What is an e-petition?

An e-petition is an idea, a call for action or a proposal put forward by a citizen to the local authority. The proposal is published on the council webpage, and other citizens can support it by signing it.

The petition is perhaps one of the simplest democracy tools available today. The idea is that an individual can submit a proposal and obtain support from other citizens. E-petitions give people a simple and easy-to-understand way of engaging in the development of the local community, and thereby to gain an understanding of the democratic processes. This gives all citizens the opportunity to engage with community issues between elections. E-petitions do not change the role of the elected representatives, but rather provide them with better insights into and understandings of what engages the citizens.

It is the simplicity of petitions that makes this tool particularly suited to be used via the internet. You can submit, support and follow proposals, as well as view the results online. Of course, petitions may also be conducted via mail or telephone, but the simplest and most cost-effective method, and the one which gives the largest number of people the opportunity to follow the process, is to use an online system. If a local authority should choose to accept petitions also via mail and telephone, these should be entered into the online system so that they, too, are visible on the webpage.

Introducing e-petition systems gives local authorities new ways of gaining insights into informal discussions and debates, for example in online social media, about public service issues. E-petitions give local authorities an official channel for these debates through their own webpages. Through a political commitment it is also possible to bring e-petitions that receive strong public support into the political process. This provides the local council or health authority with the opportunity to address ideas and proposals through the formal structures and make visible the democratic process, which also includes prioritisations.

The Citizen Dialogue project has initiated a scheme to offer local authorities the opportunity to try out the e-petition tool. We use the English expression 'e-petitions' as a working name but hope that local authorities will make up their own terms for this approach when it is presented to the citizens. Malmö, the first municipality in Sweden to introduce e-petitions, calls its approach "the Malmö Initiative".

E-petitions are a new tool, which is offered by the Citizen Dialogue project to municipalities and county councils for development and trial through a new learning network. In this factsheet you can read more about this tool, which was developed in the UK and since then has spread all over the world. E-petitions provide a simple way for people to submit ideas and proposals to the local authority. Malmö is the first municipality in Sweden to introduce e-petitions.

We hope that you will find the contents of this brochure interesting, and that it will make you want to know more about the e-petition tool. More factsheets will be published, and if you would like to receive them you are welcome to subscribe by sending an email to **marie.kullgren@skl.se**. If you want to know more about the project, please contact **lena.langlet@skl.se**, **kjell-ake.eriksson@skl.se** or **anders.nordh@skl.se**.

Aim and purpose of e-petitions

A clear purpose is at the core of how an e-petition system is designed. Clarity of purpose helps manage citizens' expectations of what the system will do. Of course, the aims may vary, but in general the focus is on making more people participate in the development of the community in order to counteract a democratic deficit. But this is not enough; the aim must also be to make the local services more effective and to raise quality by having citizens contribute their own knowledge and experiences of local public services.

From a citizens' perspective, an overarching purpose of the work could be described as the citizens gaining meaningful democratic experiences, where they feel that:

- They understand in advance what will happen and what advantages may be gained from participating.
- The local authority has followed through on what was promised.
- They may not have obtained exactly the results they wanted, but they understand why.
- They have had the opportunity to meet with other citizens and together develop proposals to influence the development of the community in which they live.

Origins in the UK

Initially, the e-petition tool was developed in the UK and the Commonwealth countries. These countries have a long tradition of petitions/proposals where citizens collect signatures for a proposal, which is then submitted to the decision makers. In the late 1990's, a modernisation program for public services was initiated in the UK. The aim was to promote people's trust in public services and to improve public service efficiency. This involved a requirement to involve citizens in the development of local services.

Several public authorities developed new methods for involving people, and some of these were ICT-based. In 2006, a special initiative to develop online participation methods was started. A number of pilot areas, including Kingston and Bristol, developed various methods; one of which was e-petitions. The idea was to make the handling of petitions more transparent and to make it possible for new groups to submit initiatives to the local authority. Since then, e-petitions have spread to other countries in Europe and the rest of the world; including Sweden. The design of e-petitions and who is responsible for them differs between countries and organisations. The starting point has always been to create a system that is suited to the particular circumstances of the community in question.

The advantages of e-petitions

- An e-petition is a simple tool which is easy for the citizens to understand and use. Because of its simplicity, it is a good method for stimulating local engagement.
- E-petitions are managed via the internet, and are useful tools for reaching new groups of people.
- Efficient e-petition systems provide feedback to participants and thereby promote positive participation experiences.
- As well as the person submitting the petition, all citizens, politicians and administration officers can follow the processing of it. The method is based on openness and transparency.
- It is easy to sign an e-petition; no particular skills are needed.
- Online petition tools may be adapted to different organisational sizes, which means that they can be used by small municipalities as well as large county councils.
- E-petitions provide elected representatives with the opportunity to become more visible to citizens. Their role is also important when the e-petition system is introduced.
- The local authority can choose to stay in contact with those who have signed an e-petition and can in that way reach more active citizens.

The road to an e-petition system
10 steps for a successful process

Step 1 – Initiation

The idea of introducing e-petitions may come from various sources – individual public servants or politicians, or from a local political party. Regardless of who puts forward the e-petition proposal, it is necessary to have in-depth discussions about the purpose of the system. If the conclusion of those discussions is that e-petitions should be introduced, a political decision to that effect – including how it will be managed – needs to be taken.

Step 2 – Planning

Once the council has decided to establish an e-petition system, the planning phase begins. The more thoroughly this phase is carried out, the higher the chances of success. This involves, among other things, reviewing the internal processes, planning the practical running of the system, creating a clear structure vis-à-vis the users and deciding which resources will be used to administer the system.

Step 3 – Choice of technical solution

Technical considerations
Here, there are a range of alternatives. The service can be outsourced or run within the internal administration. The most common approach is to have e-petitions submitted on the council's webpage; that way all published petitions can be viewed by everyone. The choice of technology must be based on the functions that the systems should include.

Step 4 – Implementation

When the decision has been made, the planning done and the IT system selected, the implementation phase begins. The most important aspect of this is to design the way a petition will be presented on the website. E-petition systems may look different in different communities, but they usually comprise the following:

- A description of how the e-petition is processed by the local administration.
- The rules for e-petitions.
- Information of any thresholds; the number of signatures that are needed before the authority will start processing the proposal.
- A "code of conduct."
- Clear information about handling times.
- Clear and concise language being used in both designs and descriptions.
- A description of the way the e-petitions will be moderated.

Step 5 – Pilot test

Before the system is launched, a pilot test is a good idea. Through the processing of a number of challenging e-petitions, both the technical solution and the administrative processes are tested. Here the focus should be on the whole process, not just the technical system.

Step 6 – Marketing

To a large extent, the marketing is about timing – it is important to be neither too early nor too late. When an e-petition system is introduced, it is important to market and inform about it continually until you arrive at a stage where people see it as a natural way of influencing local services. Getting there takes patience and perseverance and is not something that is achieved in just a year or two. During the marketing you should keep in mind that the citizens are not a homogenous group that all seek information in the same way, and that you therefore need to use a range of different channels for disseminating information.

Step 7 – Launching

On the day of the launch of the e-petition system it may be a good idea to draw extra attention to it by festivities, displays in public places where people can test the tool, "walk and talk"-activities where people are invited to participate, etc. The launch can also be built into already established events and activities. Here, too, timing is very important in order to reach the greatest possible effect.

Step 8 – Realisation and moderation

The system is up and running, all components are in place, and the officers in charge of running the system hopefully have a number of e-petitions to administer. At this stage it may be a good idea to have weekly debriefs to discuss how the system functions, internally as well as externally.

Step 9 – Follow-up

Already in the planning phase, it is important to establish methods for follow-up. It is also important to decide who is responsible for the follow-up, time-plan and the dissemination of results to politicians, officers and citizens.

Step 10 – Evaluation, improvement, learning and dissemination of results

By analysing the results of the follow-up activities, ideas for improvement may be developed and actions taken. It is important to reflect on what can be learnt from the process and the results, and how this may affect and change the working methods. The aim should be to evaluate and analyse whether the goals that were set for the e-petition initiative have been reached, both with regard to democratic development and increased efficiency.

Malmö – the first municipality in Sweden to introduce e-petitions

Malmö is the first municipality in Sweden to introduce e-petitions. The method is called "the Malmö Initiative." Here is the story of the project as told by municipal commissioner Anneli Philipson and project leader Grethe Lindhe.

Anneli Philipson, why did you introduce the opportunity to submit e-petitions?

In Malmö we have tried several different methods to develop e-democracy. In discussions with the political committees we discovered that there was an interest in promoting e-democracy, and on that basis we produced two different tools for that. One is the Malmö Initiative, and the other is the Malmö Panel. The Malmö Initiative is a tool which may be described as a sort of simplified "suggestion box" on the internet. It is a forum where Malmö residents may submit proposals for how public services can be improved. Then other Malmö residents may comment on and discuss the proposals. The proposals that appear on the website may serve as inspiration to the politicians, and they can bring them into the decision processes.

The Malmö Panel is a digital panel with 1,600 Malmö residents. The participants give their views on and respond to questions from the elected representatives in the political committees. Through the panel, the representatives can check on various matters fairly early on in a decision-making process. You might say that we now have a way for the Malmö residents to bring their ideas to the politicians, and another one where the politicians in turn bring their questions to the residents. I think it is important that we show that we are interested in communicating with the citizens of Malmö, that we are open to proposals and ideas and invite them to a dialogue.

Have you received any proposals?

We have been running the Malmö Initiative for a little over a year – we started in July last year – and we have received close to 200 proposals. This shows that the people in Malmö have many ideas and suggestions.

What are the proposals about?

Most proposals are about the environment, traffic and city planning. We do not get all that many ideas about schools or care for the elderly, but maybe the Malmö Initiative is not be the best tool for dialogue about those questions. We may have to find other ways to get that discussion going.

Are people allowed to comment on the proposals even if they do not live in Malmö?

Of course, but the Initiative is about Malmö. You may have views on, for instance, transports to and from Malmö, or how you are treated when you come to Malmö. Naturally, the proposals don't necessarily have to concern local politics; central government politicians are free to read the Malmö Initiative and comment on the proposals, but it was created primarily for the local municipality.

Are all proposals published?

A few proposals are not published. We have officers who review them before they are passed on to the Malmö Initiative. But those that have not been published are very few. For instance, there have been proposals that do not require political decisions, such as simple matters of the local neighbourhood: bushes that need trimming or wrongly parked cars. That type of question does not belong in the Initiative, but are of course passed on to the relevant department in the municipality.

Do you have a set of rules for this?

We had a discussion about rules when we started the Malmö Initiative. Our conclusion was that initially we would not need a set of rules. We wanted to wait and see if there was a need. But so far, no such need has arisen. The officers modify all proposals, and if there is anything that is questionable, they raise it with us politicians.
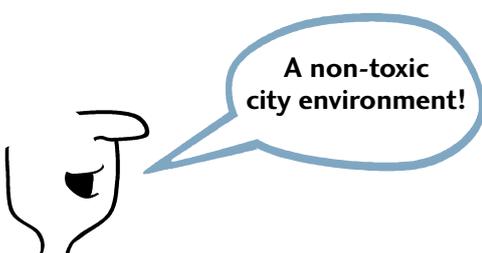
What could be improved?

Something that has not functioned very well is the dialogue on each proposal, and we want to improve that. It must be made easier to discuss and comment on the proposals, and we are currently looking at technical solutions to come to grips with that problem. We would also like the political parties to be active in the Malmö Initiative. As soon as our discussion forum is up and running, I think it will be easier for the political parties to step in and comment on the proposals. It doesn't have to be only the municipal commissioners who participate in the discussion.

How have the media reacted?

The media have been interested in and positive to the Malmö Initiative. Occasionally the newspapers report on the five most popular proposals, or proposals which no-one else has signed. The fact that the media publicise the Malmö Initiative and point to it as a way of influencing what happens in the municipality makes more and more people interested.

How do you market the initiative?

When we launched the Malmö Initiative, we made extensive marketing efforts. Now

> Speed limit 30 km/h in Håkanstorp-Johanneslust!

> Compensate Limhamn-Bunkeflo for the high rental costs of their premises!

> Make the Möllevång market car free!

> A non-toxic city environment!

> Build low-cost homes for students and young people in Malmö!

The five most signed proposals!

Continued Malmö is the first municipality in Sweden to introduce e-petitions ➤➤

that it is established, we inform via the regular channels, such as the newspaper Our Malmö. In that newspaper, which is published eight times per year and distributed to all of Malmö's residents, we inform about the Malmö Initiative and the opportunity to submit proposals. We may also write about the various proposals and what happens to them.

You were inspired by Bristol in the UK – how does their way of using e-petitions differ from your Malmö Initiative?

In Bristol they handle the proposals in the same way as our "citizens' proposals", which in accordance with Swedish law enter directly into the political decision-making process. We already have that tool, which is administered by the Malmö district. Instead, the Malmö Initiative means that we invite citizens to participate in a dialogue. Another difference is the way we do politics. In the UK, collecting signatures for petitions is a long-established tradition, and e-petitions are a way of digitising that procedure. We don't have that tradition in Sweden. But we were inspired by e-petitions as a technical tool for submitting proposals and creating a dialogue between the people of Malmö.

What advice do you have to those who plan to introduce e-petitions?

One advice would be to be clear, both to yourself and to others, about the purpose. Do you want to introduce e-petitions to get a dialogue and a discussion going, or to bring finalised proposals into the political decision-making process? The purpose affects the way you design the technical tool. I am not always a friend of new technology, or let's say new technology is not always a friend of mine, so to me it has been important that this tool is not more difficult to handle than any other dialogue tools just because it's computer-based.

What's special about the Initiative is that we are encouraging a dialogue between people living in Malmö. At the Malmö Initiative I can submit a proposal, and then someone else may come in with more ideas and build on my proposal, then someone else again, and so on. The dialogue is digitised, and new proposals may appear which perhaps otherwise would never

have emerged. This could never have happened if we had not made it digital, so that the Malmö residents can communicate with each other.

I see e-petitions as one tool among many for dialogue between people. Different people choose different ways of communicating with the local council and the politicians. Many young people use the internet as a natural everyday tool, and I hope they will be attracted by a forum such as the Malmö Initiative. To some people it will be easy to submit proposals to the Initiative via our webpage; others will pick up the phone and call the municipal commissioner; yet others will send email. And some will pocket their anger or call a general meeting.

People will find different ways to start a dialogue, and the Malmö Initiative is one way – it's as simple as that. For those who want to introduce e-petitions, the important thing is to be clear right from the start about what it is that people are invited to, and to have the courage to try things and learn as you go along.

Grete Lindhe, Project leader of the Malmö Initiative

We learnt this tool from the English, who are very good at e-democracy, and I must say that the Malmö residents have been much more interested than we thought they would be. We have received some 200 proposals, but the important thing is that there are many more Malmö residents who support them, and several proposals are supported by as many as 300 people.

The proposal which so far has received the highest number of signatures is "Towards a non-toxic city environment!" Those who

Article from the newspaper Vårt Malmö.

submitted that proposal have received a lot of media attention, and they also used their own webpage to create engagement and collect signatures. The proposal is out until May 2010, and then we'll see where it ends. Many proposers ask what they should do when they have received a number of signatures on their proposal. We tell them that they may submit it as a citizens' proposal supported by those who signed it. It takes resources to manage an e-tool, even if the Malmö Initiative does not require very much.

We are planning to develop it further through a discussion forum, where for each initiative you can engage in dialogue and discussion about the individual proposal. We think that will lead to further improvements.

Links to organisations with e-petitions

The city of Malmö – http://www.malmo.se/Kommun–politik/Paverka.html
Birmingham – http://epetition.birmingham.public-i.tv/
Bristol – http://epetitions.bristol.gov.uk/index.php
The parliament of Scotland – http://epetitions.scottish.parliament.uk/
The Netherlands – http://www.petities.nl/