THE CONGRESS
OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 248 (2008)[1]
E-tools: a response to the needs of local authorities

1. As the pace of change in information and communication technologies continues to increase, the opportunities for local authorities are very promising: they have more technical applications than ever at their disposal to inform their citizens, gather views and to use their findings to improve service delivery.

2. E-tools also offer local elected representatives and their administrations considerable opportunity to improve the organisation of their work and to engage those elements of the electorate who have previously been reluctant to participate in the political process.

3. Standing still is not an option. The new information technologies are changing the face of local democracy; many of the most successful initiatives are being launched by citizens rather than local authorities. Local authorities are obliged to respond to the changing environment, an environment where they no longer have the same degree of control as to how local political debate is conducted.

4. The best way to meet the challenge of the new citizen empowerment that e-tools are generating is for local authorities to make intelligent use of such tools themselves, using e-democracy tools 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 presuppose 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 and significant proportion of citizens risks 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: they can reduce costs by adding power to processes but if the original procedures and working methods are flawed, the introduction of e-tools may just exacerbate and make more visible failings which were previously hidden. Careful attention therefore needs to be given to the introduction of new technologies and applications. The aims, objectives and required outcomes of a project must be carefully thought out before the implementation stage.

7. It is important to keep in mind the basic principles of local democracy, not to get side-tracked, and to learn how to make the best use of new applications, while being aware of their potential shortcomings, dangers and pitfalls. There is a clear need for guidance, evaluation and support. Local authorities stand much to gain from working together, looking for 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 careful 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. Recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

a. recognise the potential of e-tools for improving local democracy;

b. ensure that consideration of the application of e-tools in local government is an ongoing part of its intergovernmental activities;

c. seek solutions to the problem of the digital divide, such as promoting courses in new technologies for all age-groups and all sectors of the population;

d. address the issue of the increasing technical literacy requirements for using e-tools;

10. Recommends that the Committee of Ministers ask the governments of its member states:

a. to give logistical support to local government for improving local democracy through the use of e-tools;

b. to ensure that successful local authority initiatives are widely publicised and made available to other authorities.

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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)2REC, draft recommendation presented by A. Drobotov (Russian Federation, L, SOC) and E. Van Vaerenbergh (Belgium, L, ILDG), rapporteurs).