



## Lessons learnt from CitizenScape Pilot trials

*CitizenScape has been developed to address the problem of democratic deficit, by utilising the phenomenal popularity of online social networking. Co-creative online spaces such as Facebook, YouTube and MySpace are successfully welcoming citizens to engage and build communities – places where everyone can have their say, sharing knowledge, ideas and opinions. Engagement with democratic decision-making processes has meanwhile significantly decreased, and these state-of-the-art web-based tools have been neglected in their potential to bridge that gap. The underlying assumption of CitizenScape is that people are already using the internet in a civic way – the question is whether it is possible to connect this to formal democracy.*

Here we describe some of the learning from the project and group these together into strategic, policy and process issues which we believe will be of interest to anyone who is trying to use new technologies in order to support democratic engagement. This might include Elected Representatives, Government Officers and Community Co-ordinators. We also believe that the strategic issues highlighted are of interest to the practitioners and best practice leaders in the field of eDemocracy.

### 12 key learning points from the CitizenScape Project

#### Strategic issues that were addressed

- 1 You need to build trust in the process
- 2 Co-production of content and process can help build levels of engagement
- 3 At some point you need to address the need to involve the elected representatives and bring together the engagement and democratic agendas
- 4 Democracy requires Accountability – to work effectively online we will need to consider how to manage online democratic identities

#### Policy points to be discussed

- 5 Co-production means that you can't always moderate content – you need the right policy in place to manage this risk
- 6 You need to consider if you want to 'short-cut' the recruitment process by offering incentives

#### Process: Some practical advice

- 7 Take the time to establish the level of current activity before you start
- 8 Don't expect to be able to choose the topic – it's more likely it will choose you
- 9 Building these communities takes time – you need to build this into your project plan
- 10 Make sure you have made the right assumptions about user knowledge

#### Project Learning for future funded projects

- 11 Try to use an Agile method for gathering requirements on an ongoing basis
- 12 Devolve site administration to the project participants wherever possible

The project started with a very wide set of objectives and provided an opportunity for the team to explore some of the wider issues which are highlighted when you look to engage with citizens within their own social web spaces. The following sections highlight the most important lessons which have been learnt from the pilot trial projects: >>

## Strategic

Some of the issues that were encountered were at a more global and strategic level – these really highlight some of the big questions that are arising around discussions on eDemocracy and the democratic deficit. In a project this size, we were not able to address these topics to any great depth but have been able to add to the body of evidence that should be encouraging more work and thinking in these areas:

**1 You need to build trust in the process:** Trust is a huge factor in participation – no-one will participate if they do not believe that they will be listened to. *“It is mind-boggling that huge levels of complaints by the public have so little impact. I am furious at how powerless we seem to be.”* Citizen, Bristol

It is difficult to establish trust in the platform from the start of the project. This makes setting the code of conduct a critical part of the project as it gives all parties the opportunity to discuss how they want to work together. This discussion was, in the main part, carried out within the project teams rather than within the wider community, as the pilot sites did not feel able to openly address this point with stakeholders because of their internal restrictions around what can and cannot

be allowed on Council websites. This is an issue that needs to be addressed more vigorously as part of the process in the future. *“It’s important to establish a regular presence to get a response – It helps to build some social capital first. The tone of content is also important: posts work better if you ‘ask for help’ rather than trying to tell people stuff. Posting interesting links is a good entry point”* Officer, Bristol

## 2 Co-production of content and process can help build levels of engagement:

One of the objectives of the project was to use citizens in order to create and manage much of the dialogue on the CitizenScape platform as well as to use their wider networks in order to promote and drive traffic to the sites. The project teams worked with a variety of volunteer moderators and Community Ambassadors. However the initial view of the role was too rigid, with an expectation that there would be similarity between different individuals in how they wanted to carry out this role. By the end of the project the Community Ambassador role was described as a collection of tasks rather than a defined role, and these tasks operated across a full spectrum from marketing to mentoring, from moderating to contributing. It could be seen that the full range of these tasks actually start to resemble the role of the elected

## What is CitizenScape?

Over a 12 month period, pilot trials of the CitizenScape programme integrated and tested Web 2.0 tools and solutions in a socially purposeful way, encouraging people to participate in concrete legislative and democratic processes. With a clear objective of increasing citizen participation by 25%, four contrasting local authority pilot sites were trialled across Europe. The specific focus of these trials was to engage citizens

with the implementation of EU environmental legislation at a local level. The CitizenScape project connected existing social web environments to democratic debate in order to create a co-produced civic space which empowers individuals and communities to formally participate as decision-makers.

The table below shows who the CitizenScape partners were:

Partner	Role		Web
1 National Microelectronics Applications Centre Ltd	Project Manager, Coordinator, user requirements, sustainability.	IE	www.mac.ie
2 Public-i Group Ltdd	Technology Platform service Provider/Evaluator.	UK	www.public-i.eu
3 Bristol City Council	ePetition/Viewfinder System & User Org/Field Trials	UK	www.bristol.gov.uk
4 Comune di Genova	User Org/Field Trials – Large City	IT	www.comune.genova.it
5 Donegal County Council	User Org/Field Trials – Remote Rural Area	IE	www.donegalcoco.ie
6 Rozvojova Agentura Zilinskeho Samospravnneho Kraja	User Org/Field Trials – less favoured region.	SK	www.razsk.sk

representative, and this tension is something that needs to be explored further.

Where a Local Authority is trying to work with a specific topic then they need subject based evangelists as Community Ambassadors, as they will help to connect the debate to the pre-existing community far more effectively. In addition, the topic we chose was an 'expert' one and as such not easily related to more informal debate. This widened the gap between what people were talking about and wanted to talk about. It might have worked better to develop this through NGO relationships rather than directly to individual citizens. The NGOs could broker the conversations through Community Ambassadors who are experts in the space.

**3 At some point you need to address the need to involve the elected representatives and bring together the engagement and democratic agendas:** All of the sites felt that they had not done enough to involve elected representatives in the project. This was partly because of the timing of the project and choice of subject but also because of an acknowledged skills gap where elected members have not yet come to terms with how to use social media. This is not a new discovery but the need to involve members, at the same time as ensuring that they have the skills needed in order to be involved, is a critical one. *"The participants need to see the politicians listening even if the information is actually used by officers"* Officer, Bristol. This comment encapsulates the belief of the project that it is essential to find a way to involve politicians in online participation projects such as CitizenScape. There are considerable barriers to doing so in terms of resources and adoption of technology by this group, but it does not change the fact that the citizens need to see the politicians publicly committing to the space and to the process if it is to have credibility.

**4 Democracy requires Accountability:** To work effectively online we will need to consider how to manage online democratic identities: In order for participants to move seamlessly from their social web spaces to the civic space it is clear that a shared identity management system would make the user experience far simpler. The team responded to this by implementing OpenID for all user registration on the site and this will be evaluated as part of the project. Technicalities aside, one of the new issues that arises through this approach is the need for participants to decide whether the online identities that they use are

suitable for the civic space. This is an issue which was first highlighted with Local Authority staff but is also relevant for all participants and will be discussed as part of the evaluation of the project.

The questionnaire respondents were relatively sophisticated web users with multiple email addresses and the regular users of screen names. However, when asked to work in the democratic context of CitizenScape most people in fact used their real names and not their screen names. This is a result that warrants further investigation.

## Policy

Further to these larger strategic questions there were a number of policy decisions highlighted for participants:

**5 Co-production means that you can't always moderate content – you need the right policy in place to manage this risk:** Overall the ability to re-purpose content from other sites was extremely helpful and meant that we could quickly build content rich sites. The fact that we could easily include content from other sources also meant that the pilot sites were able to work more effectively with external partners and be seen as collaborators rather than competitors for web traffic. However, the fact that this content could not be moderated does bring some concerns and is something that needs to be managed. While on the one hand all the sites can see the value in doing this there are some practical and legal considerations which need to be addressed. The European Project format meant that most sites could side step this problem, although it is an issue for ongoing sustainability. The view of the team is that this needs to be managed through a formal risk management process so that all risks are transparently managed, and that a more formal social web contract is to be signed with participating sites.

**6 You need to consider if you want to 'short-cut' the recruitment process by offering incentives:** The role of subject expert is essential and requires considerable motivation, and the 'host' needs to ensure that they are incentivising people to participate. This is not necessarily a cash incentive (though this was trialled) but also other content or subject interest incentives. >>

### *Process: Some practical advice*

The project also found that some simple steps can make the use of social media tools work far more effectively:

**7 Take the time to establish the level of current activity before you start:** The CitizenScape approach to some extent assumes pre-existing social web activity – both in terms of sites and in terms of individuals – which can be leveraged in order to start the conversation within the platform, as well as by providing potential Community Ambassadors. Over the course of the project it became clear that there is a need to include a social web audit at the start of such a project and to resample this data at regular intervals to ensure you have a clear picture of social media activity. A template for the social web audit has now been developed and has been applied in pilot sites in the UK.

**8 Don't expect to be able to choose the topic – it's more likely it will choose you:** With the relatively short period of the project (short when compared to policy cycles), participation relies more heavily on the topic which is chosen. We have learnt that as the social web is inherently self-managed, attempting to 'choose' the topic to engage with is very difficult (as CitizenScape focused on the local implementation of EU legislation). Web 2.0 means that the "Command & Control" of the message is not possible, as it is on a traditional website. So we cannot choose or force the topic, which is exactly what the pilot trials have found. *"The kids are very environmentally engaged but did not want to be engaged with a specific topic - We have achieved engagement – just not on the subject we intended!"* Officer, Donegal

**9 Building these communities takes time – you need to build this into your project plan:** One major learning point is the fact that building trust with the citizens takes time and the pilot sites felt this project is not long enough to do this thoroughly. While many of the participants were very positive about the approach they were too used to the usual 'top down' approach to engagement and were not ready to participate fully.

**10 Make sure you have made the right assumptions about user knowledge:** This level of reliance on the social web assumes a level of technical sophistication from the participants which is more available within certain demographics. In designing these spaces, it is important to try to avoid building for the enthusiastic early adopter and to aim at building for a participant who is less engaged with the technology in the first place, as the usage of these technologies is on the increase.

This means that the offline engagement which needs to accompany the project must include a large element of en-skilling the participants if this approach is to work. The project team is approaching this by spending time training community moderators and activists and encouraging them to pass these skills on.

### *Project Learning*

The team also identified some project related learning which will be of use in future funded projects:

**11 Try to use an Agile method for gathering requirements on an ongoing basis:** Overall the technology was fit for purpose and fulfilled the terms of the brief. However many of the design assumptions at the start of the project were, on reflection, very web 1.0 and better suited to building traditional websites rather than web 2.0 web spaces. As has been stated, the technology continued to evolve throughout the project. The pilot sites have each been learning a great deal about the social web environment throughout the project, and were not perhaps in a position to clearly state their requirements at the outset.

**12 Devolve site administration to the project participants wherever possible:** As discussed the pilot sites found that they needed to make more changes to their sites than could be managed by the development resource at Public-i. The response to this has been to create far more sophisticated administration tools than were previously envisaged.