Abstract

This paper examines the role of information and communication technology (ICT) policies in shaping the participatory nature of local e-government. It suggests that civic involvement through e-government practices requires a combination of direct and indirect ICT policies (Cohen, van Geenhuizen and Nijkamp, 2005). Direct policies focus on ICT infrastructure development and enhance civic adoption and use of ICTs. ICTs also support policies indirectly through data organisation, information dissemination and the provision of spaces for discourse, deliberation and contributions to decision-making processes. Drawing from policy examples from Australia and the United Kingdom (UK), this paper suggests the need to combine federal guidance with local knowledge, while using policies to support ICTs and using ICTs to support policies. Such a cohesive and integrated policy relationship between federal and local government bodies is needed if local e-government is to advance to facilitate civic engagement.

Introduction

Extending ubiquitous, reliable, high-speed broadband to all Australian premises can also promote online engagement with government that provide[s] opportunities for greater public participation in the development of policy and service delivery.

— The Australian Federal Government’s National Digital Economy Strategy
(Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, 2011: 43)

The Internet offers governments the chance to develop the democratic quality of representative government through the provision of new avenues for civic participation in decision-making. As highlighted by the above quotation, large-scale infrastructure developments such as the National Broadband Network (NBN) provide the frameworks for increased online interaction and are promoted as enhancing the quality of electronic government. A key aim of the Australian Federal Government’s Digital Economy Strategy is to have four out of five Australians choosing to engage with governments online by 2020 (Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE), 2011). In addition to the provision of improved infrastructure, such a goal will require broader guidance for authorities implementing online practices. While the networked technology of the Internet allows for open-ended communication, the democratic quality of online mechanisms depends upon the application of the technology (see Catinat and Vedel, 2000).

The Australian Federal Government has recognised that the advancement of online participation requires action by and coordination through all levels of government (DBCDE, 2011). Creating a symbiotic e-government policy relationship between federal, state and local government bodies brings opportunities to develop and implement policies and practices designed to meet the specific needs of citizens in their locales. For example, federal governments can provide appropriate guidelines to create and implement e-government practices and fund infrastructure improvements. Local knowledge about an area’s requirements and citizens’ needs can also be utilised by federal governments to offer effective, appropriate and integrated policy approaches to ICT infrastructure and use.
This paper focuses on local e-government, suggesting that local areas provide a useful context for targeted participatory e-government practices, particularly as local governments occupy the space where the effects of state and federal initiatives materialise. Using a municipality as a focus and foundation for online deliberation may encourage more participants in discussions through an increased interest in local issues (such as development proposals, rates and council elections), whilst providing a connection to government and the decision-making processes that directly affect citizens’ lives and shape their community. Utilising globally networked communication technologies is a way to help reassert the importance of specific locales, and 'reinforce the position of the local government apparatus as the key provider of information and arena of discussion and decision making' (Tambini, 1999: 318).

Using examples from Australia and the United Kingdom (UK), this paper highlights the effects of different federal policy approaches on the development of local e-government. Australian local e-government is currently advancing autonomously from federal guidance, with ad hoc ICT applications often implemented without guiding policy documentation. The result has been a broad focus on improvements to one-way service delivery online, with local authorities often overlooking the potential use of ICTs as platforms for two-way civic connection with representatives. In the UK, the Federal Government has employed a top-down policy approach with broad contexts and requirements for development that privilege local authorities creating their own online initiatives to suit the specific needs of their citizens and local priorities. This approach has facilitated the steady evolution of local participatory e-government practices that offer contexts for civic discussions and engagement with government.

A long-term, sustainable approach to participatory e-government development will depend on a cohesive governmental strategy that combines federal and local knowledge, while using policies to support ICTs and using ICTs to support policies. Advancing online engagement requires a combination of direct and indirect policies to enable sufficient civic access to ICTs, help citizens develop appropriate skills to use new technologies, provide content citizens can contribute to that is of relevance to their lives, and ensure that civic participation in online political practices will impact decision-making.

ICTs and the roles of local government

Pratchett (1999) identifies that there are three complementary roles of local government: local democracy, public policy-making and direct service delivery. In terms of ‘local democracy’, Pratchett recognises that it is the responsibility of local government to provide improved methods for democratic participation:

Local government, as the institution of democracy closest to local communities, has a vital role to play not only in behaving democratically, but also in engendering and enhancing democratic practices and consciousness among citizens.

(Pratchett, 1999: 734)

If participation is perceived to occur at the local level, then strengthening local democratic structures may improve civic satisfaction with the political system. In terms of ‘public policy-making’, local governments are required to provide forums for resolution of territorial, economic and social conflicts, provide community leadership, pursue community wide goals, and develop and ensure achievement of strategic visions for their locality such as sustainable development programs (Pratchett, 1999). ‘Service delivery’, such as public transport, aged care, and household waste collection, has traditionally been seen as the primary role of local government and remains important in the organisational structure of local governments (Pratchett, 1999). ICTs can be used to address and develop all three roles, which can help local authorities to govern more effectively.

ICTs are not, however, commonly used by local governments to develop local democracy and public policy-making. Instead, service delivery improvements are the primary focus of local
government ICT use throughout Australia (see O’Toole, 2009). Offering electronic services brings several advantages for local governments. A large proportion of local government operations depend upon the collection, processing and use of information. Digital networked technologies provide avenues for more efficient and effective data handling and improved organisational performance, generating financial savings for the government in the long term by, for example, minimising the number of staff hours needed for customer services practices (see Beynon-Davies and Martin, 2004; Silcock, 2001). With growing populations and up to 80 percent of citizen transactions with government taking place at the local level (Shackleton, Fisher and Dawson, 2005), ICT-enabled service delivery methods help government bodies cope with an increasing demand for services. This is a necessary development for several Australian local governments with populations larger than a small state or territory of Australia. For example, Queensland’s Brisbane and Gold Coast City Councils both have greater populations than the state of Tasmania, the Northern Territory, or the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). With over one million residents, Brisbane City Council’s population is closer to the combined populations of Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the ACT (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2010a, 2010b). Electronic service delivery methods help local governments like Brisbane manage high demand, and the time saved through local e-service delivery can theoretically be re-focused towards the government’s other roles of fostering local democracy and public policy-making.

Service delivery alone is no longer an adequate role for local governments (Pratchett, 1999) as councils are increasingly under pressure to modernise their structures through ICTs in order to execute a broader range of tasks (O’Toole, 2009). Tensions existing between different governmental roles have to be addressed if ICTs are to be used to strengthen local government operations. By combining participatory online practices with electronic service delivery, local governments can address their public policy-making and local democracy roles through two-way civic consultation. This point has been recognised by some Australian local governments including the Brisbane City Council, which utilises an online discussion forum to encourage civic contributions to current consultations and uses social media including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to further engage with citizens (see www.brisbane.qld.gov.au). Darebin City Council in Victoria trialled an e-forum to facilitate greater civic involvement in decision-making and increased government transparency and accountability (see Walsh, 2009). Such forms of direct civic participation in policy processes utilise networked digital communications to reinforce the connection between citizens and their government, thereby strengthening local democracy through more open public policy-making and offering improved methods of service delivery. As recognised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2003), utilising ICTs to incorporate the views of citizens, as Brisbane and Darebin have done, may bring additional benefits to governments by building civic trust in representatives and increasing the likelihood of gaining acceptance of a council’s policies and decisions.

The large diversity in the geographic, demographic and population sizes of Australian local governments can make it difficult for authorities to develop and implement online participatory practices. In stark contrast to Brisbane City Council, the Shire of Murchison to the north east of Geraldton in Western Australia has six councillors representing a population of 112 (ABS, 2010b), equating to one representative for approximately every 19 citizens. Australia is also home to geographically disperse local government areas, including the largest local government area in the world. The Shire of East Pilbara (also in Western Australia) spans more than 370,000 square kilometres. In cases like these, local governments are unlikely to possess sufficient knowledge, skills and resources to develop participatory e-government practices. Here, federal guidance and support are needed, particularly in order to facilitate civic access to and use of ICTs but also to aid authorities in the development of local online content and applications.

Local government bodies possess the knowledge necessary to ensure federal developments are the most effective and appropriate for particular areas, and are well positioned to address the specific needs of citizens with varying ICT skill levels. Strong policy frameworks are needed, however, in
order to achieve a more integrated relationship between federal and local governments in the development and use of ICTs for participatory e-government. Chanan (1997) identifies that, in general, policies need to be more explicit in identifying localities as the primary setting for implementation, and that community development requires more specific policies. Local government policy processes can take into consideration socio-economic divisions or infrastructure requirements that affect their locality — more effectively developing policies to specifically suit their citizens’ needs — than larger scale government bodies. By recognising the importance of locales, policies that focus on civic participation improve the likelihood of citizen involvement in the issues and decision-making processes of direct relevance to citizens.

Direct and indirect ICT policies

Government policies shape civic capacity to participate in politics and the subsequent influence of civic participation on policy decisions (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). Government ICT use requires strong policy frameworks to ensure democratic application of technology (see Catinat and Vedel, 2000). These frameworks are needed in order to provide contexts for civic participation, enable equality of civic capacity to access and contribute to these contexts, and ensure that civic contributions are considered in decision-making processes. Such broad goals can be achieved through a combination of direct and indirect ICT policies (Cohen et al., 2005). Direct policies support ICT access and adoption, while indirect policies are concerned with the broader use of ICTs in government operations.

Cohen, van Geenhuizen and Nijkamp (2005) analyse the experience of Dutch cities and suggest that local areas provide a key context for both direct and indirect ICT-related policies. Direct policies, in which the final goal relates specifically to ICTs, fall within two categories: policies that focus on infrastructure development and policies that are intended to help enhance adoption and use of new technologies. Local governments hold a key position to address both types of direct policies. On the one hand, local governments are fully aware of the available infrastructure in their region and are in the best position to identify what needs to be developed, particularly to cater for growing populations. On the other, local governments are familiar with the traditional participation methods their citizens use and understand the key issues pertaining to their locality that may limit ICT use (including issues such as age, linguistic background and socio-economic status). This knowledge can be considered when developing policies to enhance ICT infrastructure and when implementing new practices through ICT adoption policies. Examples of direct ICT policies include requiring housing estate developers to install the appropriate infrastructure to support broadband Internet during construction, and the provision of free access terminals and educational programs in local libraries.

Governments also have indirect ICT policies that do not specifically have ICT-related goals, but instead use ICTs to achieve other defined goals (Cohen et al., 2005). For example, ICTs can be used to collect and organise data relating to child care and voting registries. At the local level, indirect ICT policies often contribute to the one-way information dissemination and service delivery focus of local e-government initiatives, as improvements to these areas offer councils the greatest chance of economic gains. Common developments at the local level include paying rates and animal registrations online. But indirect ICT policies also enable local governments to develop their public policy-making and local democracy roles. Local governments are required to provide forums for conflict resolution, community leadership, and develop strategic visions for their locality (Pratchett, 1999). Using the Internet to provide, for example, discussion forums on key issues, guidance for community groups and projects, and increased information and feedback surrounding local developments are all ways that local governments can indirectly use ICTs to facilitate public policy-making and enhance local democracy.

Figure 1.1 has been developed to illustrate that effective e-government engagement mechanisms require authorities to implement both direct and indirect ICT policies. On the one hand,
Governments need to use policies to support ICT development to enhance infrastructure and address problems related to civic adoption and use of new technologies. On the other hand, governments need to use ICTs to develop their policy processes. In this regard, ICTs can be used to increase information dissemination and provide new citizenship practices that create a sense of connection between representatives and citizens. In other words, participatory e-government requires authorities to provide ICT infrastructure, ensure citizens can access and use ICTs, and provide opportunities for citizens to participate in policy discourse through ICTs. Taking such a dual focused approach to ICT policy-making — using policies to support ICTs and using ICTs to support policies — offers governments the best chances for successful e-government engagement mechanisms.

While localities provide a strong basis for e-government policy development, local government ICT-related policies are often limited. Constraints surrounding ICT policy-making at the local government level include a lack of local government recognition of the relevance of ICTs for governmental processes, uncoordinated initiatives, local governments frequently fail to recognise strategic goals, an inability in transferring visions into concrete plans of action, a lack of proactive behaviour by local governments, and insufficient ICT education amongst policy-makers (Cohen et al., 2005; see also Chen, Gibson, Lusoli and Ward, 2007). These constraints can lead to ad hoc policy-making and help to explain why local ICT policies and practices are still in the early development stage (Cohen et al., 2005). Whilst in this stage, direct ICT policies often prioritise infrastructure development and economic gains, overlooking the importance of ICT adoption and use initiatives due to the higher costs associated with implementing educational programs and providing public access terminals, or due to failure to recognise the varying needs of users. While ICTs hold real promise for new methods of civic engagement, the issues outlined above need to be addressed by local governments if they intend to adapt existing e-service delivery practices to successfully include civic participation in policy-making processes. Here, federal policies offer local governments the guidelines needed to develop participatory online practices. In particular, infrastructure developments often require federal coordination in order to ensure equal access for citizens. Notably, while federal coordination helps to ensure broad application of initiatives throughout the country, the implementation and effects of such developments are distinctively local.
This observation reinforces Chanan’s (1997) suggestion that policies need to be more explicit in recognising localities are the primary setting for implementation, and highlights the important position occupied by local governments. The following section outlines e-government policies and initiatives at the federal level in Australia and highlights their impact on the participatory nature of local e-government.

E-government in the Australian context

**Government 2.0 Taskforce**

E-government provides for a new style of politics at all levels and governments are beginning to identify the need to incorporate more participatory online practices into their operations. The Australian Federal Government recognised the importance of advancing online practices to facilitate more active citizen involvement when it launched the Government 2.0 Taskforce (gov2.net.au) in June 2009. The taskforce was assigned the duty of investigating how the government could facilitate better services and greater engagement through the Internet’s Web 2.0 capabilities. After six months of research, including the use of online public sphere forums and road shows, the taskforce released a report to the government entitled, *Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0* (2009). The report provided thirteen recommendations for the Federal Government to adopt when developing its online practices. The central recommendation was the need for: ‘A declaration of open government by the Australian Government’ (Government 2.0 Taskforce Report, 2009: xvii). In an increasingly common refrain, this recommendation emphasised the value of government transparency and citizen involvement in policy-making to facilitate a healthy democracy. It was also recognised that such reform must take place at all levels of government (Government 2.0 Taskforce Report, 2009).

In May 2010, the Federal Government produced a report in response to the taskforce’s suggestions. The report makes it evident that the government agreed with the taskforce’s central recommendation that it was desirable to change the culture of government to promote greater participation in Australia’s democracy (Government Response to the Report of the Government 2.0 Taskforce, 2010). A *Declaration of Open Government* was subsequently issued on 16 July 2010 to demonstrate the government’s commitment to an open government, based on a culture of engagement that enables better access to and use of government information, sustained through innovative technology use (Department of Finance and Deregulation, 2010). The declaration offered three key principles to support an open government: informing, engaging and participating. This citizen-orientated approach is a promising development for the future of e-government in Australia.

Since the release of the government’s report, there has been little emphasis placed on developments to actively engage citizens online. In part, this is likely due to the media silence following the report’s release, as the *Declaration of Open Government* was announced the day before the 2010 Federal Election was called. While the election provided an opportune occasion to capitalise on an open government to connect with citizens, the major political parties employed only limited use of Web 2.0 tools in their election campaigns. While they offered the ‘veneer’ of Web 2.0, there was little actually occurring behind it (Stilgherrian on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Radio National, 2010). Even those two-way features of the Internet that were utilised by candidates were restricted as they often failed to provide any form of ongoing dialogue.

The taskforce and declaration are important steps forward for e-government in Australia. Commitment to action is, however, dependent upon the willingness and ability of political representatives to support new forms of engagement. Moreover, effective e-government requires ongoing research and development, with online initiatives continually updated to suit changes in the communicative environment, a point overlooked by the six month operation of the Government 2.0 Taskforce. Also noteworthy is that the government’s declaration responds to recommendations, meaning essentially there is no new policy here that ensures commitment to action across the
different levels of Australian government. In essence, the Federal Government has done little to guarantee the actual development and implementation of mechanisms that facilitate new forms of civic participation. The provision of effective policy frameworks requiring action and implementation is a fundamental problem inhibiting e-government development.

**Australian e-government policy frameworks**

At the federal level in Australia, there have been policy developments in communications infrastructure, enhancing services and civic engagement that illustrate a commitment to e-government. Examples of past strategies include *Australia’s Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006: Opportunities and Challenges for the Information Age* (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), 2004), which identifies four broad objectives, four strategic priorities and sixteen associated strategies designed to provide ‘the policy platform needed to address new challenges to Australia’s position as a leading information economy’ (DCITA, 2004: 5). *Better Services, Better Government: The Federal Government’s E-Government Strategy* (National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE), 2002) focuses on citizens and proposes strategies to achieve greater efficiency, ensure convenient access, build user trust, and enhance citizen engagement. *Australia’s National Broadband Strategy* (NOIE, 2004) concerns the coordination of broadband infrastructure availability across different levels of government. Similarly, infrastructure developments under the *NBN* are aimed to provide over 90 percent of Australian citizens with fibre optic broadband connections offering speeds of up to 100 megabits per second (see DBCDE, 2011; Given and Watkins, 2010; Tucker, 2010; Corner, 2010).

While the Australian Federal Government has introduced several e-government related policies and strategies over the past decade, these have not led to effective action across Australia or changed the online operations in the different tiers of Australian government: ‘there remains a vast mismatch between electronic government as it actually is and as it is vividly imagined’ (Thomas, 2004: 270). This mismatch raises the question of why the Federal Government’s e-government policies and strategies are not leading to effective action. To assess this question, initiatives under the Federal Government’s e-government strategy, *Responsive Government: A New Service Agenda* (Department of Finance and Administration, 2006), will be examined. This document was selected because it is the most recent Australian e-government policy and, unlike the documents mentioned above, it addresses both direct and indirect approaches including service delivery improvements, online civic engagement, and the need to improve existing infrastructure. It outlines issues, such as security and privacy, which hinder e-government advancement, and provides key priority areas for development with subsidiary strategies within each area. Overall, the e-government strategy offers a basic framework for e-government implementation, and encourages online engagement with government. To achieve this, the Federal Government developed principles to support a consistent experience for citizens engaging with governments online. These principles offer governments at all levels a guide to use in the development of participatory e-government practices.

**Principles for ICT-enabled citizen engagement**

The Federal Government developed broad *Principles for ICT-Enabled Citizen Engagement*, recognising ‘the potential to further promote a culture of democratic decision-making in Australia’ (Department of Finance and Administration, 2007: 2). Eight online engagement principles were established from research on existing national and international principles and with input from representatives from all levels of Australian Government. In this document, the Federal Government recognised that some government bodies have limited financial resources to engage citizens online. Subsequently, the principles are meant to act only as a ‘best practice guide for agencies wishing to engage with citizens using Information Communication Technology (ICT) as part of their policy making processes’ (Department of Finance and Administration, 2007: 1).
The principles are:
1. Commitment;
2. Community Focus;
3. Community Capability and Inclusiveness;
4. Mutual Respect, Confidence and Trust;
5. Interactivity and Flexibility;
6. Responsibility and Accountability;
7. Security and Privacy; and
8. Evaluation and Efficiency.

(Department of Finance and Administration, 2007)

These principles seek to enable two-way, responsive partnerships between governments and citizens through information access, knowledge sharing and discussion. They recognise the need to facilitate broad involvement reflecting the diversity in citizen capabilities, locations and socio-economic circumstances. Community consultation is strengthened by informing citizens how their input is used in government policy-making. These processes require corresponding privacy protection, information security and identity authentication measures that comply with relevant legislation (Department of Finance and Administration, 2007).

These guidelines are meant to assist government departments throughout Australia to focus on strengthening community consultation and input into government policy-making. However, as these principles were designed as a best practice guide only, there are no explicit policies in place that require government agencies using ICTs to adhere to these principles. Without any binding requirements towards e-engagement, there is also no assurance that government ICT use will promote Australia’s democratic decision-making culture, as the preamble to the principles suggests. While the Federal Government’s ‘online engagement with government’ strategy required these principles to be developed, many of the online initiatives implemented at the federal level do not actively engage citizens in two-way communications practices that promote ongoing dialogue. Instead, these initiatives focus predominantly on further development of online service delivery mechanisms.

The Australian Government entry point

Under the e-government strategy, the Federal Government was required to develop an online service point (australia.gov.au). This website provides the context through which the government addresses the priority areas set out in the e-government strategy, and offers a space for civic connection with government. The purpose of the website is to consolidate departmental websites to offer a streamlined online presence that simplifies access and use for citizens (Department of Finance and Administration, 2006). The website was to be designed to enable citizens to conduct transactions across various government departments without needing to reconfirm their identity, simultaneously update citizen details across agencies, and provide pre-filled forms for improved service delivery. In May 2007, over $42 million was allocated to develop the online entry point (Turner, 2007).6

At present, the entry point allows citizens who register to log on to utilise customised settings, such as search topics and locations. The website contains links to numerous government department websites and blogs, publications and job search functions, and is undergoing continual development. It has a ‘Have Your Say’ page on public consultations administered by different government departments. However, the majority of these links to public consultations possess only limited two-way communication facilities, such as requests that individual submissions be posted or e-mailed to the government department. Moreover, issues in these public consultations are raised by the government departments, meaning citizens are unable to participate in or create their own
discussion topics. While it is commendable that the Federal Government’s online entry point makes citizen access to government information easier, the website does not currently enable advanced civic engagement processes or new forms of participation in policy discussion.

Instead, the entry point provides an alternative means for citizens to carry out transactions with government departments. Therefore, the website reflects the service delivery focus of most e-government initiatives and understandings (Freeman and Hutchins, 2009), and partly contradicts the government’s own principles for online engagement. If the Federal Government is unable to articulate the differences between service delivery and civic engagement clearly in its e-government practices, then it should come as little surprise that other tiers of Australian government appear to neglect online civic engagement mechanisms. As highlighted earlier, many Australian local governments prioritise service delivery, suggesting that the federal documents are having little effect on locales. The following section highlights the impact of federal policy on local e-government in the UK.

United Kingdom e-government policy frameworks

In the UK, a federally coordinated policy approach provides e-government targets, standards, frameworks and strategies designed to utilise ICTs to improve local government processes. These policy frameworks have been in place since the late 1990s, with their national implementation occurring prior to the widespread integration of new technologies and e-government strategies into the operations of local governments. Of particular importance is the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA); a term used to collectively describe more than 20 policies that were developed between 1998 and 2001, which relate to modernising local government operations. The LGMA encompasses a broad range of direct and indirect policies aimed at providing guidance to local authorities when developing and implementing innovative citizenship practices and improved governmental services. In this agenda, e-government is considered a key instrument that can be used to achieve policy goals and enhance local democracy, and is backed by substantial federal resources (see Martin and Bovaird, 2005). Under the LGMA, £350 million was provided by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) for local e-government initiatives and a further £25 million was allocated towards trialling new ways of working with the public (Martin and Bovaird, 2005).

The ODPM recognised that a cohesive approach to local government modernisation was needed. In order to prevent policy drift and minimise the impact of changes to political leadership and the ministry, a ten year vision was implemented. This vision recognised the importance of local government in the improvement of service delivery, civic engagement with the decisions that directly affect communities, vibrant leadership, and the need to coordinate various levels of government to achieve better outcomes for local citizens (see Leach and Pratchett, 2005). Importantly, the ten year vision recognised the significance of civic engagement:

Our vision is: greater participation by people in the decisions that affect them locally, leading to services which better match the needs and preferences of communities. This requires: building trust that engagement will make a difference, and offering new opportunities to engage, particularly for those who have not felt empowered.

(ODPM in Leach and Pratchett, 2005: 321)

The federal coordination of e-government activities in the UK has aimed to encourage citizens to utilise the Internet by increasing access opportunities with measures including public access terminals, training programs and motivational campaigns to encourage use (Hernon, 2006). The citizen-centred approach undertaken through the LGMA also ‘encouraged local authorities to use their own priorities to drive implementation’ (Morphet, 2009: 209). ‘Locally sensitive’ e-government development aims to provide practices at the primary location of most day-to-day services and citizen involvement with government (Pratchett, 2004; see also Shackleton et al.,
This approach meant that local governments are responsible for designing and implementing strategies and online practices to meet the specific needs of their citizens, although within the broader contexts and requirements set by the Federal Government (Pratchett, 2004).

Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker (2001) evaluated the perspectives of UK local governments on public participation online. They identified that negative effects, such as potential security and legitimacy issues, are not seen by local governments as reasons to avoid implementing participatory practices. Instead, ‘most authorities saw them as a challenge to be overcome’ (Lowndes et al., 2001: 213), and part of the learning process that is necessary to develop more effective strategies. In 2005, the ODPM commissioned an evaluation of the progress made under the LGMA. There were encouraging results, particularly in terms of significant improvements in service delivery and civic satisfaction with UK local governments (see Martin and Bovaird, 2005). Martin and Bovaird (2005) argue that the implementation of the LGMA was a key driver behind the e-government improvements implemented by councils and that the LGMA enabled more effective leadership by government officials, as well as increased engagement with citizens.

Not all UK local governments have progressed at the same rate in the implementation of e-government applications (potentially hindering participation prospects for citizens from particular municipalities). The majority of e-government developments that have been undertaken involve increased information dissemination and improved service delivery, placing such sites in the early development stage of e-government (Cohen et al., 2005). Local e-government applications in the UK are, however, advancing under the agenda. Pratchett, Wingfield and Karakaya-Polat’s (2008) study of local government websites in England and Wales indicates that 32 percent of UK local government’s provide online discussion forums. This finding suggests that federal guidance is aiding both improvements to services offered to citizens online and the evolution of participatory e-government practices that facilitate civic connection with local representatives.

The UK’s top-down policy approach illustrates that federal governments and local governments can work together to provide an integrated approach to citizen participation and engagement. While online initiatives are still undergoing development by UK local governments, this approach promotes long-term sustainability of citizen-orientated practices designed to meet the specific needs of citizens in their locales. It combines direct and indirect ICT policies, with guidance and support offered to local governments to increase the likely success of new engagement opportunities, and draws from local knowledge to develop the most appropriate practices for citizens.

**Evolving e-government: a cohesive policy approach**

Methods for online engagement are fundamentally shaped by the e-government policy approach undertaken by authorities. Both direct and indirect e-government policies are needed to enhance civic participation in decision-making through e-government. Combining these types of policies offers a broad approach to e-government that facilitates access to ICTs, helps citizens develop appropriate ICT skills, and assists governments to provide relevant content and spaces for civic participation and engagement. It is, however, worth noting that problems of civic engagement cannot be solved through policy alone (Simone, 2010). Rather, strong policies facilitate and support more effective implementation of infrastructure and services, and shape how civic involvement influences policy-making.

At present, limited policy guidance of local e-government in Australia is resulting in the autonomous development of ad hoc online applications and initiatives that predominantly reiterate the service delivery role of local governments. While several authorities have implemented or are experimenting with participatory e-government practices, these often lack policies guiding both online content and applications, and the ways civic involvement is incorporated into decision-making. Increased opportunities for online engagement at the local level require more effective policy frameworks, which can often be found federally. Federal guidance is useful both in the provision of resources needed to improve infrastructure access and to educate and assist local
bodies when developing online spaces and incorporating civic participation in policy-making, facilitating local democracy. Knowledge about a local area’s infrastructure requirements and citizens’ needs can be utilised by federal bodies to optimise policies and implement more effective, appropriate and integrated developments aimed at enhancing ICT infrastructure and use (see Goggin, 2003). Local governments are also well positioned to develop targeted online initiatives as they can identify and address obstacles likely to hinder e-government advancement in particular areas, which will vary depending on the type of online initiative, specific locales, government bodies and citizens’ needs. This paper suggests there is a need for these two levels of government to more effectively intersect in order to develop an integrated policy relationship, as is occurring in the UK, to produce optimal online opportunities for civic engagement and connection with representatives.

In Australia, the challenge does not lie in developing appropriate guidelines for e-government development. The federal policies, strategies and principles already address direct and indirect approaches to e-government and are designed to facilitate civic participation and engagement with representatives. The challenge lies in getting local governments to realise the worth of utilising such documents, and getting federal initiatives to recognise the needs of locales. A symbiotic approach to online citizen participation and engagement — combining federal and local knowledge while using policies to support ICTs and using ICTs to support policies — promotes long-term sustainability of citizen-orientated e-government practices designed to meet the needs of citizens in their locales, and provides thorough support for e-government engagement mechanisms.

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1 Brisbane City Council has 27 councillors to govern the 1,067,279 residents of the municipality, equating to one councillor for every 39,529 citizens.

2 This shire’s geographic size is larger than the State of Victoria.

3 Implementation of Web 2.0 measures specifically addressing the taskforce’s recommendations is estimated to be at least 18 months away (Colley, 2010). By this time, it is likely that the government will require a new taskforce to investigate more recent technological developments.

4 Collins (2010) notes that the will and capacity for governmental change will require broader reform of government operations, such as discontinuing the practice of blocking access to many Web 2.0 tools like Twitter.

5 The Federal Government provides no indication of what form representative input came in, or what other countries’ principles were considered.

6 Notably, the Australian Federal Government has allocated an additional $2.3 million from its 2011–2012 budget ‘to investigate and test some preliminary developments to improve people’s ease of use and access to government services [online]’ (DBCDE, 2001: 44, emphasis added). Again prioritising service delivery, key areas to be explored include the capacity for citizens to update their details simultaneously across government departments, the use of pre-filled forms, and enabling citizens to view all communication with government in one place (DBCDE, 2011). Arguably, all of these service delivery applications should already have been funded and implemented under the entry point website, a task originally set by the Federal Government in 2006.

7 For the purpose of this paper, the LGMA’s influence on e-government is explored. The agenda itself is, however, a much more extensive set of policies covering broader public service reform, with different initiatives having various degrees of success (see Laffin, 2008).

8 Many non-Australian municipalities take a more active role in initiatives that aim to improve infrastructure and eliminate access and skill inequalities (see, for example, Wiklund, 2005; Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal, 2008; Aurigi, 2005).