN, B., 2008. Citizens and Resource Allocation: Improving Decision Making with Interactive Web-Based Citizen Participation. *Public Administration Review,* **68**(3), pp. 564-575.

ROBBINS, C. and ROWE, J., 2002. Unresolved Responsibilities: Exploring Democratisation and Sustainable Development through a Community-Based Waste Reduction Initiative. *Local Government Studies,* **28**(1), pp. 37-58.

ROHLINGER, D. and BROWN, J., 2009. Democracy, Action and the Internet after 9/11. *American Behavioural Scientist,* **53**(1), pp. 130-150.

ROWE, G., POORTINGA, W. and PIDGEON, N., 2006. A Comparison of Responses to Internet and Postal Surveys in a Public Engagement Context. *Science Communication,* **27**(3), pp. 352-375.

SÆBØ, Ø., ROSE, J. and SKIFTENES FLAK, L., 2008. The shape of eParticipation: Characterizing an emerging research area. *Government Information Quarterly,* **25**(3), pp. 400-428.

SAGLIE, J. and VABO, S.I., 2005. Online participation in Norwegian local politics- the rise of digital divides? *Lokal politisk deltakelse',14th Nordic Political Science Association (NOPSA) Conference,* 11 –13 August 2005.

SALTER, L., 2004. Structure and Forms of Use. A contribution to understanding the 'effects' of the Internet on deliberative democracy. *Information, Communication and Society,* **7**(2), pp. 185-206.

SANFORD, C. and ROSE, J., 2007. Characterizing eParticipation. *International Journal of Information Management,* **27**(6), pp. 406-421.

SCHLOSBERG, D., ZAVESTOSKI, S. and SHULMAN, S., 2007. Democracy and E-Rulemaking: Web-Based Technologies, Participation, and the Potential for Deliberation. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics,* **4**(1), pp. 37-55.

SCOTT, J.K., 2006. 'E' the People: Do U.S. Municipal Government Web Sites Support Public Involvement. *Public Administration Review,* **66**(3), pp. 341-53.

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2006b. *Digital Inclusion Strategy.* Edinburgh: Stationery Office. Available http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/12/22112316/5 [accessed 20/11/09]

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2006. *Transforming Public Services: The Next Phase of Reform.* [online] Edinburgh: Stationery Office. [online] Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/130092/0031160.pdf [accessed 20/11/09]

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2004. *Consultation Good Practice Guidance* [online]. *Available:* http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/1066/0006061.pdf [last accessed 20/11/09]

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2003a. Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. Edinburgh, The Stationery Office: Available: http://www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/acts2003/asp_20030001_en_1 [last accessed 18/11/09]

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2002b. *Information Age Government in Scotland- A Common Framework.* Edinburgh: Stationery Office.

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2002. *Renewing Local Democracy: Next Steps.* [online] Edinburgh: Stationery Office. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2002/03/14425/1662 [last accessed 20/11/09]

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2001b. *Digital Inclusion: Connecting Scotland's People.* [online] Edinburgh: Stationery Office. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2001/09/10080/File-1 [last accessed 20/11/09].

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2001a. *Working Together for Scotland: A Programme for Government.* [online] Edinburgh: Stationery Office. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2001/01/8100/File-1 [last accessed 20/11/09].

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2000. *21st Century Government Action Plan.* Edinburgh: Stationery Office.

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE, 2006. *Transforming Public Services: The Next Phase of Reform Progress Report.* [online] Edinburgh: Stationery Office. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/176695/0049898.pdf [last accessed 20/11/09].

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT, July 2007-last update, improvement service for local government. [online] Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/local-government/18777 [last accessed 20/11/09].

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT, 2009. *Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2009 General Report.* [online] *Edinburgh:* Scottish Government National Statistics.

Available:http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/289599/0088642.pdf [last accessed 16/01/10].

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT, 2004. *Public participation handbook.* [online] Available: http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/vli/participationHandbook/Participation_Handbook_6th_August_2004.pdf [last accessed 20/11/09].

SHAH, D., CHO, J., EVELAND, W.P. and KWAK, K., 2005. Information and Expression in a Digital Age, Modelling Internet Effects on Civic Participation. *Communications Research,* **32**(5), pp. 531-65.

SHAPIRO, I., 2003. *The State of Democratic theory.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

SHELLEY, M.C., THRANE, L., SHULMAN, S., LANG, E., BEISSER, S., LARSON, T. and MUTITI, J., 2004. Digital Citizenship: Parameters of the Digital Divide. *Social Science Computer Review,* **22**(2), pp. 256-269.

SILVERMAN, D., 2005. Doing Qualitative research: a practical handbook. 2nd edn. London: Sage.

SMITH, G., 2009. Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Democratic Governance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SMITH, G., 2005. *Beyond the Ballot, 57 Democratic Innovations from Around the World.* ISBN: 0955030307. A report commissioned by *'*Power : An Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy*'* (a centenary inquiry established by the Rowntree Charitable and Reform Trusts).

SNAPE, D. and SPENCER, L., 2003. The Foundations of Qualitative Research. In: J. RITCHIE and J. LEWIS, eds, *Qualitative Research Practice: a guide for social science students and researchers.* London: Sage. pp.1-23.

STANLEY, J.W. and WEARE, C., 2004. The effects of Internet Use on Political Participation, Evidence from an Agency Online Discussion Forum. *Administration and Society,* **36**(5), pp. 503-27.

STEINMANN, R., KREK, A. and BLASCHKE, T., 2005. Can Online Map-Based Applications Improve Citizen Participation? In Bohlen, M., Gamper, J., Polasek, W., Wimmer, M.A., eds, *E-Government: Towards Electronic Democracy*. International Conference TGOV 2005, Bolzano: Italy March 2005, pp. 35-35.

STERLING, R., 2005. Promoting democratic governance through partnerships? In: NEWMAN, J. ed, *Remaking Governance, Peoples, Politics and the Public Sphere.* University of Bristol: The Policy Press. pp. 139-158.

STRAUSS, A. and CORBIN, J., 1998. Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

SZERSZYNSKI, B. and O'DONOGHUE, M., 2003. *Public consultation through the internet : a guide to the issues involved in using the internet for public consultations.* Lancaster: IEPP.

TAYLOR, J. and BURT, E., 2005. Managing Trust, generating risk: Incorporating the voluntary sector in UK e-Government. *Information Polity,* **10**, pp. 25-35.

TORPE, L. and NIELSEN, J., 2004. Digital Communication between Local Authorities and Citizens in Denmark. *Local Government Studies,* **30**(2), pp.230-244.

TOSH, P., 2005. *A Review of Aberdeen's Community Planning Framework.* Aberdeen City Council.

TRANSPORT SCOTLAND, 2007-last update, transport scotland: development management guidance ePlanning. [online] Available: http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/reports/road/j8508-06.htm [last accessed 16/01/10].

ULSANER, E.A., 2004. Trust, Civic Engagement, and the Internet. *Political Communication,* **21**(4), pp. 223-242.

VAN DIJK. JAN A.G.M., PETERS, O. and EBBERS, W., 2008. Explaining the acceptance and use of government Internet services: A multivariate analysis of 2006 survey data in the Netherlands. *Government Information Quarterly,* **25**(3), pp. 379-399.

VANDENBERG, A., 2000. Cybercitizenship and Digital Democracy. In: A. VANDENBERG, ed, *Citizenship and Democracy in a Global Era.* Hounsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: MacMillan Press Ltd. pp. 3-17.

VERBA, S., SCHLOZMAN, K.L., BRADY, H. and NIE, N.H., 1993. Citizen activity: who participates? what do they say? *The American Political Science Review,* **87**(2), pp. 303-318.

WALLIS, J., 2005. Cyberspace, information literacy and the information society. *Library Review,* **54**(4), pp. 218-222.

WARD, S., GIBSON, R. and LUSOLI, W., 2003. Online Participation and Mobilisation in Britain: Hype, Hope and Reality. *Parliamentary Affairs,* **56**, pp. 652-668.

WATSON, K., March 2005. *Young People and E-Participation. A study into the feasibility of extending e-democracy initiatives aimed at young people in Bristol.*

WEARE, C., 2002. The Internet and Democracy: The Causal Links Between Technology and Politics. *International Journal of Public Administration,* **25**(5), pp. 659-691.

WEISSBERG, R., 2003. Technology Evolution and Citizen Activism: The Net and the Rebirth of Limited Government. *The Policy Studies Journal,* **31**(3), pp. 385-394.

WELLMAN, B., HAASE, A. Q. U. A. N., WITTE, J. and HAMPTON, K., 2005. Does the Internet Increase, Decrease or Supplement Social Capital?: Social Networks, Participation and Community Commitment. *American Behavioral Scientist,* **43**(1), pp.175-185.

WEST, D., 2004. E-Government and the Transformation of Service Delivery and Citizen Attitudes. *Public Administration Review,* **64**(1), pp.15-28.

WHYTE, A., MACINTOSH, A. and SHELL, D., 2006. *An e-Democracy Model for Communities. Final Report of the e-Community Council Project.* Edinburgh: International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University.

WHYTE, A. and MACINTOSH, A., 2001. Transparency and teledemocracy: issues from an 'e-consultation'. *Journal of Information Science,* **27**(4), pp.187-198.

WILHELM, A.G., 2000. Democracy in the Digital Age, Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace. London and New York: Routledge.

WILSON, D., 1999. Exploring the Limits of Public Participation in Local Government. *Parliamentary Affairs,* **52**, pp. 246-259.

WIMMER, M., 2007. Ontology for an e-participation virtual resource centre, *Proceedings of the 1st international conference on Theory and Practice of electronic governance,* December 10th-13th 2007.

WRIGHT, S., 2006. Electrifying Democracy? 10 Years of Policy and Practice. *Parliamentary Affairs,* **59**(2), pp. 236-249.

WRIGHT, S. and STREET, J., 2007. Democracy, deliberation and design: the case of online discussion forums. *New Media and Society,* **9**(5), pp. 849-869.

YANG, K., 2005. Public Administrators' Trust in Citizens: A Missing Link in Citizen Involvement Efforts. *Public Administration Review,* **65**(3), pp. 273-286.

YATES, S., 2004. *Doing social science research*. London: Sage.

YIN, R.K., 1994. *Case study research: design and methods.* 2nd edition. London and Thousand Oaks: Sage.

ZELWEITRO, J., 1995. Progressive Activism on the Internet. *Alternatives,* **21**(3), pp. 16-18.

Appendix 1: Benchmarking grid

Local Authority websites
Political information
General Information
composition of council
committee information
structure of council
publication of agendas
minutes of meetings
budget information
local plan information
web broadcasting of meetings
info to make a complaint
links to parties
election information
info on public meetings
Links to government sites
Council deparments
background info on deparments
guide to services available
info on performance
Links
Policy documents
Contact and Dialogue
General email
Councillor email
Department email
Debates on specific issues
Free debates
Webchats
Online questionnaires
Information on consultations
community group info
Feedback on previous consultations
Explanation of process
Electronic Petitioning
Blogs by councillors
Snap polls
Decision making games

Chat room
E-panels
Virtual communities
Alert services
FAQ on political issues
Inclusion
Site Map / Browse / Directory
Effective search function
Home page links
Scrolling
Help
Language Support
adaptible for visually impaired
FAQ
Use of Plug ins
Glossary
Navigation Elements
Navigation Placement
Consistent Layout
Images
structure
Information Elements appropraite
HomePage info clear
printer friendly version
Works in different browsers
Fonts are clear
Colours appropriate
Extra Features

Appendix 2: Interview schedule for local authority officers

Consultation is an important tool used by councils for assessing the views of the local population and engaging the local people in the policy making process. Recent innovations in ICTs have meant that electronic consultations such as electronic forums and questionnaires are now possible. This research does not argue that electronic consultations can wholly replace traditional forms of consultation such as meetings but it is important to investigate the potential benefits of these new technologies for improving the local consultation process.

These questions have been developed to find out Councils' experiences of conducting local consultations (both 'traditional' and electronic) and whether or not they would be willing to engage in electronic consultations. The results will be collated and analysed to assess the current consultation practices in Scottish Local Authorities.

Part A: Consultation Processes

To what extent is consultation used in the council.

[prompts]
- Citizens Panel
- Citizens Juries
- Focus Groups
- Meetings
- Electronic questionnaires
- Electronic discussion Forum

Please give some examples of consultation

Is there a co-ordinated strategy/best practice guidelines for consultation in your Council?

Has there been research conducted into best practice guidelines for consultation?

Does anyone participate in knowledge sharing networks for best practice guidelines for consultation? This could be between departments, with other councils or with external institutions.

How do you ensure that the consultations are representative? In particular how do you encourage people from ethnic minorities, low income groups etc

Did you provide information on the consultation process to people that are participating? This could include policy documents on the proposal, information about the process etc

Are the results always considered when policies are developed? Are there formal processes for this?

How are the results of consultations reported back to the public?

What do you think would encourage more people to take part in consultations?

[prompts]
- if it was directly relevant to them
- if they were more widely publicised
- if they were at a more suitable time/place
- if there was more transparency in the process
- if there was adequate feedback given
- if they were cost-effective

Other (please give information)

Part B: Electronic Consultation

Do you conduct any electronic consultations?

IF YES

Which forms of electronic consultation do you use? Please indicate all that apply
- electronic questionnaire
- discussion forum on a particular topic
- Free discussions on any topic
- web chat with councillor/head of service
- emailing concerns about a specific issue
- other (please give details)

Are the results used in the policy making process?

Do you conduct analysis of who is participating or are they anonymous? If not how do you ensure that the results are representative

How are the consultations advertised? Are there links to the consultation from the homepage of the website?

What information is provided on the process of electronic consultation?

What benefits have you found from using electronic consultation?

What drawbacks have you found from using electronic consultation?

Do you have any concerns about electronic consultation? Please indicate all that apply

- Don't have sufficient functionality built into the Council website
- Not enough people have internet access in this area
- Do not feel comfortable with using the technology
- Do not believe that the results are accurate
- Security/confidentiality fears
- Offline consultations are more effective
- Electronic consultations are too expensive
- Other (please give details)

Do you feel that the use of electronic consultation will encourage more people to participate?

IF NO

If you do not use electronic consultation, is it something that you would consider using in future?

Which forms of electronic consultation would you consider using? Please indicate all that apply
- electronic questionnaire
- discussion forum on a particular topic
- Free discussions on any topic
- web chat with councillor/head of service
- emailing concerns about a specific issue
- other (please give details)

What would you view to be the benefits of electronic consultation?

What do you feel would be the drawbacks of electronic consultations?

Do you have any concerns about electronic consultation?
[prompts]

- Don't have the functionality built into the website
- Not enough people have internet access in this area
- Do not feel comfortable with the technology
- Do not believe that the results would be accurate
- Security fears of using the internet
- Offline consultations are more effective
- It would be too expensive to implement
- Other (please give details)

Do you feel that the use of electronic consultations encourages more people to participate?

(please give reasons)

ALL RESPONDENTS

Any further comments relating to local consultations in particular electronic consultations.

How are elected members involved in consultations

Are there specific circumstances particular to your council that makes electronic consultation particularly appropriate/inappropriate?

Appendix 3: Letter of invitation sent out for case study interviews

Dear Councillor,

As part of a PhD study at The Robert Gordon University I am researching the use of consultations in the policy making process at the Local Authority level in Scotland. The aim of the research is to find out whether consultation is an effective tool for improving public participation and enhancing local democracy.

I am looking to interview elected members and policy officers from Aberdeen City Council to find out:

- To what extent consultation is used in the policy process
- Benefits and drawbacks of using consultation
- Methods used in consultation (in particular whether electronic consultation is used)
- Who participates in the consultations and what is done to encourage more people to participate
- If consultation is regarded as an effective way of increasing participation in politics more widely

The interviews will take place in March and will last approximately 45 minutes. If you are able to participate in this research project please contact Elizabeth Tait on 01224 263430 or email e.j.tait@rgu.ac.uk. If I have not heard back from you by the 27th February 2007 I will attempt to contact you by phone or email.

I would really appreciate your participation as I am keen to get the views of leading councillors.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Tait

Appendix 4: Interview schedule for case study

Part A: Consultation Processes

Please describe your role in terms of Consultation

To what extent is consultation used in the council.

Please give examples of methods used:
E.G.
- Citizens Panel
- Citizens Juries
- Focus Groups
- Meetings
- Online questionnaires
- Online discussion Forum

Please give some examples of consultations that you have been involved in

Is there a co-ordinated strategy/best practice guidelines for consultation in the Council across all departments? If so, how was this developed? Who were the key players in developing it?

Has there been research conducted into best practice for consultation?

Does anyone participate in knowledge sharing networks for best practice guidelines for consultation? This could be between departments, with other councils or with external institutions?

Which, if any, national policies influenced the consultation strategy?

How do you ensure that the consultations are representative? In particular how do you encourage people from ethnic minorities, low income groups etc. How crucial do you think it is that consultations are representative?

What role do interest groups play in consultation?

Did you provide information on the consultation process to people that are participating? This could include policy documents on the proposal, information about the process etc

Are the results always considered when policies are developed? How are they considered? Are there formal processes for this? Can you give examples of a policy that has been changed or influenced by a public consultation?

How are the results of consultations reported back to the public? How are they reported?

What do you think would encourage more people to take part in consultations?

- if it was directly relevant to them
- if they were more widely publicised
- if they were at a more suitable time/place
- if there was more transparency in the process
- if there was adequate feedback given
- if they were cost-effective

Other (please give information)

Part B: Electronic Consultation

Do you conduct any electronic consultations? Independently of as part of a process involving other methods?

How did this strategy come about? What was the reasons behind adopting this strategy?

Tell me a bit about how you use the web for consultation?

Which forms of electronic consultation do you use or which have you considered using?
- online questionnaire
- discussion forum on a particular topic
- Free discussions on any topic
- web chat with councillor/head of service
- emailing concerns about a specific issue
- e-petitions
- ikiosks
- other (please give details)

Are the results used in the policy making process the same way as offline consultations? If so how?

Do you conduct analysis of who is participating or are they anonymous? If not how do you ensure that the results are representative

How are the consultations advertised? Are there links to the consultation from the homepage of the website? Are they advertised any other way

What information is provided on the process of electronic consultation?

What benefits have you found from using electronic consultation?

What drawbacks have you found from using electronic consultation?

Have you had any difficulties with electronic consultation?

- Technical problems
- Digital divide concerns
- Staff training
- Public unwilling to use the facilities
- Concerns about accuracy of the results
- Security/confidentiality fears
- Offline consultations are more effective
- Cost implications
- Other (please give details)

Do you feel that the use of electronic consultation will encourage more people to participate?

What role do Councillors play in the development of consultations, particularly electronic consultations?

Appendix 5: list of websites from benchmarking exercise

Aberdeen City Council: www.aberdeencity.gov.uk

Aberdeenshire Council: www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk

Angus Council: www.angus.gov.uk

Argyll and Bute Council: http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/

Comhairle Nan Eilan Siar (Western Isles Council): http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk

Clackmannanshire Council: http://www.clacksweb.org.uk

Dumfries and Galloway Council: http://www.dumgal.gov.uk

Dundee City Council: http://www.dundeecity.gov.uk

East Ayrshire Council: http://www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk

East Dunbartonshire Council: http://www.eastdunbarton.gov.uk

East Lothian District Council: http://www.eastlothian.gov.uk

East Renfrewshire Council: http://www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk

Edinburgh City Council: http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk

Falkirk Council: http://www.falkirk.gov.uk

Fife Council: http://www.fifedirect.org.uk

Glasgow City Council: http://www.glasgow.gov.uk

Highland Council: http://www.highland.gov.uk

Inverclyde Council: http://www.inverclyde.gov.uk

Midlothian Council http://www.midlothian.gov.uk

Moray Council: http://www.moray.gov.uk

North Ayrshire Council: http://www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk

North Lanarkshire Council: http://www.northlan.gov.uk

Orkney Islands Council: www.orkney.gov.uk

Perth and Kinross Council: http://www.pkc.gov.uk

Renfrewshire Council: http://www.renfrewshire.gov.uk

Scottish Borders Council: http://www.scotborders.gov.uk

Shetland Islands Council: http://www.shetland.gov.uk

South Ayrshire Council: http://www.south-ayrshire.gov.uk

South Lanarkshire Council: http://www.southlanarkshire.gov.uk

Stirling Council: http://www.stirling.gov.uk

West Dunbartonshire Council: http://www.wdcweb.info/home/

West Lothian Council: http://www.westlothian.gov.uk/