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HARMONISING DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS: EVALUATING AN EGOVERNMENT INITIATIVE IN SOUTH EAST QUEENSLAND

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ABSTRACT

Development application (DA) assessment processes have traditionally been paper based, and assessed according to planning systems unique to each Local Government. Fragmented and inconsistent DA assessments resulted. Consequently, local government approvals of DA have been criticised as being slow, difficult to negotiate, and to lack transparency. Recently, the RRIF program sought to improve DA processes across 21 local governments in South East Queensland. RRIF aimed to reduce red tape and improve the transparency of DA assessment. While RRIF achieved valuable improvements in DA assessment, particularly increased consistency, transparency and streamlining; additional opportunities for harmonisation remain.

Keywords: eGovernment, development approval, consistency, transparency, harmonisation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Recent initiatives around the world have highlighted the potential for information and communications technology (ICT) to foster better service delivery for businesses. Likewise, ICT has also been applied to government services and is seen to result in improved service delivery, improved citizen participation in government, and enhanced cooperation across government departments and between government departments.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2006) identified local government development assessment (DA) arrangements as a 'hot spot' needing specific attention, as the inconsistent policies and regulations between councils impeded economic activity. COAG (2006) specifically suggested that trials of various ICT mechanisms be initiated which may well be able to improve DA processes for local government. While the authors have explored various regulatory mechanisms to improve harmonisation elsewhere (Brown and Furneaux 2007), the possibility of ICT being able to enhance consistency across governments is a novel notion from a public policy perspective. Consequently, this paper will explore the utility of ICT initiatives to improve harmonisation of DA in local governments.

Specifically, this paper examined as a case study the recent attempt to streamline Development Assessment (DA) in local governments in South East Queensland. This initiative was funded by the Regulation Reduction Incentive Fund (RRIF), and championed by the South East Queensland (SEQ) Council of Mayors. This paper examines the ways in which increased harmonisation was achieved through the project.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review outlines the concepts of eGovernment and eGovernance as these relate to enhanced service delivery through the use of modern ICT. The espoused benefits of eGovernment over traditional service delivery are examined and will be used as a framework for evaluating the recent attempt to improve the DA processes in South East Queensland.

2.1 DEFINITIONS

Central key concepts to understand this initiative are those of eGovernment and eGovernance, which are defined and explained below.

2.1.1 eGovernment

eGovernment refers to the development and application of ICT towards the improvement of activities in the public sector. The Audit Office of New South Wales argues that eGovernment:

is about improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government by using the Internet and related technologies (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2001).

In turn ICT allows for the development of new ways for delivering services, and provides for opportunities for new partnerships within the public sector and between the public sector and other sectors. According to Becker et al (2006), eGovernment:

entails the simplification and implementation of information, communication and transaction processes, in order to achieve, by means of information and communication technology, an administrative service, within and between authorities and, likewise, between authorities and private individuals or companies (Becker et al, 2006).

An important, if not central, point about eGovernment is that ICT is the platform or facilitator for systems and institutional change. By moving service delivery on line, organisations are forced to examine their own structure, examine their own policies and operating procedures, and examine how they relate to customers and other stakeholders. eGovernment is not simply about developing

and implementing a technology, it is about building organisation and governance structures to support the organisational implementation of the technology (Saxena 2005).

eGovernment has both fiscal and social dimensions. The fiscal dimensions are about the quality and cost of service delivery. The social dimensions are about improving citizen access to government and developing more effective and interactive mechanisms between the government and all community stakeholders. Hence the OECD (2003) argues that eGovernment is more about government and less about 'e'. In particular, "IT should not be considered in isolation, as it has become an essential instrument to transform the structures, cultures and operations of government" (OECD 2003, 2). Thus for government ICT processes do more than just enhance efficiency, they enhance or enable the engagement of citizens in the process of government. This then, leads to the concept of eGovernance, which is central to the development and implementation of eGovernment.

2.1.2 eGovernance

While eGovernment provides the opportunity to rethink how the government provides services and how it links them in a way that is tailored to the users' needs, eGovernance is far more about people and politics than it is about technology and rationality (Heeks 2001). In essence governance is about the system of organisation and management that supports the IT systems. Governance requires public sector organisations to re evaluate their organisation, their rationale, their operations and their relationships with stakeholders. If governments can achieve this radical new conception of their role, then there is the potential for eGovernment to transform "not only the way in which most public services are delivered, but also the fundamental relationship between government and citizen" (Symonds 2000, p. S3). eGovernance contributes to the functioning of democracy by online provision of government information which would otherwise be difficult to obtain or unavailable, and through online debates and plebiscites (Teicher et al. 2002, 14).

An eGovernance focus needs to be differentiated in the literature from techno-centric views of eBusiness. Unfortunately, most interpretations of eGovernance have been techno-centric to date (Bhatnagar and Schwabe 2000). Bringing a governance-centric focus, though very much desirable, is often difficult as it requires addressing a number of critical issues. Saxena (2005) argues that these are:

- *Defining a citizen-centric or governance-centric vision for the eGovernance projects.*
Developing a process-oriented view of government work – which enhances collaboration within and between government agencies
- *Developing a performance management system* for efficient and effective service delivery,
- *Defining a flexible technology architecture* that is secure, provides easy access to users, and is scalable for high-volume operations as well as being cost-effective for the government.

Organisational support is required at a number of levels to support the ICT platform. Few incentives have been built to encourage adoption of eGovernance initiatives within government. For example, governments have seldom incorporated marketing into their eGovernment activities, nor have they targeted specific segments of their user base to encourage taking advantage of those services (Jupp, 2003,135).

2.2 BENEFITS OF EGOVERNMENT / EGOVERNANCE

The benefits of eGovernment and eGovernance initiatives are examined below Benefits are not interpreted here in purely monetary terms, but in a broader sense of costs and benefits to business, consumers, government and society at large.

2.2.1 Direct Benefits of eGovernment / eGovernance

The potential advantages of eGovernment are significant in terms of financial and efficiency gains but also in terms of in the effectiveness of delivering core services and in more effectively accessing stakeholders and developing new relationships within and outside of the public sector. eGovernment may help break down government agencies boundaries and jurisdictional barriers to

allow more integrated whole-of-government services across the three tiers of government in Australia (Huang et al, 2002). This breaking down of silos also applies within the same tier of government in terms of more effectively linking departments and agencies within the one tier of government. Reaching out to citizens and communities to not only deliver better quality services, but provide more service access, is an important purpose of eGovernment. Beyond these frontline objectives eGovernment provides opportunities for improved citizenship and partnerships developing within and outside of the public sector.

Various authors (eGovernment Benefits Study 2003, Huang et al. 2002, OECD 2003) argue that the benefits of eGovernment are:

- *efficiency gains* – savings in data collection, information provision, communications with clients and transaction costs
- *service improvements* – improved customer focus for service delivery and increased accessibility to services
- *improved policy outcomes* – through information sharing, interaction with citizens and explaining policies and programs
- *improved governance* – through openness and ongoing communication, greater communication with stakeholders
- *building trust* between government and citizens - through opening up policy development, explaining policies and ongoing communication

2.2.2 Indirect Benefits of eGovernment / eGovernance

The development and application of eGovernment processes in itself can generate indirect benefits that may not have initially been foreseen, but are important by-products of eGovernment.

Often the processes of developing and delivering eGovernment requires organisations to examine how they deliver services and how they relate to other divisions within the same organisation and to other organisations in the public sector. Harris and Cornelius (2003) conclude that the development of eGovernment systems leads to new organisational architecture and new ways of doing business and delivering services. Inter agency collaboration over the delivery of one service can lead to ongoing collaboration over the delivery of additional services. Inter-agency information sharing results in offering fewer contact points for end-users of public services, thereby leading to more efficiencies in the delivery of these services to the end-users (Bajaj and Ram 2003). In addition there is an educative and knowledge sharing process that enables separate departments and agencies to better understand what is happening elsewhere within the in one organisation or in other organisations. Information sharing can result in more effective policy design but also result in agencies and their employees developing a holistic view of service delivery. eGovernment allows for empowerment of citizens in being able to seek out the information they require on their own accord (Tan et al. 2005).

By reviewing the available literature on eGovernment and eGovernance, there are a number of consistent themes which emerge from the literature, which could be expected from such initiatives. Those themes which occur numerous time in the literature are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 – Summary of Benefits of eGovernment projects identified in the literature

Benefits
Inter/Intra Government Collaboration
Improved engagement of citizens
Improved service delivery
Improved access to services
Reduced cost to the consumer
Transparency of government processes

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Public policy case studies have been called for as a way of advancing public policy practice (Osborne & Brown 2005). A case study is “a method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive descriptions and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context” (U.S. General Accounting Office 1990, cited in Mertens 2005:237). Case studies provide for in-depth analysis of a particular issue or technology as it impacts an organisation or industry, and can provide strong recommendations for improvements in theory, technology or policy.

Two main methodologies were used in this case study to examine the RRIF project: semi-structured interviews and content analysis of policy documents?

3.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured face to face interviews were conducted with individuals responsible for the implementation of the RRIF program in South East Queensland. Semi-structured interviewing was selected as the main methodology as it ensures cross case comparability (Bryman and Bell, 2001: 346), and is important methodological tool when conducting exploratory and explanatory studies – particularly in order to find out what is actually happening in practice (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2000: 245).

The interviewees were selected via purposive sampling (Zikmund 2003: 383) as respondents required particular expertise concerning the implementation of the RRIF project in their local jurisdiction in order to be able to respond meaningfully to questions.

A snowball sample of six councils out of the 21 involved in the project, was undertaken – two small, two medium, and two large councils. By interviewing councils which were different sizes, it was hoped that resource issues and other variables which could affect implementation of the initiative could be identified.

The interviews were then analysed using content analysis in order to code the issues raised by interviewees.

3.2 CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis is a technique for gathering and analysing the content of text (Neuman 2000: 292), and is an approach that has wide applicability in policy related research studies (Marinetto 1999: 68). Content analysis in this project is descriptive rather than interpretive (Bauer 2000: 135), particularly as the “concreteness of materials studied in content analysis strengthens the likelihood of reliability” (Babbie 2004: 324). A key element of content analysis is the use of a coding system to quantify the data into an analysable format. Coding systems in content analysis can identify numerous characteristics of online text content (Neuman 2000).

Individual informants have been de-identified and any commercial in-confidence information has not been divulged. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees have been withheld. When citing interviewees, the generic term ‘interview x’ is used as a means of preserving anonymity. The names of government departments, government reports, and most government policies have not been obscured as most of this information is already freely available, either on the Internet or in public libraries. The names of individual councils interviewed were also obscured.

4.0 FINDINGS - RRIF PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Regulation Reduction Incentive Fund (RRIF) program was created by the Australian government with the aim to provide incentives to local councils to reduce red tape for small and

home-based businesses. The funding for the program was facilitated through a competitive merit-based grants process targeted at Local Government Authorities. Grants were awarded to projects which targeted specific areas identified for reform (AusIndustry, 2007), in the SEQ this focused around improving DA processes and creating transparency in environmental health policies, regulation and compliance.

An important key factor to note with this case study is that it is unusual for an eGovernment initiative. Typically individual government departments undertake eGovernment projects in order to improve their internal performance. The RRIF case study examines the implementation of an eGovernment initiative across 21 autonomous local councils in South East Queensland. In order to move ahead, agreement needed to be reached between councils at the highest level.

The RIFF program consisted of two projects:

1. Planning and Development Online
2. Local Government Toolbox

These projects were designed to reduce red tape in the areas of development assessment, environmental health and regulation and compliance, with an overall vision to enable customers to interact more transparently with councils through standardising the way councils operated through the various initiatives within the projects. The two projects each incorporated three initiatives:

Table 2 - Summary of RRIF project initiatives

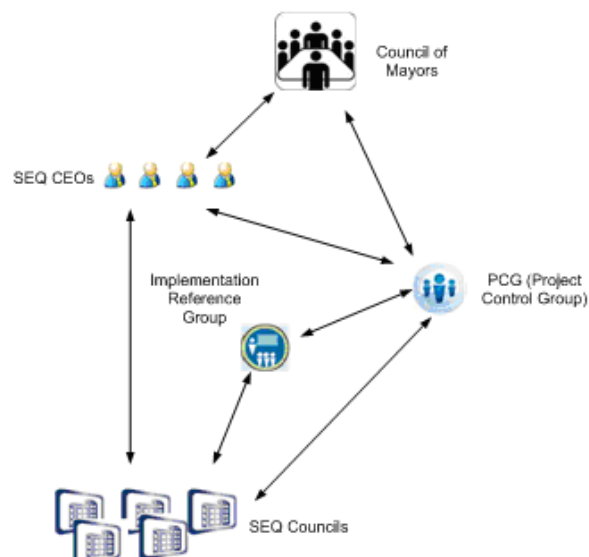
Planning and Development Online	Local Government Toolbox
DA Tracking	Customer Facing Information
Planning Scheme Online	Customer Service Scripting
Risk Smart	Local Law Review and Standardisation

Key elements of the project which are related to harmonisation are discussed below. Firstly, the governance arrangements of the project are examined as these enabled the project, but were also strengthened by the project. Secondly, the Local government ToolBox is examined. Thirdly the Planning and Development Online is examined.

4.1 RRIF PROJECT GOVERNANCE

The application process for RIFF was originally initiated and endorsed by the Council of Mayors (CoM) following in their vision of “speaking with one voice for South East Queensland”. The RIFF Program in SEQ acted as a catalyst aimed at harmonizing processes across 21 councils. The Council of Mayors as the top tier of governance within the program was unique as it provided a unified body which had agreed to implement a set of initiatives for the SEQ region. Underneath the CoM control groups were also formed to steer and provide focus to each of the initiatives that made up the RIFF program. These governance bodies were designed to bridge the gap between the Council of Mayors, project team, project implementers and the eventual users of the system. This structure is outlined in Figure 3.

Figure 1 – Governance Model



The importance of the governance structure for the RRIF project, and the consequences of the governance structure are discussed further below:

4.1.1 Importance of the governance structure

One of the unusual features of this project was that it was conducted across a number of local councils, which are technically autonomous from each other. As was noted in Figure 1, the RRIF project engaged the peak agency for the project which was the Council of Mayors for South East Queensland (SEQ Council of Mayors) and the CEOs of South East Queensland (SEQ CEOs), who endorsed the project at the highest level, and gave impetus and legitimacy to the RRIF program.

Having the support of the CEO's and the Mayors was beneficial. Without their support I don't know whether we would have been able to achieve the requirements as a region.
[Interview 8]

I think one of the things that really helped us was the Council of Mayors group and the CEO's, they really cleared the path for us to make this essentially happen... How that played out was that there were a couple of times that we needed to go back to the Council of Mayors and CEO's with when we need regional agreements for certain aspects of the project.

[Interview 11]

From a public policy perspective the SEQ Council of Mayors does not have statutory or legislative authority. It is simply a group of councils collaborating to achieve regional outcomes and share information between councils. The RRIF project is possibly the first major activity conducted by this Council.

4.1.2 Consequences of the governance structure

While the governance structure enabled the RRIF program to be undertaken, the RRIF program also resulted in improved information sharing and relationships between local governments in South East Queensland.

Improved Relationships

Huang et al. (2002) argue that improved relationships within and between government agencies can be a consequence of eGovernment initiatives. This is supported in the interviews:

SEQ Councils we were able to deliver. We have established and built very good relationships with each other, and that is implemented very much through the regular meetings we have with DA Managers in the region. We are very strong, we are like a support group, obviously there is a lot of pressure in local government and dealing with the development industry so having the support of all of your peers in the region is very good.

[Interview 8]

In actual fact that was one of the positive outcomes of the whole RIFF process, [was that] other Councils have reported that the relationship building internally between their assessment services people and their IT people was a major positive outcome of the project ... We talk more now with the other Councils ... because of the project.

[Interview 10]

Information sharing between councils

Bajaj and Ram (2003) argue that improved information sharing, which can lead to increased efficiencies, is also a consequence of eGovernment initiatives. This view was supported in the interviews:

That's right, you don't necessarily have to go to a meeting to share information. You can get online and have a look at it at your own convenience basically.

[Interview 5]

Toolbox is almost like an online chat line, it has got those capabilities as well, you can chat with people, and saying I think this means this, what do you think it means? ... so if [other councils] have had the same sort of problem, that sharing of information, there would be no way of knowing that data before, so [now] you can ring the guy up. You can get onto somebody and say this is the problem I am having, how did you guys handle that?

[Interview 3]

Thus the RRIF project built on and extended existing collaborations between councils. The various ICT tools have enabled information sharing across councils, which has enabled increased standardisation of certain approval processes in councils.

4.2 PROJECTS CONDUCTED UNDER RRIF

The two projects carried out under the RIFF program were delivered through two different approaches; each approach aimed to facilitate a model where the needed expert knowledge could be sourced to meet the project needs. Local Government Toolbox was developed as a custom made solution built in-house while an outsourced product was developed for the planning and development project (RIFF SEQ Program (A), 2007).

4.3 Local Government Toolbox

The objective of Local Government Toolbox was to act as a knowledge base for councils with its primary aim to provide the same environmental health information and local law policies across the whole region. As part of the initiative it focused around standardising local laws regionally. The system enables customers to access one set of council requirements online, no matter under which council jurisdiction they belong.

Prior to making the information public and standardised the project team was involved in setting a process under which laws would be distributed to councils, agreed upon and signed off after which only then being loaded onto the system. The team was required to script and standardise the laws yet still ensure variance in laws across councils were met. This process of standardisation was an efficient way in which to harmonise local laws across the region and only made possible through the project team consisting of council workers with expert knowledge in this field.

The way the application was built enabled enough flexibility to have both generic and council specific sections to accommodate for variances in local council fees and requirements.

A screenshot of the toolbox interface is below (Figure 3)

Figure 2 – Standardisation Acceptance Process

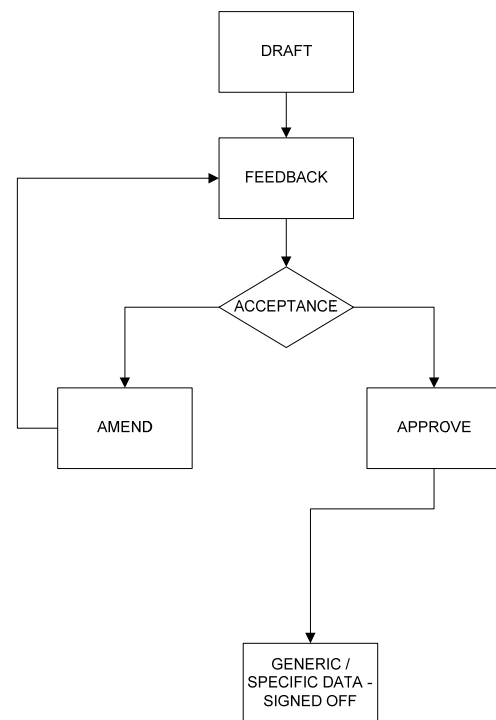
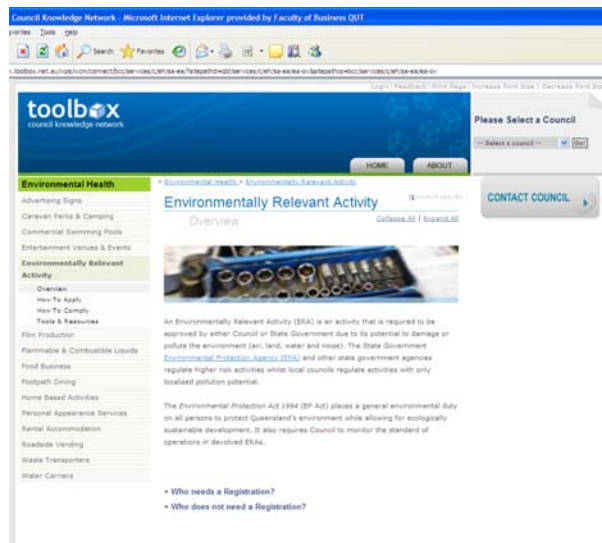


Figure 3 - Screenshot of the Toolbox Website



As a web-based knowledge management system Toolbox gives council staff, individuals from the public and businesses access to regionally consistent information and standardised local law policies. Through information consistency and transparency the intent is to reduce the need for interactions with councils (RIFF SEQ Program (A), 2007).

4.4 PLANNING DEVELOPMENT ONLINE

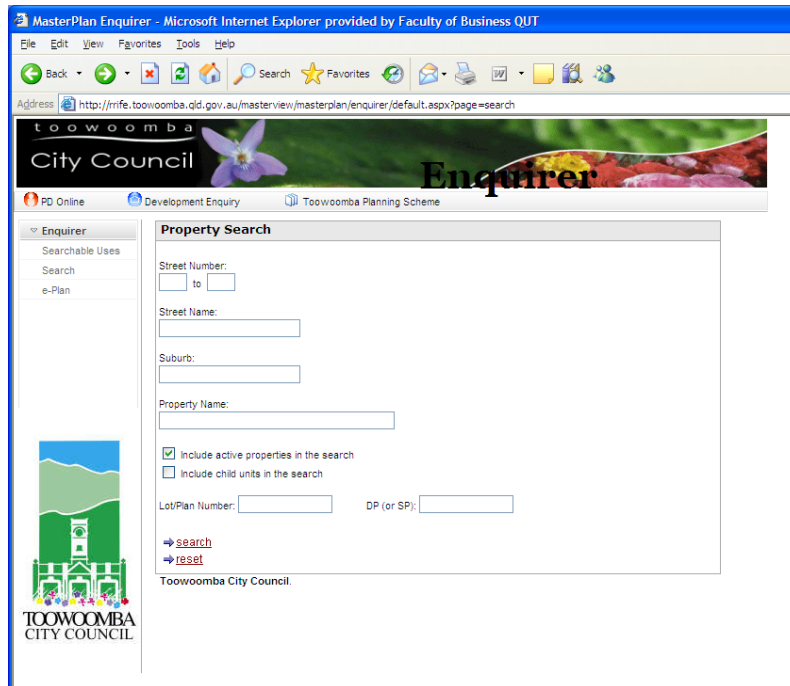
The initiatives within the second project, Planning and Development Online focused on improving DA processes through standardisation, a clearer application process and information transparency and consistency. As part of this initiative property information that had previously been paper based was made available electronically.

4.3.1 DA Tracking (DAT) – Property and Application Enquiry

The Property and Application Enquiry initiative has been designed to provide customers with the ability to firstly view property information and secondly track the progress of development applications online. Its objective is to provide basic property and mapping information to planners, developers and members of the community to aid in their preparation of a development application based on property information made available. As part of this module it provides a facility to view other development applications.

The second component in the application tracks the progress of development applications from lodgement through to determination, identifying the current status of an application, tasks undertaken as part of the assessment process and estimated assessment timeframes. In addition as part of this process it provides any associated documents that may be required. Transparency in the application process was aimed at increasing accountability in council staff and intended to speed up the application approval process through the ability to track this process. A screenshot of this application can be found in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 – Screenshot of DA Tracking – Toowoomba Shire



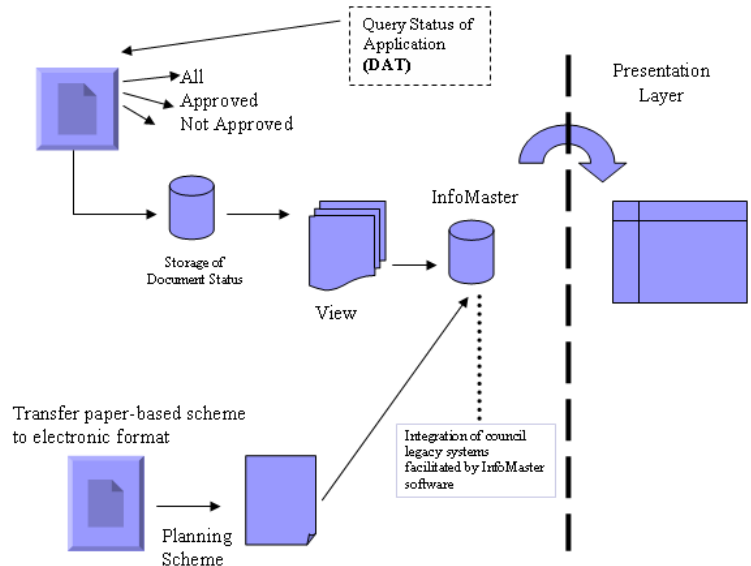
4.3.2 Planning Scheme Online

The Planning Scheme Online (PSOL) initiative was developed to provide more accessible, accurate and timely planning information to planners, developers and members of the community about what levels of assessment and development controls are applicable to specific properties.

PSO was made possible through the transfer of each council’s paper based planning scheme to an electronic format, integrating relevant information into the scheme online and providing tools to be used by the public to query the information presented. With all this information accessible via the web, it emphasises a shift in making the overall development application process more streamlined and seamless. Overall, the process enacted a significant shift from having to access hard copies or searching for PDF versions in the past that were quite difficult to locate.

Planning Scheme Online allows relevant planning scheme information, regulatory planning information and basic property and mapping information to be accessed with relative ease. The manner in which the application works ensures it only displays only relevant information for a development application. In turn this ensures the council’s application process is more transparent and council customers can lodge their application with greater ease as they are aware of the necessary documentation required to complete the application. Through this process it is intended that the overall application process will become more efficient (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 – PSOL and DAT



4.3.3 RiskSmart

The Risk Smart application intends to introduce a streamlined process for assessing “low risk” development applications through the use of a series of questions relating to a selected “use type” (eg. building a warehouse in an industrial area). As part of this process it qualifies the level of risk associated with a development and if deemed as low risk provides a turn-around of five working days. Formal applications still need to be submitted but the outcome is a faster assessment turnaround for customers if the application is identified as low risk, with business benefiting from time and resource savings across the region. Industry associations such as the Property Council of Australia (2007) are particularly interested in the Risk Smart initiative as it has the potential to dramatically cut down the approval times for specific types of applications.

RiskSmart aims to deliver the following benefits to planners, developers and the community (RIFF SEQ Program (E), 2007)

- Efficient identification of the level of risk associated with applications
- Transparency of planning scheme provisions and decisions
- A front end system which alerts applicants to risks prior to the lodgement of their application
- Fast assessment/approval of low risk applications
- Provides transparency as to what requirements are needed for the submission of a quality application
- Reduction in councils’ assessment time frames and duplication of effort in the assessment process.

With RiskSmart each council was required to develop their own risk frameworks and criteria for the public to utilise. Given the complexity of applications most councils implemented only one scenario under which the risk smart application process would be applicable with the intent to increase this in the future. RiskSmart is summarised in Figure 6, and a screenshot of the application is Figure 11.

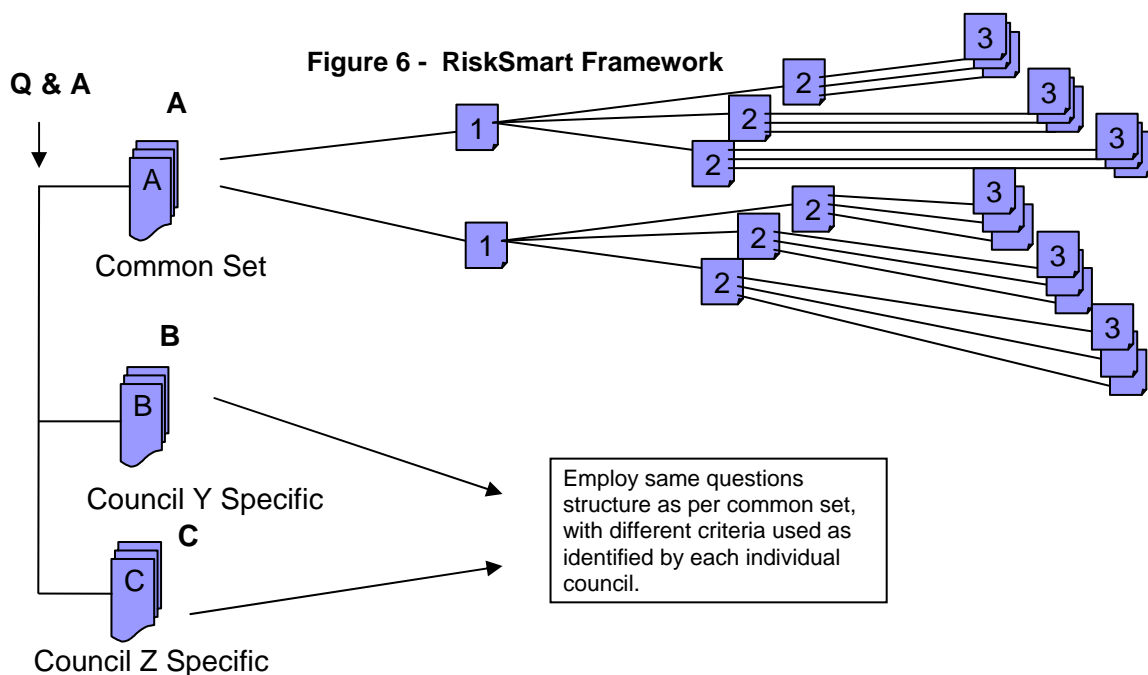
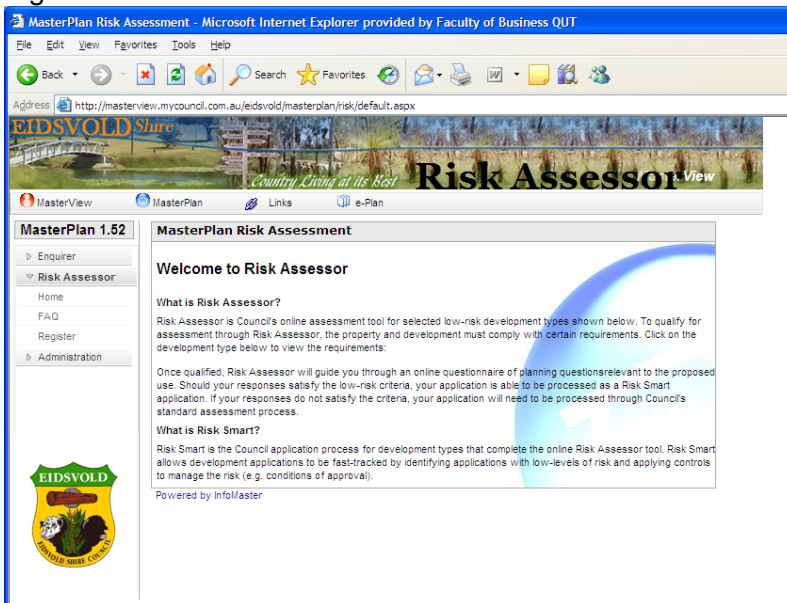


Figure 7 – Screen Shot of Risk Assessor – Eidsvold Shire



4.4 BENEFITS OF THE RRIF PROJECT

4.4.1 Improved access to services and or information

OECD (2003) and Huang at al., (2002) argue that increased access to services and information is one of the likely consequences of eGovernment initiatives. This is supported in the interviews:

Beforehand, we had applicants screaming to have that information accessible ... and the benefit for us was that instead of the applicants coming in and hassling the counter staff or ringing up my planners, they could jump online and essentially download the information themselves. We have had anecdotal feedback, it is fantastic, it is easy to use, real estate agents love it, valuers love it ... instead of them having to come into council and ask a series of questions they can now search for that information themselves online. The online tool provides a lot of information in relation to property.

[Interview 8]

Improved access to information has had a number of consequences. Notably these include increased transparency, pressure to keep information up to date, and a reduction in counter enquiries, and improved service delivery.

4.4.2 Improved Transparency

Tan et al. (2005) argues that increased information provision is empowering for citizens and is an important element in eGovernment initiatives. One particular element of the Planning and Development Online project was that it enabled increased participation in the scrutiny and comment of DA. Whereas before, individuals had to travel to their councils in order to view and comment on DAs, now they are able to view and comment on these applications from home. Additionally, whereas the names of people providing comment were typically kept anonymous, now the names are displayed, with a view that this may discourage vexatious submissions.

For other councils that was new for them, and this notion that people could see submissions, but it would seem from an outsider that this would improve your transparency, this was seen as a big win out of the whole thing.

[Interview 1]

I think it has certainly made the process that councils go through a bit more transparent, because you can actually get on and see where an application is up to, what information has been submitted with the application. If it is an impact accessible

application, this council has made submissions available online, including the names and addresses of the submitters ... So I think that in terms of impact of accessibility of applications, making people aware that their submission is available to the general public, they are probably less likely to make a vexatious submission.

[Interview 5]

4.4.3 Improved service delivery and information provision

OECD (2003) also argued that eGovernment initiatives could result in improved service delivery to citizens. For many councils, this increased provision of information has also enabled faster turnaround times on applications, and therefore improved service delivery:

if we can have a 5 day turnaround for say 40% of our applications, because they are so easy to process, because there are no significant outstanding issues, they have all been addressed prior to lodgement, it is great for the industry, great for Mums and Dads, and great for the Council.

[Interview 8]

The spin off to the council should be better made applications, faster turn around because of the quality of the applications has improved

[Interview 2]

4.4.4 Reduced costs to the consumer (time or \$)

Often the logic behind implementing a eGovernment project is to reduce costs. This is true for the RRIF project, with interviewees noting savings in reduced approval times, reduced reliance on consultants, reduced adaptation costs, and reduced fees.

The first saving is in the reduced processing times

There are huge cost savings there to streamline the DA process in particular.

[Interview 1]

We have seen the flow on results of all of that, by delivering information on how to apply to the customer we are getting better quality applications come into council which equals faster processing times because we don't have to go back out and ask for more information and which leads to faster final approval times which makes the applicant happy

[Interview 6]

4.4.5 Increased Consistency across councils

As noted in the introduction, COAG (2006) had argued that pilot projects needed to be implemented in local government agencies to demonstrate the potential for ICT to deliver improved harmonisation across councils.

The two main projects within RIIIF achieved consistency in different ways. ToolBox was able to achieve considerable improvements in standardisation:

Every Council had their own food fit out guide, and they were all excellent guides, but it is State and National Legislation so it is no reason why every Council had to have a different one. So we picked the best bits out of every one, and everyone agreed to that one version and now for the future if there is ever a change in food legislation, that one version gets changed and 22 councils have got that updated version, so from that point of view it is brilliant.

[Interview 6]

While the Planning and Development Online did not increase the harmonisation of the actual content of local legislation, it certainly provided a similar look and feel across South East

Queensland. The project itself is the first major collaboration between many of the councils, as is noted by interviewees:

Again, I think it was just a major initiative that effected the whole region so we recognised the need to work together and collaborate on how we could as a collective unit achieve the project outcome. We really did look at the needs of the region, rather than an individual focus, and we were very supportive.

[Interview 8]

To see 18 councils in SE Qld, plus the Burnett ones, actually implement a major software system and achieve that in 9 months with the level of standardisation that there is, is a major achievement.

[Interview 10]

So there are a number of findings which confirm those found by other researchers. In particular, the research found that RRIF provided opportunities for the improved engagement of citizens, information sharing and collaboration between councils, improved access to services and improved service delivery, and transparency of government. Further work however is needed.

4.4.6 Further work required

While seen as a good first step, more work is required in order to achieve the outcomes that industry desires particularly at a regulatory level:

Down the track, ultimately, between the nineteen councils there will be one set of standards, rules and regulations and all that sort of business we will all work off them, but at this point of time, if we talk local laws, there could be 19 different sets of local laws.

[Interview 3]

While many interviewees felt that the RRIF project made gains in the area of increased harmonisation, within the constraints of existing regulatory frameworks, many noted that much work was needed in order to achieve harmonisation.

Personally, I can't see how we are going to get uniformity unless there is a uniform [planning] scheme ... [there's] different terminology, like what we call a detached dwelling [another council] might call a house, or like it is just minor things. What you might consider would be allowable in one Council is not in another, like set backs and building materials and all sorts of things. There's squillions of things that are just different in different councils, so until there is uniformity at that level, I don't see how having the same look and feel on the website is going to help that much.

[Interview 7]

Thus, while the RRIF project achieved consistency in certain areas, there were limitations due to differences between the current local planning schemes. The Integrate Planning Act was being reviewed at the time of the interviews and the results were not known on what the changes would be. Most people interviewed were also aware of a Queensland government initiative called "Smart eDA" currently underway in Queensland, which unfortunately was beyond the scope of this project to investigate. Additionally future research would need to consult with users of the services to determine if the views from within local councils align with those accessing and using those services.

5.0 CONCLUSION

It is important that to recognize that the initiatives undertaken formulate a platform from which business can perform transactions with councils in a simplified manner. Increased transparency, accessibility, accountability and consistency all contribute to reduce red tape in the areas identified

for reform which included development assessment, environmental health and regulation and compliance.

The governance of the project enabled the project to be undertaken in a collaborative manner. However, a by product of the project itself was increased information sharing and improved relationships between separate local councils.

Increased information provision to the public, a core element of both projects, were seen to result in improved transparency of process and quality of applications. In turn, these resulted in improved service delivery, due to the improved quality of applications, and therefore reduced costs to consumers. Increased consistency in the Toolbox project was also achieved. Thus the RRIF project has demonstrated that local councils can work collaboratively to achieve an outcome which has positive outcomes for industry and society. As a case study, there are valuable lessons which could be learnt from for other initiatives.

Future research would need to examine potential impact of impending changes to the IPA, local council amalgamations, and the views of a wider range of stakeholders.

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