

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 266 (2008)¹

E-tools: a response to the needs of local authorities

1. The advance of new information and communication technologies provides a great opportunity for local authorities, but they need to be prudent in how they embrace the new technologies if they are to achieve a real improvement in local democracy.

2. E-tools offer considerable possibilities to local elected representatives, not only to improve the efficiency and organisation of their work, but also to reach out to citizens who do not normally participate in the political process. The increasing take-up of new communication tools by all sectors of the population is dramatically changing the ways in which people communicate with each other. This is raising expectations that local authorities will also adopt the new channels of communication.

3. The new information technologies are set to change the face of local democracy. However, many of the most successful initiatives are currently being launched by citizens rather than by local authorities. Local authorities are obliged to respond to the changing environment, an environment in which they are no longer able to control how local political debate is conducted in the same way as previously.

4. The best way to meet the challenge of the new citizen empowerment that e-tools are facilitating is for local authorities to make intelligent use of such tools themselves, using e-democracy applications and techniques to raise levels of trust and engagement.

5. Local authorities need to be both careful and ambitious in their approach to new technologies. The new media often pre-suppose an ever-increasing technical literacy, without which local authorities risk making costly mistakes or being sidelined. There is a danger of a growing divide between the computer literate and the rest. A significant proportion of citizens risk being alienated and excluded from political debate. Unwise use of the new media could therefore weaken the political process rather than strengthen it.

6. E-tools are not a panacea: while they can reduce costs by adding power to processes, if the original procedures and working methods are flawed, the introduction of e-tools may actually exacerbate and make more visible the failings which were previously hidden. Careful attention therefore needs to be given to how new technologies and applications are introduced. The aims, objectives and desired outcomes of a project must be carefully thought through before a new application is implemented.

7. It is important to avoid getting side-tracked and to keep in mind the basic principles of local democracy; to learn how to make the best use of new applications, while being aware of their limitations, risks and pitfalls. This is an emerging and fast-changing sector where there is currently a lack of clear guidance and evaluation. Local authorities stand to gain much from working together, seeking common solutions and sharing good practices.

8. In the light of the above, the Congress,

a. convinced that the quality of local democracy and citizen engagement can be greatly enhanced by intelligent use of e-tools by local authorities;

b. convinced that local authorities need to embrace e-tools in a prudent and informed way to avoid costly mistakes;

c. aware that many important technical innovations at the local level are citizen-generated and that local authorities have a duty to react to these developments;

d. bearing in mind the work of the Council of Europe Ad hoc Committee on e-democracy (CAHDE) and the results of the Council of Europe Symposium on e-democracy (Strasbourg, 23-24 April 2007),

9. Calls upon local authorities in Council of Europe member and observer states to:

a. embrace e-tools as a means of improving local democracy;

b. take care that due consideration and planning and preparation are given to introducing e-tools and that they are not used simply to automate practices and procedures that are already weak or flawed; the introduction of e-tools should be an occasion for reviewing the procedures that they are intended to improve;

c. ensure that their staff and representatives are given appropriate support in the use of new technologies and take steps to avoid a rift between those who are more technically literate and the rest;

d. take steps to encourage the take-up of new technologies by all sectors of the population, for example by providing free or low-cost Internet outlets at public service points such as libraries;

e. ensure that the agendas and reports of council meetings are available online;

f. ensure that successful initiatives are shared with other authorities;

g. give serious consideration to how they could improve their engagement with citizens, through the use of such tools as blogs and online surgeries, and improve the feedback that they receive from citizens through the use of tools such as e-petitions and e-panels;

h. take care to maintain parallel traditional systems, when introducing new methods of communication, so that people who are slower to take up new technologies are not excluded from the political process;

i. work closely with national associations of local authorities to share experiences and to develop policies and advice.

10. The Congress calls on national associations of local authorities to:

a. pool their experiences in the implementation of e-tools in local government;

b. set up online advice centres to assist local authorities in the planning and implementation of projects.

11. The Congress resolves to:

a. pay special attention to using e-tools to improve its communication with members and associations, and to

improve public awareness of its activities using tools such as Wikipedia, RSS feeds and interactive websites;

b. include the development of e-democracy in its priority activities and to actively contribute to the 2008 Madrid Forum for the Future of Democracy, which will be devoted to e-democracy.

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Local Authorities on 27 May 2008 and adopted by the Congress on 29 May 2008, 3rd Sitting (see Document CPL(15)2RES, draft resolution presented by A Drobotov (Russian Federation, L, SOC) and E. Van Vaerenbergh (Belgium, L, ILDG), rapporteurs).