The role of new technology in participatory budgeting

This discussion paper on online participatory budgeting (e-PB) should not be seen as an authoritative guide to software, systems or tools. Rather it is a general overview of the possible use of e-democracy tools for Participatory Budgeting (PB). It includes a set of 'assessment questions' to help you decide whether to develop online or e-PB.

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Overview and Executive Summary

There has been growing awareness that e-democracy practices can be adapted for participatory budgeting (PB). The purpose of this paper is to consider the opportunities and constraints of using e-democracy tools in this way, so citizens can better influence decision-making over public resources.

The PB Unit does not have a view on the use or not of e-PB. Our role is to analyse the potential benefits and risks and to help practitioners consider these when deciding whether or not it can add value to their project. We also intend to disseminate good practice, case studies and lessons learned to aid practical consideration of e-PB.

This paper should not be seen as an authoritative guide to different software, systems or tools. Rather it is a general overview of the possible opportunities from using e-democracy techniques for PB. It includes a simple self-assessment process to help you consider if you want to use e-PB.

Examples of e-PB have been emerging in Latin America, the USA and Europe. A number of UK models have already evolved. There is much to be learnt from these experiences but like all PB processes it is important to adapt any specific engagement tool to local circumstances, and to use the most appropriate technology.

In putting this paper together the PB Unit held informal discussions and invited a range of views from officials engaged in PB work, and professionals working in the field of e-democracy. We looked at international and early UK experiences, and participated in a number of relevant international conferences. To help us further develop our thoughts, in April 2009 we held a small stakeholder workshop in partnership with Delib, who are e-consultation and online opinion research specialists.

The PB Unit are not experts at e-democracy, which is a large and at times highly technical field. Continually emerging new tools such as social networking, simulation games and video blogs are already widely used to improve engagement processes. We are aware that different experts hold different views about which are the best methods.

The PB Unit feels that technology shouldn't be the main driver for considering e-PB. Rather the design and process of PB itself should indicate whether or not e-PB could add value. Online participation on its own does not make good PB practice and doesn't fit with our values, principles and standards. However, e-PB as an aspect of a more traditional face-to-face PB process can enhance the offline experience. We feel (and other's experience has shown) that good online participation is created by integrating it with the offline world – as most people don't experience a distinction between the two. By creating a distinction it creates an artificial environment that is not conducive to engagement.

The two key aspects of PB that create concern in relation to e-PB are transparency and community cohesion. Both of these issues can be mitigated by joining up online and offline PB activity.

Transparency is one of our key values for PB and it is essential that the process is open and clear to all, and that public budgets at the level of the PB process, are clear and accessible to all. Online information can both help and hinder transparency. Through simulation and budget tools citizens can gain greater understanding of budgets and the PB process. Detailed information such as budget reports can be cheaply and quickly exchanged. However, issues around trust can arise if the voting process used isn't transparent fair and secure – a poor process is open to complaints around whether or not those projects that got the most votes actually got funded. Furthermore, a lack of robustness in verifying who participated can open up the process to criticisms of unfairness and vote

rigging. By including both face to face and online ways to engage you can address trust and fairness issues in a much more open manner and reduce concerns of this nature.

One of the most exciting and initially unexpected outcomes or 'by products' of PB is community cohesion. Through the process of offline PB, people come together to discuss projects and priorities – they meet people they wouldn't normally meet, and develop a greater understanding for their neighbours and their community. It breaks down the barriers between groups in communities and often people end up changing their mind about what to vote for through the course of engaging with other members of their community. Online, participation is a much more individualistic process. Engagement is very much optional, and forums are currently quite limited and miss out any facilitated deliberation, which is a key value and aspect of PB. By integrating both you can get both the convenience of online participation with the greater benefits of offline participation.

E-PB may be a 'way in' to democratic engagement for those many citizens that don't relate to traditional politics. A way of engaging with younger people for example. E-PB could also facilitate the involvement of minority groups or those not engaging with traditional PB. E-PB can be used as a way of planning and developing new projects, and also of continually listening to demands or keeping engagement going beyond decision day.

The internet means we can cheaply and quickly share information. Reports and meeting notes can be made accessible and people can choose how much they want to read. However language still needs to be remain clear and simple and the information given needs to be relevant and correct. Good content is everything. Over-complexity can become a trap in itself.

Technology when adopted is not neutral - it may change the balance of power, but not necessarily in the interests of the most marginalised in our society, who remain on the other side of a wide digital divide. Online take-up by the poorest and also within some specific age and cultural groups remains low. Maintaining active online discussion forums for example is much harder in lower social-economic communities. Capacity and skills to enable successful online engagement are still rare within UK public authorities. We have observed many experiences of poor commissioning, bad management and expensive projects being abandoned by public bodies. Pointing to the difficulties of implementing and managing ICT in the face of rapid changes in technology .

Traditional PB is about empowering and strengthening communities, not just individuals. We are concerned the individualistic nature of online participation may well conflict with this aim. Government bodies need to consider what kind of communities it wants to see and engage with in the future and change policy and practice accordingly.

Opportunities of e-PB

Early in 2009 a small group of people invited by Delib and the PB Unit gathered to consider how e-PB might work. As part of that process a number of clear opportunities from e-PB were identified. Some felt e-PB could be used for a whole PB process, others advocated its use at a specific point within a PB programme. These discussions have informed the following un-prioritised list of potential benefits.

More accessible processes

- Online technology can open up wider access to information and devolve power over how that information is used. Information and news can be readily exchanged online, through websites, online video, email and social networks.

- E-PB can help engage the young and the otherwise 'hard to reach' groups. Social marketing techniques can be aimed at 'early adopters', bloggers and other champions of online technology; people who, with suitable support and encouragement, will work effortlessly on your behalf to get more people motivated to turn up to face to face meetings.

- All of us, whatever our abilities, face barriers to participation for which e-PB might offer solutions. Some are as simple as a lack of free time to participate. New technologies might provide new engagement opportunities to suit individual need. For example people might be anxious about entering unfamiliar social situations, or be fearful of public authorities or institutions, and may feel more at ease participating online.

- Online participation may help disabled people take more of a part in community life and so gain influence through access to customised computer interfaces or specialist software.

- Discussion forums or information websites run by support groups abound with free, relevant and often very specialised help. Open source technology is an example of how collaboration online can challenge powerful private interests and build on line or virtual communities.

Supporting individual engagement

- The increasing take-up of ICT at home, in a familiar and non threatening environment, means people can choose to participate at their own pace, at a time that suits them, and in ways that remain within their own control. It is also possible to keep track of who participated and place the evidence of their participation onto a public record.

- E-PB can help keep 'engagement momentum' going throughout a longer PB process and enable participation well beyond a decision day PB event, filling the gaps in the engagement calendar between face to face meetings and creating more deliberative space by allowing those involved in a PB process to keep in touch, hold debates and share information.

Invigorating collective engagement

- Online networks can help develop grassroots campaigns and mobilise people in new and often surprising ways. Many people believe that online technology like blogging and open source software can be a democratising force in itself.

- Through simulations and online games it is possible to practically demonstrate how democratic processes might work, and to explain potentially complex topics in fresh and engaging ways.

- Visually appealing and interactive websites can present information in a vibrant, impactful and flexible way that printed communication cannot easily emulate. Well structured

information disseminated through trusted websites can appeal to fleeting visitors and die hard searchers after information alike.

- Some commentators have noted how altruistic behaviour can flourish online. Car sharing, free exchange and recycling websites are examples. The use of reviews and ratings, which allow people to recommend or critique goods or services is having an impact on how preferences are being exercised.

Better ways of working

- Online technologies increasingly allow us to build a picture of how priorities and investments shift over time and vary between communities of interest. Tracking individualised responses through unique identifiers, web stats or personal profiles are allowing sophisticated messages and incentives to be directed at specific communities. The opportunities from e-PB are wider than an easy way of collecting one off votes or preferences.

- E-PB might be cheaper than other forms of engagement. A large number of people can participate simultaneously, and online surveys and polling can capture many responses and turn them into useable reports. Online voting can be quick, secure and cheap to run. Communication and printing costs can be reduced and information updated quickly.

- Online technology can be easily replicated, and successful models transferred to other situations. Once start-up costs are met there can be increasing economies through re-using and adapting successful templates and procedures.

More open democracy

- You can reach large numbers of people and work at a great speed using email, social networks and mobile phone technology. Information can be customised to target specific individuals or communities. Personal online profiles, blogging, polling and video sharing can create a sense of ownership and interactivity.

- Transparency over public budgets and democratic process can increase, with the ability to make documents available online, making up to date information freely and widely available. Records of meetings and key decisions can be circulated and stored in online archives. Online public scrutiny coupled with the use of traditional media might lead to the discovery, exposure and ultimate censure of wasteful, unlawful or corrupt public officials and politicians.

- Researchers, public officials and community activists can amass, search and re-order large quantities of data very quickly. They, and the wider public, can seek out or be provided with information held in public and academic databases and online libraries.

In summary, there may be a number of 'wins' to using e-PB. In evaluating whether these are going to be realised it is helpful to prioritise your own aims and objectives, consider any risks and then select the most appropriate solutions.

Risks and concerns of e-PB

Online tools do not always work successfully, fairly or cheaply. In developing this paper concerns have also been expressed to us. Within The PB Unit the most debated is a potential loss of meaningful deliberation from remote and increasingly individualised engagement. Because e-PB is so new many of the risks identified below are potentially unfounded. We just do not know yet which if any will actually undermine the transparency and damage the legitimacy of more traditional face to face participatory budgeting. So we suggest you avoid a rush into e-PB without due consideration. Below is a summary of our concerns.

Failing to devolve power

- E-PB may improve access for one group or community at the expense of another. New technology, whether on the web or in another arena is not a neutral force, and can change who, how, when and why people participate.

- There is little objective evidence that e-PB is actually helping PB processes. PB should seek to bring benefits for all, by offering outcomes for local communities, for politicians and for service delivery agencies alike. Online technologies will not however suit everyone or every situation.

- The take-up of new technologies is growing fast, but is by no means universal. As reported in a recent paper by Public – I *over half (51%) of those on low earnings (up to £10,400 per annum) had NEVER used the internet. This compares to only 6% of those earning over £36,400. The same study revealed that 71% of those aged 65 or over had NEVER used the internet, compared to just 4% of those aged between 16 and 24."*
(Source: Making technology work for Participatory Budgeting. Public–I and Davy Jones Consulting 2009)

- It may also reduce the public demonstration of transparency that comes from meeting face to face and the immediacy and drama of the public decision making event. You may gain quantity at the cost of quality. Empowerment is never a simple numbers game.   E-PB can also open up concerns around fairness and transparency in voting processes because the process can't be 'seen' online.

Lack of effective control

- Poorly run processes, whether online or not are open to manipulation with powerful elites or those confident with new technology capturing the process. It may create a two tier situation with deliberation swamped by mass, superficial participation.

- New technology brings issues about the ownership, attribution and accuracy of information. Online encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia have undoubtedly democratised how information is collated, shared and made available. They have shown that when working well they can be self-policing to some extent. But there are concerns about how information can be manipulated online. Identifying a specific source of a story or the selfish interest of an initiator of a particular viewpoint is not always easy. Misinformation can spread just as quickly as the truth.

- New technology can cost considerable sums to implement, and if motivated by profit, companies can lock users into specific software, or expensive support and servicing contracts. Copyright and licensing of bespoke technology can limit flexibility.

- A number of concerns were raised in our stakeholder group about evidencing participation, ensuring representativeness and also about online security. Malicious activity, such as

hacking, denial of service attacks on websites, email spamming and spyware (a form of covert surveillance) are possible. Voting processes may be vulnerable to 'viral' campaigns or automated mass voting.

- Evidence of manipulation may be hard to acquire or disprove, leading to distrust in the outcome or a reluctance to use online methods for decision making over public money. Public bodies may fear they are open to the use of judicial review to block unpopular results or overturn badly designed processes.

- Early adoption brings inevitable risks and long term cost can be difficult to predict. Websites or new technologies can quickly become obsolete, as better and cheaper ways of doing things emerge. Over the many years that participatory processes can take to mature, predicting what will be sustainable is not easy.

- The world of online technology is very fast paced and it is hard for public organisations, particularly those dealing with multiple layers of bureaucracy to keep up. Public procurement is littered with costly and failing online solutions that seemed a good idea at the outset. By the time an organisation has managed to implement a particular technology, it may well be obsolete because a newer, better product has been created. This can create risk of particular concern in the current economic climate.

Limiting participation by over-reliance on online methods

- While it is potentially easy to monitor who is engaging or not, it is less easy to force someone to use a technology they do not understand or trust. This would imply it is risky to rely on only one way of participating when wishing to be inclusive. PB is about giving people choice and power over what happens in their lives and their communities. Restricting the way that people can participate reduces the free choice element of PB.

- There is the inter-related issue of working through existing organisational communications structures and the potential lack of skills, resources or culture to innovate e-PB within the public sector. Developing a unique local PB brand has been shown to be highly successful. But large corporate' website front pages are already crowded with other messages.

- Communication strategy and corporate identity may already be in place, existing contracts and ways of working can be inflexible, and website menus and navigation can be hard to update. So it may be hard to offer an easy route through to where decision making and e-PB takes place. A new e-PB platform can be created, but this means extra expense, takes time and may create just even more confused messages.

- E-PB has yet to show whether or not it enables the traditionally 'hard to reach' to become engaged. Whilst who is 'hard to reach' depends on the engagement activity and the local area, often those that are most marginalized in society – whether financially or socially or both – are least likely to engage with the public sector. Empowerment is about empowering them to engage in the first place and good community development can't be replaced by E-PB. Those most disempowered and marginalized are unlikely to feel more listened to by a computer than by a person. However, E-PB may engage the 'can't be bothered' who can be 'hard to reach' simply because they don't want to be engaged. If the process is something they can do in the own time on their own terms they may decide to 'be bothered'. It's unlikely, however, that this group of people is generally disempowered. If the point of PB is to empower, surely then community development should focus on those that are most disempowered and marginalized – who will benefit most. PB has never been about engaging with everyone. Practitioners need to consider who they want to engage with and why, through the PB process and tailor the process accordingly.

Invisible leadership and extreme or individualised behaviour

- There is also the opportunity for 'bullying', or other unmediated exchanges, with dominant voices creating false impressions of authority or support. Sanctioning online bullies or those that target the vulnerable is hard, as it is easy for them to simply move into fresh domains.

- Extremists (not terrorists, but simply those holding extreme or unjustifiable views) may become convinced of their own authority by congregating online. By seeing their prejudices being reflected in others, or simply by being given a platform for their views. Any slight participation, such as visiting a webpage, can mistakenly be counted as active support, breeding a false sense of legitimacy.

- Small, well travelled or geographically isolated communities can sustain themselves through communicating online, and whilst this may be a good thing for their internal cohesiveness or benefit, can also isolate them from engaging more widely. Immediate neighbours may become less important as people engage in long range relationships or within niche communities of like minds.

- Elected councillors may have particular concerns over the legitimacy of decisions taken online, without the long established protocols, accountability and declarations of interest of more traditional political process. PB, and e-PB may be seen as some form of tyranny of the uninformed and a challenge to our representative democratic process.

- Councillors may feel e-PB is a way for public officials, cabinet members and service directors to bypass elected members or established community and voluntary sector engagement structures. Using direct democracy, mass individualised engagement and the pressure of immediate feedback they can appeal directly to citizens at the cost of councillor control. PB and empowerment does mean shifting power, and there will always be those fearful that any change will diminish their existing influence.

- The Councillors Commission, looking at the role of councillors, has called for councillors to be the leaders and facilitators of participatory processes. A key value for PB is participatory democracy supporting representative democracy. If there no or limited role for councillors in E-PB then representative democracy may end up being undermined or by-passed rather than supported.

Poorer deliberation

- Some commentators we have spoken to have raised concerns about the quality of online deliberation. Many apparently lively forums and blogs are perpetuated by a very small number of active participants, with the majority remaining silent onlookers. It is easy to be invisible or on the edge online. To draw in everybody and offer them an equal voice requires the online equivalent of good community development and best practice in inclusion.

- Human beings are highly evolved and practiced social creatures. Through face to face contact we learn many things about each others motives. By watching subtle changes of expression, intonation or body language we intuitively manage complex social interaction and can rapidly draw conclusions about who we can trust, and where common interest may exist.

- We are also generally able to manage conflict or difference by the way we communicate back and forth in groups. As any good facilitator knows, team working is often quickly achieved among strangers when acting together in a structured way. The PB Unit believe many of the deeply empowering benefits of PB emerge from collective action, and also seeing others act democratically, through participatory decision making processes within a public arena.

- Online exchanges, whilst appearing to be rapid, cannot compete with a dynamic meeting of individuals within a shared physical space. Instantaneous exchange with a large number of people is possible, but at a risk of using short sound-bites in place of detailed argument. Instantaneous reaction can replace reasoned and sophisticated debate.

- The individualistic nature of e-PB means that the by products or other outcomes from a public event, such as of groups learning about others' work and forming partnerships to work with each other or practices such as putting money back into the pot are unlikely to happen online alone.

Appendix A: Self assessing e-PB

Is e-PB right for us?

The table below offers a list of e-PB opportunities we have identified from our own discussions. We suggest you hold a discussion with your stakeholders about whether e-PB is the way to go and how to best link it to your PB programme particularly why, when and how you might use e-PB in your local context.

	Potential Opportunity from e-PB	**An option for us?**
Accessibility	Involve more local people throughout the whole PB process.	
	It can make it easier to participate	
	Participation online is a potentially more accessible environment	
	Enable some 'hard to engage' people to get involved	
	Widen participation to a scale not possible offline	
	Overcomes difficulty of finding suitable meeting venues	
	Participants choose their own best time to get involved	
Local identity	Presentations or proposals made through online videos	
	Share priorities and needs among the pool of participants	
	Share and deliberate online the options for PB investments	
	Create community understanding about what is happening locally	
	Information provided in a way that is locally meaningful	
Representative democracy	Online debate can aid scrutiny and transparency	
	Platform for local councillors to be visible community leaders	
	Online feedback can help monitor ongoing impacts	
Costs	Use social networks to spread awareness no extra financial cost	
	May reduce the cost of engagement processes in the longterm	
	Opportunity to use existing community websites/infrastructure	
Communications	Show public investments are making a difference	
	Widen participation through social networks	
	Provide visual information about a community, place or interest	
	Gather positive feedback from participants to encourage others thinking about being involved	
	Use personal stories showing positive outcomes for local people to provide inspiration and impact online	
	Give direct access to officers through online or email contact	
	Build a strong local PB identity through the online brand.	
Ongoing involvement	Online games and simulations can build up trust in the process	
	Online voting and polling builds up ongoing interactions and builds confidence in the process	
	Mobile phone voting might be more secure than online	
Partnerships	Share costs with partners of setup, management etc	
	Coordinate engagement activity with partners	

Overcoming the risks we face

As well as opportunities, technology brings its own risks. Below we have listed a number of possible risks. We suggest you build on this list through holding a stakeholder group discussion, which also includes an opportunity to debate how to manage the risks.

	Potential risks of e-PB	A risk for us?
Quality of Participation	Making it too easy to participate weakens local ownership	
	People participate as individuals and not as part of community	
	People participate according to their self-interest not the community's	
	Issues are dealt with in a shallow and populist way	
	Real deliberation is difficult to achieve online	
	Extreme or inflammatory views can find a platform	
	Interest groups may be able to manipulate the process	
	Selfish or bullying behaviour is hard to mediate or control	
	Lack of connection between online and offline participants leads to conflicting or inconsistent results.	
Technical issues	Creates yet another channel to participate without clear benefits	
	The technology is not within local people's control	
	The existing corporate website may be unable to adapt sufficiently to be effective for PB	
	Lack of knowledge around which technology is most appropriate means the technology doesn't work as was expected	
Affect on representative democracy	The outcome is challenged as illegitimate because of a lack of transparency with voting results or poor online security	
	Lack of clear role for councillors as leader and facilitator undermines representative democracy	
Costs	Adopting pre-packaged software doesn't always work and bespoke software can be expensive	
	The costs outweigh the benefits and do not justify investment in e-PB	
Accessibility	Creates a new barrier to involvement, particularly amongst the more disadvantaged groups in the community.	
	Loudest and most confident voices take over control online	
	The most disempowered don't tend to have access to the internet	
Communications	Communications and branding conflicts with corporate image, leading to confusion	
	Participation happens remotely so information is easily controlled	
	Easy for it to remain just another corporate communication tool	
	Inaccurate media reports or misinformation damages the process	
Partnerships	One organisation may control the whole online process diminishing partners' ownership	

Appendix B: Next steps if you decide to adopt e-PB

If you've decided to move forward and design an e-PB process that works for you, this checklist may help you clarify that process:

- € We've discussed who gains influence and who might lose from our proposal.

- € We have agreed the core values that will guide our work

- € We and our stakeholders understand the key aims and objectives

- € We have considered what extra capacity and skills are needed

- € We have collected evidence that we need to make this change

- € We have a process to evaluate successes and act on failures

Planning your implementation:

Once you have considered the opportunities and risks of a specific process you can move on to the next steps in planning your process. This might be:

- Establishing high level aims and objectives

- Mapping opportunities for e-PB throughout the engagement process

- Identifying resources needed to run the process

- Getting stakeholder approval

- Establishing a delivery team and a resident led steering group

Many of the topics above are already discussed in:

- Our PB toolkit, and other resources on our website.

- Our Values Principles and Standards document

- The National strategy for PB.

NB: It is unlikely an e-PB process is sufficient in itself. Face to face deliberation should still occur, and e-PB offer another way to participate.

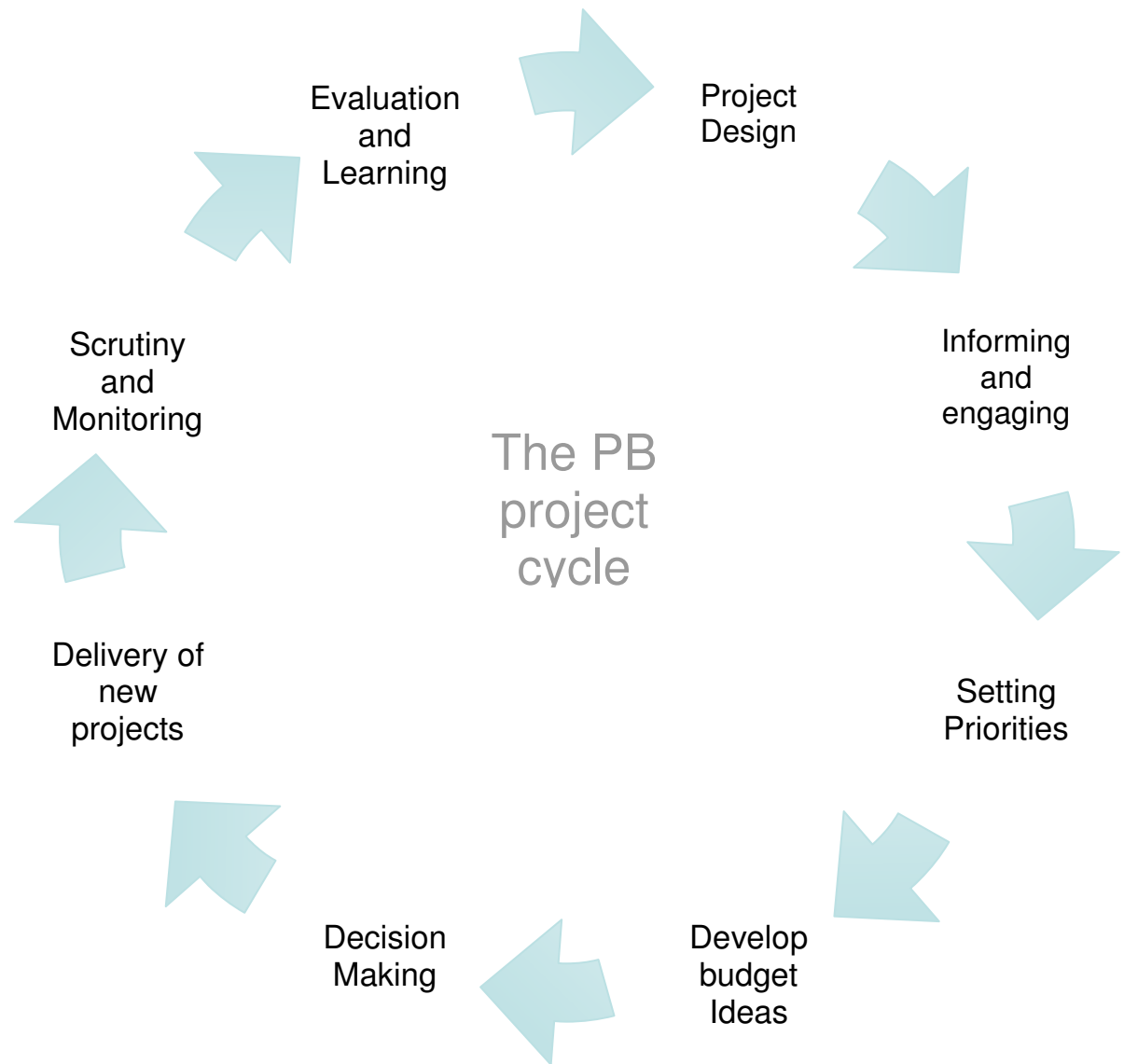## Appendix C: Using e-PB throughout the whole PB process

The diagram graphically illustrates how a PB process moves through a number of stages.

Whilst not universal, it presents common project stages for PB.

We hope it will help you identify opportunities for e-PB.

You can print the graphic onto a large sheet of paper and allow stakeholders to place coloured notes onto the project cycle to identify opportunities for e-PB, and also where other processes may be more appropriate.

You can then, use the results in a later facilitated action planning session as on the next page.

The PB project cycle

Evaluation and Learning

Project Design

Informing and engaging

Setting Priorities

Develop budget Ideas

Decision Making

Delivery of new projects

Scrutiny and Monitoring

Appendix D: Planning for implementation

Once you have identified the risks and opportunities, and considered where in the cycle of PB you might add an online element, you may wish to develop an implementation plan. Below we have suggested a table to use to do this. As a first step, to limit the number of things you need to consider, we suggest you prioritise and then consider only the most important issues initially.

Use the table to develop actions to address the most important issues you identified in a group situation such as a stakeholder workshop. Adapt the table to your requirements. We include an example entry in italics.

Issue under consideration (The task and any barriers)	Who needs to be involved in this issue?	What support or information do they need?	What resources are available to improve the likely outcome?	How do wider community (or marginalised) participants become more empowered?
a) Councillors are concerned the process is unrepresentative or misses key participants	Councillors, officers and community representatives	Examples where benefits have been shown. Share monitoring data. Invite councillors to the event	PB Unit toolkit, regional networking, participation data, benchmarking.	Stronger process, recording of participation. Extra work in specific communities.
b)				
c)				
d)				
e)				
f) (continue list as needed)				

The results can be worked up by the project group or coordinator into a final project plan to inform how you might begin your e-PB programme. Of course online collaborative project planning and management tools exist and you might explore their use in running your process

Further information

We are happy to support any project wanting to try out e-PB as part of a wider PB process. E-PB is still a new process and there are very few examples of it in the UK, so far. We aim to develop some case studies online which showcase e-PB.

For more information on PB generally and for case studies please go to www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk

If you would like to contact us for a chat about e-PB or your PB project or if you have any queries please contact us on:

Tel. 0161 236 9321
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There are many companies which provide software for e-participation. We don't endorse any particular company, however, a number have contacted us and we are happy to pass on contact details to you should you want to get in touch with these companies directly.