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Financial and resource implications

Introduction: who administers the site?

5.1 A number of contributors proposed that the House would initiate an electronic petitions website under its own administration. This was favoured by the Department of the House of Representatives.

5.2 Such an approach echoed the Queensland Parliament's focus on security and verification of signatures, which led to the site being managed under the Parliament's administration. While the electronic petitions website was managed by a third party in Scotland, there were aspirations to bring it under the administration of Parliament.[1]

5.3 Clearly, creating and maintaining a website of this nature would involve expenditure and resources. This chapter considers the kinds of costs involved in an electronic petitions website for the House of Representatives, and the resource needs that could result.

Financial background

5.4 The Clerk of the House advised the Committee that 'financial and resource implications of an e-petitions system on a dedicated web-site model' were 'an important issue for the department' since it had:

> for a long time, 15 years … had the tradition of absorbing new functions and trying to do them without additional expenditure to

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1   Mrs J Irwin MP, Submission no.14, p.1.

> the public purse. I think we have just about reached the limit of where we can go to that extent.[2]

5.5   As a result:

> The implementation of such a system would need to be adequately funded, and the department's view, as a matter of principle, is that it needs to be fully funded from new and additional Budget funding for the department. While there are significant uncertainties as to the initial set up and ongoing operational costs of such a system, the department believes that it would not be able to fund an e-petitions system based on a dedicated website model, without such supplementation.[3]

System cost

5.6   The Clerk told the Committee that potential costs for an electronic petitions system lay within a range. At the upper end of estimates, there was 'UK£500,000 with annual running costs of £750,000' estimated by the UK Management Board for a House of Commons electronic petitions system (modelled on the 10 Downing St electronic petitions facility). Another figure was the AUD$80,000 that had been invested for development and implementation for the Queensland Parliament hosted facility, 'with modest ongoing costs'.[4]

5.7   However, a further less expensive option was raised. The Speaker of the Queensland Legislative Assembly offered the House of Representatives a licence to the software system developed for the Queensland Parliament for a 'nominal' licence fee.[5] Similar arrangements had already been made with the Tasmanian Parliament, where a system had been operating in both the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council following a 2004 Committee report recommendation.[6]

5.8   In a response to a proposal put to him by the Committee, the Clerk agreed to the advisability of trialling an initial low-cost implementation, employing 'the same host as we have in the Queensland and Tasmanian parliaments'. This would mean that the House of Representatives 'would

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2   Clerk of the House of Representatives, Submission no.13, p.9.
3   Clerk of the House of Representatives, Submission no.13, p.9.
4   Clerk of the House of Representatives, Submission no.13, p.9.
5   The Hon Mike Reynolds MP, Submission no.12, p.2.
6   The Hon Michael Polley MP, Submission no.5, p.1; Mr D T Pearce, Submission no.6, p.1.

not have to pay the full set-up cost and it would be a basic system'. This, it was suggested, 'would be a start' in implementing an electronic petitioning system in the House.[7]

5.9   The Committee also received advice on financial aspects of an electronic petitions website from Mr David Elder, Serjeant-at-Arms of the House of Representatives. Mr Elder noted the offer from the Queensland Parliament of a licence for its system at nominal cost. He suggested that while there 'would need to be some adaptations', and the Department 'would need to run a project to bring that on board and make it work effectively in our own system', it was anticipated that this 'could probably be done at a relatively modest cost'.[8]

5.10   Mr Elder also advised that such a project could 'be done using capital funds through the Department of Parliamentary Services', noting that while:

> there is certainly a lot of pressure on our operational budget and
> on DPS's operational budget, for capital items such as this there is
> less pressure. We believe that we can probably develop the system
> without additional funding, using capital funds available to DPS. I
> have flagged that possibility with DPS and they do not see any
> great impediment to that.[9]

5.11   This opens the possibility that a House of Representatives electronic petitioning system could be implemented on the basis of a low initial cost for the software licence. Capital funds could be used for implementation and other initial costs, including additional hardware (such as servers) that was needed and other software licences that would be needed for the proprietary database management software used in the Queensland system.[10]

5.12   Ms Ann Mackinnon from the Department of the House of Representatives advised on the practicality of this option 'from an IT point of view', saying that 'it would be a relatively straight forward process'. It would, she suggested, 'be a project', but the Queensland Parliament had 'established this system' and the House of Representatives would simply be 're-implementing it and modifying it here slightly for our situation'.[11]

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7   Mrs J Irwin MP and Mr IC Harris, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 November 2008, p.2.

8   Mr D Elder, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2009, p.1.

9   Mr D Elder, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2009, p.1.

10   The Hon Mike Reynolds MP, Submission no.12, p.2.

11   Ms A Mackinnon, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2009, p.4.

5.13   It is important to note that the system used by the Queensland Parliament allows petitions to be submitted for initial approval, posted so that they may attract signatures, and be taken down at the end of the signature period, and other basic elements of the management of electronic petitions. It does not include discussion forums or other social-networking facilities such as those employed in the Scottish Parliament's petitions system. Mr Elder advised that:

> to the extent we go to a system with more bells and whistles, it becomes less affordable, and my comments about us being able to do this without additional resources may need some qualification.[12]

Day-to-day costs

5.14   If the House of Representatives adopts the system developed by the Queensland Parliament it could implement an electronic petitions website for comparatively little cost. However this still leaves open questions of cost for the day-to-day administration of the system.

5.15   In assessing the potential exposure of the House in this regard, it is useful to consider the experience of the Queensland Parliament. The Clerk of the Queensland Parliament also spoke to the Committee about resource implications. He told the Committee that the software system had 'very low' maintenance requirements'. [13] In terms of daily work-flow, the Clerk told the Committee that the 'day-to-day operation of the system is run through my office, which comprises my secretary and me':

> Literally, when a member sends in an e-petition request form, my secretary brings it through to me. I approve the wording on the form and ensure that it is within the rules. She then enters the details onto the database and then presses the required buttons, if you like, built into the software to put it up on the website. The petition system automatically shuts itself down on the closing date. My secretary then prints it out and we present the petition to the house on the next sitting day.[14]

5.16   Resource implications were also described by the Speaker of the Queensland Parliament, who told the Committee that:

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12   Mr D Elder, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2009, p.2.
13   Mr N Laurie, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 June 2009, p.5.
14   Mr N Laurie, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 June 2009, p.5.

> [t]he processes are not completely automated and require some
> data input and processing from Parliamentary Service staff
> including the follow up process of posting Ministerial responses
> on the site. Total maintenance of the site is estimated at about .4 of
> a full time equivalent officer.[15]

5.17   This confirmed Mr Elder's suggestion that, in view of the anticipated low
        cost of initial implementation, most of the 'operational costs' for the
        system 'might be largely ones for your committee secretariat rather than
        back-end IT sort of expenditure'.[16] As a result, the Department did not 'see
        resourcing as necessarily being an impediment in being able to proceed
        overall'.[17]

Committee comment

5.18   In the Committee's view, on the basis of advice from the Queensland
        Parliament, there are relatively low overheads for maintaining the
        electronic petitions system. However, numbers of petitions are likely to be
        greater for the House of Representatives, based on a sample over five
        years:[18]

Year	Queensland Parliament	House of Representatives
2007	205	148
2006	166	276
2005	176	235
2004	133	471
2003	137	369

5.19   Moreover, if electronic petitioning facilities were to capture public interest,
        the House of Representatives could become a focus for petitioners around
        the country, further increasing number of electronic petitions.

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15   The Hon Mike Reynolds MP, Submission no.12, p.2.
16   Mr D Elder, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2009, pp. 1-2.
17   Mr D Elder, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2009, p.2.
18   Source: Exhibit 3, p.14, *Making a Difference,* p.8.

5.20   The Committee also notes the increased limits on functionality that stem
        from cost constraints. Earlier the report noted risk to reputation as an
        argument against adopting discussion forums. To that can be added the
        argument that cost precludes their use in the near-term: due both to costs
        for development (especially in view of these facilities not being available
        in the current Queensland system), and in view of the further resources
        that would be needed to administer them.

5.21   However the Committee believes that a watching brief should be
        maintained on these forms of functionality. It may prove to be the case
        that Parliament risks falling behind contemporary methods of
        communication unless it maintains an awareness of developments in the
        area.

5.22   The Committee is also aware of an argument that the provision of
        discussion forums could serve as a way of controlling risk. Discussion
        forums would offer an alternative to independent forums where the
        House has no ability to moderate discussion. This would increase the
        ability of the House to protect against loss of reputation if offensive
        material were seen to be associated with a petition to the House.

5.23   Consistent with this, the Committee believes that where possible a system
        installed to manage electronic petitions in the House of Representatives
        should not only be scalable, but should leave open technical avenues so
        that further functionality could be added when the House reviewed its
        requirements.