



Electronic or Online Participatory Budgeting (E-PB)

Guidance for practitioners

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide a quick reference guide to PB practitioners considering or implementing an element of online participatory budgeting (PB) as part of their participatory budgeting process. This document is not a full, in depth, look at every aspect of online participation. We have produced a longer discussion document on the topic which can be found on our website if you wish to read more on the subject.

The PB Unit is not an expert on, nor do we hold a view of the suitability of, different technologies or software packages and what they are be used for. This guidance is not aimed at helping you choose the right technology. The PB Unit's view is that online participatory budgeting is best done in conjunction with more traditional face to face/offline participatory budgeting practices rather than a standalone exercise. This is because a number of the values and benefits of implementing PB such as facilitated and meaningful deliberation, transparency community cohesion can be compromised by online practices. However, we recognise that participating online can be a way of increasing overall numbers and engaging certain parts of the community in particular and our view is that, if included as part of a wider PB strategy it can support and strengthen more typical face to face PB practices.

We have identified a number of opportunities and risks from implementing e-PB and a summary of these is provided below.

PB is a fairly new process to the UK and e-PB is even newer. There are very few areas that have implemented e-PB beyond providing additional information online to support an offline PB process. However, to give you an idea of what can be done, we have included a case study from Alston Moor in Cumbria. They did an online PB process for their community travel plan. A few other places that are considering or have tried an element of e-PB are Staffordshire, Lambeth, Tower Hamlets and Manton. Manton included videos of projects seeking the funding which were also available online, as well as at meetings, for people to view. Tower Hamlets included budgetary and PB information on their website as well as at meetings. Staffordshire used the internet as one way of getting involved in PB, along with text and face to face voting. Lambeth have plans to adopt a similar approach to Staffordshire.

The remainder of the guidance consists of tools which we have adapted from our own processes in discussing and thinking about e-PB. The purpose of the tools is to provide you with a starting point for your own discussions about e-PB, to help you think and discuss the various possibilities and issues and to come to your own conclusions about whether or not you want to use e-PB and if so, how and at what stages in the overall PB process you might use it. The tools aren't designed to provide the answers for you and they aren't designed to help you put together the nuts and bolts of an e-PB process.

We intend for these tools to form part of a new edition of our toolkit for PB, which will also have a number of tools new to the toolkit for PB overall. These tools may also be useful for e-PB. We suggest you look at our website at www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk for more information, guidance and tools on PB as a whole.

Opportunities and Risks of e-PB

Opportunities	Risks
Provide wider access to information. Information can easily be exchanged in a variety of formats eg videos, blogs etc	E-PB may open up access to some groups of people at the expense of others. Whilst some may choose to participate online others may choose not to or are unable to.
May enable engagement with groups that wouldn't necessarily engage face to face PB eg young people, busy lifestyles, rural communities, people with disabilities etc	There is little objective evidence that e-PB actually supports PB processes as a whole.
People can participate in a way that suits them, at a time that suits them in an environment they may find more comfortable	Whilst the growth of online technologies is fast, take-up is much slower and considerable numbers of people do not have access to the internet. Costly technology may be used which becomes obsolete quickly
Online participation creates records of who participated, when and how, which can be a valuable source of information to the public sector	E-PB may be at risk of being manipulated and overrun by political elites, extremist views or those that are more technologically advanced.
Ongoing online tools, simulations, games, polls etc can keep momentum going throughout the PB process – keep people engaged.	New technology raises issues of ownership, attribution and accuracy of information. Once information is in the public domain it's hard to retain control over it and prevent manipulation or distortion of it.
Online simulations and games can help to explain potentially complex issues such as public budgets in a way that is fresh and engaging	New technologies can be very expensive to purchase and use. Software companies typically work for profit and aren't focused on democracy or engagement. They may lock users into expensive contracts for software. Copyrighted or bespoke software can limit flexibility of use.
People can choose to access as little or as much information as they like online – people are less likely to feel overwhelmed by too much information as they may in printed format.	The internet generally is always at risk of hacking, viruses and other malicious activity so any online activity is at risk from it.
Informal discussions in forums can lead to new and innovative ways of solving service issues – provide access to people's views and ideas in a way not usually afforded offline	There is no way of controlling online participation – there are risks around managing representation, evidencing participation and engaging with 'hard to engage' groups
Long-term e-PB may work out cheaper than face to face PB	Evidence of voting manipulation can be hard to evidence or disprove which may result in distrust and discredit the process

Opportunities	Risks
The online space can be utilised for a number of different engagement methods making it more cost effective	Organisations will need provide resources and training to use the technology effectively both for staff and citizens
E-PB can potentially reach larger numbers of people	Communication strategies and websites are often fairly rigid and it may be hard to fit new technologies effectively into existing parameters
Budgets can be made more transparent by publishing information online	The most disempowered, 'hard to engage' groups typically also lack access, trust and skills to use the internet. E-PB may further disengage these groups of people.
	E-PB doesn't easily provide a way for councillors to engage with the process or their constituents. It could undermine representative democracy
	Online participation is an individualist activity. Deliberation isn't facilitated so people do not come to a community view so are more likely to vote from an individualistic viewpoint rather than a community viewpoint.
	From pilots that have happened so far, small numbers of people actually participate in online discussions, although more read them. Thus e-PB could actually reduce the number of active participants.

Case Study: Alston Moor's Community Travel Plan Online PB

The Alston Moor Community Travel Plan was used as a pilot to conduct an online participatory budgeting trial. This trial was part of the EU 'eParticipation Action' programme launched in January 2007 to "demonstrate online tools for effective public debate and participation". The pilot project was one of four 'testbeds' and worked three other projects in Germany, Greece and Italy.

Alston Moor is a small rural community in North Cumbria with a population of 2,200. Cybermoor Ltd was the UK's first broadband, community owned co-op set up in January 2003. Cybermoor and the community of Alston Moor have experience of e-participation in discussing local issues online using their community portal (www.cybermoor.org) since 2001. The website has over 300 members and on average 35,000+ visitors per month. The community has a higher than average number of households with broadband (over 60% compared with the national average of 35%).

Cybermoor delivered the project in partnership with Cumbria County Council. The objective of the online process was to collect qualitative feedback from the community to influence the Community Travel Plan process, which aims to encourage the local community to discuss, suggest and agree realistic transport improvements proposals for their area.

Phase 1 of the online process gave an overview of the objectives of the Community Travel Plan and its ultimate aim of producing a community prioritised list of highway improvements. Online tools available within the site included access to comprehensive background material made available by Cumbria County Council. Users were asked to study the information presented to them and comment on the plan and the priorities already identified via an online forum and the interactive map.

In Phase 2, the community were asked to choose and vote, in order of priority, five schemes they felt would be the most beneficial to the community.

Although the site registered 3,829 views during the period it ran, a relatively small number (81) of participants actively took part in the process. However, it was agreed by those involved in the pilot that there were definite benefits to using online tools for community engagement processes, including:

- reach a wider audience;
- a greater and deeper range of information can be made available online;
- move public engagements beyond an opportunity to express opinions to active participation in the decision making process;
- enable informed decision making through a more deliberative process that would be almost impossible through more traditional off-line consultations.

Cumbria County Council also ran offline consultations through various existing engagement mechanisms for the community travel plan, so the online PB process was not the only way that people could participate in influencing the plan. However, the votes that were taken online did result in those projects being prioritised so people were making real decisions.

Experience from this trial suggests that online forums should not be seen necessarily as a less time consuming or cheaper alternative to face to face participation. Participants are not gathered in a (chat)room, left, and visited some time later to find that discussion has taken place, opinion formed and decisions made. As with face to face forums they need facilitation. They require the equivalent amount of time to organise and prepare as face to face meetings.

The process was able to make available a wider and deeper range of information than would be practical or sensible at public meetings. This enhanced 'layering' of information enabled participants to involve, and inform themselves, at the levels of their choice. It would be possible to support face to face participation by including relevant documents on the internet with perhaps an accompanying online discussion forum.

In terms of the quality of participation it has been noted that, unlike many online forums, there were no 'facetious' comments. It can be argued that by emphasising the involvement of the County Council, and by the amount of detail provided, that we have succeeded in emphasising the importance of participation. The context for the e-participation was that it grew out of previous public and other meetings in Alston Moor and was part of an already known decision making process. Priorities were identified and costed and a significant amount of background material was made available to the public.

Tools - 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	
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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.

Using e-PB throughout the whole PB process

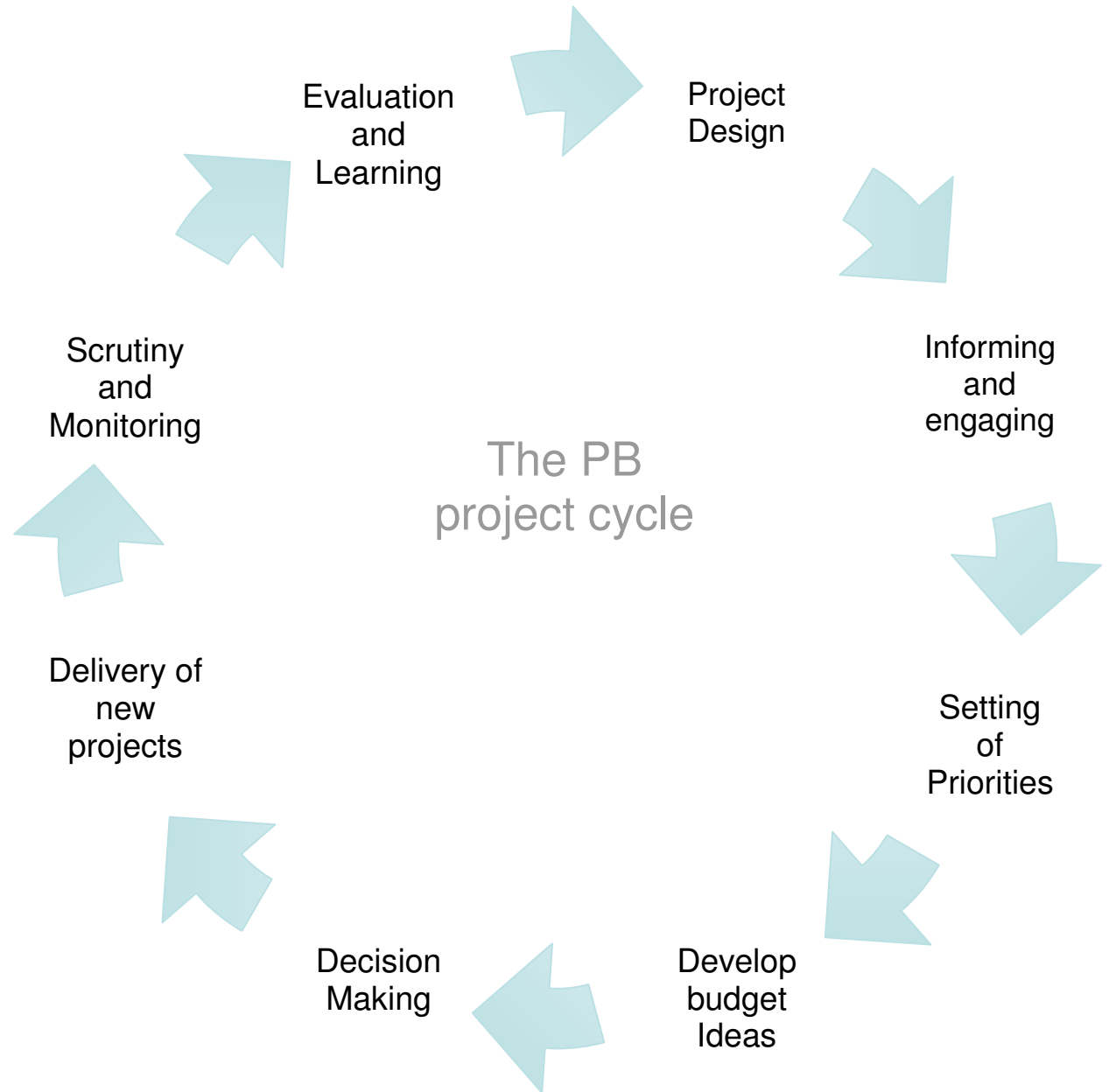
The diagram graphically illustrates how a PB process moves through a number of stages.

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.



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?
<i>a) Councillors are concerned the process is unrepresentative or misses key participants</i>	<i>Councillors, officers and community representatives</i>	<i>Examples where benefits have been shown. Share monitoring data. Invite councillors to the event</i>	<i>PB Unit toolkit, regional networking, participation data, benchmarking.</i>	<i>Stronger process, recording of participation. Extra work in specific communities.</i>
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

If you would like to discuss PB or e-PB or both, have any queries or just want to have a chat through various aspects of your project, we are available by email and phone. We can also arrange to meet you to talk face to face or with a group of colleagues or stakeholders.

We try to put as much information as possible on our website about PB. Our website is www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk

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