E-Petitions in Local Government: the case of Wellington City Council

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Abstract. This paper presents a case study of the use of e-petitions by local government. Wellington is the capital city of New Zealand and the local city council has a history of making innovative uses of ICT. In 2006 the city council launched a new ICT policy and one of the main aims was to use e-democracy to improve citizen participation. One way of doing this was by launching the use of E-petitions in 2007. This paper discusses some of the issues around the use of e-petitions and analyses the use of e-petitions by Wellington City residents between 2008 and 2010.

Keywords. E-petitions, e-democracy, local government, New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

Wellington is the capital city of New Zealand. The City Council (WCC) has a history of involvement in innovative uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In 1995 it launched an InfoCity Strategy (Huff 1996) which consisted of a number of initiatives based around the rollout of a fast broadband network in the central business district. Alongside the physical infrastructure, WCC put in place a number of projects to help community groups, such as free website hosting. It also improved access to computers in disadvantaged areas of the city.
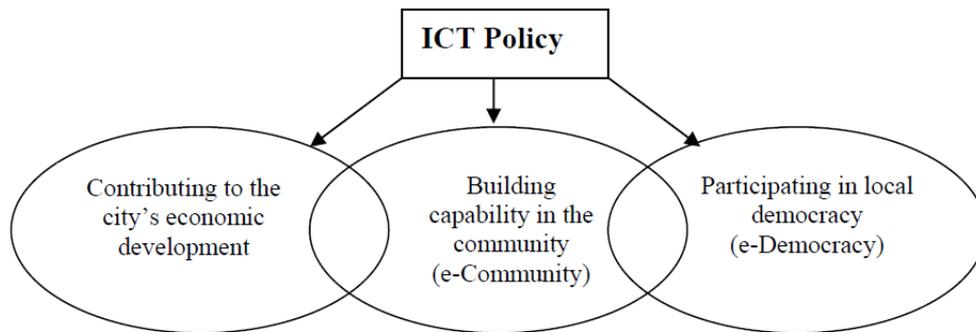
Figure 1: Wellington City Council ICT Policy Overview (Wellington City Council 2006) p3.

In 2006 WCC developed a new ICT policy (Wellington City Council 2006) which built on existing projects and also added some new initiatives. The policy was divided into three interrelated areas as shown in Figure 1. The e-community aspect was already well developed, but e-democracy and economic development were new areas. This paper concentrates on the developments the council put in place to improve e-democracy

E-DEMOCRACY

For both national and local government lack of participation by their electorates is a cause for concern (Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley 2008; Miller 2009). This is apparent in falling voter numbers at elections, and by a general lack of interest in politics between elections. This problem is often particularly acute for local government, though there are some examples of more active participation at the local level (Alport and Macintyre 2007). The Internet offers the potential for government to overcome this issue by reaching out directly to the electorate in their own homes.

E-democracy is the use of ICT to facilitate and encourage participation in decision-making processes (Wellington City Council 2006). It offers the potential to provide greater accountability, can improve access to information and services for hard to reach groups, and can facilitate dialogue between citizens, elected members, community groups and communities (Wellington City Council 2006). There are a number of potential applications such as e-voting, webcasting, elected member blogs and interactive forums.

E-democracy is only part of the solution to the issue of low participation, and policy makers need to be aware that it will only be effective if used alongside more face-to-face initiatives in the community. The groups that have traditionally been marginalized from local government processes are likely to be the same groups

that have limited access to ICT (Wellington City Council 2006; Alport and Macintyre 2007), so any introduction of e-democracy needs to be carefully thought out so as not to exacerbate existing social divisions.

Many e-democracy projects are very good at providing information to citizens, but the flow of information is mainly one way. Elected members create web sites that are essentially "information storehouses" (Alport and Macintyre 2007), many local government websites are designed as "one-stop-shops" offering the facility to download application forms and information sheets. Though such sites are useful any e-democracy project that is aiming to increase citizen engagement needs to take further steps to promote feedback and dialogue.

A survey carried out to evaluate citizen's attitudes towards e-government in the UK (Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley 2008) found that interest in e-government was low overall, but there was some evidence that citizens appreciated the ability to obtain information from government web sites. However there was little interest in using e-government for engaging with the democratic process, and the ambitions of government far outstripped those of citizens (Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley 2008). E-government advocate Steven Clift (2008) confirms this. Reflecting on 15 years of activism in e-government, he estimates that only 5% of the public are active users of e-government and the challenge now is to reach the remaining 95%.

E-PETITIONS IN WELLINGTON

E-democracy can be divided into two components. One part is concerned with the electoral process, including e-voting. The other addresses participation in democratic decision making (Macintosh and Whyte 2008). For WCC, e-voting was not considered, as it was not provided for in the Local Electoral Act. The council's aim was to use e-democracy to encourage citizens to participate between election times.

Petitions have always been a popular way for citizens to engage with local and national government. People are more likely to become actively engaged in politics over a particular issue that has direct relevance to their lives rather than becoming involved in broader institutional agendas. Petitions are less popular with politicians themselves, who view them as not fitting in well with government procedures (Miller 2009). However, for members of the public, the low involvement but high impact nature of petitions means that they are more likely to sign a petition than engage in any other form of political activity. For example, the British Number Ten web site[1], which is used by citizens to petition the Prime Minister directly, is well liked. It was set up in 2006 and in the first two years of operation it received

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[1] http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/

29,000 petitions and 5.8 million signatures in total (Miller 2009). E-petitioning systems have also proved very popular for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly (Macintosh and Whyte 2008).

Before formalising their ICT formal policy in 2006 (Wellington City Council 2006) WCC had already introduced a number of initiatives to improve e-participation, for instance making information on how to participate in the council's decision-making processes available in different languages, and the creation of a "fix-it" page that the public could use to inform the council of a problem. Much of WCCs thinking around e-democracy and e-participation was influenced by the ideas of Steven Clift (2004). One outcome of the new ICT policy (Wellington City Council 2006) was the launching of an e-petitions system[2] in 2007. As previously discussed such systems had proved popular in the UK, as they were easy to use and open source software was available to implement them cheaply.

One of the reasons for the success of e-petitions is that they are perceived to be transparent by the general public, as there is generally an established process for publishing decision outcomes. The WCC system allows anyone with a verifiable address within the electoral area to create an e-petition to collect signatures about any issue the council is responsible for. After the closing date the petition is presented to the appropriate council or committee meeting, usually the Strategy and Policy committee. WCC reserves the right to refuse a petition, but will give a reason for that refusal (Blyth 2007).

	2008	2009	2010	Total
Accepted	21	21	18	60
Declined	6	20	14	40
Total	27	38	32	100

Table 1: Numbers of accepted and declined petitions between 2008 and 2010

Between 2008 and 2010 WCC received a total of 100 petitions, as shown in Table 1. Of these 40 were rejected and 60 accepted. The reasons for rejecting the petitions were published on the e-petitions web site. Apart from a few outliers that were rejected because they were abusive or slanderous, the reason for rejection generally fell into one of four categories. Some petitions were outside the jurisdiction of the council, others were covered by existing legal processes (for

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2   http://www.wellington.govt.nz/haveyoursay/e-petitions/index.php

example objections to new buildings), some were duplicates of existing petitions, and others were withdrawn after discussion with the council. This last category usually consisted of small scale issues that could be sorted out more speedily by local consultation such as reducing speed limits around a particular school.

Sixty petitions were accepted, attracting 29,246 signatures in all. The accepted petitions were grouped into five different categories as shown in Table 2. The highest number of petitions received concerned transport issues which covered parking, changing bus routes, and traffic signals. Better facilities for cyclists were a hot topic, with one 2008 petition for more cycle lanes attracting 1,355 signatures.

The second most popular category was the environment, which included rubbish collection, recycling, street lighting, noise pollution, control of pigeons and facilities for dog walkers. In 2008, three different petitions were raised protesting against WCC's plans to cull pigeons in the city centre, attracting 894 signatures overall. The pigeon cull was called off. However, as the cull had also received widespread criticism in local media, this could not be attributed to the petitions alone.

	Transport	Environment	Image	Politics	Amenity	Tot
2008	9	7	1	1	3	**21**
2009	6	5	6	3	1	**21**
2010	3	4	7	3	1	**18**
Total	**18**	**16**	**14**	**7**	**5**	**60**

Table 2: Numbers of accepted petitions for different categories between 2008 and 2010

The petition that attracted the most number of signatures overall, 9,957, was one raised in 2009 in opposition to a proposal by the council to phase out free recycling bins and replace them with paid recycling bags. Again this proposal was dropped by the council, but again the e-petition was just one of a number of widespread protests against this proposal.

The third most popular group were petitions that concerned the image of the city, which covered topics like changing street names, erecting monuments, and liquor and smoking bans. Some of these petitions could arguably have been placed in the environment category, but it was decided they were more focused on how the city was perceived by both residents and visitors. The issue of banning smoking in the central city provided a good example of polarized opinions (Miller 2009), as a 2010 petition to ban smoking which collected 672 signatures was swiftly followed by a petition to protect the rights of smokers. However the counter-petition attracted only 40 signatures. In 2011 a petition has been put up suggesting that the

e-petitions system is changed to allow negative responses to a petition as well as positive, which would allow people to register opposition to a petition without having to go to the lengths of setting up a counter petition.

The fourth category covered petitions that were more overtly political, such as making councilors and their family members declare their interests and adding a peace symbol to the WCC logo. Though there were fewer petitions in this category some of them received large numbers of signatures. A 2009 petition to make Wellington a fair trade city collected 1,185 signatures, and in the same year 984 people signed a petition to requesting that the free web site project for community groups should continue to receive WCC funding.

The remaining petitions were placed in the amenities category and mainly focused on saving parts of the city that were threatened by new developments, or adding new facilities such as drinking fountains.

Miller (2009) analysed petitions submitted to the Number Ten website, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly to see what the top themes were. Obviously they are national governments with a very different jurisdiction to a city council. However there were some common concerns, petitions covering transport and environmental issues were top issues for all four petition systems.

One of the reasons for the popularity of e-petitions is their transparency; the person setting up the petition has to declare themselves, as do the signatories. The number of signatures is recorded as is the response of the council to the petition. In some e-petition systems there are some rules around the numbers of signatures collected, The WCC system does not appear to have any explicit rules around numbers. However petitions that collect less than 20 signatures tend to be withdrawn by the petitioner.

The most common council response to a petition was a referral to the Strategy and Policy committee. By 2010 the date that the petition had actually been received by the committee was also being recorded. The amount of information about the response of the committee was variable. Sometimes there was a PDF file which listed fairly detailed actions and sometimes there was a note that the issue had been passed on to council officers to inform their work. Often there was no response other than it had been referred to the committee. This raises questions about the effectiveness of e-petitions, have WCC made any significant changes to their procedures or are the e-petitions simply getting lost in the bureaucracy? Occasionally petitions were presented directly to the council. In the case of policies around cycling and dogs, a number of petitions were being set up around the time WCC was developing formal policies on these issues, and the petitions were referred directly to the groups working on that policy.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Governments in OECD countries have invested significant amounts of time and money in engaging citizens in public decision making, but are paying much less attention to evaluating the success of these initiatives (Macintosh and Whyte 2008). In 2007 the results of a UK government survey showed that the provision of e-government services far exceeded usage by the public, with only 22% of people using the internet to download information, 7% to download forms and 5% actually returning completed forms (Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley 2008). Though citizens appreciate the value of online services to some extent, there is very little evidence that citizens see any value in using e-government to engage with policy makers. Theoretically the internet provides the ability to enhance democracy, but citizens are generally unwilling to participate in the online public sphere (Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley 2008). It would be interesting to carry out further research to investigate the reasons behind this.

Petitions have always been a popular means for citizens to engage in politics and e-petitions, which speed up the process of collecting signatures, have also been well received. They provide a low-commitment way for people to lobby and make their views known on various topics. They may not be the favored method of politicians and policy makers but given the low take-up of other forms of electronic engagement their popularity cannot be ignored.

At the local council level, lack of participation is generally a greater problem than for national government, and e-petitions open up possibilities for increasing citizen engagement. What is critical to this ongoing success is the ability of the petitioners to see a transparent and fair response to their petition. Local councils may need to reconsider their decision making processes in order to take this into account.

It is also useful for policy makers to examine the most common topics for e-petitions. Are they simply reflecting knee-jerk reactions, as with the emotional response to the pigeon cull, or do the areas of concern reflect issues that citizens are becoming increasingly concerned with, for example does the demand for better facilities for cyclists reflect growing concerns about the environment by Wellington residents?

There is also the issue of how representative of the general electorate the users of the e-petition system actually are. Though no formal analysis was carried out there were definitely a few names that cropped up a number of times as the proposers of different petitions. One petition at least was started by a Member of Parliament. Overall the petitions had 29,246 signatures between 2008 and 2010; it would be interesting to work out how many different individuals were involved and whether the same individuals were signing multiple petitions. For example the Number Ten web site attracted roughly 5.8 million signatures between 2006 and 2008, but there were only 3.9 million email addresses registered (Miller 2009). Though it could

raise some ethical issues it would be interesting to collect demographic information about the age, ethnicity and income levels of signatories.

As well as the danger of the e-petition system being hi-jacked by a small group of political activists, there are also digital divide issues to consider. The most active users of the internet are educated males, between the ages of 25 and 45 who earn above average incomes (Miller 2009) whereas those with low income are the least likely to have access to a computer at home. However though this issue is important, it should be pointed out that Wellington residents are generally better educated, better paid, and have more internet connections than the national average. This is one of the reasons why WCC was the first local council in the country to launch an e-petitions system, and any lessons learned will need to be communicated to the other local councils in New Zealand.

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