

Selecting and setting-up an e-petition facility

e-petitions are tried and tested. Governments across the world have been using e-petition facilities successfully over the last ten years. As such, the technology and knowledge of how it can be used to support local petitioning is well developed.

Moreover, e-petitions are popular with the public; local authorities advanced in e-petitions report that they account for almost half of all petitions received.

e-petition facilities are not designed to replace traditional paper petitions but instead used to enhance the petitioning process and further develop public participation.

practical advice for
local authorities

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About this document

The aim of this document is to provide practical advice and assistance to local authorities implementing the e-petition requirements of the Local Democracy Economic Development and Construction Act 2009¹. This should be read in conjunction with this document and is subsequently referred to as 'the LDEDC Act'.

The content of this document focuses on how to select and set-up an e-petition facility and covers option analysis, feature selection and effective operation. It has been produced with input from early adopters, suppliers and market experts and forms part of a wider package of supporting materials such as the petitioning online community of practice².

For petitioners

- Petitioners can discuss a petition and petition outcomes
- Petition organisers can back-up their petition with additional evidence
- Petitions can be signed conveniently and are held securely
- Petition organisers benefit from convenient ways to promote the petition

For local authorities

- Moderation ensures inappropriate or ineligible petitions are not lodged
- Moderation provides the opportunity for petition organisers to be made aware of alternative options for resolving the issue
- Better monitoring of live issues
- An e-petition facility can draw attention to other online services

In implementing an e-petition facility, local authorities can realise a number of stakeholder benefits

For both

- Duplicate petitions are less likely
- e-petitions can be easier to process
- There is increased transparency and accountability
- e-petitions can be more effectively timed with the decision making cycle of Local Authorities

¹ Local Democracy Economic Development and Construction Act 2009.

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2009/ukpga_20090020_en_1

² The petition network

<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/c/2195982/home.do>

Requirements of the LDEDC Act

Section 10 requires principal local authorities to provide a facility for electronic petitioning. As such:-

- Authorities **will need to put in place an e-petition facility** and in doing so evaluate the different options available.
- We recommend e-petition facilities have regard to e-government statutes and standards, such as web accessibility guidelines.

Section 11 (petition schemes) requires principal local authorities to make, publicise and comply with a scheme for handling both paper and electronic petitions.

- We suggest that good petition schemes will incorporate arrangements for paper and electronic petitions in a consistent manner, setting out clearly how to petition in hard copy and electronically.
- A principal local authority **must publish its petition scheme on its website** and consequently we suggest that a good petition scheme will clearly signpost the authority's e-petition facility. In-turn, the e-petition facility should make clear links to the petition scheme.

Section 12 (Petitions to which a scheme must apply) has a number of relevant stipulations, namely S12.(1)(b), S12.(3)(b) and S.12.(1)(d). As such:-

- Authorities might want their **facility to alert** citizens or officers when certain thresholds or triggers have been reached. For example, when a petition has gained enough signatures to trigger a council debate.
- **Local authorities can choose to verify signatures** if they wish. We recommend that local authorities consider if they want their e-petition facility to include functionality which assists with this or has features to detect suspicious activity.

- Principal local authorities are **only required to respond to e-petitions made through their e-petition facility** but they can choose to respond to e-petitions submitted by other means. For example, those forwarded by other authorities, submitted by email or sent by intermediaries such as local newspapers. We recommend that local authorities should consider which types of electronic petition will be accepted as part of their petition scheme.

Section 14 (requirement to take steps) has relevance in S.14 (1)(b) and S.14 (7). In particular:-

- An e-petition facility **must feature moderation** so that e-petitions can be vetted before they go 'live'.
- A local authority's petition scheme **must** ensure that the authority's e-petition facility allows citizens to create a petition which can be published online and made available to others for electronic signature.
- When an active petition is made **there should be a mechanism for notifying the petition organiser** in writing (or by email) of the steps the authority has taken or proposes to take in response to the petition and of the authority's reasons for doing so.
- A principal local authority's petition scheme **must** ensure that where an active petition is proposed to the authority, **the authority must publish that notification on the authority's website** within the specified period unless the authority considers that in all the circumstances it would be inappropriate to do so.

As well as familiarising itself with the LDEDC Act, a local authority should be aware of other statutes and standards that can influence the design of an e-petition facility.

These are explored in the next section...

Other requirements

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 should already be familiar to local authorities. The FOIA laws apply to e-petitions too. Particular attention should be given to the disclosure of signatures. While some petitions are generated in the public domain with no expectation of anonymity, e-petitioners can wrongly assume their participation is private.

- Good facilities will include a 'privacy policy' which details how the authority intends to use personal data. For example, "we will only use the information you provide us to verify the authenticity of signatures. Unless you ask us not to, we will write to you a maximum of two times about the issues raised in the petition."

The Equalities Act 2006 requires public bodies to take steps to avoid discrimination against certain groups in society.

- Facilities should conform to the 2008 Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0³. Adhering to these guidelines will ensure that web content is formatted in a way which these groups find easy to deal with.

I feel ePetitioning is really important - a way of furthering the inclusivity etc of the council. It is not just disinterested or disadvantaged people who cannot get involved in local issues, but busy people who have trouble doing much else other than work and bath the kids before 8pm - the Internet is my saviour.

Petition Organiser

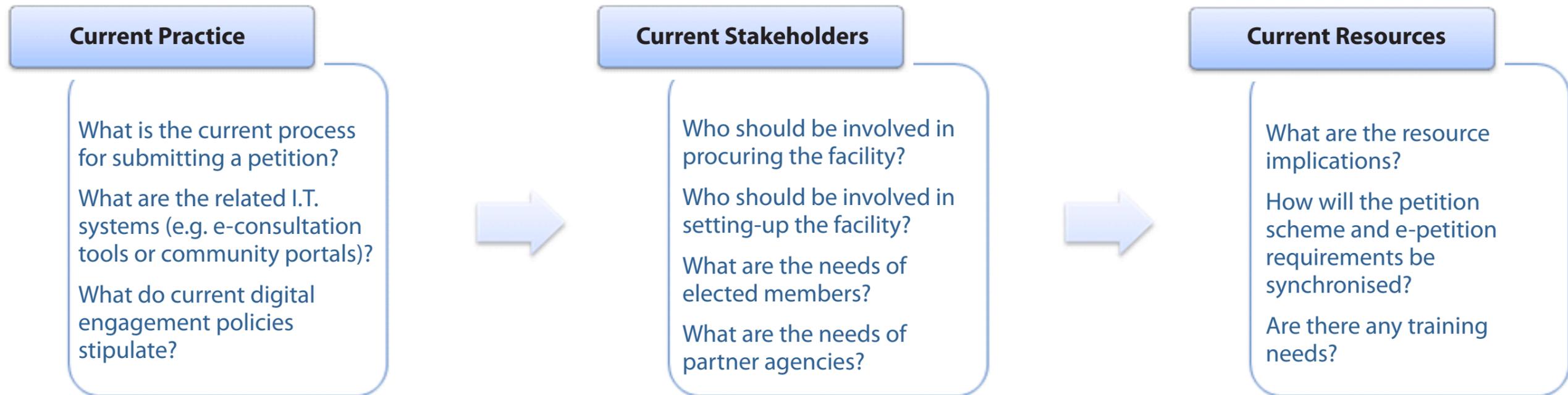
One of the roles of the councillor is to provide help, and mine is an ethnically diverse ward and there are certain groups and organisations - ethnic and religious - that find it difficult to get accurate, adequate representation. And as they get access to technology, this presents a chance to give them that representation - it is much more inclusive.

Elected Member

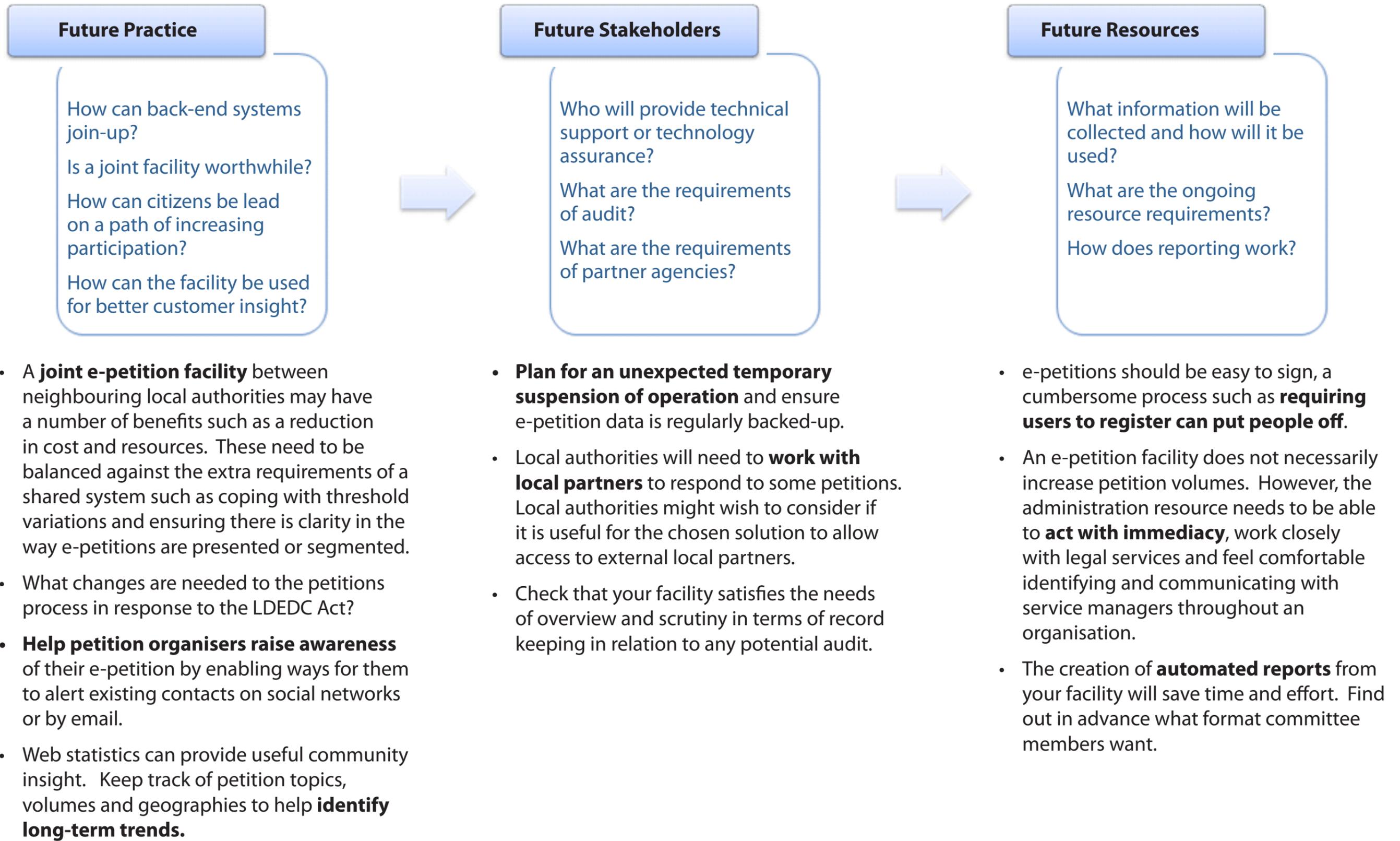
³<http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>

e-petition audit

Use this framework to identify the *additional* requirements of an e-petition facility, as shaped by the current practices and future needs of your organisation



- Think about how **paper petitions and e-petitions converge**. For example, what should be done in terms of archiving?
- Local authorities should consider **how best to integrate** their e-petition process with relevant online information. For example, linking e-petitions to council meetings or decisions, webcasts or online forums.
- Can **existing software tools** provide e-petition functionality with the purchase of a simple add-on?
- It is likely that more than one person will need to administer the facility. **What levels of access will therefore be required?**
- The facility might **affect the working arrangements of a number of departments** such as democratic services, I.T. and corporate consultation.
- **Elected members** can also support petitions. It is a good idea to keep them informed, **encourage them to promote the facility among their constituents and discourage them from using it for political purposes.**
- Procuring a facility **doesn't have to be expensive** but some thought should be given to the ongoing cost/resource requirements of each option.
- **Training needs are varied.** For example: how to operate the features and what constitutes a valid petition.



Feature summary

Use this summary to formulate a set of core technical specifications for your e-petition facility

Mandatory specification

- The public-facing user interface meets the minimum government web accessibility guidelines
- The system operates in a way that adheres to data protection law
- e-petitions can be moderated
- Users can create, view and sign e-petitions
- Citizens can view the outcome of petitions

Suggested enhancements : optional features which will improve productivity

Recommended specification

- The tool can detect suspicious activity
- The tool collects web statistics
- The tool has reporting features
- The tool has facilities to handle data from paper and electronic petitions
- The user and administration interface is easy to use
- The tool can electronically acknowledge the receipt of new e-petitions
- The outcome of an e-petition can be relayed to the petition organiser by email
- The tool can be administered simultaneously by a number of people, each with varying degrees of access control

Creating an e-petition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to capture optional supplemental information from the petition organiser such as the action they wish to be taken, by whom, when and the actions taken prior to lodging the petition.
Viewing and signing an e-petition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A search facility • A petition list which includes the total number of signatures to-date and the start/end date of each petition • A way of visualising petition thresholds (as set in your petition scheme) and progress thereof • Allows the use of popular digital identities such as government gateway or 'Open-ID' if applicable. This will help citizens remember their details and improves authentication. • A petition archive, mindful of the Data Protection Act • A filter to display petitions by status (e.g. open or closed, by date or alphabetically) • A list of rejected petitions
Comments and forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability for the petition organiser to set-up discussions or contact other petitioners. This could be on the system itself or externally (e.g. using Facebook)
Feedback and response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A single and specific point of contact for all users by virtue of an email address (e.g. petitions@localauthority.gov.uk) • Alerts for elected members
Security, Validation and Privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signature validation such as requiring the petitioner to respond to a verification email • Safeguards to reduce the likelihood of false results such as the flagging of petitions which have been electronically signed in rapid succession • Safeguards to prevent the automatic creation of content by computers (SPAM). If this relies on extra input from the petitioner then make sure the process is straightforward for groups with accessibility constraints
Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow e-petitions to include keywords (tags) so that they can be sorted more easily • Each petition should generate its own, easily promoted web address (URL)

Tips and tactics

This section contains useful tips on how to get the most out of an e-petition facility.

Privacy policy and disclaimers

Local authorities should create a privacy policy which incorporates a data protection statement to alert petitioners that their signatures will be made public, their activities logged and potentially captured long-term by internet search engines.

Examples are provided below:-

Data Protection Act 1998. The data controller is {example council}. The details you provide on this petition will only be used in connection with {insert a short description of **all** the purposes you want or intend to use this information for}. Your information may be shared with {brief description – e.g. the petition organiser}.

People visiting the e-petition will be able to see your name in the list of those who have signed it but your contact details will not be visible. Information we collect includes {insert any details of information logged such as IP addresses}.

{Insert wording on the procedure for changes to this policy}.

Disclaimer on external content : Although {insert council name} aim to monitor all external links as best we can, we are not responsible for the content or privacy practices of external websites. Any external links to other websites are clearly identifiable as such. {council} is not responsible for the content of those pages and excludes all liability for such content to the fullest extent possible under English law. To report an offensive external link, email {insert email address}.

Validation of signatures

Accepting anything other than digitised paper petitions or those from trusted petition schemes increases the risk of fraud. Good e-petition facilities include tools to prevent or flag misuse. These might include:-

- Petitioners being asked to verify their email address and not being allowed to sign the same petition more than once
- Automatic checks on the validity of postcodes and the cross-checking of personal information
- Logging an Internet Address (IP) for each signature [be sure to notify citizens of this in any privacy policy].

The User Interface

The design of an e-petition facility should be carried out with the objective of maximising user-friendliness.

Simplicity will generate effectiveness. If there is complexity around creating, viewing or signing a petition then citizens might easily be put off. It is equally as important to ensure the facility is easy to use for system administrators.

In accordance with this **we recommend that e-petition facilities:-**

- Have consistent styling in accordance with the principal local authority website so that petitioners can recognise the facility as being official
- Contain substantial links between pages on the principal local authority website and the e-petition facility
- Allow each petition to have its own, concise web address

Tips and tactics

Ongoing maintenance

Activity reporting, including that of suspicious activity, is a useful requisite.

- **Look for facilities that will provide alerts.** Groups of elected members or senior officers may want an alert when a petition is started or submitted.

Procuring a facility from a third party

In certain circumstances, local authorities are obliged (i.e. required by law) to seek tenders when entering into a new contract with a service provider.

Obligations may arise under European Procurement Directives and national legislation (i.e. UK law), or simply under the standing orders of the local authority itself (i.e. the Council's own rules).

The standing orders will regulate the manner in which competition is invited, the type of procedure and the financial thresholds above which competition is required.

It is important to note that even where a local authority is not obliged by law to tender, it may often choose to do so as a means of ensuring best value. This is becoming increasingly common, and therefore you may face a tender process even where there is no legal requirement for the council to go down that route.

Unique characteristics

e-petitions and supporting content

The pre-petitioning phase is unique to e-petitions and is the time between an e-petition being submitted for publication on the e-petition facility and the authority's decision to make it available on the facility for signature.

The existence of this initial step means that **petition organisers can be assisted with the wording of their e-petition** and made aware of alternative options for resolving the issue.

Authorities can further improve the clarity of e-petitions by helping petition organisers' focus on stating what action they would like. For example, by structuring the e-petition declaration (prayer) so that it starts "We, the undersigned, request that...".

Timescales

As well as defining when an e-petition starts, authorities have the option to define the default and maximum e-petition duration. However, it makes sense that petition organisers can schedule their petitions to coincide with key meetings of council. As such, authorities may want to incorporate flexibility and provide links to council meeting calendars.

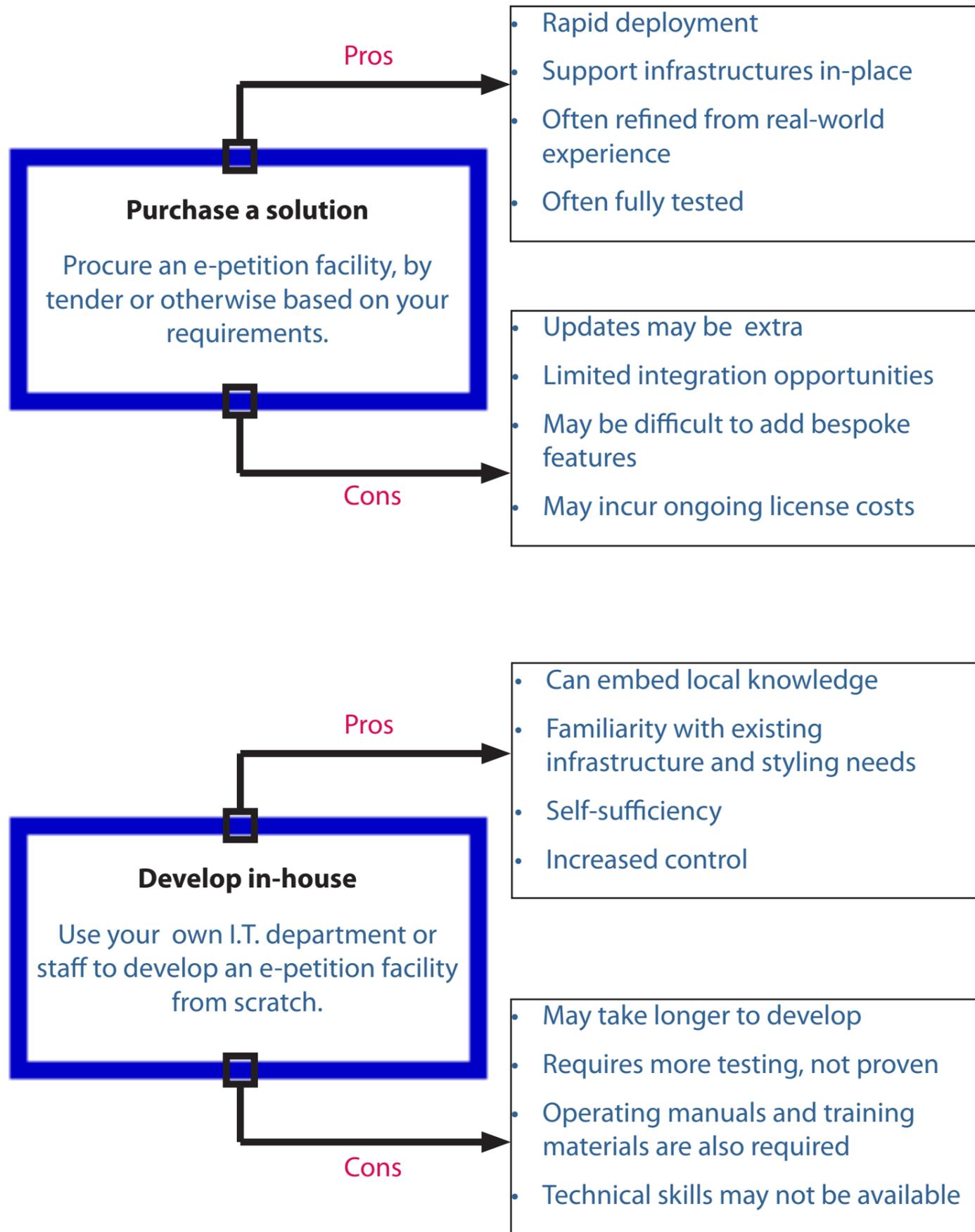
Submission

Think about the journey of a petitioner, particularly after an e-petition has been signed. As well as confirmation that a signature has been received, encourage them to go on and do something else.

Authorities have the option of an automatic handover procedure whereby e-petitions are submitted as soon as the closure date is reached or to wait for the petition organiser to trigger submission.

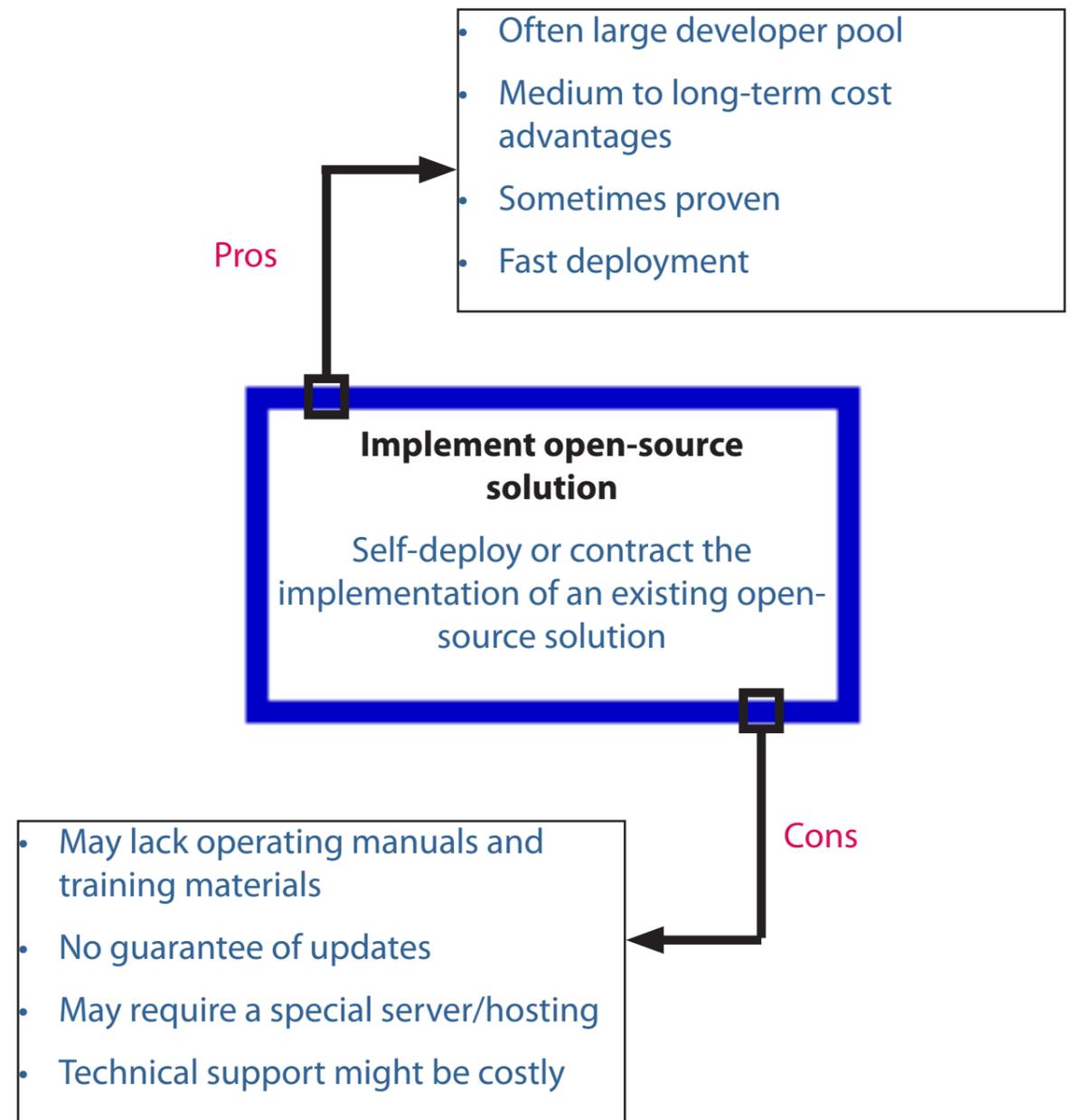
There is no right or wrong approach but the increased transparency of e-petition facilities can add to a **heightened expectation that petitions are submitted in a timely manner.**

As such we suggest that the minimum requirement on local authorities is to **remind the petition organiser to submit the e-petition soon after the closing date.**



Implementation options

The main options for selecting an e-petition facility are explored on this page. Local authorities may wish to consider each option in relation to the audit and feature requirements set out earlier in this document.



Preparing an e-petition facility

Once installed, an e-petition facility needs to be well implemented. This checklist contains suggestions for ensuring that all of the supporting structures are in-place.

The e-petition facility is compatible with any standards or commitments made in respect of public engagement and consultation



The facility is completely compatible with the petition scheme



Stakeholders are well briefed and have received adequate training



The IT system hosting the facility can cope with sudden surges in demand



A crisis management procedure is in place to deal with press and communication enquiries following a sudden surge in support for a specific petition



All page texts have been checked and the system has been self-tested to identify any snags. Penetration testing may be necessary to ensure the facility is secure from hackers.



Staff are satisfied that the facility is secure and compliant with web accessibility standards



Promoting the facility

There are a number of ways in which local authorities can promote their new e-petition facility; these should be considered against key audiences such as local community groups. For example:-

- A press release.
- Direct marketing
- Promotion to community and voluntary groups, perhaps through a workshop or a roadshow.
- Regular updates to Councillors about current issues and resolutions.
- Notifications on the local authority website or partner sites.
- Notifications to citizen panels, adverts in periodicals such as council or parish magazines.
- On-line advertising (e.g. using blogs or by sponsoring search engine keywords).
- Embedding links from various parts of the council website, e-democracy tools or electronic contact channels. For example, council operated digital television services or by adding a link to email

Launch day

The initial launch of an e-petition facility is vitally important to its success or failure.

We suggest that authorities think about launching their facilities with at least one live e-petition.

A 'primer' e-petition such as this can often be readied by speaking to elected members or community groups in anticipation of launch day.

Ongoing tasks

Once an e-petition facility is fully operational it must be continually maintained, updated, developed and advertised. Many of these systems will be perceived as 'experimental' by staff and public alike.

Referring to the fact that the facility is not a finished product, known in I.T. terms as a "beta", affords forgiveness when things go wrong and promotes a culture of user feedback. We recommend that authorities label the service as being 'in beta' until the number of post-launch tweaks and adjustments have settled to a minimum.

To this extent we also recommend that authorities:-

- Provide regular updates to the site in an effort to maintain fresh content.
- Periodically review the site features to ensure they are functional.
- Monitor how well staff are responding to e-petitions raised, particularly in relation to the expectations set-out in a scheme.
- Make citizens feel that their engagement is meaningful by highlighting positive outcomes.
- Be seen to be active, particularly with providing petition feedback and chasing petition organisers on their intentions for closed, yet inactive e-petitions.
- Include a review of the facility as part of any wider review of the petition scheme.
- Involve community groups and petition organisers in the continual improvement of petition schemes and e-petition facilities