Better e-petition systems could boost digital democracy at local level

August 24 2016, by Cerri Evans

E-petition systems used in local government across the UK could help to improve political participation and debate – but only if current systems are overhauled, according to new research by leading public policy scholars.

Political scientists from the University of Lincoln say the current fragmented approach to e-petitions taken by different local authorities around the country could be transformed through adoption of a simple, unified set of rules. This would help more members of the public feel they can have their voice heard and participate in democratic decision-making on local matters.

Currently not all councils in the UK accept e-petitions from the public,

or have systems in place to deal with them once submitted. The requirement for local authorities in England and Wales to respond to petitions was repealed in the Localism Act 2011. Instead, such online 'calls to action' are now established at the discretion of each council and there is no obligation to respond to them.

The research was conducted by Dr Catherine Bochel and Professor Hugh Bochel, from the University of Lincoln's School of Social & Political Sciences. They reviewed existing research on e-petitions, drawing on Dr Bochel's previous research into the various e-petition systems employed at national, devolved and local levels in the UK.

Dr Bochel, who has given evidence to the UK parliament's Procedure Committee and Political and Constitutional Reform Committee on the potential of e-petition systems to support the democratic process, said: "We do recognise e-petitions face a number of challenges, not least those linked to the so-called 'digital divide' and socio-economic factors.

"However, e-petitions which are underpinned by an appropriate system for handling them offer a potential way for local authorities to enable citizens to 'reach in' to them, raising issues and putting forward ideas across a whole range of subjects and services.

"Rather than relying on authorities to 'reach-out' to public opinion, such systems can bring benefits to councils, including enhancing citizens' engagement with different aspects of the political system, assessing levels of public support for particular initiatives, and educating people about the way in which local authorities work.

However, the type of system established by individual councils is a crucial part of the success of any system."

A possible model now being proposed for local government e-petition

systems includes:

- Having a clear statement of purpose so petitioners know what they can and cannot achieve
- Being easy to submit without the need to go through an elected representative
- No minimum signature threshold to ensure people without backing from influential organisations or the ability to generate lots of publicity have the same opportunity to be considered
- Offering advice and guidance to petitioners before they submit their petition
- Being reviewed by a Petitions Committee which could consider each petition and decide on whether and how to progress it
- Including a tracking system to enable petitioners to see the progress and outcome of their petition online
- Giving specific feedback to signatories on the topic and eventual outcome
- Being integrated as part of the wider local political decision-making system

Professor Hugh Bochel added: "We have outlined a very simple process which could form a strong foundation for e-petition systems at local authorities while ensuring that people from all backgrounds could participate. A well-designed and appropriately resourced e-petitions system would give people the opportunity to have their voices heard.

"This use of digital democracy has the chance to encourage people to engage with the democratic process – something we know can be lacking if you just look at voter turnout in recent years. As well as giving the public a voice, e-petitions can help to educate and inform petitioners about local democracy and decision-making."

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Provided by University of Lincoln

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