

Citizen Engagement Platforms and Public Accountability in Local Governance: A Framework for Digital Answerability, Responsiveness, and Enforceability

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Abstract

This conceptual paper aims to reframe citizen engagement platforms in local governance as accountability infrastructures rather than mere participation or service-delivery tools. It seeks to clarify under which conditions such platforms generate answerability, responsiveness, and enforceability. The study adopts a conceptual and theory-building approach, grounded in Bovens' accountability framework. It develops an integrative model linking platform design features (information disclosure, interaction, and traceability) to citizen engagement, accountability processes (questioning, justification, and visibility of follow-up), and accountability outcomes. From this model, testable propositions and measurable indicators suitable for municipal contexts are derived. The paper shows that digital platforms contribute to accountability when they enable intelligible information, structured citizen voice, and traceable follow-up mechanisms connected to formal oversight arrangements. The framework identifies responsiveness (e.g., response time and resolution rates) and enforceability (e.g., implementation of commitments) as observable outcomes of digital accountability. It also highlights boundary conditions such as digital inequality, data quality, and administrative capacity, which influence whether engagement translates into meaningful accountability. The study advances accountability theory by specifying its socio-technical instantiation in platform-mediated governance. It contributes a design-oriented framework that moves beyond participation metrics and makes accountability empirically observable in digital settings. For practitioners and policymakers, the framework provides actionable guidance for designing and evaluating citizen engagement platforms, emphasizing intelligibility, traceability, and integration with oversight mechanisms to ensure that participation leads to tangible accountability outcomes.

Keywords

Citizen engagement platforms; local governance; public accountability; digital accountability; responsiveness; enforceability

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Introduction

Local governments increasingly adopt digital platforms to engage citizens in planning, budgeting, service requests, and policy feedback. While the open-government agenda links transparency and participation to public accountability, research still often treats engagement as an end in itself rather than as part of an accountability chain. As a result, a key question remains: when do citizen engagement platforms merely

amplify voice, and when do they function as accountability mechanisms that create answerability, responsiveness, and enforceability? (Mangai & Ayodele, 2025; Mao et al., 2025; Secinaro et al., 2022).

This article proposes a framework that connects platform design features to citizen engagement and, in turn, to accountability processes and outcomes in local governance. Based on Bovens' conception of accountability (Bovens, 2006) as an actor forum relationship (information, questioning, judgment and follow-up), we demonstrate how digital platforms can facilitate each of these stages. Specifically, platforms can make data visible, organize questions and justifications and support follow-through when integrated into regular oversight processes. We contribute by translating the accountability relationship into platform design requirements and observable municipal outcomes, enabling evaluation beyond participation metrics (Bovens, 2006; Firtin et al., 2025).

Beyond application, we refine accountability theory by specifying its socio-technical instantiation in platform-mediated governance, thereby extending the actor forum relationship into digitally structured interaction environments.

We do not propose a general digital-government maturity model, a technology-adoption checklist or a comprehensive theory of digital transformation. Instead, it is an accountability-mechanism model that specifies the minimum design and institutional conditions under which engagement platforms produce answerability, responsiveness, and enforceability (Bovens, 2006; Spanò et al., 2026).

1. Review of the scientific literature

1.1. Accountability as a relationship (Bovens, 2006)

(Bovens, 2006) defines accountability as a relationship between an actor and a forum in which the actor has an obligation to explain and justify conduct, the forum can question and judge, and the actor may face consequences. This definition highlights that accountability is not synonymous with transparency: information is necessary but not sufficient. The accountability process involves (at least) information, debate, and judgment, and it becomes strong when judgment can trigger consequences (sanctions, correction, or remedial action) (Bovens, 2006).

1.2. Digital governance and open government

Digital governance research emphasizes that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) can enhance transparency and facilitate public oversight by enabling real-time, accessible information and lowering access barriers. Evidence from open-data initiatives shows that disclosure can empower citizens to monitor government actions and increase civic involvement, while also facing obstacles such as data quality problems, limited digital literacy, and bureaucratic resistance. These obstacles matter because they condition whether information becomes intelligible scrutiny. In open-government practice, participation is similarly framed as complementary to accountability: participatory processes are expected to strengthen the ability of stakeholders to hold officials accountable, but only when they are inclusive, meaningful, and connected to decision processes (Mangai & Ayodele, 2025; Hidayat, 2025; OECD, 2017).

Recent research in accounting and public management cautions against viewing digitalization as an automatic solution. As (Spanò et al., 2026) demonstrate in their review of public sector accountability, the success of digital transformation relies heavily on specific institutional contexts and governance structures. The authors argue that digitalization often acts as a temporary palliative rather than a true panacea for long-term accountability, frequently introducing ethical and democratic challenges that remain insufficiently examined. This perspective reinforces the need for frameworks that explicitly map the mechanisms through which digital platforms either succeed or fail in generating accountability.

1.3. E-participation and digital accountability

The E-participation literature provides a bridge between engagement and accountability. The UN-inspired typology of e-participation differentiates e-information, e-consultation, and e-decision-making, moving from disclosure to interactive deliberation and influence. Participation should therefore be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for accountability, which additionally requires structured justification and the possibility of consequences.

Recent empirical work finds that higher levels of e-participation are associated with stronger citizen voice and accountability-related outcomes, while also highlighting the role of access and the digital divide. Digital-accountability studies further argue that platforms can enable accountability when they create traceability of interactions and make follow-up visible, especially when participation is institutionally linked to oversight institutions (Mao et al., 2025; Firtin et al., 2025).

1.4. Dimensions of Accountability and forums in local digital governance

Local accountability is multi-forum. In municipalities, officials may be accountable not only to citizens (as a public forum) but also to elected councils/committees, auditors and inspectors, courts, and sector regulators. This matters because digital platforms can strengthen one accountability relationship (e.g., citizen scrutiny) while bypassing or weakening others (e.g., formal audit trails) or create overlapping demands that resemble accountability excess rather than a coherent system (Bovens, 2006; Spanò et al., 2026).

Bovens' framework (Bovens, 2006) suggests that accountability quality can be assessed by the quality of information provision, the quality of debate (opportunities to question and be heard) and the quality of judgement procedures (independence, clear standards and proportional consequences). Translating this to digital engagement implies that platforms should be evaluated not only by participation counts but by whether they improve the reliability and sufficiency of disclosed information, citizens' ability to pose questions and receive reasoned justifications and the mechanisms through which platform outputs can trigger correction, remedial action, or other consequences (Bovens, 2006).

2. How platforms become accountability mechanisms? The framework

As summarized in Figure no. 1, the proposed mechanism chain is built on one core premise: digital engagement platforms function as accountability infrastructures by converting public participation into transparent scrutiny and measurable follow-through. This requires three design layers (platform features) and two process layers (engagement and accountability process), culminating in outcomes that can be measured in municipal settings (Bovens, 2006; Firtin et al., 2025).

The proposed chain is analytical rather than strictly linear, as feedback loops and contextual moderators may reinforce or weaken the transitions between stages.

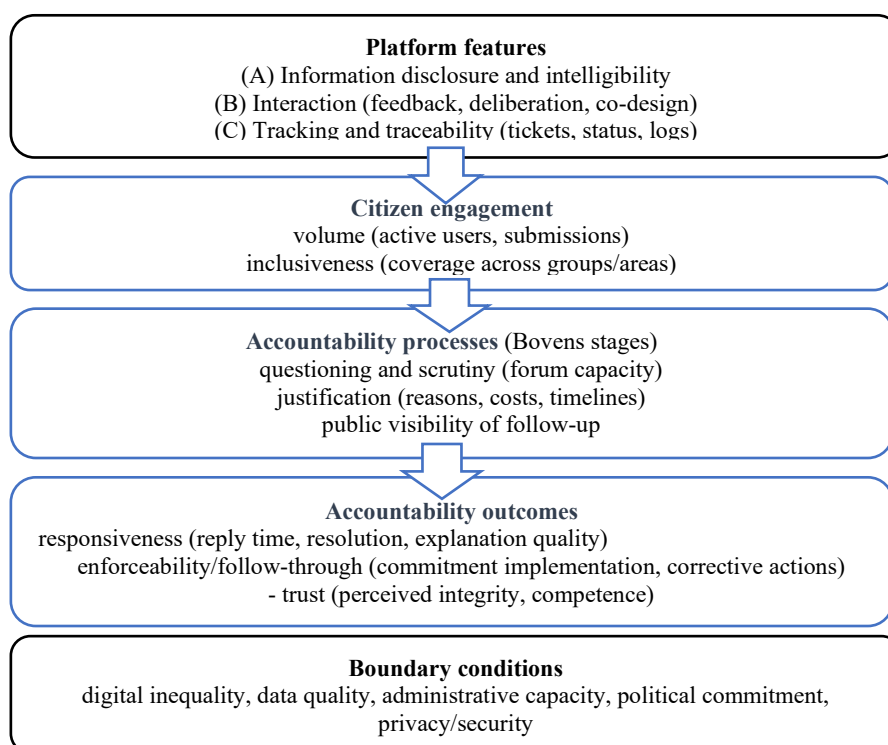


Figure no. 1. Conceptual framework (mechanism chain)

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Bovens (2006); Firtin et al. (2025)

2.1. Pathway 1: Answerability via transparency and intelligibility

Platforms strengthen answerability when they disclose not only data but also intelligible explanations of decisions and performance. Municipal dashboards that include budgets, project timelines, procurement information, and service standards can increase citizens' capacity to ask "why?" and to assess whether outputs match commitments. Open-data evidence suggests that real-time accessibility can facilitate public oversight and civic involvement, but only if citizens can interpret and use the information (Hidayat, 2025; OECD, 2017; Sleigh & Vayena, 2021). Intelligibility is also a communication and design problem. Evidence from public engagement research in data governance shows that visualizations and plain-language

explanations can improve clarity, understandability, and participation, thereby strengthening transparency and accountability perceptions. At the same time, visuals carry rhetorical power (logos/ethos/pathos) and can unintentionally mislead or manipulate if not designed and tested ethically. As state by (Sleigh & Vayena, 2021), for local-government platforms, this implies that dashboards, maps, and performance graphics should be user-tested for comprehension, include methodological notes, and avoid decorative transparency that users cannot interpret.

Proposition 1 (P1). Greater information disclosure and intelligibility features are positively associated with answerability processes (questioning and justification) on local platforms.

2.2. Pathway 2: Social accountability through voice and scrutiny

E-participation lowers participation costs and can widen access to feedback and deliberation. From an accountability perspective, citizen voice turns users into a forum capable of questioning and scrutinizing decisions. Platforms supporting discussion threads, endorsements, and co-creation may deepen scrutiny by making disagreement and alternative proposals visible (Secinaro et al., 2022; Mao et al., 2025).

Proposition 2 (P2). Interactive voice and deliberation features are positively associated with engagement volume and inclusiveness, which in turn increase public scrutiny and justification demands.

2.3. Pathway 3: Responsiveness as an accountability outcome

Local services (waste management, roads, permits, public lighting) generate frequent and concrete interactions. When platforms record requests and track official responses, accountability can be operationalized as responsiveness: reply to rates, response times, resolution rates, and the quality of explanations for accept/reject decisions. Responsiveness is defensible as an accountability outcome because it captures whether officials treat citizen claims as requiring both an answer and action (Dorasamy, 2025; Mangai & Ayodele, 2025). In this sense, responsiveness operationalizes answerability when responses are reasoned, publicly visible, and normatively anchored in an obligation to justify conduct.

Proposition 3 (P3). Tracking and case-management features are positively associated with responsiveness outcomes (reply rate, response time, resolution rate, justification coverage).

2.4. Pathway 4: Enforceability through traceability and oversight integration

The strongest accountability claim emerges when platforms connect citizen input to formal oversight (municipal councils, ombuds mechanisms, audit follow-up). Traceable logs and public status information can support consequences by documenting whether commitments were implemented and whether corrective actions were completed. Digital accountability research highlights that e-participation can enable accountability when it is institutionally embedded and when inequalities in access are addressed. Analogous designs in digital-audit contexts illustrate how citizen-initiated verification and complaint channels can be built into socio-technical accountability architectures (Abytaeva & Ryskulov, 2025; Bovens, 2006; Firtin et al., 2025).

Proposition 4 (P4). Oversight-integrated platforms (linking participation to councils/ombuds/audit follow-up) are positively associated with enforceability outcomes (commitment implementation and corrective action completion).

2.5. What counts as consequences locally?

In municipal settings, consequences are often administrative and procedural rather than punitive. Platform-enabled accountability can therefore be assessed through concrete, locally realistic follow-up actions such as: documented corrective actions and rework orders; service-level penalties or escalation rules triggered by missed response times; formal council motions, agenda items or hearings prompted by platform evidence; publication of audit follow-up and implementation status; and contract-management actions (e.g., supplier warnings, liquidated damages, or non-renewal) when issues relate to outsourced services (Bovens, 2006; Mangai & Ayodele, 2025).

2.6. Platform typology and accountability mapping

Citizen engagement platforms may take multiple archetypal forms, and the accountability pathway depends on which functions dominate. Transparency portals primarily enhance answerability by publishing decisions and supporting documentation, while participatory platforms (e-consultation, deliberation, co-design) emphasize voice and scrutiny. Service-request platforms (ticketing/CRM systems) excel at responsiveness, whereas oversight-integrated platforms link participation to council scrutiny, ombuds channels, or audit follow-up, thereby strengthening enforceability and corrective action (Deligiannis & Peristeras, 2025; Firtin et al., 2025; Mangai & Ayodele, 2025; Secinaro et al., 2022). Evidence from widely

used participatory platforms (e.g., CONSUL) highlights that participation gains remain uneven across socio-demographic groups and that accessible financial and non-financial information is critical for meaningful involvement. This reinforces the need to treat intelligibility and inclusion as design requirements, not optional add-ons (Secinaro et al., 2022).

Table no. 1. Platform archetypes and expected accountability emphasis

Platform archetype	Dominant features	Accountability emphasis	Illustrative indicators
Transparency portal (decision repository)	Publication of decisions, budgets, contracts; searchable archive; plain-language summaries	Answerability (information and justification)	% decisions with rationale/costs; timeliness of updates; readability/usability checks
Participatory platform (consultation/deliberation)	Proposals, threads, voting/endorsement; moderation; feedback on accept/reject	Voice and scrutiny; legitimacy	Participation rate; deliberation depth; % proposals receiving reasoned responses
Participatory budgeting / co-design	Rule-based process; project pages; budget constraints; progress tracking	Answerability and follow-up; allocative transparency	Budget execution updates; completion vs plan; citizen satisfaction
Service-request / CRM ticketing	Issue reporting; service standards; status updates; routing and escalation	Responsiveness	Reply rate; median response time; resolution rate; reopen/appeal rate
Oversight-integrated platform	Public follow-up logs; linkage to council/ombuds/audit; corrective action tracker	Enforceability / corrective action completion	Commitment implementation; audit recommendation completion; publication of remedial actions

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Deligiannis & Peristeras (2025); Firtin et al. (2025); Mangai & Ayodele (2025); Secinaro et al. (2022).

2.7. Boundary conditions: when engagement is not accountability

However, engagement does not automatically create accountability. Participation may be symbolic if inputs are ignored, if decision rationales are not published, or if follow-up is not visible. Inclusion and capacity are therefore critical: digital inequality, limited literacy, and infrastructural gaps can reduce the representativeness of platform participation and weaken the forum's ability to scrutinize. Data quality problems and bureaucratic resistance can also create transparency without accountability, where disclosure substitutes for justification. These boundary conditions should be modeled as moderators (or necessary conditions) in empirical tests (Deligiannis & Peristeras, 2025; Firtin et al., 2025; Hidayat, 2025; Mangai & Ayodele, 2025; Secinaro et al., 2022; Spanò et al., 2026).

In addition, digital platforms can introduce new accountability risks, including privacy intrusions, surveillance practices, algorithmic bias in automated triage or decision-support systems, and power asymmetries linked to platformization and vendor dependence. Digitalization may therefore destabilize traditional accountability arrangements unless governance structures explicitly address ethics, democratic quality, and interoperability with back-end financial and service systems. These considerations motivate evaluating not only increased engagement, but whether digitally mediated accountability remains fair, contestable, and institutionally anchored (Spanò et al., 2026).

3. Measurement orientation for empirical studies

3.1. From indicators to indices: a Platform Accountability Index

To facilitate cross-municipal comparisons, researchers can aggregate the framework into a simple Platform Accountability Index (PAI). One approach is to score platform design features across the three feature domains (disclosure/intelligibility, interaction, tracking/traceability) plus oversight integration (e.g., 0–2 scales) and combine them with observed outcomes (responsiveness and follow-through). Feature scores can be constructed via structured platform audits; outcome scores can be derived from administrative

records (e.g., response time, resolution, commitment completion) (Bovens, 2006; Mangai & Ayodele, 2025; Mao et al., 2025).

The PAI is not a substitute for causal analysis, rather it offers a transparent operational summary for descriptive benchmarking, cluster analysis (e.g., high participation–low follow-through) and as an explanatory variable in panel models (Bovens, 2006).

3.2. Measurement menu and data sources

Table no. 2 provides a pragmatic menu of indicators aligned with the framework. The list is designed for municipal datasets that combine platform analytics, administrative records, and (optionally) citizen surveys.

Table no. 2. Measurement constructs, indicators, and data sources

Construct	Definition (platform/accountability lens)	Example indicators	Typical data sources
Citizen engagement (mechanism)	Citizen participation volume and inclusiveness enabled by the platform	Active users; participation rate; neighborhood coverage; proposal/comment volume; deliberation depth (threads, sustained participation)	Platform logs; user metadata (where lawful); community surveys
Answerability (process)	Extent to which officials provide information and justification that can be questioned	Share of initiatives with published rationale, costs, timelines, KPIs; completeness/timeliness of budget execution or project updates; availability of plain-language summaries and tested visualizations (readability/usability checks)	Dashboards; open data portals; content analysis of posts and project pages
Responsiveness (outcome)	Timely and substantive response to citizen inputs	Reply rate; median response time; resolution rate of service requests; % proposals receiving accept/reject with reasons	Ticketing modules; CRM/service systems; platform case histories
Enforceability / follow-through (outcome)	Implementation of commitments and corrective actions triggered or documented via the platform	Implementation rate of commitments; publication and completion rate of corrective actions (e.g., audit recommendations)	Council/committee records; audit follow-up reports; platform status trackers
Public trust and perceived legitimacy (outcome)	Citizen trust, perceived fairness, and legitimacy of local decisions/services linked to platform use	Trust in local government; perceived transparency and fairness; perceived responsiveness; willingness to use and recommend the platform	Citizen surveys; platform feedback ratings; periodic satisfaction polls

4. Research designs to test the framework

Three complementary research designs can be used to test the proposed mechanism chain:

- Comparative municipal panel: collect platform-feature scores (disclosure, interaction, tracking, oversight integration) across municipalities and years and relate them to engagement and responsiveness metrics (e.g., response time) using fixed-effects models.
- Mixed-method platform audit: combine content analysis (justification quality, follow-up visibility) with interviews of platform managers and oversight actors to assess whether citizen inputs trigger formal processes.
- Natural experiments or staggered rollouts: exploit platform upgrades (e.g., adding a tracking module or public status pages) as events and estimate pre/post changes in responsiveness and trust perceptions.

In all designs, moderators should be measured explicitly (digital inequality, literacy, administrative capacity, political commitment), as they condition whether engagement translates into consequential accountability (Mangai & Ayodele, 2025; Nyadzi & Morris, 2026).

5. Discussion and implications

5.1. Accountability-by-design principles for local platforms

Across platform archetypes, the framework implies five practical accountability-by-design principles:

- intelligibility (plain-language rationales and ethically tested visualizations);
- contestability (routes for appeal, escalation and correction);
- traceability (logs, timestamps and public status tracking);
- oversight integration (linking outputs to councils/ombuds/audit follow-up);
- data stewardship (privacy, security, and transparent rules for automated triage/decision support).

These principles respond directly to calls to reimagine accountability under digital transformation and to address ethical and democratic challenges that arise when platforms are opaque, captured or poorly governed (Firtin et al., 2025; Sleight & Vayena, 2021; Spanò et al., 2026). This framework offers three implications for public accountability in local governance. First, it clarifies that platformization contributes to accountability only when it reproduces the core elements of the accountability relationship: information plus justification, questioning plus public scrutiny, and the possibility of consequences. Second, it identifies responsiveness as a locally observable accountability outcome that can be measured with administrative data, enabling more rigorous evaluation than perception-only studies. Third, it provides a design-oriented view: adding tracking, public status visibility, and oversight integration moves platforms from participation tools to accountability infrastructures.

For practitioners, the framework translates into actionable design recommendations: publish rationales and performance indicators in plain language; enable threaded deliberation and structured feedback; implement ticketing with clear service standards; and integrate platform outputs with council scrutiny, ombuds channels and audit follow-up, making corrective actions publicly visible. Policymakers should also invest in inclusion (access, literacy, accessibility design) to avoid accountability benefits accruing primarily to digitally advantaged groups (Dorasamy, 2025; Mangai & Ayodele, 2025; OECD, 2017; Secinaro et al., 2022). Positioning engagement platforms as accountability infrastructures also responds to recent calls in the public sector accounting and auditing literature to reconsider accountability under digital transformation. Rather than assuming technology is a panacea, researchers emphasize ambivalent outcomes and potential risks, including bias, privacy concerns, and the weakening of democratic accountability when platforms are opaque or captured by powerful actors (Spanò et al., 2026). Designing for intelligibility (including responsible visual communication) is therefore not ancillary but central to accountable digital governance (Sleight & Vayena, 2021).

Conclusion

This conceptual paper argues that citizen engagement platforms in local governance can be framed as public accountability mechanisms, when they convert participation into a structured accountability sequence: citizens access intelligible information, exercise voice and scrutiny, receive official justifications, and observe traceable follow-up and potential consequences. Building on Bovens' accountability relationship (actor–forum) and its core stages (information, debate/scrutiny, judgment, and consequences), we translate an abstract accountability concept into a platform-oriented mechanism chain linking platform features (disclosure, interaction, traceability) to engagement (volume and inclusiveness), accountability processes (questioning, justification, public visibility of follow-up), and outcomes (responsiveness, enforceability/follow-through, and trust) (Bovens, 2006). While trust is not accountability per se, it is treated here as a downstream perceptual outcome that may result from sustained answerability, responsiveness, and enforce-ability.

Our main contribution is therefore not an empirical test, but a parsimonious framework that makes accountability observable in digital settings: it clarifies when engagement is likely to be consequential (rather than symbolic), provides a platform typology and a measurement menu that municipalities and researchers can operationalize (e.g., reply rates, response time, justification coverage, implementation of commitments and corrective actions), and articulates boundary conditions: digital inequality, data quality, administrative capacity, political commitment, and privacy/security that explain why similar platforms can produce very different accountability effects.

The framework also yields a practical implication for design and evaluation: platforms should be assessed not only by participation volumes, but by whether they close the loop from citizen input to justified

decisions, visible follow-up, and credible consequences. Future research can test the propositions through comparative municipal studies, before-and-after platform upgrades (e.g., adding traceability or oversight integration), and mixed-method platform audits combining administrative logs with user experience and trust measures. In short, this paper positions digital citizen engagement as a potential accountability infrastructure, while specifying the institutional and design conditions under which that potential becomes real. We use the term “infrastructure” to denote institutionalized and routinized accountability mechanisms embedded in socio-technical systems, rather than merely technological tools.

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