
Project title: E-Democracy Initiatives
Strategy area: Governance

1. The Proposal

This proposal focuses on implementing the e-Democracy component of the Council's Draft Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Policy. This policy is currently in a draft format and is being presented to the Strategy and Policy Committee (SPC) on 16 February 2006 to be signed-off for the purposes of public consultation.

International evaluations of some e-Democracy initiatives have provided useful information on whether or not e-Democracy is able to impact on public participation and engagement levels in political decision-making processes. While some initiatives are clearly able to, the findings on others is inconclusive. As such, this proposal suggests taking a conservative approach to implementing the e-Democracy component of the policy, with the Council only implementing those initiatives that have proven successful (or are low cost and therefore lower risk) over the next couple of years while the initiatives that are more risky, high cost and/or resource intensive are further evaluated.

2. Strategic Fit

The e-Democracy component of the ICT Policy, and this proposal, directly fit with the following strategic priorities:

- Priority 13 The Council will improve civic decision-making, transparency and public involvement
- Priority 15 The Council will improve communication with communities.

3. Relationship to Existing Activities

The Council has been advancing its e-Democracy capability over the past few years through the information and functions it has made available on its website.¹

The proposal directly implements the e-Democracy component of the Council's Draft ICT Policy. e-Democracy will also play a critical role in supporting the desired outcomes of the Communication and Participation Project, due to be reported to SPC on 9 March 2006.

¹ Information-wise, the public is able to access: elected members' contact details; accountability information (annual plan, annual reports); policy and bylaws; meeting schedules, including reports and minutes; a consultation schedule; information on how to participate in the Council's decision-making processes in a number of different languages; and information on all of the Council's services. Function-wise, the public is able to: receive "web-alerts" when new information is put on the website; make an electronic submission for Council consultations; inform the Council of a problem through the "fix-it" page.

4. Proposal Costs

<i>Outline project costs per year</i>										
Project Component	Operating expenses \$000									
	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
<i>Web development</i>	50	50	0*	0*	0*	0*	0*	0*	0*	0*
<i>Marketing</i>	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
<i>Total</i>	55	55	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

* Further funding may be requested as a result of the further evaluations/investigation undertaken.

5. Project Outline

A “moderate approach” to implementing the Council’s e-Democracy policy means that only those initiatives that have proven successful elsewhere (or are low cost) will be undertaken in the short-term, while further investigation is undertaken on the higher risk and/or cost initiatives. As such, the following initiatives could be undertaken over the next two years within the above budget:

- a) *e-Public participation* – public participation submitted via an electronic form from the website for consideration at a committee meeting. Although it is currently possible for people to email comments to Democratic Services for distribution to Councillors, under this initiative the participation would be received in the meeting and recorded in the minutes in the same way that other public participation is. The Council’s Standing Orders may need to be changed if this initiative is to proceed, and rules would need to be established around language use, how often people could use the facility, and how many would be accepted per meeting (and whether or not this would impact on the number of public participants able to speak in total).
 Cost: None – an online form can be created and administered within current budgets
 Risks: Low – would create firm rules around appropriate usage
 Evaluations: None available.

- b) *e-Petitions* – the internet provides the opportunity for petitions to be run online. Such petitions can be established online, have names collected electronically, and then be tracked to show the Council’s receipt of it through to how it is responded to. This initiative may also impact on the Council’s Standing Orders as it elaborates on the current process, which is limited to how petitions will be received and treated at Council meetings.
 Cost: Medium-High - \$50,000 for software and officer time
 Risks: Low – although expectations would need to be managed regarding the impact petitions can have
 Evaluations: Positive. Increases transparency around the process.

- c) *e-Panels* – residents would be able to sign up to be part of a group that is regularly provided with information on relevant Council issues and consultations and asked to provide input/feedback. For example, Wolverhampton City Council in the UK aims to have 650 online participants who regularly participate in providing views on current issues facing the Council.

- Cost: Medium (\$30-50,000). This does not include officer time, which is included in the \$30,000 set aside for implementing and operating the “civic network” initiative (described in the “Engagement in Decision-making” new initiative – 43G). If the civic network does not go ahead, additional funding for officer time will be required for this initiative.
- Risks: Medium – would need to ensure appropriate resourcing so that people receive information regularly as well as feedback on consultations they have already been a part of
- Evaluations: Positive. Creates an informed group of people commenting on Council issues.

Note: This project differs to the “civic network” project being considered under the Engagement in Decision-making initiative (41G) as it is directed towards any interested citizen, who may not necessarily have expertise in a particular area of Council’s business.

Deliverables by 2006-09

By 2009, this initiative would have delivered a more comprehensive e-Democracy module within the Council’s website, which would include:

- 06/07: e-Public participation and e-Petition functions
- 07/08: e-Panels
- 08/09: understanding of the Council’s ongoing use of e-Democracy.

Drivers for the proposal

The identified drivers for the project are:

- Council’s agreement that its 1995 “InfoCity Strategy” be updated to an ICT Policy, and that an e-Democracy component be included in the new policy
- recognition that the internet provides the Council with new opportunities for engaging and communicating with the Wellington public.

Risks of postponing the proposal

e-Democracy provides an important new method for improving the way communities are able to engage with the Council (elected members and officers). Postponing the implementation of a more comprehensive e-Democracy programme may undermine trust and confidence in the Council’s commitment to improving its engagement.

Benefits

The potential high level benefits to accrue from this proposal are:

- improved community involvement in decision-making processes
- growth of trust and confidence in the Council’s decision-making
- the Council becoming a leader in e-Democracy in New Zealand.

Alternative options

Other options for implementing the e-Democracy component of the ICT Policy are:

- *Maintaining the status quo:* The Council has been implementing e-Democracy initiatives as an integral part of its internal Web Strategy. Incremental progress could still be made within established budgets, including low or no cost options such as an e-Public participation initiative. However, this option may result in no comprehensive or coordinated e-Democracy programme being implemented.

- *Undertaking an intensive roll-out:* A more intensive 3-5 year programme could be established requiring approximately \$100,000 per year for a 3-5 year period with ongoing resourcing in the outyears for additional operational staff and a marketing campaign. Such additional initiatives that could be undertaken include:
 - elected members websites and/or web logs
 - discussion forums.(Noting that the evaluations on these initiatives have currently proven inconclusive, although further research may support either these initiatives or new ones being undertaken later in the 3-5 year period).

6. Conclusion

e-Democracy provides an opportunity for the Council to use new technologies to enhance the way it engages with the public and enables it to participate in the Council's decision-making processes.

This project will implement the e-Democracy component of the ICT Policy (which is being presented to SPC to be signed-off for the purposes of public consultation on 16 February 2006) as well as significantly support the Communication and Participation Project (and Governance Strategy).