



Policy Response to: Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

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1. About mySociety

1.1 mySociety is an international not-for-profit social enterprise based in the UK, where we run a number of projects designed to give people the power to get things changed. We invent and popularise digital tools that enable citizens to exert power over institutions and decision makers, and work internationally to support partners who deploy our technology in countries around the world. As one of the first Civic Technology organisations in the world, we are committed to building the Civic Technology community and undertaking rigorous research that tests our actions, assumptions and impacts. Our global research work into digital development, civic technology and user-centred design has positioned mySociety as a leading authority in digital civic engagement and participation.

2. Introduction

2.1 Whilst themes of citizenship and civic engagement cover a very broad spectrum of activity, this submission will focus on elements of digital citizenship, participation and engagement. The use of digital technologies in civic life is common in the UK in the current age; however, the strategies employed, the technology implemented, and the impacts of such activities shape the entire participation experience, and have significant consequences for the ability and enthusiasm of individuals seeking to participate. This evidence therefore raises issues and considerations that cut across the questions and potential solutions discussed in the HoL published call for evidence. As a world leader in civic technology, mySociety has conducted extensive research and experimentation in order to understand how digital technologies can be best utilised to engage citizens in civic life, and it is upon this expertise that this evidence is based.

3. Existing points of digital engagement

3.1 There are currently a number of digital routes by which citizens may engage with civic life online. These can primarily be grouped into five categories: Social Media (Twitter, Facebook etc); Reporting Mechanisms (online forms or apps feeding one-way information digitally from citizen to public authority); Consultative Mechanisms (notices requiring citizen response to public bodies on specific issues); Informative Mechanisms (information provision to citizens without a transacting activity); and Conversational Mechanisms (email, or other two-way transactional information flows). These various mechanisms enable higher volumes of interactions and reduce barriers such as distance and time, but are imperfect in their execution, especially when used by official, bureaucratically structured organisations to engage with the public. This section provides a brief overview of these categories, their strengths and their weaknesses.

3.2 Social media provides a low level and high volume means of civic engagement. It has been shown to enable and instigate engagement by a wider audience than traditionally engaged groups; however, conversation is unstructured and vulnerable to a range of problematic issues such as co-option, bullying and harassment, echo-chamber effects, and fake news. Civic participation through social media is effective for collective and campaigning activities as an

organising and/or broadcasting method, but provides limited benefit in more meaningful participation with the state itself. The quality of interaction between state and citizen through social media is also highly variable due to the differing communications strategies, personalities and digital competencies held within different authorities, and public and political offices. Negative engagement experiences with one form of authority have been shown to reduce the probability of citizens attempting to engage digitally a second time, and as such, there is a real risk that poor digital engagement strategies may in fact have a disengaging effect.

3.3 Reporting mechanisms online provide citizens with the opportunity to notify officials about certain issues. Traditionally such mechanisms allow information to flow only one way, for example, where a citizen reports an incident or issue to a local authority (such as on FixMyStreet.com), with the expectation that the authority in question will remedy the issue. Such tools can provide a valuable and user-friendly conduit for information, and can improve the maintenance and management of communities through what is essentially the crowdsourcing of information that is vital for officials to deliver their services. Such mechanisms are, however, often executed poorly online as a result of ineffective digital architecture, lack of research in the design of the service and lack of human and financial resources to build and maintain a user-friendly digital interface. mySociety research has shown that even the cosmetic appearance of a reporting mechanism will have an effect on the type of person that will consider using it, potentially to the detriment of large groups within society. Another issue with these tools is that they rarely provide the citizen with follow-up information. If a citizen reports an issue that is not clearly followed up, they have been shown to be less likely to report other issues in the future (Peixoto, 2016).

3.4 Consultative mechanisms online generally comprise an invitation from official sources to citizens to provide feedback or opinion concerning very specific themes or issues. These mechanisms operate very narrowly, and generally allow information to flow in only one direction. Engaging digitally through consultative mechanisms can allow interested citizens to provide expert and valuable evidence on specific issues; however, they require citizens to have existing levels of motivation, skills and engagement. Online surveys are easier for citizens to engage with than requests for written evidence, and require a lower time commitment; however, often survey methodologies employed by official channels are not sufficiently accommodating to collect relevant related information, and can often appear tailored to acquiring support for pre-existing policy ideas. Consultations online requesting written information provide much greater flexibility, but require that the respondent has sufficient reading, policy understanding and digital skills/resources to understand the purpose of the consultation, and the composition skills to present their thoughts. Both surveys and written calls online generally require respondents to move between several web pages, with PDF files containing further details often a feature of responding to written calls, and external non-mobile-responsive websites used for surveys. These are not trivial issues, as individuals with low levels of digital, reading or writing skills, and individuals using mobile devices or devices that do not run PDF software may be easily deterred from engaging with these exercises.

3.5 Informative online mechanisms tend to be the most common information interaction between citizen and state, in which citizens are simply able to access websites and other digital information outlets to collect the information they require without having to ask for it. Gov.uk, TheyWorkForYou.com and local authority websites fall into this category. While it could be argued

that this is not a ‘participative’ activity, it is in fact such information provision that will often catalyse further action, whether that is a digital action on the same website, an action that engages with a different section of government, social media or NGO, or an offline action. Easy access to relevant information is one of the most empowering factors in citizen-government interaction, as it enables the citizen to understand the rules and structures within which any participation will take place, and who the relevant stakeholders are. This is particularly important in multi-level governance or devolved contexts, and when individuals are dealing with extremely large and complex organisations. Information provision online by government is, however, variable in quality and user-friendliness. Whilst Gov.uk represents significant strides forward in improving the quality and usability of information concerning central government, it is mySociety’s experience that most people get involved in democracy and participation online closer to home where local issues directly concern them. Official information provision mechanisms tend to be of a lower quality at the local level and less conducive to use by citizens lacking confidence and skills, and again, negative experiences online at a local level may inhibit the willingness of citizens to wish to engage further, either in an online or offline capacity.

3.6 Online conversational mechanisms represent a higher quality of interaction for citizens engaging through official channels because of the two-way information flow. Citizens are able to interact with a ‘real’ person, rather than a form or official email address, and are often provided with the opportunity to use their own words and experiences during the interaction, with officials able to respond, clarify and provide the relevant service. Examples of conversational mechanisms are FOI request procedures and the website WhatDoTheyKnow, or the ability to email political representatives or message them through sites such as WriteToThem. While the cost for providing two-way interaction online is higher for authorities, it provides an overwhelmingly better experience for users, and in many ways compensates for flaws in digital design that may deter individuals from engaging through forms or reporting mechanisms. Users of mySociety services often comment that although their specific issue may not have been solved or their request for information fulfilled, they appreciated the ability to interact with a person and to receive an explanation for why their issue could not be resolved. While many online engagement mechanisms are becoming more intelligent and more automated, such automation should not be built without providing citizens with clear alternative mechanisms to interact digitally with public officials.

3.7 This section has briefly reviewed the most common participation and engagement mechanisms employed by official bodies, and has demonstrated that many such tools are vulnerable to poor design and implementation that can significantly affect the volume of people able to engage and can alienate certain demographics. Any future engagement or participation digital solutions must be mindful of the merits of each method.

4. Individual barriers to digital engagement

4.1 A significant number of individuals in the UK remain on the wrong side of the digital divide, and currently, there are 15.2 million adults in the UK that are either non-users or very limited users of the internet. While digital education in schools is improving, it is a myth that all young people

are digital natives. It is perhaps unsurprising that many older people lack digital skills; however, people on low incomes, those with low levels of education, people with social, physical or learning needs, people from certain ethnic minority groups and people not participating in economic activity are also amongst the most likely to lack digital skills. Approximately 90% of non-internet users are disadvantaged in some way. Unfortunately, these are likely to be the people using public services the most, and therefore the migration of services, participation and information online represents a huge hurdle to engagement for these service users.

4.2 Digital civic participation requires skills, resources and in many cases an incentive or specific motivation. The Good Things Foundation has demonstrated the benefits of upskilling those that find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide, however individuals often require additional support to engage with civic or democratic issues that require a different body of knowledge. mySociety has identified that individuals with lower levels of education, individuals with lower incomes and individuals not in work are more likely to engage with civic issues at a local level in the first instance, and therefore digital design of civic engagement mechanisms should accommodate local aspects in order to engage individuals that are not well represented in state-level civic engagement activities.

5. Institutional barriers to digital engagement

5.1 While the digital divide represents external factors in reducing civic engagement online, the opaqueness, structure and bureaucracy of the public sector has also been shown to limit the effectiveness of digital government-citizen interaction. Many public sector organisations use ageing digital infrastructure, incompatible with new software that is able to streamline workflows and citizen interactions. A number of innovative online tools are available for citizens to interact with officials efficiently, however in many cases these are unable to be integrated with official systems to create a seamless experience for both user and service provider. The Open311 standard is a good example of how such barriers can be surmounted, but often are not, due to the commitments many public bodies have to outdated IT structures. Additionally, many civil servants outside of teams with a dedicated digital remit lack the confidence to use new technologies, and as such may frustrate implementation through bureaucratic means.

5.2 Many public-facing government websites and digital tools reflect the structures of their internal bureaucracy, rather than being designed with the needs of the user in mind. This manifests in information or tools being placed on file-paths that are grouped under the responsibilities of departments or specific initiatives. This reduces the likelihood of individuals engaging through the most appropriate channel, because the logic of the user is very different to the logic of the bureaucracy. User-design research in the build phase of engagement tools is vital in understanding how to cultivate higher volume and more efficient engagement.

5.3 Should the HoL Committee recommend further participation and engagement activities be explored in a digital format, consideration of how bureaucratic structures may frustrate those activities should be key in the design process. Where new digital tools are implemented, they may

fail not because of citizen enthusiasm, but because of institutional reticence to embrace new technology.

6. The benefit of designing digital participation architecture alongside policy-making

6.1 As noted in the previous sections, the design of tools for engagement is one of the most important activities in the development process. mySociety's research has demonstrated how icon placement, colour-schemes, imagery and language have a significant effect upon whether, and how, an individual chooses to engage. These design considerations have been shown by mySociety research in the USA to be best addressed alongside policy-making, rather than as a digital afterthought to a fully finalised policy. This research examined a number of case studies of tech implemented by official bodies in the USA and demonstrates that including developers and designers in the development of the policy, and through using user-design research methods, the quality of the policies made was improved for citizens and for the officials providing services. This was because bureaucratic logic, inefficiency in potential processing or accidental inconsistency within the policy was identified as a potential barrier prior to a policy being completed, and joint-working enabled more streamlined policies to emerge that would be deliverable through citizen-centred online mechanisms.

6.1 While not every policy can benefit from full user design exercises, consultation of developers and designers at the point of participation policy development would likely positively influence not only the digital engagement mechanism, but the policy outcomes as well.

7. The role of civil society in facilitating engagement

7.1 As noted in several sections in this paper, citizens often struggle to participate in civic activity for a wide variety of reasons. Civil society can, however, provide a valuable bridge between citizen and state, and can demystify methods of participation that may seem irrelevant or intimidating to individuals unused to interacting with government. mySociety research has demonstrated that the cost of facilitating meaningful interaction rises when targeting the most disengaged and digitally disadvantaged groups; however, high cost, high support and low volume targeting is effective at achieving positive outcomes. On the technology side, individuals and NGOs outside of government have demonstrated significant innovation and expertise in designing services for citizens to interact with government that are more effective and user-friendly than official channels. This external innovation is a good driver for improving official channels, and enables NGOs like mySociety to experiment and demonstrate how good outcomes can be achieved at a low cost. Code for All programmes provide another example of how it is possible to leverage external expertise into official digital activities which can be improved for the benefit of the public.

8. Recommendations

8.1 When developing new methods of civic participation, mySociety recommends that the following points be taken into consideration:

8.2 Employ digital mechanisms suited to the specific type of interaction required, mindful that the motivations and benefits to officials and citizens of the participatory exercise may be very different

8.3 Enable two-way information flows wherever possible: citizens are more positive about interactions when they feel their own voice has been heard.

8.4 Consider using more targeted digital mechanisms for individuals with low levels of digital literacy and confidence: a one-size fits all approach will generally deter the most disadvantaged.

8.5 Design participative policies collaboratively with the digital and user community: such collaboration reduces the likelihood of policy failure further down the line

8.6 Involve NGOs to engage the hard to reach and to leverage innovation and ideas into the design and implementation of participatory activities.