

eDemocracy Policy Framework 2004

Purpose

This document builds on the previous eDemocracy policy framework published in November 2001. It has been designed to guide the Queensland Government's future eDemocracy developments and directions. It is a statement of intent which reaffirms the government's commitment to using new and emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve community outcomes.

Definition

eDemocracy refers to the use of ICTs in democratic processes. It builds on opportunities provided by new ICTs, such as the internet, interactive digital television, and mobile communication systems, to increase public participation in government decision-making. eDemocracy provides additional avenues for governments, individuals and groups in the community to:

- engage with each other
- become informed about issues
- consult and exchange views on matters of public concern.

eDemocracy is one of the ways that government is using new ICTs to improve the way it does its business and to enhance community outcomes. Other ways include online government transactions, electronic access to government information, using ICTs to improve coordination across government operations and to build skills and competencies of officers.

eDemocracy in Queensland aims to complement traditional methods of community engagement, such as public meetings, workshops and focus groups, and to strengthen our system of representative democracy – it is not a different model of democratic governance.

Government role

Listening to and working productively with Queenslanders are two hallmarks of the Queensland Government's community engagement agenda. The government has initiated a multi-level approach to engaging with people and communities in the business of parliament and government including Regional Parliament, Ministerial Regional Community Forums, Community Cabinets and a host of other avenues. eDemocracy is a new and innovative avenue and is positioned firmly within the broader community engagement agenda.

Increasing public involvement in decision-making does not just mean finding better ways for governments and individuals to communicate with each other. It also means promoting informed and vibrant dialogue within the community on public policy issues – in effect, contributing to the democratic 'infrastructure'.

Government has a role to play in building the capacity of individuals and communities to engage in democratic processes. ICTs provide a means for doing so through improved access to information, new avenues for engagement at a community level, and by providing additional ways of communicating that encourage participation among those who are currently not actively engaged with government.

eDemocracy outcome

Inclusive, informed and productive public involvement in decision-making through the use of information and communication technologies.



- expanding channels – using ICTs to complement traditional forms of community engagement
- innovation – research and ongoing review to identify new opportunities, build an evidence base of what works and share knowledge to enhance good eDemocracy practice.

New eDemocracy directions for Queensland

Queensland has a history of successfully implementing eDemocracy initiatives. Online consultation, electronic petitions and broadcasting Parliamentary debates over the internet have been operating since 2002 and have been well-received and used by many Queenslanders.

The Queensland Government will, in collaboration with others, expand existing eDemocracy initiatives and continue to explore, develop, and implement innovative and effective ways of using ICTs that achieve inclusive, informed and productive public involvement in decision-making.

Immediate priorities include:

- continuing to build online consultation opportunities and further developing the government's community engagement website (www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au) including refining its functionality, useability, look and feel
- actively exploring national and international trends regarding the use of different ICTs for government and community democratic engagement
- new initiatives including developing ways to use and promote online tools to augment existing community engagement activities such as Ministerial Regional Community Forums
- working with other government agencies and levels of government to increase their capability

to undertake online engagement regarding policies and services

- building capacity of those involved in democratic engagement to make the best use of eDemocracy processes and tools.

Benefits of eDemocracy

eDemocracy in practice has many benefits. eDemocracy helps overcome some of the barriers to participation of traditional avenues by providing ways for people to make their views known to the government and parliament that are less limited by constraints such as place, time, mobility and other access restrictions.

This means a greater voice in the working of government for people who are less able or less inclined to engage with government. Both government and the public benefit from greater participation – a high level of public involvement means that policy can be developed with the benefit of a wide range of different opinions and evidence.

eDemocracy contributes to more informed policy debate by providing a convenient and efficient way for people to access and exchange relevant information and contribute opinions which inform and support deliberations on issues.

eDemocracy also taps into popular technology applications. For example, computers and mobile phones are already part of the daily lives of many Queenslanders and are seen by young people in particular as convenient, efficient and enjoyable ways of communicating with others. Online methods can distribute information to a wide audience quickly and relatively cheaply and contributions can be analysed and responded to electronically, making acknowledgement, analysis and feedback processes more efficient, timely and cost-effective for all parties.

eDemocracy objectives

The objectives of the Queensland Government's eDemocracy initiatives are to:

- provide safe, secure, efficient and effective ways for people to interact with the Queensland Government, Parliament and each other on public policy issues that are less limited by accessibility constraints such as place, time, cost and existing networks than traditional avenues
- increase knowledge and understanding about democratic processes and public policy issues in the community, which can in turn promote better policy choices, decisions and outcomes
- build the capacity and active participation of those involved in democratic engagement, including individuals or communities contributing to public policy making as well as public officials and elected representatives engaging with the community on these matters
- demonstrate government's responsiveness to public input and transparency of decision-making.

Queensland Government commitment

International experience suggests that the single most important success factor in improving community engagement is genuine government commitment to good practice engagement. The Queensland Government will engage and involve Queenslanders and their communities in government processes to strengthen communities and deliver responsive government. This means identifying and adopting innovative and effective ways of communicating, connecting and acknowledging the role of the citizen in shaping the development and implementation of policy.

Under the eDemocracy policy framework, the Queensland Government, in collaboration with

others, will continue to explore and implement ways in which ICTs can be used to strengthen democratic processes and produce better outcomes through community engagement in the business of government.

The guiding principles for Queensland's eDemocracy policy flow from the government's broader community engagement agenda. The principles are:

- inclusiveness – using ICTs to broaden community involvement in government decision-making including with hard-to-reach groups
- reaching out – using ICTs to improve access to information and assist knowledge-sharing and deliberation, so as to deepen community input to government decision-making
- mutual respect – applying consistent standards of respect for listening and responding to the views, concerns and experiences of Queenslanders whether they communicate with government using ICTs or more traditional forms of communication
- integrity – making effective use of ICTs to improve access to information that promotes informed deliberation and transparent decision-making
- affirming diversity – using ICTs to promote and incorporate diverse opinions and perspectives into government decision-making
- adding value – using ICTs effectively and efficiently to build partnerships and work productively together
- security and privacy – ensuring privacy protection, information security and identity authentication are addressed so that Queenslanders feel confident in participating online

Wider policy context

The eDemocracy policy framework is part of the Queensland Government's commitment to building a Smart State, where innovation and smart solutions are used to produce better community outcomes. eDemocracy policy links with the principles of the Queensland Communication and Information Strategic Plan and is also part of the Queensland Government's approach to community engagement as set out in the Community Engagement Improvement Strategy. eDemocracy initiatives complement and operate in conjunction with traditional forms of consultation and interaction between the public and government, to give people the opportunity to choose the method that suits them best and not be disadvantaged by being unable to access a particular method for communicating.

eDemocracy is a dynamic and evolving area. As ICTs expand and as the body of knowledge about eDemocracy activity grows, more opportunities emerge to build effective and sustainable eDemocracy practices. Policies need to be strategic, flexible and continually under review to provide the best outcomes.

eDemocracy key considerations

ICTs are powerful tools for improving the ways government and communities go about their business and interact with each other. Similar issues of public concern arise for eDemocracy as with any other use of these technologies.

- **Privacy and Security** – Protecting information and personal privacy is critical. Although Australia ranks highly in international benchmark studies on eGovernment performance, particularly on privacy protection, only about one-third of Australians trust the security of electronic communications with the public sector. eDemocracy practices will respect privacy and protect security

of information by strict adherence to government endorsed security and privacy principles. Queensland eDemocracy processes will also be designed to include appropriate safeguards for authenticating communications between government and the public.

- **Digital Divide** – While most Queenslanders use ICTs such as the Internet (over two-thirds of Queenslanders in 2003 accessed or intended to access the Internet in the following year) use varies by age, education, income and geographic location. There is a 'digital divide' where some groups in the community do not have ready access to ICTs. Others may have access but are limited by skills, knowledge and abilities to fully use the technologies. Some groups are therefore disadvantaged in taking up the opportunities offered by eDemocracy. Queensland government agencies are addressing these barriers in a number of ways including skills training programs and awareness-building activities.
- **Complementing other avenues for engagement with government** – The government is committed to continuing to use eDemocracy as a way of complementing, not replacing, traditional avenues for engaging with government.

Review and evaluation

Ongoing review is a key feature of the eDemocracy policy framework to ensure that emerging issues and opportunities in this rapidly developing field are identified and addressed. eDemocracy initiatives will also be regularly evaluated to ensure they are working effectively and delivering appropriate outcomes.

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