

**Election Information Websites Session**  
**e-democracy'06 16<sup>th</sup> November 2006, London**  
**Summary**

Jason Kitcat, University of Sussex, provided a very brief overview of the two projects being discussed: The Election Alarm Clock piloted by Lambeth with the Electoral Commission and Delib and then My Election by Swindon with Delib. Both sites had been popular with those who had used them and in both areas there had been a rise in turnout, though the sites cannot claim to be the cause of this rise. Feedback that came from users of both sites was positive but showed that they expected more from the sites; more about the candidates, links to manifestos and so on. Mr Kitcat finished by raising four potential challenges to why more couldn't be done with such sites:

- Legal  
Concerns over what councils can and can't publish during an election period restricts the amount they are willing to put online.
- Why Us?  
At all levels of government it is easy to argue that other bodies have just as much, if not more, reason to take responsibility for publishing more elections information online.
- Costs  
Vetting and uploading large amounts of information is costly and it isn't clear who will or should pay for it.
- Marketing  
Creating new websites specifically for elections presents a new marketing challenge as there is one more website address people need to remember or find.

Chris Quigley, Delib, provided some perspectives on the challenges in providing online election information tools. For example the Election Alarm Clock seemed to be best provided nationally, but when they realised all the local differences such as authorities having elections at different times, the scope of the project became more challenging. They needed to use local information and do local promotion. Mr Quigley noted that the divide between national and local had been very challenging for Delib.

Mr Quigley also highlighted the emphasis electoral administration offices put on voter registration for part of a year and then turnout for the remainder of a year (when there was an election). But with tools like the Election Alarm Clock registration could be promoted continuously, election year or not.

Even though the My Election website for Swindon did much more than the Election Alarm Clock the site was much easier to deliver because all the information could be locally sourced. Particularly successful was the forum letting people post why they chose to vote or not to vote. Feedback on their candidate information section was that users wanted to see much more than just the name and party.

Alan Winchcombe, Swindon Borough Council, noted that during 2003 Swindon piloted e-voting and as part of their Internet voting system there was a site filled with candidate information, statements and manifestos which proved popular. This feature had to be specifically authorised however the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA) did not allow it to happen again in 2006. Mr Winchcombe noted that they were going to apply for

permission to provide the extra information as part of the 2007 pilots. The Electoral Commission have indicated that they aren't unhappy with such information being piloted. In Swindon, at least, voters didn't get information about the candidates from the candidates themselves. Candidates were only going out and targeting their known supporters frustrating other voters.

Mr Winchombe stated that DCA had refused to fund the marketing but fortunately the councilors have been supportive and provided the funds. Without spending money on marketing and promoting such tools and information to the electorate it isn't clear how we can boost turnout.

Mr Winchombe noted how some politicians seem to think of the council as their own private club which they have earned the right to be elected to again and again. Some question why turnout should be raised when more people voting could risk them losing their seats! Mr Winchombe argued that we have to fight such attitudes and work hard to get more people involved. The My Election site worked well for Swindon, got unanimously positive feedback and voters will be wondering what has happened if they don't provide the same and more in following years.

Helen Abraham, London Borough of Lambeth, started by noting that Lambeth was very different to Swindon having run only e-counting previously. The borough has a very diverse, mobile population with a 40% turnover of electors on the register *every year*. The canvass for the register is becoming increasingly challenging to get a response. Around 160 languages are spoken in the borough and understanding eligibility to vote is also a challenge for residents.

The electoral register forms look very formal and are clearly from the council making them unattractive for people coming home from maybe 12 hours of work and commuting. The attraction of the Election Alarm Clock was the potential for it to reach especially the younger voters (18-34) who had proven very hard to access. It was very hard explaining to funders ideas like viral marketing, which was used to access the target demographic. Postcards were distributed around the borough. Café and shop owners of all cultures were very enthusiastic and keen to spread the word about the importance of voting.

Ms Abraham said that it was clear from their pilot that people want to vote and want information but catching them at the right time and place is very difficult. Lambeth would have liked to put more information online but legislation did not permit this, however an activist created a local website called [electionmemory.com](http://electionmemory.com) which did provide substantially more information. Lambeth did link to this site in one of the alerts they sent out via the Election Alarm Clock.

A learning point was that it took quite some time for awareness of the site to build so while not that many people registered before the election, use of the site has continued to grow as search engines and other sites have linked to the Election Alarm Clock. Ms Abraham also noted that the Lambeth Youth Council had felt that the design for the site could have been older and slightly more urban.

Ms Abraham argued that for these tools to show real success they need to be national projects with properly funded marketing. Remembering another site address is an issue which is tricky, one national site would help.

Mr Quigley noted that the real value from these tools developed when they were used as part of an ongoing process and not just as one-offs. This tied into marketing these tools which also needs to be an ongoing, consistent, process he said.

Mr Quigley went on to comment that the Election Alarm Clock idea had come from research the Electoral Commission had undertaken on transient voters. He himself had moved around London and noticed that many didn't realise they needed to re-register to voter after moving. The problem is that Delib don't have data for each authority, only those who have contracted them, so if someone visits the Election Alarm Clock site from outside of Lambeth then they can't tell them much at all. This is where national co-ordination is needed.

[The session then was opened to all present for discussion.]

Mr Kitcat asked participants what ideas they had for expanding the provision of election information online.

One participant noted that in Wales, with the Assembly, they have a large number of elections and providing information for each of these would be a serious drain on the small council budgets available. Ms Abraham noted in response that the marginal cost, once a site is built, is miniscule as the information is just one more web page. However the participant raised concerns about the cost of resources in terms of staff time. Mr Winchcombe commented that inputting the data wasn't too much of a chore and shouldn't be off-putting. Mr Quigley noted that the data usually already exists within councils it's just a matter of putting it online. If councils managed their data themselves, which was possible, Mr Quigley said that their tools would be much more powerful. But if Delib or some other organisation have to go round every single council collecting and inputting the data it would become prohibitively costly.

Richard Allan, Head of UK/Ireland Government Affairs, Cisco and former MP for Sheffield Hallam, noted that supplying much of this information lies with the political party. When Parliament had similar discussions it emerged that the information Parliament felt it could put online was not what MPs wanted online. Voters want to see, and politicians want to write, their views and not just bland biographies. Mr Allan also commented on guidelines requiring non-political use of Sheffield.gov.uk email addresses by councillors. He argued for clear but sensible national guidelines on the legal issues as locally advisors tended to be over-cautious. Then the council could provide as much neutral information as possible before linking to sites with more politicised information. Then next question then would be, Mr Allan concluded, how do we get the political parties to have their information online and up-to-date locally?

Ms Abraham commented that Wolverhampton led a stream as part of the e-democracy programme examining the issue of legal guidance for councilor web pages. Due to demand the guidance has been recently updated. Ms Abraham said that even when linking to an external site and making clear that the council isn't responsible for its content there is a small chance of spurious complaints over the link but that shouldn't stop authorities from doing this.

Ms Abraham noted that with Lambeth's councillor web pages they have an Acceptable Use Policy which requires councillors to not put political content on their web pages – they are able to put links to other sites on their pages, which could include linking to a private

blog.

Ms Abraham commented that with the new Electoral Administration Act there is a duty to promote electoral information. Given this legal duty, Ms Abraham argued that it is odd to shut down all the councillor information during the election period as this is precisely the time when people want to access it the most. There are some issues around not all candidates having access to computers and the Internet which means that councils might need to provide assistance in assuring a more level playing-field.

Ms Abraham accepted that local government tends to be risk averse but if someone does complain it is easy to remove offending links.

Mr Kitcat commented that in Brighton they are trialing councillor blogs also and that most users are linking to their party sites so that they can say something political. The strict guidelines in place allow these links, they just don't allow political content on the council servers. So there are options and legal guidance shouldn't be over-egged. Mr Kitcat then asked that if something can be done, who is going to provide election information and how?

Mr Allan highlighted the role of the political parties and candidates as being the ones with the incentives to do something as they are the ones who want to get elected.

Ms Abraham noted that in parts of London at least 50% of candidates are not members of any party. This is where councils should have a role in facilitating and giving training which becomes a duty under the new act.

Mr Winchcombe agreed that with the legal duty in the Electoral Administration Act the electorate will expect the council to do more. Mr Winchcombe also suggested that the Electoral Commission may soon be publishing performance standards for this area of activity. Support needs to come from local electoral administrators particularly when independent candidates won't have the facilities to do these things themselves.

Mr Quigley noted that in three clicks someone can set up a free blog. The tools are free and incredibly easy to use.

Ms Abraham commented that sometimes the barriers are to do with confidence, particularly if a candidate is new to politics. They need to understand the rules governing what they can and can't do as well as technology. Ms Abraham felt this was an area where councils definitely could make a difference.

Mr Winchcombe added that Swindon still has councillors who do not have access to a PC and don't know how to use them. In spite of the council supplying the kit, some refuse to use them.

Mr Quigley suggested that sometimes shaming politicians into using the facilities worked by showing how many already are online.

Mr Kitcat then challenged the participants on whether the assumption that election information should be provided at the local level was a good one. With transient voters such as highly mobile single people in their 20s, how could we address our aim to encourage them to vote locally when they move around so much?

Ella Smith, International Teledemocracy Centre, Napier University, commented that it was important to take a citizen's perspective when discussing these tools. Ms Smith emphasised the need for good election information and other participants commented that in addition to what was made available in the pilot sites discussed, the polling card sent to registered voters was also a source.

Mr Winchcombe noted that because of the language required to be used on the poll card many don't understand it or throw it away. In Swindon they now send the card in a less obviously local authority envelope to increase the number of people reading it.

There was also discussion amongst participants about how to increase awareness of the role the electoral register plays in helping someone get credit such as for mobile phones or mortgages and how the information on the register is used.

Mr Winchcombe told the participants how in Swindon they send a colourful information booklet along with the electoral registration form. This booklet emphasizes first the credit rating and other benefits of registering in preference of saying that you can't vote if you haven't registered. The majority of callers to Swindon's electoral administration office are people refused credit wanting to register. Unfortunately, Mr Winchcombe noted that central government doesn't allow local authorities to print the registration forms as they would like hence some of the misunderstandings and difficulty people have in registering.

Mr Kitcat asked if the problem of election information provision was a local problem that needed a nationally prescribed solution or a national problem that would develop local solutions.

Mr Allan responded by saying that if someone searches for local elections in Google and sees a result for every local authority in the UK then perhaps that isn't the answer. Ideally people need to be guided to the right place as many don't know for sure which authority they fall under.

A representative from the Electoral Commission commented that they do provide the [aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://aboutmyvote.co.uk) website which aims to provide the information for people wanting to register and vote. The site does direct people to the correct electoral administration office based on the post code they have entered. The site is promoted as part of the Commission's electoral registration campaign.

One reason the site was developed, the representative noted, was that many people mistakenly think the Electoral Commission is responsible for electoral registration and so they receive a large number of enquiries about registering. The Commission has had internal discussions about providing more information on the site but it would be unmanageable for them to provide details on every candidate but also it is a policy position for the Commission not to have any political information on their sites.

Ms Abraham suggested an improvement for the [aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://aboutmyvote.co.uk) site whereby users could be given precise links to pages or tools for each authority, such as the Election Alarm Clock for Lambeth.

Participants discussed the lack of understanding voters have in how their council works and what responsibilities councillors have. Also some misunderstandings people have

about what they are actually voting for in local elections. Many agreed that if people knew more about what their local authority did they would be more likely to vote. Mr Winchcombe mentioned that they are trying to deliver some of this type information to schools but it had been hard to get into the schools.

There was discussion of the problem that some postcodes lie between two wards and constituencies which can confuse some online tools. Mr Allan argued that as it is roughly 2% of cases where postcodes can't be definitive, it was still worth doing it for the 98% where there wasn't a problem.

Mr Kitcat asked what role the media could and should play in providing election information online? How could government provided resources fit in?

Many noted that the BBC and The Guardian were both very strong online during general elections, but not so strong for local elections. Mr Winchcombe recounted how the local BBC Radio station had been very supportive during the last election with the breakfast show host cutting callers off if they said they weren't going to vote!

Mr Kitcat asked for any final thoughts from the panel.

Mr Winchcombe wished that the DCA would listen to what local authorities and the public are saying – they want moderated candidate information easily accessible on the web.

Mr Quigley emphasised the importance of not getting hung up on perfection. There might be a few glitches in the data here and there but 98% of the time it was useful and welcomed by users. Piloting and experimenting were very important for maintaining progress.

Ms Abraham highlighted the importance of targeted promotion, such as increasing the number of ethnic minority candidates and publicising tools like the Election Alarm Clock in boosting turnout. Emphasising year-round engagement as well as voting was key to sustained growth in interest.

Mr Kitcat thanked all the participants. [ends]

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Summary provided by Jason Kitcat. More information about the Election Alarm Clock and My Election pilots can be found at <http://jasonkitcat.com/edem06/>