Digital tools for democratic participation

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Introduction

Identifying the role of digital tools for democracy requires careful thought. Events of the last few years have shown the enormous potential for technology to change everyday life and how democracies work, but in many respects, the effects have been ambiguous. While early discourse on the internet was optimistic about the potential for technology to improve democratic life, what has since become clear is that digital tools for democracy do not provide easy shortcuts to better quality democratic engagement or outcomes. The design, implementation and marketing of these tools is important in shaping their impact.

This report examines digital tools for democracy at the local level. As a companion paper to a review of current academic research in the area, it examines how digital tools can be used by local authorities to help catalyse and nurture a democratic and participative civic culture.

At their core, digital tools for democracy are concerned with information flow between citizen and state. This information flow can be categorised into three broad but differing modes of communication. Positioned from the point of view of the local authority, these are:

- **Broadcast**: government > citizen (one to many)
- **Listening**: citizen > government (many to one)
- **Collaboration**: citizen/government <> citizen/government (many to many)

Digital approaches can dramatically lower the cost (either in money or time) of communication. They can allow simple transactional actions to be performed more cheaply, make it easy to simultaneously engage with individuals located in different geographic regions, and shift what was previously one-to-one communication to one-to-many — and such a shift opens up opportunities to explore novel forms of participation.

This report considers how digital tools may help local authorities create more effective communication and collaboration, but equally importantly, also examines the downsides and potential issues in implementing some of these approaches, demonstrating how the context around their implementation is key.

The approaches examined in this report represent a variety of tools and services designed to support digital democracy, developed in the UK and abroad. We have included references to mySociety products (including those that are sold commercially to local authorities such as FixMyStreet Pro and FOI for Councils) where relevant. The analyses, comparisons and conclusions drawn are based on publicly available data, and have been generalised to provide as useful a review of digital tools for local democracy as is possible at this time.
Equal participation

When investigating the engagement of citizens in a process, it is important to ask which citizens are being reached by. Good democratic engagement should lead to meaningful change, and novel insights being generated and heard. Not only is it important for the purposes of equality to ensure that the existence and outcomes of these activities reach wide audiences — but the composition of those participating will influence the outcome. Where a participant group is homogenous or unrepresentative of the wider citizenry, the results of any activity may be biased or skewed and miss important insights from certain populations — and thus may be inappropriate for the wider community. In some instances this may result in the diversion of funds to support those who find it easiest to have their voice heard.

The word ‘citizen’ is a contested term. We use it meaning to include all those within a community. However, different people within a community may hold different national citizenships. While only certain non-UK citizens (Irish, Commonwealth and EU citizens) have voting rights in local elections, all residents are likely to have interactions with the local authority, for instance through service provision. Creating opportunities for democratic engagement outside of elections — for instance, through participative and deliberative activities — allows these voices, as well as those of transient populations, to be heard.

The next complication in asking ‘which citizens’ is that there are likely to be people who are not resident within the administrative boundaries, but who will still be affected by decisions taken by a local authority: for instance those who commute into an area, or spend a significant amount of time shopping or involved with entertainment activities there. These people are in principle identifiable and reachable, although some may contest the degree to which a local authority should consider the views of non-rate payers.

However, in other cases the problem is more abstract. Inherently, consultations on future house building are much more accessible to current residents whose lives might be negatively affected than to the potential future residents who would benefit. It is outside the scope of this paper to suggest what parameters should be set in such circumstances: however, it is important to recognise when considering digital tools for democracy that distortions and disagreements can arise from the most basic assumptions made when starting the process. Consultation and collaboration may succeed within the bounds that have been set, but these bounds are almost always contestable.

Even within the relatively comfortable area of engaging “current residents”, not all residents require equal effort on the local authority’s part to engage with. Long term residents are likely to have a better understanding of existing communication and consultation mechanisms, while newer or short term residents are less likely to be aware of these, making it harder for local

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1 Gov.uk, Types of election, referendums, and who can vote
authorities to reach them. In addition, different communities within a local authority may not be equally represented (or understood) by council decision-makers, leading to inadvertent exclusion from council processes if deliberate attempts are not made to understand those which are less easily accessible.

It is easy to unconsciously build in biases to participative processes and digital tools in favour of those who are comparatively easy to reach, or who, due to language, confidence, capacity and/or skills, find it easier to engage with a local authority. While this does not negate the value of the participation achieved where these biases exist, it is important context in evaluating whether a programme has reached a wide enough group of the community to have created a genuinely broad culture of participation.

The interaction of digital democratic tools with the considerations above is not straightforward. In theory, digital tools can help support the geographically excluded, allowing those in rural or remote areas to attend meetings or contribute without leaving their homes. However, many rural areas are not served by good broadband or 4G connections, and are generally more populated by demographic groups less likely to use online tools. Likewise there is a substantial problem of digital exclusion for the elderly or people whose disabilities make accessing online services more difficult. Those living in areas affected by multiple forms of deprivation are also likely to be poorly connected at home, meaning that provisions at local libraries and schools are more important to the effectiveness of digital tools.

It is equally valuable to ensure that citizens are given the opportunity to engage at the times that suit them, giving consideration to, for example, those with caring responsibilities or shift work, who may struggle to know their availability ahead of time. Digital tools, which allow for asynchronous engagement, can support these needs. Similarly people whose disabilities make accessing offline consultations (whether it is physically attending events or filling out paper forms) more challenging maybe better able to engage using digital tools. People who are physically distant but who will still be affected by a decision will also have more capacity to engage online. Issues of deprivation, distance and disability cover a wide range of different situations that often overlap in complicated ways.

In this context, digital tools are just that — a tool in the box that is useful for some purposes but not others. Digital tools have a wider reach, but in online spaces it is hard to replicate the depth and quality of offline deliberation. On the other hand, creating truly representative deliberative conversations such as Citizens Assemblies is not a time and cost effective approach for every piece

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2 Ofcom (2017), Digital divide narrows, but 1.1m UK homes and businesses cannot get decent broadband; Blank, G. and Graham, M. (2017) 'Local Geographies of Digital Inequality [unformatted]', Social Science Computer Review.
3 Burton L (2013), Cultures of the Internet: The Internet in Britain
4 Anderson A, Whally J (2015), Public library internet access in areas of deprivation: The case of Glasgow
of engagement that a local authority may wish to carry out. Other face-to-face engagement, if missing key voices, will arrive at narrow or biased conclusions, and gives the appearance to those who cannot take part that their experience and opinions do not matter.

Solving several problems at once requires mixed approaches. Just because a digital tool does not help an authority reach all of the most excluded people in a community, this does not mean that implementing a digital tool cannot be part of a process that does just that. Where a tool efficiently manages information or provides opportunities to vote, its use at offline events and in public kiosks can help bridge problems of digital access. Where using a tool can bring down other costs, those funds can be redeployed towards outreach and other real world activities to broaden participation. The use of digital tools must be understood as part of the whole system, which involves gauging not just what the tool does, but the effort and time it can free up to address other priorities.

This is especially important given the political context. As argued in the 21st Century Councillor, the impact of austerity in reducing local authority budgets is a driver of local councillors and authorities seeking collaborative approaches. Consultation on public service delivery can also be about building consent for reducing funding, thus depoliticising difficult prioritisation decisions. When participatory exercises are about exploring how authorities should do less (or the community do more), it is all the more important that participatory exercises reach a broad range of affected people.
Multi-authority collaboration

The complex landscape of local government in the UK

Local government in the UK is complicated and poorly understood, and this poses many complications for residents who wish to engage with a local authority.

In some parts of the UK someone may live within the bounds of a county council that has responsibility for some services (such as education) and also within a district council with responsibility for services such as waste collection. In other parts, there are single unitary authorities responsible for all these services. Some areas fall within combined authorities, have elected mayors, many of which have different delegated powers, and some are covered by parish councils. In addition to this, local authorities in Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland all have different delegated responsibilities.

This presents several potential complications:

1. Citizens might live within several councils, each of which has different decision-making powers
2. Citizens might not be sure exactly which council to engage with for a specific issue they wish to raise.

A 2018 report by the centre for Policy Studies investigated whether people could correctly identify the layers of government that had decision-making powers over the area in which they lived, finding that all forms of local authority had a recognition rate below 40% and that overall “0% of those surveyed gave a correct answer to each of the nine questions. Only 3% got all but one right, and 14% got none right. In total, only a quarter got six or more, with the average person scoring 4 out of 9.”

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Given the complexity of local government in the UK, this is not hugely surprising. In addition to this, the boundaries between administrative areas are often not obvious, unlikely to be relevant to how individuals live their lives, and not always stable. In 2019 the boundaries of Glasgow and North Lanarkshire changed to move 300 people who were “cut off from the rest of Glasgow by road, with no direct access to the south and the rest of the city” into a different local authority (with different schooling and service provision). In the same year, there was a consolidation of local authorities in Dorset, Suffolk and Somerset, with multiple level councils merging into unitary authorities, and smaller district councils merging together.

The multi-tiered nature of local government in some areas of the UK also has implications for accountability, as not only do these different levels have different responsibilities: they also may have different political control, which may impact the ability of these councils to work together. The Cambridge Labour party published a leaflet in 2017 that in part reminded people that the City Council and County Council were run by different rival parties. Clearer understanding of who is responsible helps citizens hold elected bodies to account in elections, and can help citizens understand what is most useful to raise with which body.  

A council knows what its powers are, what its boundaries are, and hence to an extent who its residents are. The reverse is clearly not true. People do not have a good understanding of their local authority, or even often what that is. This compounds the issue of a lack of public understanding of the role of local councillors, with the Lewisham Democracy Review finding that citizens, and even council staff, were unclear on this (p. 7).

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Service intermediation

Service intermediation is an approach where, in order to offer better access to services, fewer but universal points of contact are created, which can be referred to under the label of a ‘311’ service.

311 services in the US were initially a non-emergency equivalent to 911, used for general problem reporting and access to government services. The goal is that citizens don’t need to know which department to report a problem or ask a question to, as they can use 311 as an entry point to government. 311 services begin in Baltimore as a reaction to the large number of non-emergency calls to the 911 system, and following success in Baltimore it was promoted by the Clinton administration as a way to improve local government performance and taken up by various city and local governments in the United States. While it is primarily a phone service, websites and smart-phone apps are now alternative channels for reporting in some cities.

These are approached at the level of the municipal government, but the approach can be taken a step further to intermediate local authorities entirely. GOV.uk uses as a backbone over a number of different services a local links managers that guides the user to one of a number of individual local authority websites dealing with the specific service they require. That means that people using GOV.uk to find an access point for a service (e.g paying council tax) are prompted to enter a postcode, which is mapped to a local authority and the relevant page for the service is then delivered.

mySociety’s WriteToThem similarly uses a postcode lookup to map people to the elected representatives for their region (and tell them about the responsibilities of different layers of government). While the postcode-to-service pattern is ubiquitous, it is worth remembering that these boundaries do not line up precisely, and that there are around 4,300 postcodes that cross council boundaries, which results in a small set of people being consistently routed to the wrong authority by this process. mySociety’s FixMyStreet is a UK based issue reporting service, and in this instance the position of a problem is reported on a map. Depending on the kind of problem, it is reported to the relevant team for the relevant council for that specific point via email (with some councils having a deeper integration directly into their internal system — and others refusing reports through the service). In terms of issue reporting there are similar services such as SeeClickFix in the US, and the lovecleanstreets app in the UK. In France a number of public authorities manage public communications through apps such as NeoCity and AnimaCité which also have issue reporting abilities, but these apps are limited to specific local authorities.

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Collaboration between authorities

In reaction to recent local government funding reductions, a key recommendation for authorities looking to reduce costs is through sharing services between multiple authorities.

There have been 626 partnerships, which the Local Government Association estimates resulted in £200 million in savings during 2018/2019. However, a Commons Library briefing paper found that “it is not clear what the savings figures are intended to compare against” and a study of local authority finances found “no evidence of a relationship between the degree of participation in shared services and the change in relative administration costs, either for all councils taken together or for upper- and lower-tier councils separately”. Indeed, this study found that shared front-line services, rather than clerical, seemed to be associated with an increase in costs, where costs of coordination and working between multiple organisations outweighed any overall reductions.

While some of this may represent high set-up costs that will demonstrate a better pay-off over a longer period of time, these arrangements are not necessarily stable. The tri-borough arrangement of Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster became less viable and was reduced to a bi-borough relationship when political control of Hammersmith changed and was no longer ideologically in sync with the other two. In other cases, shared services may not be a long term arrangement because they are, or are seen to be, a precursor to mergers of local authorities, as was the case in Dorset.

What this reflects is that collaboration has costs as well as benefits, coordination costs cannot be ignored when considering the benefits, and that this applies as much to people as to organisations. A process may result in a better outcome, but require far more investment in time by participants that reduces the benefits.

From a democratic point of view, shared services can also blur lines of accountability, and inherently restrict the freedom of individual councils to reduce coordination costs enough to create savings. Reduced choice would not always result in worse outcomes, but reflects the trade-offs involved in collaboration.

The lesson here is that the benefits of inter-authority collaboration are harder to realise than generally assumed. Digital tools that help collaboration between councils should be aimed at reducing clerical and capital costs rather than frontline costs, with a focus on where digital tools can make coordination as easy as possible.

This might involve platforms that solve smaller problems (lower individual savings, but also fewer coordination problems) across a wider range of authorities. Digital platforms, for instance, can be good at making more effective use of idle assets. In the US, several digital services help with

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8 Elston T, Dixon R (2019), Austerity in English local government: why collaboration was not the answer after all, LSE Politics and Politics
sharing capital costs, for instance CoProcure which helps with the co-purchasing of assets, or Munirent.co which helps with sharing vehicles between local governments.

When sharing information with the public, larger platforms increase discoverability at the expense of flexibility. For instance when hosting open data, there are a number of different possible layers that data can be shared at:

- Some councils host their own data portals, eg https://opendata.camden.gov.uk/.
- Some councils collaborate on a common portal, eg datamillnorth.org which was originally a Leeds City Council initiative but now contains information from several councils as well as public and non-public bodies.
- opendata.esd.org.uk is a local government association portal that releases data across local government.
- data.gov.uk acts as a general data portal across government.

These kinds of shared platforms reduce costs with scale, but may not be appropriate for all uses. For instance, Data Mill North has a wider remit than government data and acts as a hub for organisations working with data in the region as well as hosting data.

While the idea of shared services and pooled costs may seem obvious, there are also drawbacks and there may be circumstances where greater collaboration would not fulfill the goals of all parties involved.
Accessing information and services

At a basic level, digital tools are designed for the fast and cheap transmission of information. For citizens to be able to meaningfully interact with their local government, they need to know which services local government has responsibility for, and how this is managed in their specific geographic area. This section explores two ways of accessing council information.

Council websites

While early local authority sites had a focus on tourism and local business, modern sites are heavily based around resident services, listing — and often providing online forms to access — council services (transitioning from a wide broadcast-only method of communication, to more directed communication focused on the individual use of services, and framing the citizen as a ‘consumer’). This is a searchable and straightforward way to find a huge amount of information provided by the local authority, providing you know what to look for.

How a local government presents itself to the world tends, at least in part, to mirror its internal organisational structures and silos. For instance, separate forms for reporting different kinds of problems reflect not that the process of reporting in itself is materially different, but that the problems are addressed internally by different teams, who create processes that meet their internal needs. An examination of a range of local authority websites demonstrates the striking differences that exist in how similar organisations running similar services present themselves digitally to their citizens, and how they choose to prioritise the services available.

For example, Ealing Council positions rubbish and recycling, parking, and council tax most prominently on their site. Croydon’s front page focuses on voter registration, school admissions, and information about housing. York emphasises online payments, problem reporting, and council information while Leeds favours a tool to check bin day, making payments, and planning applications. Examining a sample of twenty councils, the top billed service was council tax for five of these (and in second place for a further five), but others split their focus between rubbish and recycling, planning applications, jobs at the councils and information about benefits.

Liverpool City Council explicitly list the most popular services searched for and produce a very different list emphasising school admissions and term dates during the summer. Of course, differences in service selection will be driven in part by different demand by residents for different services in different places, but also by decisions taken by the council website team on what the most important information/services are.
In terms of the back end system, around 270 councils use ModernGov and around 40 use CMIS, with the remainder using a variety of different digital infrastructure systems. A new set of regulations mean that local government websites will have to meet a set of accessibility standards by September 2020 to make sites accessible to individuals with a range of disabilities.

While it is not a legal requirement in most of the UK, one way many local governments have tried to increase their transparency is through streaming council meetings, enabling residents to view proceedings. In the UK, there are several services aimed at facilitating public meetings using digital tools (ModernGov, CMIS) by making transcripts and documents available online, but also services like Public-i that sell live streaming and transcription services to local authorities to make meetings more accessible.

The large number of local governments in the US has created a market for products helping local municipalities communicate with their citizens. Many of these take the form of website frameworks/apps that help share meeting agendas and videos/minutes (Granicus, Romulus). Some are aimed at moving government interactions online more generally, for instance SeamlessDocs is based on transitioning PDF and paper based processes into online forms.

Other cities are experimenting with more interactive approaches. mySociety's research on 'Civic Tech Cities' in the US found that:

> While some e-government theorists (and civic technology advocates) have argued that adoption of technology will have a transformative effect on government function, the change so far appears less dramatic. Civic tech-style tools employed by municipal governments in the US, whilst often effective and popular with users, remain ad-hoc, niche, and vulnerable to personnel and budgetary changes.

Expanding the impact of several civic technology tools implemented by US municipal governments strengthens the evidence that technology does not abruptly change the nature of public services or their administration. However, they do appear instrumental in encouraging incremental change. Civic technology tools, in providing a better online interface for communication between the public and municipal services, contribute new forms of motivation to departments to improve their ability to support digitally-transmitted service requests. Appreciation for the value of the tool creates internal and external pressure on the department to provide ongoing maintenance and improvements to the tool and its related public service. Even if those improvements are presently out of reach for some departments, appreciation for the digitised service, plus a clearer understanding of the ways...

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9 Sourced from Democracy Club's Local Government Scraper Framework
10 Councils in Northern Ireland have a statutory requirement “as is reasonably practicable” to ensure at least an audio recording of any meeting open to the public, and requirements on how long these must be available for: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2014/8/section/47
that service could be enhanced, suggests the creation of fertile ground for further incremental e-government evolution.

Similarly in the UK, integration of consultation and other forms of collaborative platform are in the early stages, usually hosted on a separate sub domain (eg getinvolved.croydon.gov.uk) that reflects that these tools are more specialised (or run by third parties) and have not been integrated into the general frameworks powering the main council sites. They do, however, show how these platforms are becoming less experimental for one-off projects and are being incorporated into the general understanding of what a council website can do, demonstrating another shift towards a council’s online presence.

Freedom of Information

In a step beyond the simple, one-way broadcast method of information transmission, citizens can also make bespoke requests for information from local authorities. What information and documents are published on a council website is a decision made by the local authority, but local authorities also produce and depend on an enormous amount of information that is not available on their websites. Access to information law makes a large amount of this information legally accessible (if not always practically accessible) to the general public.

Formally, many kinds of information request can be grouped under the umbrella of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, although as ‘data subjects’ people also have the right to make a subject access request (SAR) for personal information related to themselves.

As a result of the Freedom of Information Act (2000), people have the right to request information that public authorities hold. Certain types of information are exempt, rather than there being and prescription as to the kind of information that can be requested. However, in order to exercise this right, people need to know that they have the right, how to exercise it, and that the information actually exists within the authority.

Public access to information is not a digital development. In the 14th century, authorities in Bristol created new ordinances to enhance access to public information where several people in the commons were given their own keys to repositories of official documents, in order that ‘every man can have copies of records when need be’.

The world’s first general Freedom of Information law that gave access to public documents was passed in Sweden in 1766. But what digital tools facilitate is the practical reality of remote access and duplication of public documents. When requests can be made electronically, it is far easier to request information.

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mySociety research shows that local authorities collectively received around 475,000 FOI reports in 2017. This represents a large amount of resource spent assessing requests and making information public, but in most cases ‘public’ only means the information is released directly to the individual requestor. Given only a minority of councils (28%) publish a disclosure log (online repositories of answered requests), most information released through FOI only reaches the person who asked for it.

Websites like mySociety’s WhatDoTheyKnow (or Muckrock in the US) publicly display FOI requests and the related responses made through the site so that the information is permanently publicly accessible. This could theoretically help reduce resources spent on the administration of FOI, but this portal only accounts for a small fraction (6%) of FOI requests sent in the UK. The picture is slightly different for central government, where information from between 15-17% of audited bodies and between 18-21% of ministerial departments is available through WhatDoTheyKnow. Should such a central portal be implemented for the administration of FOI across all public bodies in the UK, this could potentially reduce costs significantly.

The benefits of making information public is that doing so acts as a light form of collaboration, where publishing in the open reduces further work for both the public and public authorities, as explored in the next section.

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Digital collaboration

Silent collaboration: FOI and 311

Digital tools can create indirect collaboration. In the case of WhatDoTheyKnow, the actions of one person requesting information through an FOI request is potentially useful both to future people seeking the same information, but also local authority workers not having to resend the same information. This is a silent form of collaboration, where work previously done is made available for others to use, and so multiplies the benefit of the work. This can also be done by individual local authorities through their own websites. While FOI officers in local authorities are often sceptical about the value of disclosure logs in driving down requests, this might be a issue of discoverability — users will only access a disclosure log if they know it is there. A test of a tool that prompted people making new requests to view similar existing requests reduced the overall number of requests received by Hackney Council:

*In the first seven months of use, in 50 cases where suggestions were shown to the requester, they did not subsequently make a request — around 7% of the total number of requests made through the front end during that time.*

Collaboration in this form is less visible than others because it results in actions not taken, but this still represents less aggregate work for the same results by both the public and the authority.

Returning to 311 services, a key advantage of digital versions of issue reporting tools is that they can make the information available publicly, reducing the need to communicate at both ends. If a citizen wishes to report a pothole, opens a digital tool, and finds that the same pothole has already been reported recently, there is no need for them to duplicate that report. This reduces unnecessary communication with the authority — but leaves no trail except in actions not taken.

For individual authorities, shifting reports from email or phone to systems that automatically feed into a workflow system can reduce the cost of data entry in addition to the cost of back and forth communication: for example, FixMyStreet integration can reduce the number of calls chasing progress and those required for clarification. Importantly, it can also reduce the number of duplicate reports made because previous reports are visible online:

*Finally, they can see a 30% decrease in street light reports. Since Bucks are one of the councils who display all their streetlights on FixMyStreet it’s now very easy for a resident to check*

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online whether an issue has already been reported for any specific lamp post. If it has, they can also see its progress towards resolution — so there's no need for them to open a new report.

There is also the opportunity for more active collaboration. Different people can add updates or comments to existing problems to reinforce that it refers to an issue that is still ongoing (or one that has been resolved). Such threads can be surprisingly long-lasting and may raise related issues, as a report about seagulls in Brighton shows: it received replies for nine years before it was eventually closed to comments.

While this silent collaboration leads to more effective communication, when considering if the tool is a democratic one it is important to note that studies of 311 in general and FixMyStreet in particular have found uneven rates of reporting based on demographic features of an area. Where a council is only, or disproportionately, responsive to reported problems, this may be at the expense of problems experienced by citizens who, for various reasons, are less likely to report.

**Broadening consultations and engagement**

Public consultations as a method of hearing from the views of citizens have become more institutionalised through the second half of the twentieth century. This is not to say that the public were not involved in previous forms of consultation, but they were more likely to have been represented through voluntary organisation. Indirect representation like this is likely to convey some sense of public needs, but struggles to convey a representative view.

In contrast to more established devices of mass participation like petitions, consultations are explicitly invited by the authority, and so there is some expectation that they will lead to action. However, many are accused of being tokenistic, and only being conducted after decisions have already been reached. Outside of formal consultations, which have some strict legal requirements, many local authorities carry out a range of engagement and participative activities, either to go beyond that consultation activity, or to explore ways to co-produce services with their residents on issues they are not required to 'consult' upon.

Current standards in online consultations trend towards long PDFs describing the evidence and an associated survey. The list of current government consultations shows a mixture of online surveys, as well as PDF and Word templates to be submitted to email addresses.

Written/online engagement activities can remove some barriers to in-person presence at consultations, which tend to be unrepresentative of the broader community (a study on US public

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17 Crane J (2018), Why the history of public consultation matters for contemporary health policy, Endeavour, Volume 42, Issue 1, Pages 9-16
making general idea sources features. possible people (Mini projects. platform/service that)

other 1,300 people. Questions can be proposed, categorised and given positive or negative points.

Society Your community general in refine and rate ideas. feedback and this There individual replies to building a better collective picture of opinions.

Evidence platforms with access, to meetings participation, practice plans that are now found a digital statutory form). They is aren't digitisation of offline forms of participation. Digital tools can make evidence and plans more readable by the general public, and add a layer of transparency to community feedback that would be absent in offline consultations designed to help communities discuss, refine and rate ideas.

Delib's Citizen Space is used by various UK national and local government organisations to assist in running a consultation process. Digital tools can make evidence and plans more readable by the general public, and through the publication of responses can add a layer of transparency to community feedback that would be absent in offline consultations. Social Pinpoint is a similar crowdsourcing platform that allows themed proposals to be commented on, voted for and ranked. Your Priorities is an open source tool produced by Citizens Foundation and used in a Democratic Society project in Argyll & Bute, a project that generated 150 ideas and had discussions between over 1,300 people. Questions can be proposed, categorised and given positive or negative points.

Other tools are well adapted to consultations and engagement activities around geographic issues that suit the use of maps. Common Place (https://www.commonplace.is/) is a consultation platform/service used by local councils and developers to get feedback on aspects of development projects. It creates a sub-site that can then be divided into separate areas by development or theme. It was used by the London Borough of Waltham Forest for the consultation surrounding the Mini Holland project. As in this example of a road safety consultation (https://wroadsafety.commonplace.is), reports can also be made directly onto a map to help people give more exact feedback. Similarly, EngagementHQ has features for a wide-array of possible modes of engagement, with the similar option of a place-based approach, as well as more general idea sources features.

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Platforms useful for consultations can also be pitched as more general tools. **Consul** was initially a framework designed by Madrid City Council for a Participatory Budgeting process, but that has now been used and adapted in 33 countries. It includes options for collaborative commenting on legislation, Participatory Budgeting, features for creating and gathering support on proposals and holding general online debates. Hence it can be used for consultations and other engagement activities (and is useful as an open source tool), but also has more specialised use as a Participatory Budgeting platform.

Some UK cities operate general online consultation platforms where citizens register and can then take part and receive updates about future consultations, importantly allowing participation through mobiles and tablets. On **Let’s Talk Newcastle** engagement can vary between polls, surveys focus groups and “topic walls”, which allow group deliberation on an issue. **Talk London** similarly allows comments, surveys and discussions for consultations, engagement activities, and programmes run by the GLA. Alternatively, automated tools can be used to indirectly gauge preferences and problems of citizens. **Zencity** is a US based tool that uses 311 reports and social media to produce analysis for local authorities.

Digital tools for consultation can also take the form of evaluation frameworks that allow councils to assess and make better decisions for an area. Public Health England's **SHAPE tool** is a platform that includes a number of health assets to help understand patterns of ill health across a region to assist in medical planning and transportation decisions (eg where poorer levels of health can be explained by inaccessible healthcare). **The PLACE Standard** is a tool that uses 14 questions to assess the quality of place, and aggregate responses can be used to understand what people feel is good and bad about an area and to make simple comparisons to other areas.

Digital tools provide an opportunity to explore new ways of conducting conversations with the public, where both sides can be a part of question forming. **Allourideas.org** explores the idea of wikisurveys, which allow alternative options to be presented by users over time. **Pol.is** is designed for open-ended questions of a large group. Based on the results of these answers, similar statements and votes are grouped together to understand the different kinds of opinions that are present among the users. This is useful as a way of hedging against skewed participation because it will help explain the different kinds of opinions (with different sets of preferences), instead of simply crowning winners.

The above examples show the diversity of ways in which digital tools can be used to create a more collaborative consultation process that helps the community build a collective picture of options from local knowledge and ideas. However, the most important element remains the question of whether the consulting authority is committed to engaging with the process in earnest.
Participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting (PB) refers to a broad family of participatory practices where the public are directly involved in allocating funding to activities, in some instances through generating the ideas for projects, and in most, directly choosing which to fund through processes of deliberation or voting. This is another form of communication migration away from the broadcast method (‘here is the budget’) to a more collaborative approach (‘tell us what you want the budget to look like’). There have been a number of PB activities initiated by local governments in the UK, most related to small grants given to community organisations, although there has been a move towards using these approaches to decide authority spending priorities. Dundee ran the UK’s first Participatory Budgeting process using mainstream budget in 2018. The role of the public authority is both to provide funds for projects, and to define the framework and process for public involvement.

As explored in mySociety’s 2018 research into Participatory Budgeting, PB is a “fast policy” that has spread around the world, and not only has diverse forms, but diverse reasons for implementation: “Government believes it can be used to increase democratic engagement, to generate public ownership of budgetary decision-making, and to tacitly generate public support for incumbent government. [...] And for citizens, it could provide a public route to request new or improved facilities or services that may not have been a political priority for governing parties or civil service managers”

Participatory budgeting is at its most successful where it provides residents with an opportunity to suggest new ideas for their community and to work together, rather than just inviting them to decide between ideas developed by government. PB Scotland’s Charter reflects that PB does not inherently lead to good outcomes, but has to be rooted in firm principles and meet set standards.

There is a variety of digital tools that can be used to enable Participatory Budgeting processes. These include tools to support the generation of proposals or activities to be funded, including Your Priorities created and maintained by Citizen’s Foundation, and tools that can support the decision-making process itself, such as Citizen Foundations’ Open Active Voting, or D21. There are also tools that can support many different aspects of Participatory Budgeting including Participare, Consul, and Empatia. The proposal stage is a key area where digital tools can be transformative, and they allow a wide array of ideas to be considered and presented before moving to a smaller list for the voting phase.

Thinking about how to best use these tools depends upon the design of the process itself. As with other digital tools, using online platforms for deliberation has benefits in allowing wider participation, but perhaps at the cost of some of the relationship building and resultant shared solution finding that is seen in face-to-face deliberation. Digital tools used for voting in Participatory Budgeting likewise can allow wider participation, and make it easy for those who are
taking part in the process to view relevant information prior to selection. There is a problem, however, if increased participation (more people taking part) results in more concentrated participation from subsets of the population (who could skew the distribution of public money).

Online voting can also open up security problems, and trying to address these can increase barriers to participation, where increasing the security of the process through adding verification removes some of the benefits of increasing access. Security related concerns may not be significant in the current UK context, when PB is used to to allocate comparatively small funds, but if PB becomes a means by which to allocate larger sums of money then this becomes more challenging. In EU countries, ID cards are often used as verification, but there is not a similar universal form of ID in the UK.

As such, digital tools do not provide easy answers to the problems of offline PB, but when deployed as part of a hybrid system they create greater reach. For instance, assisted kiosks to help people who do not have access to the online voting can help expand access and improve the management of a PB process.

**Civic crowdfunding**

Civic crowdfunding (CC) is similar to Participatory Budgeting in the sense that it involves a significant collaborative communication element, with the public producing ideas and voting on projects, but is very different in that voting is conducted through personal financial donations. Public involvement is instigated through the possibility of investing public money, and defining the rules that allow a project to qualify for public funds. A Future Cities Catapult report describes civic crowdfunding as:

“A subcategory of crowdfunding through which ‘citizens, often in collaboration with government, propose, fund and deliver projects that aim to provide a community service or deliver public value through a local-area-improvement project.’”

This is a modern spin on the model of funding projects by public subscription. Rodrigo Davies describes civic crowdfunding projects as delivering four different kinds of return to investors (p. 15):

- Private good (21%) - funds to raise money for specific people
- Common pool resource (11%) - funds to raise money for limited public goods (giving the example of a community chicken farm that distributes eggs to local residents)
- Club good (18%) - project that benefits those who donate
- Public good (50%) - project that benefits the public beyond those who donated

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The Local Government Information Unit found that local councils such as “Dorset and Plymouth, have partnered with Crowdfunder to attract applications for community projects, with the promise of matched funding from the council if the crowd contributes”. While Crowdfunder is a generic crowdfunding platform, SpaceHive is a UK-based service explicitly designed for co-funding community projects, with the expectation that community funders (like local authorities, but also charity and community groups) will partner with the site and play a role in funding projects. Lewisham in 2015 used Spacehive and pledged “up to £10,000 towards the most popular projects” which led to 36 projects being successfully crowdfunded “raising £323,000 from more than 1,300 backers”.

In some respects, these platforms behave similarly to Participatory Budgeting platforms. Citizens create projects, and the most successful receive public funding. It differs in the important respect that voting is only open to those that pay, and those who pay more have a greater ability to influence the results. While Participatory Budgeting describes a reallocation of public money, CC is extracting additional money from the community to fund projects.

Davies (2015) argues that crowdfunding platforms tend not to support a deliberative process. “The idea is expected to be fully formed” when placed on the platform, but the inverse is only true of some Participatory Budgeting systems. The crowdfunding method has class-based echoes of those most affluent believing that they know what is best for the community, which is not necessarily the case. The benefit is that a higher volume of projects can be funded with a lower investment of public money. Rather than provide 100% of the funds, councils can either match funding or invest according to their own criteria.

Davies points out that that civic crowdfunding is ambiguous about increasing or reducing economic inequalities, being equally able to crowd-fund a new civic centre in a deprived area (adding to substantial government investment), or raise money for private security patrols in wealthy ones “several of the largest civic crowdfunding campaigns to date have drawn the majority of their funding not from a high, volume, low donation value crowd, but from wealthy donors”.

This makes it especially important that match-funding rules do not blindly top up all donations to projects, as this could result in public money being used towards projects that benefit a limited number of people. Funders can raise the importance of small donors by addressing them in their funding guidelines. For instance, the Crowdfund London 2018 campaign run by the Mayor of London had a £1 million pound fund, with a cap of £50,000 on any one project, and in the project

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22LGiu, & Spacehive. (n.d.). How To: Crowdfunding for local authorities.
24Ibid.
guidelines explicitly said that a factor in deciding to fund was the breadth of support as opposed to total funds raised.

This issue relates to the problem that crowdfunding (especially online crowdfunding) is more likely to be participated in by certain groups, with certain kinds of campaigns being harder to fund (eg those aimed at supporting the elderly or those with disabilities).\textsuperscript{25} Platforms that allocate resources by participation run the risk of under-allocating funding to projects where more people who do not participate would benefit, or where there is a strong need for a few people as opposed to a moderate need by many.

https://doi.org/10.1145/2783446.2783585  p. 47
Conclusion

This paper has explored a number of possible digital tools for different forms of democratic engagement that move communication between citizen and authority from a one-way broadcast method, to a more inclusive and representative many-to-many collaborative and deliberative method. The breadth of existing tools demonstrates that this is a problem currently being worked on from many different angles. While digital tools have enormous potential for democratic engagement, the exact implementation and local context matters. Work has to be done to make sure the use of digital tools is expanding participation proportionally rather than excluding specific groups of people. When selecting tools, thought is required not just about the best tool for the task, but for the best tool that fits the wider context.

The use of digital tools must be understood as part of the whole system, which involves gauging not just what the tool does, but the effort and time it can free up to address other priorities. Digital tools make participation easier for some groups (those with difficulty accessing offline processes) while potentially excluding others. However, just because a digital tool does not reach everyone, it does not mean that implementing a digital tool cannot be a significant component of a process that does just that. Where using a tool can bring down other costs of the process, those funds can be re-deployed towards outreach and other activities to try and broaden participation.

While many of the previously discussed tools have been specifically designed for the needs of local authorities, general purpose tools can also have enormous value, with the advantage of often being available cheaply and with a wide base of support and user knowledge.

This is especially useful where local budget or capacity does not support external paid services or installation of open source products. For instance, looking at running Participatory Budgeting in a small town, commercial survey tools like SurveyGizmo can provide a PIN code-verified voting process. Simpler and more general solutions may be easier to administer than specialised systems which will often be much better suited to the task, but might require more learning to administer. On the other hand, they might also create challenges in designing a process that is as participative as it might otherwise be, as many of these tools are more limited in function, and haven't been designed specifically for the purpose of democratic engagement. As explored in mySociety’s report exploring digital options for Citizens’ Assemblies, there are also many digital lessons that can be learned from event management and conferences that apply to offline participatory events.

The tools presented in this document are not comprehensive, but give a flavour of the kind of uses that are currently in place. For broader examples, the Civic Tech Field Guide gives a wider list of civic and govtech projects that might be of interest, but primarily details non-UK projects most of which are outside the scope of this project. For UK-specific examples of recent digital innovation in local government see LocalGov Digital.
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