

Engaging Communities Online — A Queensland Perspective

Hogarth F*

Manager, eDemocracy Policy, Department of Communities, Queensland Government, Australia

Abstract

The Queensland Government's eDemocracy initiatives are delivering new ways for communities to better understand how government works and to engage in government decision-making processes about important issues.

This paper provides a brief overview of the Queensland Government's eDemocracy agenda, followed by a more detailed examination of an innovative Internet-based consultation tool called ConsultQld. The paper explores the aims and objectives of ConsultQld, the key steps which are undertaken during online consultation, recent evaluation results and critical success factors.

The paper provides a practical demonstration of how information and communication technology can increase and improve community participation in government decision-making processes and contribute to the development of informed policies, programs and services.

Keywords

eDemocracy, online consultation, online engagement, community engagement, policy development

Introduction

The Queensland Government's exploration of eDemocracy¹ commenced in 2001 with a commitment to trial online consultation, an electronic petition system in Queensland Parliament (ePetitions) and broadcasting parliamentary proceedings via the Internet. Each of the initiatives was trialled for 12 months and then evaluated. Responsibility for delivery of the initiatives was vested with an eDemocracy Unit, established in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. This unit became part of the Department of Communities in March 2004 and continues to have responsibility for the ongoing development and implementation of the government eDemocracy agenda

Unlike other jurisdictions in the world where eDemocracy has developed as part of an eGovernment strategy, the Queensland Government's eDemocracy initiatives are firmly positioned within a broader community engagement agenda. The Queensland Government community engagement agenda was developed in response to the type of issues which effect governments worldwide, including decreasing levels of public trust and confidence in government and politicians, increased expectations

¹ The Queensland Government defines eDemocracy as the use of information and communication technology (ICT) such as the Internet, digital and mobile technologies, to increase public participation in government decision-making.

that government is accountable and transparent and increased expectations that citizens should be involved in deliberations and decisions that affect their lives. Community engagement initiatives which were implemented in Queensland in response to these challenges include community cabinet meetings, ministerial Regional Community Forums across the state, a public sector Community Engagement Improvement Strategy focussing on building the sectors' capacity to engage more effectively, and the eDemocracy initiatives.

An important component of the Queensland Government's eDemocracy agenda was the development and adoption of an overarching policy framework. The framework was initially released in 2001 and revised and updated after an evaluation in 2004. The revised framework reaffirms the government's commitment to using new and emerging information and communication technology (ICT), not just the internet, to engage with Queenslanders. The framework recognises the role played by government in building the capacity of individuals and communities to engage in government processes and is an explicit statement of the expected outcomes and objectives of eDemocracy in Queensland. Queensland continues to be one of the only jurisdictions in the world with a stated policy position in relation to its eDemocracy agenda.

Online consultation in Queensland

The Queensland Government's 12-month trial of online consultation commenced in May 2003 with the launch of the ConsultQld (pronounced Consult Queensland) on the government's community engagement website <<http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au>>. Management of ConsultQld rests with the eDemocracy Policy team in the Department of Communities. The department owns ConsultQld, including intellectual property, and provides access to the tool to other Queensland government agencies free of charge.

The aims of the online consultation trial were to:

- provide an additional avenue for the public to engage in the Queensland Government's decision-making processes that is safe, secure, efficient and readily accessible
- open up the Queensland Government's decision-making process to those people who may not be reached through traditional consultation methods
- increase the transparency of consultation processes through the publication of consultation responses and the commitment to publish a government response after the consultation activity has closed
- provide a central point of reference where the public can learn about consultation opportunities of which they may otherwise have been unaware.

In addition to these specific aims, a number of key policy objectives were identified including:

- the provision of safe, secure and efficient ways for people to interact with the Queensland Government on public policy issues that are less limited by accessibility constraints such as place, time and cost than traditional avenues of engagement

- increasing knowledge and understanding of democratic processes in the community, which can promote better policy choices, decisions and outcomes.

Key steps for online consultation

The following stages are undertaken by eDemocracy Policy and an interested government agency to develop and implement online an consultation activity using ConsultQld.

Issues identification

Issues that may be suitable for online consultation can be identified by an agency or by eDemocracy Policy and can relate to policies, programs or services. Once an issue has been identified staff from eDemocracy Policy and the agency meet to discuss key issues including:

- the aims and objectives of the consultation
- the stage of the policy cycle at which the consultation will occur. (This issue is very important as there is no point consulting if the outcome is already decided, or seeking the communities' views about problems and causes if the policy is at the implementation phase.)
- complexity of the issues being consulted upon
- potential audience and whether they are suited to the online environment
- connection with the broader engagement activities and timelines. (This is important as the Queensland Government strongly views online consultation as a complementary tool, not a tool which should replace traditional face-to-face consultation.)

Once agreement has been reached that the issue is suitable for online consultation, a service level agreement outlining the roles and responsibilities of eDemocracy Policy and the consulting agency is developed and signed by respective Directors-General.

Development of content

Content for the consultation is developed by the agency and provided to eDemocracy Policy for comment prior to being posted to a test area of ConsultQld. Content includes introductory information about why the consultation is occurring, offline opportunities for people to have a say, the level of influence that comments from the community will have, and what will happen following the consultation. Content on which comments are sought is generally structured around themes or key issues to enable participants to respond to as few or as many issues as they like. All content needs to be written for the Web environment and is characterised by shorter, sharper sentences.

Communication strategy

The agency using ConsultQld is responsible for the development of a communication strategy which clearly identifies the intended audience of the consultation and the strategies to reach that audience. The key messages focus on the 'Get Involved' theme and direct people to the Get Involved website and to other engagement activities being undertaken, e.g. public meetings or telephone hotlines. A contribution of up to AUD\$5000 is made by eDemocracy Policy to the agency using ConsultQld to

assist with their communication and promotional activities, including advertising and media releases in state and local newspapers, postcard campaigns, posters, mailouts, flyers and email campaigns.

Consultation commences

Experiences to date suggest the period of consultation should be a minimum of two months. This allows people sufficient time and notice to participate and enables communication and promotional messages to be distributed and comprehended. Once the consultation has started, people wishing to participate can visit the Get Involved website, read the material presented by the agency and can also read comments which have been submitted by others.

Submit views

By using ConsultQld people can respond to a range of open and closed questions developed by the agency. Once completed, respondents choose to have their comments made public and posted back on the site for others to read, or remain private. Over 70 per cent of respondents to date have opted to have their views published on the site. Respondents are also asked to provide demographic information including gender, age and location. Neither this information, nor any other personal identification, is posted on the site.

Moderation

Moderation of all responses is undertaken by the agency within 24 hours in accordance with the website terms and conditions. Prior to the online consultation commencing eDemocracy Policy provides moderation training and a briefing from Crown Law to the agencies' nominated moderators.

Automated response

Following moderation, an email response is sent to the respondent thanking them for their contribution and advising that their views have been posted to the website (if they opted to have views made public) or advising that their submission has not been accepted. Submissions for public viewing will not be accepted if they do not comply with terms and conditions, for example, if they are irrelevant, abusive or offensive, advertising, defamatory or spam.

Refused submissions are still considered by the agency for the purpose of the consultation. Participants are notified they may revise and resubmit their comments if they would like to have their views posted on the site.

Post-consultation feedback report

All submissions are considered by the agency once consultation closes. The submissions inform a report that the agency prepares and is posted to ConsultQld within four weeks of the consultation closing date, or at a time negotiated with eDemocracy Policy. The post-consultation report generally provides a summary of the consultation process (e.g. when and why it happened, how many people participated), key themes which emerged, including examples of comments, and proposed future

steps (e.g. a report to a minister or development of options for further consultation). Respondents who nominated to be contacted are informed by email or post when the report is available.

The posting of a report is a key element of online community engagement and sends a strong message about the transparency of government decision-making by ensuring that those who participate in consultations are able to find out how their comments have contributed to the development of government policy.

ConsultQld — results to date

During the first two years of operation of ConsultQld over 1950 people have participated in 14 consultations on a diverse range of policy topics including:

- education (changes to the Middle Phase of Schooling in Queensland)
- community services (the ageing of the state's population)
- business (a review of the *Retail Shop Leasing Act*)
- health (changes to Queensland's tobacco laws)
- infrastructure planning (proposed changes to urban planning in South East Queensland).

An evaluation of ConsultQld was conducted in 2004 and gathered feedback from a variety of sources including community members who had used ConsultQld to have their say and staff in government agencies who had used ConsultQld to inform their policy development activities.

Some of the key results from community members included:

- People using ConsultQld are from across age and gender groups and live throughout Queensland, although approximately one-third are from Brisbane
- One-third of respondents had never contacted government about issues important to them before using ConsultQld
- Respondents found a number of elements particularly useful including:
 - ease of use and convenience
 - being able to read others' points of view
 - receiving an email response to a submission
 - being provided with information about future steps in the policy cycle
 - potential to share their views with other citizens.
- Making submissions on ConsultQld helped overcome barriers to participation such as lack of time or disability and increased respondents' knowledge about consultation processes and opportunities.

The evaluation also noted that officers from agencies who have used ConsultQld believed:

- online responses were of a standard equivalent to offline submissions; however, some officers believed online submissions were of a very high quality

- online responses provided very useful input into ongoing work on policy issues and informed advice to their minister
- the online consultation process generated personal opinions on the issue rather than high-quality debate.

All agency officers participating in the evaluation agreed that online consultation is appropriate and necessary, particularly considering Queensland's diversity and geographic spread. There was also recognition that online processes were providing an additional opportunity to reach diverse groups, all day every day.

Factors influencing the success of online consultation

The Queensland Government's experiences suggest where possible, online consultations should be integrated with offline consultation strategies to provide a coordinated approach to community engagement. It is also recognised that online consultation may not be suitable for all audiences, issues or stages of the policy cycle.

Experience also indicates that issues that are more suitable for online consultation are those that are appropriate to a general target audience rather than specific stakeholder groups, have broad public appeal and are topical. Online consultation can also be used to test community interest in being involved in consultation before embarking on formal and expensive offline consultation processes.

As with all community engagement activities, online consultation requires dedicated resources to develop, monitor and moderate the process. Consultations need to be well-planned and structured, timed appropriately and promoted widely. The eDemocracy Policy team play a critical role supporting agencies to plan and promote their online consultations.

Managing expectations about the level of influence which community can have in the development of a policy, program or service is essential. The inclusion of a 'policy process' page outlining the steps that need to be undertaken to make changes required (such as legislation) and indicative timeframes is one way to increase awareness of the role of citizens in public policy making processes.

Technical issues may also impact on the perceived benefits of online consultations. Download times for consultation documents, access to the technology and the demand for a speedy response all need to be considered in designing and implementing online consultation. The consultation website should also be easy for the community to find. Two-way links between the consultation site and other government sites can improve access and assist in ongoing coordination of government consultation activities by minimising duplication.

Finally, genuine commitment from government agencies to apply good community engagement principles is critical. This is addressed through the use of a service level agreement between an

agency and eDemocracy Policy which includes the requirement for the timely provision of outcome reports following the completion of the consultation.

Conclusion

The Queensland Government's eDemocracy initiatives are creating new ways for communities to increase their awareness and understanding of how government works and how to engage in decision-making processes about important issues.

The introduction of an innovative, convenient and safe internet-based tool called ConsultQld has successfully demonstrated how information and communication technology can increase and improve community participation in government processes and deliver a rich vein of information, comments and feedback to inform policy development activities. Online consultation via ConsultQld is contributing towards inclusive public involvement and is tapping into sectors of the community that may not use traditional consultation avenues.

The Queensland Government will continue to build on the successes and learnings to date to develop additional online tools and processes which will deliver new and exciting opportunities to increase public participation in democratic activities. As new technologies emerge increasing importance will be placed on ensuring individuals and communities have the skills and capacity to continue to effectively engage with their government online.