

LOCAL GOVERNMENT INNOVATION AND ANALYSIS
HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE TOWN CRIER

February 2016



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Preface

As part of its Innovation and Best Practice program in January 2014 the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) launched a blog dedicated to the exchange of knowledge and ideas relating to local government in Australia and internationally. The blog, called the Town Crier, published original articles to an audience of Australian local government practitioners, researchers, associations and peak bodies.

With the conclusion of the ACELG program in December 2015, the blog published its final article in January of the following year. In this short time of operation the Town Crier has left behind an impressive legacy of local government innovation and analysis. The Town Crier has published over 80 articles from local government practitioners, academics, students, and experts. These submissions have included commentaries, interviews, videos, databases, and book reviews, and have spanned a wide variety of local government theory and practice, including economic development, infrastructure and asset management, social cohesion, leadership, structural reform, land-use, and everything in between.

As the Town Crier wraps up its online presence a number of stand-out submissions have been recorded in the present volume, both for posterity, and to offer readers a snapshot of the valuable and diverse local government innovation and analysis currently occurring in the sector.

I would like to thank all of those who submitted to the Town Crier in its short but productive tenure as ACELG's online platform for the exchange of local government knowledge and ideas. I would also encourage those in local government to continue the dialogue advanced by the Town Crier, whether through other online platforms, peer-to-peer engagement, or local government-centric research.

Chris Watterson

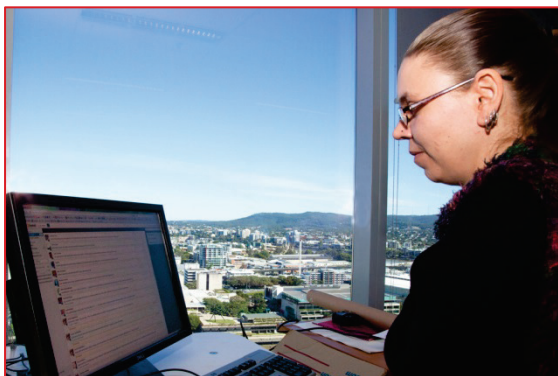
Editor, Town Crier

Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government

INNOVATION

Social media use in emergency management: Brisbane City Council case study

*Brisbane City Council, the University of Canberra and the Australian centre of Excellence for Local Government
First published in June 2011*



In January 2011 the City of Brisbane experienced the second-highest flood event of the past 100 years. The Brisbane River broke its banks, inundating major roads and thousands of homes. The Independent Review, established in late January 2011 to review the response to the flood event, commended Brisbane City Council for the manner in which it sought to provide the public with both general and detailed information.

The Review indicated that Council utilised a wide variety of communication channels, including print media, radio, television and the internet. It made special mention of the Council's use of social media, including Facebook and Twitter, which it said proved remarkably successful in rapidly disseminating information. The Review also noted that the increased demand for, and use of such social

media tools has continued after the flood event.

Context

During early January 2011 significant flooding occurred throughout Queensland, resulting in three quarters of the state being declared a disaster zone. Early identification by Brisbane City Council and the Bureau of Meteorology indicated that more than 40,000 homes and businesses across Brisbane would be affected by flooding. Council needed to urgently establish a communication channel with Brisbane residents and businesses in the flood area, as well as the broader community.

The impact of the flood on the wider Queensland community had been extremely harrowing before the floods were due to reach the city of Brisbane, and Council realised that it was vital to engage with multiple publics in a quick and reliable way. As residents frantically searched for information online, the unprecedented levels of online traffic overloaded websites throughout Brisbane, including Council's website, resulting in its failure.

Due to the rapidly changing situation and the failure of some communication channels, Council's Digital Communication Team devised and implemented a highly successful



social media campaign to communicate vital flood information to the community.

Opportunity

The opportunity to use social media channels was identified as a solution for disseminating information quickly to a large number of Brisbane residents. Brisbane City Council already had an established presence on key social media channels, enabling it to reduce set-up time and rapidly engage its existing follower base. The main social media channels used by Council during the floods were Facebook and Twitter. Council also promoted a sandbagging video on YouTube at the beginning of the flood event.

Within the first 48 hours of the flood event, social media channels proved to be a preferred communication channel for a very large number of Brisbane residents and businesses. The ubiquity of social media in people's lives allowed rapid engagement with a large cross-section of the community, whilst also granting the ability to share messages from other trusted authorities active during the flood event, such as the Queensland Police Service, Energex, State Emergency Service (SES) and Translink.

Using social media during the flood event was not only integral to spreading information quickly and engaging directly with concerned residents; it was also an opportunity to obtain useable intelligence from the public that could then be fed back to the Local Disaster Coordination Centre. This was important in the volunteering stage where Council was responsible for organising volunteers to help restore Brisbane back to its former condition.

Development of the Opportunity (including planning, strategy and design process)

Council had engaged a full time social media strategist as part of the Digital Communications Team prior to using the channels during the flood event. This was a strategic move, where Council identified the need for strategy and planning for social media across the organisation. With this resource in place, as part of a wider team who also had experience in social media, Council was prepared to immediately use these channels as a crisis communication tool. The Digital Communication Team identified the following social media communication objectives:

- Audience Reach: Raise awareness of Council's social media channels with the aim of changing the way Brisbane residents and businesses consume information.
- Information Management: Collect, process, analyse and disseminate information to Brisbane residents in a timely manner on the impact of the flood event, and to use this information as intelligence for the disaster management group.
- Information Sharing: Share important information with Brisbane residents that instilled confidence and positioned Council as a central source of reliable information on flood related issues.
- Community and Business Mobilisation: Quickly and accurately engage with and mobilise Brisbane residents and businesses that needed to evacuate, as well as coordinate volunteers during the clean-up phase of the flood recovery efforts.

Implementation

To successfully implement effective communication via social media channels during the flood event, the Digital Communication Team was initially working 24 hours a day. At the beginning of the crisis, when demand was highest, this was managed by a dedicated resource already in place. This quickly increased to a team of four people (two per shift). Each team member worked remotely via online tools.

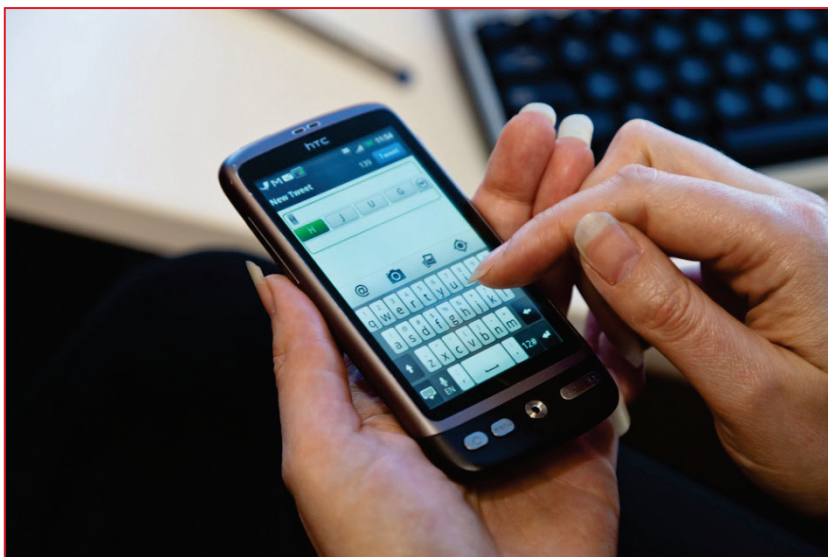
This was due to a number of factors, principally that for part of the flood event people were advised not to enter the City Centre.

As the first week of the flood event passed the Digital Communication Team started to sign off at midnight and return at 6am. This allowed staff to get some rest and return refreshed. During this time the Digital Communications Team also worked closely with the Local Disaster Communications Centre (LDCC) and in conjunction with traditional communication channels. These included the marketing unit that is responsible for media releases, community service announcements and radio/TV communication.

Council focused on four key communication areas, as well as on-going engagement:

- Evacuation Centre Locations
- Waste Disposal Information
- Health and Safety Information
- Volunteering Information.

Council's initial communication priority was to disseminate evacuation centre information. With many residents panicked about the process of evacuation, Council's social media channels were continually updated with information on evacuation centres, including what belongings they should take with them, locations, and whether pets were allowed.

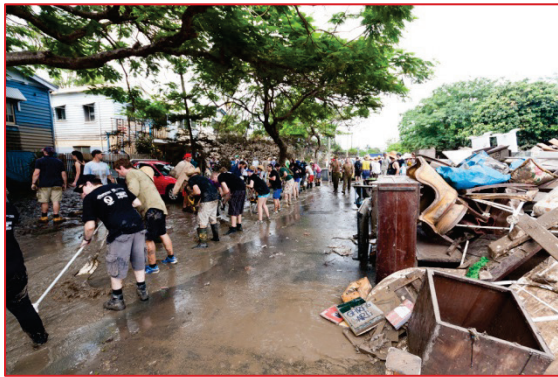


As the flood event unfolded, Council needed to provide information to residents about waste disposal and other safety tips around hazardous waste. Much of this was communicated via social media, with residents engaging in two-way conversations about when their waste services would return to normal. There were many rumours circulating, especially around water contamination, and Council was able to quickly dispel these rumours via their Facebook and Twitter channels.

In the midst of the flood, the need for health and safety information was a high priority and Council continually disseminated information focusing on protective clothing, snakes and mosquitos, hygiene and so on. Keeping the public safe was an integral part of the outgoing communications and using social media to share such information as it came through from the LDCC was essential.

One of the biggest social media successes for Council involved co-ordination of volunteers from early on in the flood event and in the aftermath. Council social media channels were used as the main communication tool to seek and coordinate volunteers to help in clean-up efforts. On Friday 14 January around 5pm, the Lord Mayor announced that there would be Volunteering Clean-Up weekend. By 6am the next day, more than 10,000 volunteers arrived at designated meeting points and had registered to help the community. On many occasions, Councillors asked for help from

100-250 volunteers with only 24 hours' notice, and upwards of 700 showed up.



Monitoring and Evaluation

Council's social media channels were monitored continuously. Using a system of 'hot topics', the most common social media queries from the public were fed back hourly to the LDCC to obtain reliable responses which could then be shared publicly.

Council monitored both their own Facebook and Twitter channels for incoming enquiries, and also monitored a number of other trusted sources to ensure that they themselves were aware of what was happening in the wider community. To make this easier, Council developed a public 'QLDFloods' Twitter list that contained a number of other authorities and trusted sources, which were commenting on the floods at this time. Organisations such as the Queensland Police, SES, Translink, Energex and major news sources were contained in the list. Individuals could subscribe to this list to provide a wider pool of reliable information from authoritative sources.

Another method of social media monitoring was to continually observe a number of hashtags such as #qldfloods, #bnefloods, and #thebigwet. These hashtags could then be evaluated on volume, content and allocated a certain level of priority. This approach allowed Council to evaluate and monitor information efficiently when there was a rapidly changing situation with a high amount of information flow. Council created their own hashtag, #bnecleanup, which was used to arrange volunteers. This hashtag was mentioned 1,430 times with a reach of 1,566,399 people. It was also retweeted by a number of high-visibility

social media presences such as 612Brisbane, SESBrisbane, 9newsbrisbane, volunteeringqld and others.

Facebook Notes were also an important tool utilised by Council during the floods, as they enabled the communication of larger pieces of information than character limits on other platforms such as Twitter allowed. These notes were then linked to directly in Twitter posts. Council posted 125 notes during the first few weeks of the flood event, with most containing Community Service Announcement information or consolidated morning updates.

Part of Council's post-flood evaluation was to measure how much the use of reach of its social media channels had grown over the course of the flood event. Individual cases of the community's engagement with Council's social media during the flood event were also monitored, with numerous memorable and successful cases documented.

For example, an individual located in Auchenflower was recovering from a stem cell operation and could thus only drink boiled water; however, the power was out. A friend of the patient contacted Council via their Facebook page and Council then asked for help via Twitter. The Tweet had been retweeted 134 times with a reach of 103,195 people. Within 30 minutes of the initial Tweet the patient had received a gas cooker that could produce boiled water whilst the electricity was down.

Another notable case was that of a young woman who was flooded at Yeronga. Her phone died so she contacted Council via Facebook asking for help. She was awaiting evacuation from the SES, which had no way of contacting her. Council contacted the SES and Queensland Police Service directly via phone and Twitter and worked with them to ensure the woman was evacuated. Within two hours the woman let Council know, again via their Facebook page, that she was safe. This was a great example of how social media can help an individual, and how authorities can work together using a public online space to ensure the safety of residents.

Many more wonderful stories exist. Council's social media channels were used to reassure numerous individuals overseas or interstate who were worried about their relatives or homes. They were also used to connect individuals with other people that could help them, from community cleaning groups through to electricians.

Critical Success Factors

One key feature of Council's use of social media during the flood was the timely and considerate responses provided to social media enquiries in a tone that was conversational and friendly. Council saw it as important to establish credibility and present an authentic, reliable presence that residents could trust. The drastic increase in public use of Council social media channels during the flood event suggest that such an impression was made.

Facebook activity:

- 1,570% Increase in likes
- 759 likes to 12,679 likes
- 17,546 comments
- 4,641,232 post views
- 21,521 views on Facebook Notes

Twitter activity:

- 180% increase in followers
- 2,955 followers to 8,291 followers
- 561 tweets sent throughout January
- 2,207 re-tweets
- 8,322,516 Twitter 'impressions'
- 105,306 clicks on links posted on Facebook and Twitter
- 7,258 total mentions.

Thus the most critical success factors of Brisbane City Council's use of social media during the floods were being organised; having dedicated resources that understood the social media space; working in conjunction with existing communication areas; and adopting a conversational, open tone with residents. It was important to develop a relationship with the community to ensure that they trusted Council as an authority in the space. It was also important to ensure that enquiries were

responded to as quickly as possible with reliable and helpful information.

Overall, considering the scale of the event and the amount of information that needed to be communicated, Council was very proud with the outcome of their social media use during the floods. The independent Flood Enquiry Review Report commended Council for their exceptional social media use.

Community rallies to deliver East Gippsland All Abilities Playground

Fiona Weigall, East Gippsland Shire Council

21st January 2016



Background

East Gippsland Shire Council has delivered an innovative \$1.72 million all-abilities playground following a 10-year grassroots community campaign for an accessible recreation resource.

Now the most used play space in East Gippsland, the playground provides an inclusive space for children of all abilities. It is widely used by East Gippsland residents, is a stopover place for tourists, and is a popular destination for family parties and celebrations.

Significantly, the project generated local investment confidence and employment during a period of investment decline, and created a sense of great achievement, energy, ownership and pride among the community, who worked for 10 years to develop it.

The All Abilities Playground was conceived of in 2004 by a dedicated group of community members and business leaders, who saw a need for a fully accessible playground in Bairnsdale, complete with toilet, shower, BBQ and car parking.

East Gippsland Shire Council partnered with key stakeholders, including the East Gippsland All Abilities Playground Association Inc.,

service groups, community groups, state government agencies and local businesses.

The opening of the playground followed 10 years of community fundraising, planning and project development. From inception to completion, the project drew strong support and many businesses contributed cash and in-kind donations.

It is an excellent example of state government, local government and community groups working together to deliver outstanding outcomes for the region

Facility

Throughout the process, the council applied the principles of the 2010-2020 National Disability Strategy by engaging with people with disability, their families and carers to design, fund and deliver a high-quality, accessible play-space that gives every child an opportunity to experience the joy of play, regardless of their physical and psychological abilities.

The result is a 2,000m², fully inclusive play space designed using “universal design principles” to ensure the park and amenities are accessible to everyone. A Liberty Swing enables people in wheelchairs to experience the simple joy of swinging, and there are six accessible toilet cubicles, one with a washing facility and hydraulic hoist.

The East Gippsland All Abilities Playground is a major public asset, contributing to the health and wellbeing of the community and delivering widespread social and economic benefits.

The playground features interactive descriptors sharing East Gippsland’s history. Play areas represent the region’s rich heritage, including a timber mill representing the mountains, hinterland and timber industry; a

boat and sandpit representing fishing, tourism and the Gippsland Lakes; and a BBQ area and paths representing local towns and highways.

Key to its success is its inclusive design, which goes beyond minimum compliance standards to ensure the public space and amenities are accessible to everyone.

One of very few playgrounds with specialised accessibility features in regional Victoria, the design is exceptional for a regional playground and is nationally recognised in disability networks as a must-stop destination for travelers with children. As well as an inclusive recreational resource, it is a popular meeting place and tourist stopover point with a high-profile location beside the Princes Highway.

East Gippsland Shire Council took the lead in managing the project, working with the engineers, engaging contractors and overseeing construction.

Financing

A unique feature of the project was its ability to attract and harness extraordinary, widespread community support, which was instrumental in securing financial backing from state and local government sources, as well as substantial community donations and significant cash and in-kind donations from local business.

The budget was around \$1.72 million, comprising \$1.1 million in council cash, a Victorian Government contribution of \$500,000, and a community fundraising contribution of around \$120,000.

Many suppliers donated goods and services – VicForests donated timber used in the playground valued at \$25,000 – or provided them at cost price. The project was built on a newly created pad, elevated to avoid flood inundation of the Mitchell River. Eastwood Corporation and Whelans Earthmoving partnered with the council to reduce the cost of the fill.

Community members and local businesses contributed substantial, uncosted in-kind support over 10 years.

Challenges

It wasn't without its challenges. The council overcame significant barriers presented by the greenfield site, including budget shortfalls, floodproofing, and the need to move services such as a water main, power lines and Telstra pit.

Each hurdle was overcome with negotiation and collaboration. East Gippsland Water, for example, waived the fee for moving a water main by bringing forward its works program for the area.

The project also represented a whole-of-community effort to remove barriers and support inclusion of young people with disabilities in local life. The level of community contribution, donations and volunteer effort, combined with East Gippsland Shire Council's significant contribution, ensured the final design was far better than originally anticipated.

Recognition

The East Gippsland All Abilities Playground project – a winner at the 2015 National Awards for Local Government – has been a resounding success, meeting its objective to create a high-quality, accessible play-space.

As well as removing barriers to participation for young people with disabilities in the East Gippsland community, it created an exciting new resource, which aligns with government policy to promote and facilitate the participation of people with disability, their families and carers in the social, cultural and recreational life of the community.

It is an excellent example of state government, local government, local business and the community working together to deliver an outstanding outcome for the region and achieve a vision that exceeds expectations.

Changing Places, changing lives

*Jack Mulholland, Maroondah City Council
20th January 2016*



Life without Changing Places

Each day we engage in work, recreation and play in our community. To enable this we rely on particular resources in our community, and one of these is toilets. Imagine for a moment how your life would look without access to a toilet. Or for any parent reading this, imagine the emotional distress in having to change your child on a public toilet floor because no suitable toilets are available. This is a practice that has been going on for years and is best depicted by the following story from a parent in her desperate search to find a suitable option to change her 10 year old son:

Several toilets and enquiries later, it had come to this: a large disabled toilet with a door that wouldn't shut properly and a white tiled floor that revealed the footprints of the many who had been here before us. It was the best I could find and it made me feel sick.

This issue exists in Australia because the National building standards for an accessible toilet do not meet the needs of all people with a disability or their carers. People with a profound or severe disability often need extra facilities such as a tracking hoist system and a height adjustable, adult-sized changing bench.

These features are found in toilets called 'Changing Places'. The Changing Places concept was introduced successfully in the UK

in 2006 with over 750 Changing Places toilets spread across the country.

The beginning

In 2012, Maroondah City Council facilitated an Access Focus Group that worked with Queensland Investment Corporation (QIC) to ensure the \$665 million redevelopment of Eastland Shopping Centre was accessible to all. In search of best practices in toilet accessibility, Maroondah City Council discovered Changing Places UK. With their assistance, and utilising evidence from shopping centres in the UK, Maroondah City Council put forward a proposal for developing such facilities to QIC, resulting in a commitment to build two Changing Places toilets - a first for shopping centres in Australia.

The success with QIC inspired Maroondah City Council to commence and initially drive a Changing Places consortium. The initial task for the consortium was to seek the expertise of an access consultant, occupational therapist and architect to develop a national design for Changing Places. The input and expertise of Equal Access, Architecture and Access, and Health Science Planning Consultants helped set a benchmark design for Changing Places facilities in Australia.

The tools

To provide a vehicle for the national design, a Changing Places information kit was developed and designed in a manner that would provide councils, architects, developers, facility managers, designers, builders and others with all the information required to plan for and build a Changing Places toilet. It includes plans, design specifications, security options, costings, castings and personal stories.

The personal stories included in the information kit both demonstrate the psychological distress and OH&S risks of an

absence of accessible toilet facilities. These included back injuries from lifting; urinary infection from sitting in soiled clothing; and dehydration when drinks were refused on a 37 degree day (the individual didn't want to have to return home to be changed). These experiences beg the question: why has it taken so long?

Support and recognition for Changing Places

There is strong basis in policy from which to encourage the introduction of Changing Places facilities. The Australian National Disability Strategy 2010-2020, which has been endorsed by the Federal and all state and territory governments, has a strong focus on improving conditions for people with a disability and their families.

In the 2015 National Awards for Local Government, Maroondah City Council's 'Changing Places, Changing Lives' project won the Disability Access and Inclusion category, an award that recognises local governments that have applied the principles of the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020. The project also won the overall National Award for Excellence in Local Government. The Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss in announcing the award said the project addressed a significant disability access and equity issue.

Changing Places also underpins the goals of the National Disability Insurance Scheme by removing a considerable barrier to social inclusion. Without Changing Places, despite all the support of NDIS, many people's lives would have remained restricted. The NDIS provides support to individuals and families, but does not include community infrastructure.

Outcomes

To date Changing Places toilets are now located at the MCG¹, Melbourne Zoo¹, Eastland, Ringwood Lake, Realm. State Government funding will also see Changing Places toilets installed at Rod Laver Arena, St Kilda Foreshore, Victoria Park in Ballarat, and the Central Business District in Shepparton.

¹ Funded by State Government of Victoria.

The Western Australian Government will also provide funding for 14 Changing Places facilities across the state.

Opportunity

Changing Places offers local councils an opportunity to change the lives of local community members who are adversely affected by public restroom inaccessibility.

The Changing Places Consortium is now led by the Association for Children with a Disability. To enquire about Changing Places, or to gain a Changing Places information kit, go to changingplaces.org.au.²

Changing Places was the winner of the 2015 National Award for Excellence in Local Government.



² Changing Places' key supporters include: Australian Institute of Architects, Planning Institute of Australia, Association of Consultants in Access Australia and the Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission.

Rockingham Arts Centre: From Ambulance Depot to Community Arts Centre – Transformed

*Ashley Pittard, City of Rockingham
10th December 2015*



Planning for the arts

The City of Rockingham has been working towards the establishment of a dedicated arts facility for a number of years. The need was first identified in a 1994 Regional Arts Implementation Study and since this time, it has been a recurrent theme in numerous plans and key documents. Notably a feasibility study in 2010, investigated the establishment of a large scale Contemporary and Performing Arts Complex. That feasibility examined a regional size venue with a significant schedule of accommodation. That feasibility work provided the consolidated research basis for this smaller scale project, specifically redevelopment the former St. John Ambulance Depot into a community arts centre.

There were a number of rationales for this redevelopment, including:

- It wasn't financially viable for the City to develop a *full-scale* Contemporary and Performing Arts Complex (estimated market value \$75 million).
- The former ambulance depot experienced a range of occasional uses, including as a public art space, which drew positive attention from the

community and surrounding businesses.

- A public arts space would provide sustainable accommodation for arts groups to come together to undertake more arts activities, forge improved relationships, and achieve a more visible presence for the arts and crafts in Rockingham.
- To offset recent closures of other public arts spaces.

The need for a public arts space was reaffirmed in a WA Department of Culture and the Arts factsheet produced in 2010, which indicated that 22% of the WA population participate in arts and cultural activities. For Rockingham at that time, that was over 23,000 and growing.

Creative Re-Use of Urban Facilities

The City had limited ability to acquire land within existing urban areas to accommodate further development of any type of civic buildings. This particular opportunity arose with the relocation of the Ambulance Service to a new venue, leaving behind an aging public service building for potential community use. In 2006 investigations – including building condition reports, asset valuations and audits – were undertaken to determine the site's suitability for public use. In 2007 the City purchased the building asset for a moderate cost and the land was vested to the City to manage with no transaction fee.

Infrastructure re-use lends itself naturally to brownfield sites and is only practical on a case-by-case basis and contingent on appropriate analysis and investigation. Importantly, landlocked or fully built-out councils should consider enhancing

relationships with government agencies or similar to obtain an understanding what Crown land exists, and its long-term potential. It is also advantageous to obtain knowledge of existing land use, and endeavour to ascertain prospective operations of other government agencies. This will assist in determining whether any urban infrastructure re-use opportunities exist and, if so, be in a better position to consider future options.

Facility Design and Development

How do you turn garage spaces into art workshops and galleries?

Notwithstanding the array of artistic pursuits – from painting to pottery, sculpture to quilting – the Rockingham Arts Centre (RAC) was designed to be able to cater for many community art events, activities and exhibitions. The venue had to demonstrate that art works and exhibitions could be planned, curated, prepared, hung and installed.

Plans were hatched to give the new Rockingham Arts Centre (RAC) a ‘facelift’ from the drab brown-brick garage appearance. Significant community engagement informed the conceptual design, with outcomes derived from creative dialogue workshops and artistic needs assessments.

The Management Plan, formulated from a number of integrated workshops assessing the concept design, incorporated projected usage of the different areas of the facility. This projected usage had been based on the identified community demand for spaces in conjunction with analysis of existing community facilities.

The final facility design included:



- A multi-purpose space suitable for the ‘doing’ of visual, craft, literary and performance arts, as well as functions, meetings, etc.
- Climatically controlled display/exhibition space
- Studio spaces for casual and prolonged use by organisations and individual artists
- A sculpture workshop suitable for the construction of public artworks
- A community meeting room
- Substantial storage areas (both internal and external)
- Supporting amenities such as a kitchen, universal access toilets, wash-down and delivery areas, etc.

The functional spaces included:

- Gallery space 87m²
- 4 x studio spaces (between 7 and 17m²)
- A multi-purpose room (76m²) and meeting room (27.5m²);
- A sculpture workshop (27.5m²).

Public art was an important design component of the RAC, and Council ensured that there was a comprehensive public art collection around the building to create interest in the precinct, and demonstrate its desired use. The public art was itself symbolic of community values and the local identity. Environmental factors were also considered in the design process, specifically to increase natural light, energy savings and ventilation opportunities.

(Ventilation and air control – temperature, humidity, etc. – for art galleries is an extremely prescriptive and technical process.)

Challenges

Working with a number of community arts groups and passionate individuals representing their own interests and pursuits throughout the engagement process threw up a number of challenges. This included working with a broad array of artistic pursuits that come in all shapes and sizes; use different mediums that vary in odour, noise, light requirements etc.; and require machines and lathes, heat and flames, heavy objects, audiences, space, storage etc.

At one stage in September 2012 when the project was due for completion, the City was informed that the contracted construction company had gone into administration and would not be able to fulfil their contractual obligations. This resulted in a lock-down of the site for four months and extensive negotiation and securities to allow the City to take over project management to complete the development. Works officially restarted some four months later in January 2013. Difficulties were then encountered through a range of issues with sub-contractors who had lost money from the construction company, were unable to complete works as they had gone on to new schedules, sought compensation from the City, or even tried to bump up the price for the same piece of work to get something back. The City was steadfast and strong in continuing to inform any concerns with the previous company were to be dealt with via communication with the administrator and that all works under the City's control would be guaranteed.

Learning's

The City has derived a number of learning outcomes from this project:

1. Like any project it takes time – and if the builder goes bust it takes even longer!
2. Opportunities do exist for the rejuvenation of existing buildings at reasonable cost.

3. Creative transformation of infrastructure can deliver cost-effective, fit-for-purpose use.
4. The importance of effective engagement, and the need to provide adequate facilities for community groups such as those involved in arts and culture.
5. The role 'place activation' plays in delivering and value-adding to urban spaces.



The Rockingham Arts Centre was officially opened in August 2013. This is our story of the transformation of a disused ambulance depot to a pulsating and attractive home for community arts. It has come a long way from housing 'meat-wagons' to now being able to display masterpieces for the masses. It now activates an urban precinct, provides a home for community arts groups, and ultimately invites the community of Rockingham to develop their creative artistic flair and have positive artistic experiences.³

This project won the Leisure Facilities (WA) award at the 2014 Parks & Leisure Australia Awards of Excellence.

³ This article originally appeared in a longer form in volume 16 of the Parks & Leisure Australia Journal.

Spreading the ‘Shop Local’ message through youth engagement

*David Power, Mitchell Shire Council
9th December 2014*



The economic context

Mitchell Shire is a rapidly growing ‘interface’ local government area that sits in the central north of Melbourne along the Hume Freeway. As a result of continuing growth and a current population of 35,000 residents, Mitchell Shire has recently been added to Melbourne’s Urban Growth Boundary. This growth has brought about both positive changes in the business community, as well as its share of challenges.

Economically, one of the biggest challenges that retailers face is escaped expenditure as a result of the close proximity to Melbourne and shopping developments in adjacent municipalities. For example, in the south of the Shire around the township of Kilmore, the average household spends \$2,073 per month on retail items and services, with only 50% of this amount actually being spent in Kilmore. Compounding this problem, 90% of the retail businesses are independently owned and operated and local retail spending has declined over the last three years. The support of local traders is considered a priority for Council as retail is the community’s third largest employer, employing over 1,100 people with a combined spending power of upwards of \$42 million – a major boon to the local economy.

Mitchell Shire Council needed to find a way to retain as much of the spending power of the residents as possible and also tap in to the \$64 million value-added revenue that the retail sector contributes to the local economy on an annual basis.

Considering that 8,287 residents leave Mitchell Shire each day for work, one of the challenges identified was to encourage this sizable proportion of the working population to travel home first to do their shopping and support their local traders, rather than doing it on the way home in other municipalities. There was also an imperative to tap into the youth population and the family market, as young people make up over a third of the local population and are crucial to shaping spending patterns and ‘Shop Local’ awareness from an early age. Council therefore identified the need to understand and utilise the role that children play in helping to shape and drive family spending habits.

The program

In 2014 Mitchell Shire Council developed a Shop Local campaign titled ‘The Mitchell Crowd’, which was designed to encourage community members to support local traders. This campaign is a new approach to the Shop Local message aimed at educating primary school children on the importance of shopping locally and supporting local jobs. The program was developed to support and enhance the existing grade five curriculum, and is oriented around persuasive and narrative learning.

Mitchell Shire’s Youth Councillors teach the 60 minute lesson to the students with support from the primary school teacher. The aim is to teach young children about the value of shopping locally, the positive spin-off effects of doing so, and why it is important for the local economy. Delivery of the program is also



supported by community traders, community groups and schools working in partnership.

The program was designed to be fun and engaging for the target audience of grade 5 school students. The lesson featured 5 cartoon characters: Handy, Foodie, Fashionista, Sporty and Hipster. These characters are the 'Mitchell Crowd', and each supports their local traders by getting their feet on the street and spending their pocket money in the local shops. They all believe that if they live locally, then they should shop locally and they want to spread the word.

Through a five minute video the students get an insight to what the Mitchell Crowd's typical shopping day is like and, as a result, how many in the local economy benefit from their shopping habits – for example in job creation.

During the lesson the grade five students pair up with a classmate and create their very own Shop Local poster and slogan, and explain what they have learned in an attempt to nurture their persuasive and narrative learning as part of the grade five curriculum.

A prize sponsored by our local traders is offered for the top three posters, and all of the posters across all 12 schools in the Shire will be displayed in the shop windows on the local streets.

At the end of the 60 minute lesson the grade five students are given a Mitchell Crowd 'goodie bag' that contains branded bumper stickers, bookmarks with the Mitchell Crowd characters, and a fridge magnet shopping list so each student can relate to a different character or personality that matches their spending tastes.

Since the program was launched in July, there has been an unprecedented level of interest

from local traders and media. The program has successfully encouraged a broad range of retailers to think of innovative ways to build interest in their businesses, and new ways of targeting their local markets. It has also encouraged traders to work in partnership with Council to enhance the quality of public spaces in and around shop fronts.



A school child's poster

When the campaign concludes at the end of the year, it is expected that there will be a shift in attitude both from a local consumer and trader perspective. It is aiming to instill community pride, see a reduced amount of escaped expenditure from Mitchell Shire, and to sustain participation in the program from traders.

The challenges

As this was a very new approach to a Shop Local campaign our first challenge was getting the schools involved. Many of the schools were happy to be involved once it was established that the campaign could be adapted to fit within the existing school curriculum. We discovered that this campaign was particularly compatible with the grade five curriculum, which focuses on persuasive and narrative learning, and we had the program approved by AusVELS which gave us access to the schools and allowed the program to become part of the curriculum.

The program had to be age appropriate and appeal to young children and relate to their personalities, but also strive to deliver a long-term outcome. As a small Council, one of the biggest challenges we faced was the limited budget and getting buy-in from local businesses and the community at the development stages of the project. Getting sponsorship initially was quite challenging, as some businesses were unsure about the program given that it had never been done before and were therefore tentative about investing from the outset. However, after the campaign was launched we were inundated with calls from local businesses wanting to get involved. We accepted their requests for sponsorship even though the campaign was fully developed, utilising this support to add to the campaign as it progressed.

Lessons for other councils

It's always good for councils to engage with the people of the future through community groups and youth services. Coming at a Shop Local campaign from a new angle allowed us to arouse interest in the campaign in new and innovative ways. By positioning it as an educational campaign it took the message of 'shopping local' away from the main street and



into the classroom. This was important because before people make the decision to shop local, an adjustment in attitude needs to take place. By going through the schools it allowed the community to own the project and recognise the benefit to themselves and the local area.⁴

The Mitchell Crowd program was a finalist in the 2014 Economic Development Australia Awards and received a Silver award at the 2014 Melbourne Design Awards.

⁴ Images courtesy of Mitchell Shire Council.

Developing and Implementing a Disability Action Plan

*Community Participation and Engagement Team, Melton City Council
4th December 2014*



Project Overview

Melton City Council launched in grand style its easy-to-read Disability Action Plan 2013-2017 last year. We were thrilled that our Plan was recognised in the Disability Access and Inclusion category of the 2014 National Awards for Local Government.

The Plan strengthens the voices of people with a disability and supports the significant role that families and carers play, underpinning Melton's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The high profile launch celebrated the Plans development and used local talent, skills and stories of people with a disability to deliver a powerful message.

The Plan recognises all people with a disability, including children, young people and adults with a sensory, physical, or neurological impairment, acquired brain injury, or mental illness. It understands the important role that families and carers play and the need for them to be supported, valued and respected.

Input from people with a disability, their families, and carers has shaped the Plan, determined its priorities, and put into actions the things that are important. It supports what people with a disability have told us; that they

just want to be able to live, work and socialise in the same way as everyone else.

The Plan now guides Council decision making on issues pertaining to people living with a disability. It enhances the participation and wellbeing of people with a disability by helping to remove barriers and increase control and self-determination in everyday life.

The Plan sets out actions over the next four years that continue to build on the success and learning's from Council's two previous disability action plans, and supports and aligns to the:

- Melton City Council Plan 2013-2017, and
- Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2013-2017.

Approach

From the very beginning of the process we knew that the final Plan needed to be written in a way that was easy-to-read and would be accessible to, and understood by our target audience. After researching other Disability Action Plans we discovered many were written at levels of complexity and comprehension that most people would struggle to understand. We did not want our Plan to read that way.

Our consultation began by asking people with a disability, their families and carers what was important to them, the challenges they face, and their views on elements of access and inclusion across the City that could be improved. One of our key learning's from the consultation process was to involve as many of the Council's officers who were associated with delivering services to people with a disability as possible. It was very important that they heard what the community was saying first hand, rather than reading an

interpreted account in a document somewhere down the track. The community's view of disability service providers and health care agencies was also sought and considered.

When consulting with the community, Council used three plain English, open ended questions to offer people living with a disability and their Associates the opportunity to respond in their own words without leading them on any particular themes or issues. The three questions asked were:

Q1. In terms of how people with a disability are welcomed and included in the life of our community, what works well?

Q2. What are the challenges/barriers in the Melton community preventing people with a disability to live, learn, work and recreate?

Q3. What improvements could be implemented by the Melton City Council or the Melton community to make Melton a better place for all people with a disability to live, learn, work and recreate in?

Simplified English and pictorial questions were also drafted for those who were non-verbal or had low literacy levels. Online surveys were also made available via 'Survey Monkey' for those who could not attend a public consultation.



In developing the Plan, Council consulted with 350 people through a series of discussions, forums and surveys. Participants included people from across the municipality representing people with a disability, their families, friends, carers, residents, local health and disability service providers, and the Melton Disability Advisory Committee. People participated with enthusiasm, reinforcing the view that the City of Melton is a great place to live, but still having more work to do in

ensuring that people with a disability can do and achieve the same things in life that others take for granted.

Collectively, a number of research methods were used to gather primary data for the Plan, including:

- Data from the 2011 census
- Four community discussion groups
- Community feedback from the CARE Melton Expo (over 550 people in attendance)
- A forum with representation from 12 disability service providers, Government and non-Government organisations, and health care agencies
- Public forums with interested members of the community
- Surveys (125) identifying key issues for people with a disability, carers and disability service providers
- Feedback from the Disability Advisory Committee.

The information gathered identified six key priority areas:

- Quality services
- Getting information
- Getting involved and active
- Valued work, employment and further education
- Built environment
- Transport.

Delivery

With feedback from the community collected and the priority areas identified, focus shifted to the delivery of the Plan. Council felt that it was important to have in place a rigorous process in place to monitor and measure our success. In particular we wanted to:

- know whether we were succeeding
- determine if/where we needed to invest more time and energy
- make informed decisions and better respond to change
- be transparent and accountable.

On this basis Council resolved to:

- provide bi-monthly reporting to the Melton Disability Advisory Committee
- report quarterly through Council's quarterly reporting process
- provide an annual outcomes report in Council's Annual Report
- report to the community through Council's newsletters.

The Action Plan launch was a significant and high level event targeting those that could bring about change. This included state and federal politicians, managers, and senior council officers and stake holders.



Impact

Through its Disability Action Plan, Council is working in partnership with the local community toward ensuring that people with a disability:

- stay informed regarding the implementation and outcomes of the Plan
- feel supported and have access to the things they need to reach their goals and aspirations
- are valued members of the community who can easily move around and enjoy the company of their friends and family
- actively contribute to their community, have a voice that is heard, and positively influence the future of the City
- have the same opportunities as everyone else.

Much has been achieved in recent years:

- Inclusive play spaces have been developed across the municipality.
- The CARE Melton Expo has been launched, which brings together local carers and disability service providers.
- Resources and publications that support carers and people with a disability have been developed.
- A range of recreational and arts opportunities involving people of all abilities have been established.
- Council has established strong networks and partnerships with providers who support people with a disability.
- New buildings have been designed with state-of-the-art accessibility features.
- Council delivers information forums and workshops to educate the community on access and inclusion for all.

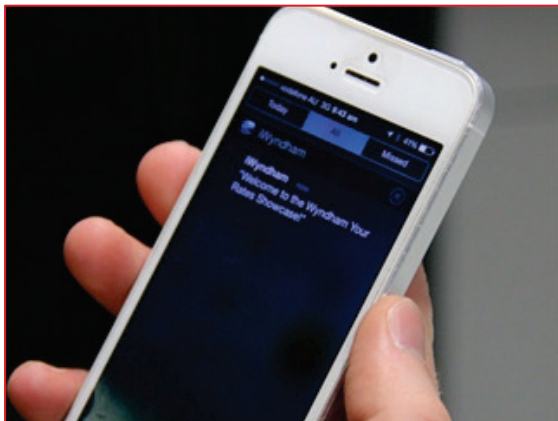
We are now:

- Working together to deliver accessible, flexible services that inform and meet the changing needs of people with a disability, their families and carers
- Improving access to information that supports informed decision making and increases awareness of services, opportunities and entitlements
- Providing people with a disability opportunities to actively participate, socialise and have fun in the community, improving their health and wellbeing
- Increasing opportunities and participation in further education and employment for people with a disability
- Increasing general participation and access to the local community
- Supporting people with a disability to move freely in and around the municipality.

The Melton Disability Action Plan was a category finalist in the 2014 National Awards for Local Government.

Councils using iBeacons for proximity-based messaging

*Adam Mowlam, Wyndham City Council
10th June 2014*



Background

One of the primary challenges of local government service delivery is getting the required information into the right hands – those that want and can use it. As an example, when Wyndham Council runs a large event such as a festival, it is very difficult to convey important messages such as an upcoming performance details, detour/directional information, special features and shows, lost children/property etc. Modern Technologies, particularly social media such as Twitter and Facebook are great at blanket dispersal of information, but they don't target attendees/participants specifically. A new technology recently released by Apple with iOS7, known as

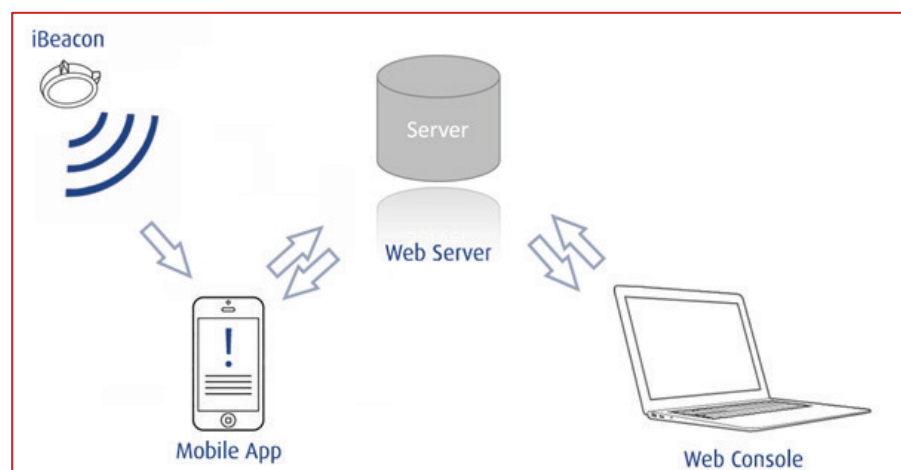
iBeacons which uses Bluetooth technology, solves this problem by delivering messages to users based on their location.

In a trial application of iBeacons, Wyndham City Council built a scalable solution that could be managed by non-technical staff.

There are three components to the solution:

1. Unique beacon – a hardware device with a unique ID that recognises nearby mobile devices. These beacons are all-weather devices, can be easily transported between locations, and can be grouped with other beacons.
2. Web-based management console – computer used by Wyndham City for the customisation of messages, the management of beacons, and the handling of web services for information transfer.
3. Mobile application – downloaded by users that can display notifications, messages, advertisements and other related information. The application is triggered when the user enters a pre-defined proximity to one of the beacons. When this occurs, the messages being managed by the console will be sent to the device via web services.

Since the beacons are relatively cheap and can be either fixed or mobilised by council staff with access to the web-management console, the beacons can be moved on a project-by-project basis. The messages that are sent to



mobile devices can also be linked to multiple beacons. For example, three beacons could be used at a single or multiple local parks to distribute the same message on rabbit baiting or upcoming vegetation work. The location of the beacons and the content of the messages can then be changed on an ongoing basis to stay up-to-date with council communication priorities.

The general public, who download the platform independent mobile app, receive the customised messages from council on their mobile device when they are near the beacons. A user can be within range of none, one or multiple beacons and can prioritise the type of messages they receive (e.g. related to upcoming events, tourist information etc.), and the messaging system will send only the requested information and only once, so as to prevent spam.

Pilot Project

To trial the use of iBeacons for Proximity-Based Messaging, Wyndham City constructed a pilot project to gather qualitative data regarding the customer experience. Staff identified “Your Rates Showcase” as a suitable event. This event was conducted indoors, in a relatively small space, with numerous available client devices and simple messaging requirements. For this project Wyndham utilised Bluecats beacons, which use proprietary encryption, replaceable AA batteries and over-the-air remote management. The availability of a software development kit with the beacon also allowed Council to integrate beacon activity with our existing mobile apps.

A purpose built mobile application called iWyndham was used for the event. During the event a running sheet of messages was used, which alerted users of the different events at the showcase and other important information. For this event each beacon was linked to the same message.

- 6:50pm Welcome to the Wyndham Your Rates Showcase
- 6:58pm Wyndham City Councillors will consider the draft Budget & City Plan from 7pm

- 7:20pm: Remember to have your say on the draft Budget and City Plan
- 7:35pm: Visit the Apps and Maps stand for a virtual look at the City
- 7:50pm: Sick of traffic congestion? Check out the Advocacy stand
- 8:05pm: Visit the Major Projects stand for updates on projects that will change the City
- 8:20pm: If you've been confused about recycling, visit Environment and Waste Services
- 8:30pm: Find the closest Council services! Visit the Communications stand
- 8:40pm: Make sure you have registered to win the iPad – prize drawn in 5 minutes
- 8:55pm: Thanks for visiting the Your Rates Showcase – www.wyndham.vic.gov.au.

There were some problems encountered during the pilot. The beacons were only compatible with the latest mobile operating systems which meant that many users with older phones could not receive the messages. Also, notifications proved temperamental when the mobile device was stationary. Despite these issues the pilot project was deemed to be a success. Some learnings from the pilot include the need to integrate iBeacon solutions with corporate applications, and the value of user data such as visitors/visitation times for future event planning.

Future Work

Further development of the mobile app could see the integration of beacon technology and social media (Facebook accounts, Twitter profiles and Instagram pages). For example, if a beacon was located in the Werribee Plains, users could upload photos of the endangered Eastern Barred Bandicoot taken from a specific area to their social media page, which would then be viewable for other users who enter the area. Another potential application includes feeding information to staff about attendance and the movement of people at public events, which could be used to assist crowd control and event monitoring.

Social Media as a Disaster Management Tool

*Karen Purser, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government
17th March 2014*



Following the release of the *Queensland Floods Commission Inquiry Interim Report* there was a lot of discussion in the media about the importance of social media in community engagement and resilience building. Councils and other agencies used SMS, Twitter, and Facebook updates to communicate directly to their communities, and receive information which they could verify and pass on to others.

Brisbane Council (see below) and the Queensland Police⁵ have both produced very good case studies outlining their use of social media during the 2011 floods, and the pitfalls and successes they experienced.

An interesting article on the way social media has been used for emergency management in America noted that “By sharing images, texting and tweeting, the public is already becoming part of a large response network, rather than remaining mere bystanders or casualties”, noting that the extensive reach of social networks allows people who are recovering from disasters to rapidly connect with resources to obtain help.

Social media use during a crisis may be beneficial because:

⁵ Queensland Police Service 2011, *Disaster Management and Social Media - a case study*.

- it's real time
- it connects you to relief agencies
- it connects you to emergency response professionals
- it lets emergency responders monitor actual conversations at the scene of the emergency in real time
- it provides numerous, real-time reports on the effects of the emergency
- it takes away much of the guesswork of emergency response.

Councils who are thinking about ways in which social media might fit into their disaster response or emergency planning should have a look at the new Emergency 2.0 wiki project (<http://emergency20wiki.org/>).

The aim of the collaborative site is to “share and advance knowledge on emergency management in the digital age”. More broadly, the site seeks to empower the community with the knowledge to use web2.0 and social media in emergency communications, and encourages participation from government agencies and schools, emergency agencies, community agencies and nonprofits, business, the media and the public.

One thing demonstrated by these events is that no council is immune from the need to review and update their update their emergency management processes and procedures.

Youth engaging youth - the Elizabeth Riders Committee

Georgina Pearce, City of Playford

10th February 2014



The Elizabeth Riders Committee (ERC) is a youth engagement initiative that has been running for six years and is supported by Anglicare South Australia and the City of Playford. The ERC is made up of 16-20 young volunteers between the ages of 12-25 years who organise skate competitions, run workshops, and do presentations across South Australia on community engagement and healthy living.

The young people on the Committee are given the opportunity to develop their leadership skills by undergoing coaching training, and by learning skills in advocacy, events management, presentation, and much more. The ERC are then empowered to use these skills in engaging other young people in the community, facilitating the delivery of youth events such as workshops and competitions for their peers. The ERC are also at a stage where they present to other councils and youth workers about 'supporting young people to engage with recreational committees', and to other young people on 'how to create change within your community'. Amy Gascoigne from Anglicare South Australia states that 'it is such an opportunity for adults to learn from young people about better ways to engage with other young people'.

Having a youth program that is delivered by young people has multiple beneficial outcomes for both the young facilitators and the participants.

Innovation and the quality outcomes achieved

Prior to the ERC commencement, Anglicare South Australia and the City of Playford witnessed a number of problematic issues in the skate park, particularly in relation to violence between young skate park users. In the 2007–08 period, Anglicare South Australia workers recalled that police call outs for youth violence were made fortnightly, and sometimes even weekly. The Elizabeth Skate Park is situated in the middle of the City of Playford, which scores 871.3 in the SEIFA index of disadvantage: the lowest scoring metropolitan council area in South Australia. Correspondingly, young people in the area often come from families with low incomes, low educational attainment, and high unemployment.

In order to reduce issues around youth violence, the ERC was formed and has succeeded in:

- Creating a committee of young leaders who meet fortnightly to discuss issues affecting the local skate park. ERC members are selected based on their social and leadership skills demonstrated in the skate park, which in turn reinforces a model whereby young people strive to demonstrate social leadership skills in order to secure themselves a place on the Committee.
- Building connections and trusting relationships with community support programs to increase the access to

available services by peers in need or deemed “at risk”

- Engaging over 2,800 young people at six annual skate competitions; 386+ young people in BMX, scooter and skate board workshops; and facilitating 13 presentations to more than 585 people in schools and councils.

The ERC is a very innovative project from a number of levels:

- Youth lead – this is an extremely important aspect of the program and we are able to demonstrate how these young people are continuing to drive change within their community.
- Self-sustainable – young people are earning an income as they run the programs, thus creating opportunities for more programs to run in the future.
- Young people teaching best practice – the ERC present on their program in other local government areas across South Australia, thus enabling the growth and support of youth engagement initiatives in other councils.

Benefits to the community

Short-term community benefits:

- Local skate park users have developed core skills in leadership and advocacy
- Nine young people have obtained their Bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award
- Fifteen young people have obtained their Senior First Aid Certificate (in order to support others in the skate park if injuries occur)
- Young people can facilitate BMX/scooter/skateboard workshops across metropolitan and regional South Australia with minimal support

- Young people can design and facilitate scooter maintenance workshops in metropolitan and regional South Australia
- 386 plus young people in metropolitan and regional South Australia have been able to attend BMX/Scooter/skateboard/scooter maintenance workshops
- Young people have developed skills in event management (including event planning, sponsorship, implementation, pack down, evaluation, promotion), and have successfully run multiple skate competitions, demonstrations, workshops and presentations.

Long-term community benefits:

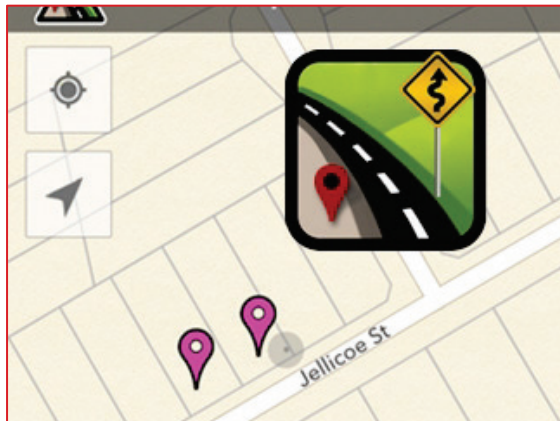
- Young people have learnt about healthy eating, drug and alcohol awareness, and health promotion
- Young people feel more part of a team, and have a sense of community and self-pride
- Young people have ownership over the Playford skate park and look after the area
- Council has a greater knowledge of ways to better support young people and engage with recreational committees
- Young people have gained skills which have assisted them with future employment
- Young people in skate parks (both in the ERC and externally) have stronger links with local support services and with Council in general.

This program won the category award for 'Youth Engagement and Participation' in the 2013 National Awards for Local Government.

Enhancing organisational capacity through mobile apps

Adam Mowlam, Wyndham City Council

30th January 2014



The Wyndham City Mobile Computing Strategy featured two key recommendations: firstly, the organisation-wide deployment of smartphones and tablet devices; and secondly, the need to build a range of mobile applications to expedite business operations by removing the requirements of staff to manually track, manage and re-enter data.

There are literally dozens of council services and functions, often mandated by the three levels of government, that can be improved through mobile computation. Indeed, the long list of services was a primary reason in Council deciding that each mobile application would be planned, designed, developed and managed entirely by internal council staff. To support the development of multiple applications, staff focused on a modular design and determined the following mandatory requirements:

1. Utilisation of standard smartphone gestures, location services/map displays, integrated camera and image handling operations, offline inspections and the use of core data, real-time cross-device data access, and the augmentation of feature overlays such as property boundaries that have custom clickability.

2. A series of web services responsible for data transfer and basic data management. The actual data transferred to and from is dependent on the operation, but the procedure is consistent across applications.
3. Web consumers who undertake various functions and operations such as defining the nearest property, coordinate conversion, create geometries for display in internal mapping applications.
4. Seamless integration of the inspection data with corporate applications such as GIS, asset management, and property/rates.

The modular development was required to address the current business operational needs covering asset inspections, vacant lot inspections, unregistered animal inspections and pool barrier audits. During the first nine months, the small team has successfully delivered seven applications.

The first application built by staff, called *Field Inspect*, won the Asset Management Category at the 2013 National Local Government Awards.

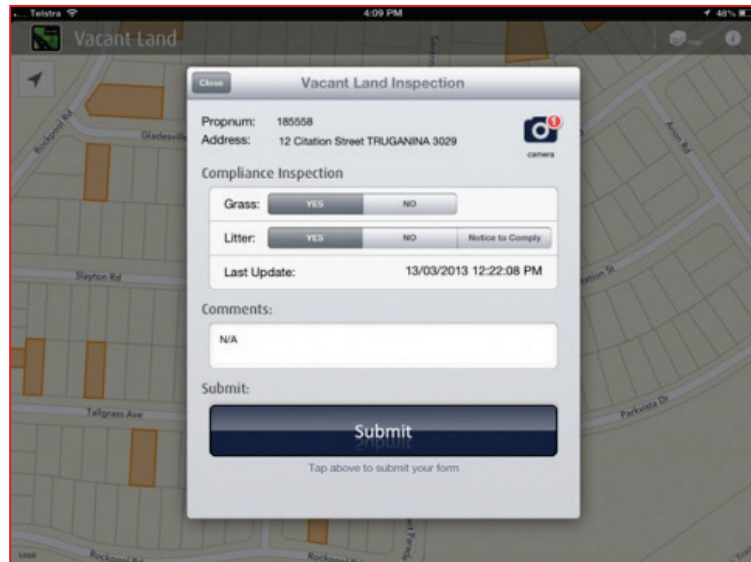
Field Inspect is used to perform mandatory inspections of Council's field assets, including road pavements, footpaths, street signs and street furniture. The application not only offers a reduction in inspection time frames, but the greater accessibility by staff improves the ability of Council to deliver informed and strategic asset maintenance and expediently assess critical problems. Both these aspects play a critical role in improving the image of the City and allow Council staff to actively achieve one of our core values: community focus. By identifying issues with assets early and regularly, the optimal schedule of proposed

maintenance and renewal can be achieved by minimising the asset life cycle costs.

To manage the inspection of properties with unregistered cats and dogs an application called *Animal Inspect* was built. The system divides the council into zones to allow multiple staff to simultaneously undertake inspections of properties that may or may not have unregistered animals. Field staff record the presence (or lack thereof) of animals, which is then integrated with the corporate system for further processing. This application has a range of benefits including improved animal/owner welfare, reduction of the impact of domestic animals on nature reserves, and assistance with overall animal management.

The *Tree Inspect* application was built to assist with the management of Council's significant tree inventory. *Tree Inspect* is used to identify tree assets, locate proposed plantings, convert proposed trees to existing assets, and undertake tree inspections. The initial map shows existing trees and proposed plantings, which are clustered should point congestion occur. The application and associated processing allows the lifecycle of tree management to be handled from the proposed planting to inspection (and if necessary removal) of a Council tree asset.

The *Vacant Land* application is used to assist legislative services staff to perform mandatory inspections of vacant land. This application ensures the public are complying with Council's policy on maintaining vacant land to reduce vegetation and litter. Wyndham City has approximately 6,000 properties without a dwelling. This application reduced the time to undertake the audit cycle, previously done using manual methods, from ten to three weeks, whilst also offering numerous other benefits such as automatically associated inspection photos and seamlessly integrating with electronic corporate solutions and reporting techniques.



The development of mobile applications in-house has produced some outstanding results. The solutions are simple, robust, user-friendly and integrated. Furthermore, the numbers indicate greatly reduced inspection times in terms of both determining the subject location and entering the inspection details. However, there have been a number of lessons learnt, especially with projects involving small teams. For purpose-built applications, which can only be used by a small number of qualified staff, project planning and staff availability for application testing and usage can be limited.

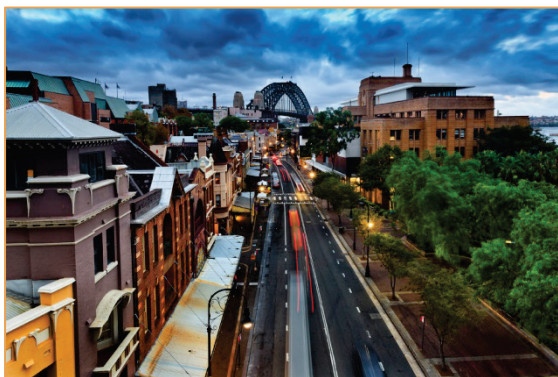
The next stage will be the development of public-facing applications, with the first, *WynConnect*, expected to be released in early 2014. This application will use location-based services to provide a property report giving the user information on waste collection days, planning information, and the nearest schools and community facilities.⁶

⁶ See a video demo of the Field Inspect app at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=OzAnfTPhLEY>.

ANALYSIS

The ‘eternal return’ of Sydney metropolitan governance: The history of Sydney global city

*Bligh Grant and Roberta Ryan, UTS Centre for Local Government
24th December 2015*



In an article on The Conversation⁷ we provided a brief account of the main reform processes in NSW from 2012 to the present, focusing on the Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP), the Government’s ‘Fit for the Future’ reform program, the role of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART), the NSW Legislative Council’s ‘Local government in New South Wales Inquiry’, and the formation of the Greater Sydney Commission (GSC).

We noted that all of these processes represent two fundamental trajectories for reform, namely proposed amalgamation – particularly for Sydney metropolitan councils – and the move toward metropolitan-wide governance. In this piece we provide an account of early

attempts at reform with respect to these two trajectories derived from Malcolm Bains and N.T.G. Miles’ contribution to *Local Government Systems in Australia* (1981). These authors freely admit that their account (in turn) is derived from the work of the venerable scholar of New South Wales’ local government, F. A. Larcome.

(At a recent luncheon hosted by the Committee for Sydney the Minister for Planning, Rob Stokes, underlined that reforms toward metro government in Sydney are nothing new. However, we think it is worth delving into the history a little more to see if we can learn from previous iterations of attempted reform.)

Bains and Miles inform us that between 1898 and 1948 there were (in essence) five attempts at significant municipal reform in Sydney. The first dated from 1898. Not content with the level of coordination that could be achieved under the *Municipalities Act 1867*, between 1898-1900 inner-city councillors drafted various ‘schemes’ to amalgamate the City of Sydney with adjoining suburbs. These plans were countered with alternative proposals – drafted by councillors who stood to lose their positions with the ensuing abolition of their areas – for a two-tiered, ‘federal’ system of city government, the upper tier of which would oversee a Greater Sydney Authority. Yet the plans faltered; Bains and

⁷ Bligh Grant and Roberta Ryan 2015, *NSW councils shake-up: is the endgame near?*, The Conversation, <http://theconversation.com/nsw-councils-shake-up-is-the-endgame-near-52381>.

Miles commenting that '[t]he supporters of the plans were so opposed in principle that the movement was quickly deadlocked'.

The second attempt dated from 1912. In what by today's standards looks like a generous display of democratic spirit, the (then) McGowan Labor Government introduced a Bill in the Legislative Assembly for a popularly elected convention to decide on the form of a greater Sydney authority. Yet the Bill was objected to because the convention was to be based on a parliamentary, not a municipal franchise. The Legislative Assembly refused to accept the amendments to the Bill proposed by the Legislative Council and the Bill stalled.

Third, following this legislative impasse, the next year (1913) the Labor Government initiated a Royal Commission to investigate and recommend a scheme for a greater metropolitan authority. According to Bains and Miles (1981) the Commission recommended a 'bi-zonal or hybrid unitary-federal scheme embracing fifty-three local units [where] an inner zone containing Sydney and twenty two suburban municipalities were to be completely unified [and] outer zone units were to be federated'.

The plan was to consecutively incorporate units from the outer to the inner zone as they developed over time, with a completely unified city government the eventual goal. However, according to Bains and Miles (1981) the resultant 'Greater Sydney Bill' introduced in 1915 was not vigorously prosecuted through the Parliament due to the impact WWI was having, and the fact that the Labor Party was divided over the issue of conscription.

The fourth attempt at metropolitan government was again pursued by the Labor Party, this time by the Lang Government from 1931. This iteration envisioned the consolidation of sixty-nine local government units to the west of Sydney City down to twenty-eight municipalities under the umbrella of the Cumberland County Council (then 4,000 square miles with a population of 1,600 000) alongside the creation of a Greater Sydney Council, which was to undertake all 'major municipal functions ... such as water supply,

sewerage, trams, port control, electricity and main roads'. A Bill was introduced in the Legislative Council to implement a federal (or two-tiered) system, and again the legislation was amended by the Legislative Council. But the Lang Government was dramatically sacked by the Governor General and the Bill was not enacted.

Fifth, according to Bains and Miles (1981) during the 1940s the Labor Party again pursued the two-pronged (i.e.: amalgamation - metro governance) approach to reforms, this time successfully reducing 66 councils to 39 in the Cumberland County under the *Local Government Areas Act 1948*. Again, however, progress on a metropolitan authority stalled, 'mainly on city-suburban disagreement as to a suitable form'.

Meanwhile, events elsewhere in the Federation had proven that municipal reforms in the direction of city government were possible. The cities of Melbourne and Geelong had reached a status as successful city municipalities by the mid-1850s (see Margaret Bowman's contribution to the same volume in 1981). Brisbane achieved metropolitan-wide government in 1925, again at the hands of reforming Labor governments (who also abolished the Upper House of that legislature – Queenslanders don't muck around). According to Bains and Miles (1981) within NSW itself councils in the greater metropolitan areas of Newcastle and Wollongong underwent significant consolidation in 1937 and 1947, respectively. Thus, in the intrinsically competitive context of Australia's developing federation, Sydney has consistently struggled with the issue of metropolitan government.

As those involved in local government in NSW will be all too aware, we are drawing nearer to the end-game of the contemporary round of reforms: The IPART's recommendations to Government for the 'Fit for the Future' reforms were handed down on 20 October in its Final Report; the Final Report of the Legislative Council's inquiry was published 29 October. The Baird Government has now released its plan for amalgamations – with metro councils reduced from 43 to 25 and regional councils

reduced from 109 to 87. The NSW Boundaries Commission has announced the process for creating new councils.⁸

At the same time, the primarily economic reasons for consolidation remain far from certain, with several peer-reviewed academic studies suggesting that the claims by Government of achieving scale and scope economies are largely illusory (see the recent work by Joseph Drew and colleagues in *Administration and Society*⁹ and *Australian Journal of Public Administration*,¹⁰ for example). Yet the burning need for improved coordination across either extant or reformed local government boundaries remains, along with serious work to build the capacity of local government to manage increased local complexities.

Nevertheless, viewed comparatively, it is not merely the twin policy goals – amalgamation and metro-wide governance – that are immediately similar in the ‘eternal return’ of Sydney’s metropolitan reform. On the contrary: It is the sites of conflict over both these issues – the seeking of advice from specialist commissions (in 1913 a Royal Commission; in 2012-13 the ILGRP, for example); and in particular the power-plays between the two houses of the NSW Parliament, through which we are reminded of the relationships between local governments and the Legislature, that are strikingly similar.

2016 is shaping up to be an interesting year in New South Wales.

⁸ NSW Government, *Process for creating new Councils*, <http://www.councilboundaryreview.nsw.gov.au/process-for-creating-new-councils/>.

⁹ Drew, J., Kortt, M.A. & Dollery, B. in press, ‘No Aladdin’s cave in New South Wales? Local government amalgamation, scale economies, and data envelopment analysis specification’, *Administration & Society*.

¹⁰ Drew, J. & Dollery, B. in press, ‘Less Haste, More Speed: The Fit for the Future Reform Program in New South Wales Local Government’, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*.

NSW Local Government Reforms: The IPART Assessment of Council 'Fit for the Future' Proposals

*Bligh Grant, UTS Centre for Local Government
22nd October 2015*



Weighing in at a hefty 496 pages, the 'Final Report' of the NSW Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) was handed to State Government on 20 October 2015. Charged with making recommendations for all NSW local governments as 'fit for the future' or otherwise, the Final Report looks and feels like the kind of document that is designed *not* to be read, while at the same time being handy for bludgeoning insects and small vermin.

Media attention has focused on the prospect of amalgamations, particularly in Sydney. In this regard, the assessment of NSW councils as 'fit for the future' – or not – portends a near future of radical consolidation, as reported by *The Sydney Morning Herald*,¹¹ ABC News¹² and the Murdoch press, the latter of which is supplied liberally and free of charge across the UTS campus. However, like the Independent Local Government Review Panel's (2013) 'Final Report' *Revitalising Local Government* published in October 2013 there is more to IPART's 'Final Report' than just

¹¹ Saulwick, J. 2015, 'IPART report: The Sydney councils facing the axe', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 October.

¹² Gerathy, S. 2015, 'Forced local government amalgamations, report finds most NSW councils 'not fit for future'', *ABC News*, 21 October.

amalgamations. In this brief post I will highlight three other features of IPART's 'Final Report' that have thus far received scant mention in the mainstream media.

The first of these is the way that the criterion of '**scale and capacity**' is used to declare individual councils as 'unfit' for the future, despite their status as financially sustainable. 'Scale and capacity' functions as the governing criterion for assessment (see 'Figure 1.1 on p. 28). It is comprised of no less than ten individual measures, including: 'scope to undertake new functions and major projects'; 'advanced skills in strategic planning and policy development'; 'knowledge, creativity and innovation'; and 'high quality political and managerial leadership'. Chapter 2 of the 'Final Report' assesses councils by region. It is clear about the weight of importance IPART placed on 'scale and capacity'. Thus, with respect to councils in the Inner West, it states (p. 49):

We find Ashfield, Leichhardt, Marrickville and Strathfield not fit for the future as they did not meet the scale and capacity criterion although each council met the financial criteria overall.

Similarly with respect to Holroyd, Parramatta and Ryde in Sydney's Central West: 'We find [these councils] are not fit for the future as they do not meet the scale and capacity criterion ... however each council met with the financial criteria overall' (p. 50). The same conclusion is reached with Canterbury, Hurstville, Kogarah and Rockdale in Sydney's South (p. 51) and Hunter's Hill, Lane Cove, Mosman, North Sydney part of Ryde and Willoughby in the North.

While it's easy to be cynical about the use of 'scale and capacity' as the governing criterion, on the other hand it is worth pointing out that IPART – inclusive of Ernst and Yong whom were commissioned to work on the Report – have not been what I term 'economically reductionist' in calculating 'fitness' on the basis of financial criteria alone. Rather, 'scale and capacity' is a 'sophisticated' measure. For their part, Ernst and Young, in their 'Analysis of Merger Business Cases (p. 406), added significant qualifications to the idea that larger councils are necessarily more efficient: 'The empirical evidence of economies from local council mergers is not clear cut. The measurement of benefits following a merger is often difficult [etc.]'.

The second feature of the 'Final Report' – which admittedly has received some media attention but is worth highlighting – is the extent to which it has embraced the '**Sydney Global City**' concept that pervades the academic literature, as well as the rhetoric of groups such as The Committee for Sydney. The most radical element of the recommendation for a 'Global City Council' (albeit with a very eastern aspect) is that the body 'should be given control over key infrastructure such as the Sydney Opera House, Barangaroo, Port Botany [etc.]' You might have read this in the papers but bear with me; I will return to the point below.

The third feature of the 'Final Report' which has escaped media attention is the extent of the endorsement of '**Joint Organisations**' as a reform option. This is particularly relevant *outside* Sydney. Thus, for *all* proposed amalgamations in regional areas (Dungog-Maitland, Armidale-Dumaresq, Tumut-Gundagai, for example) the option for a 'Joint Organisation' is also on the table. And in case you are curious as to what a 'Joint Organisation' is, the ILGRP (2013, p. 81) defined such entities thus:

The name 'Joint Organisations' (JOs) has been adopted as a generic descriptor of the new regional entities. This term is deliberately neutral: groups of councils would be free to use whatever name they agree for their particular organisation (e.g.: 'Council of Mayors', 'XYZ Councils'). A new

JO would be established for each region by negotiation amongst member councils and with the Minister. Planning and facilitation support would be provided through expert consultants (see section 18.2).

In itself, this can be read as an endorsement of regional collaboration *writ large*. However, as we pointed out in *Councils in Cooperation: Shared Services and Australian Local Government*,¹³ this kind of activity can be poorly designed and executed and as such is far from a panacea. Here, issues of what we political science people call 'institutional design' are extremely important.

However, just in case you've arrived at the conclusion that that I've turned into a shameless apologist for the present NSW State government, it is possible to be more critical about the overall strategic shape of reforms. In this guise, the argument – which I think has some merit – runs something like this... It's all very well to argue about the future 'scope and capacity' for Sydney's councils, but we ought to recognise as well that local government in Australia is the third tier of Australia's federal democracy. In this respect, it fulfils a very important role, providing – in the spirit of John Stuart Mill – a 'training ground' for politicians entering state and federal politics. If we accept this argument, what happens if we shave down – by a significant proportion – the number of local politicians in the most populous – and prosperous – city?

The answer is that this important function of local government for Australian democratic federalism (as opposed to fiscal federalism) is, at least potentially, curtailed. And in answer to the counter-assertion that these larger local governments will become more 'professional' (i.e.: more bureaucratised; more hierarchical) we might like to contemplate who will occupy these positions. The corollary of which is, surely, who will control the jewels of the city – the Opera House, Barangaroo, etc.? Food for thought...

¹³ Dollery, B., Grant, B. & Kortt, M. 2012, *Councils in Cooperation: Shared Services and Australian Local Government*, The Federation Press, Annandale, NSW.

The Reform of the Federation ‘Discussion Paper’: Hollowing-out the Federation?

Bligh Grant, UTS Centre for Local Government

26th June 2015



The Prime Minister and his Government ought to be commended on initiating both the Reform of the Federation White Paper¹⁴ and the Tax White Paper,¹⁵ thorny issues of public policy as they are. However, the fact that the local government was almost entirely overlooked in the Reform of the Federation Discussion Paper released this week is a blight on the work to date.

The President of the ALGA, Mayor Troy Pickard, expressed concern that local government has thus far been largely left out of the reform dialogue, stating: ‘the outcomes of the reform process through the Federation White Paper must also address how the needs of communities at the local level can be better met’. Indeed. In this brief discussion I ‘think through’ this virtual absence by examining the options canvassed for reforming federal financial relations in the ‘Discussion Paper’ – in essence I provide a summary of what the Government’s options for reform are with an eye to local government. It’s not pretty.

The first point is that, yes, local government is remarkably absent from the ‘Discussion Paper’. In fact the only discernible mention is on p. 92 in Chapter 5 ‘Federal Financial

Relations’, where (in a text-box, no less) it is asserted that ‘own-source revenue accounts for about 90 per cent of total local government revenue nationally’ and that ‘the options [for fiscal reform] are not intended to foreshadow any potential changes to local governments funding arrangements’, in particular the funds allocated under the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995*.

These claims represent local government as: (a) largely self-funded; and (b) existing within a hermeneutically-sealed vacuum pack moving into the future in the face of potentially radical reforms to Australia’s fiscal federalism. Both claims are spurious: The extent of local government self-funding is highly variable across the Federation (as is the self-funding by the states and territories); further, this government has already eliminated the indexing of FAGs grants, a fact not lost on the ALGA as evidenced by Troy Pickard’s recent visit to Canberra to point out that the sector would be short of \$925 million over 2017-18 as a result. That similar reforms would not be entertained in the future is by no means guaranteed.¹⁶

What I am referring to as the ‘hollowing out’ of the Federation (in other words being devoid of its third tier) commences from the beginning of the ‘Discussion Paper’. For instance the work of A. J. Brown, specifically the Australian Constitutional Survey 2014,¹⁷ is cited as evidence that: ‘most Australians believe that, while the Federation is mostly working well, it is not working as well as it could’. This places to one side the fact that the work of A. J. Brown *writ large* has fundamentally been

¹⁴ See <http://federation.dpmc.gov.au/>.

¹⁵ See <http://bettertax.gov.au/>.

¹⁶ Australian Local Government Association 2015, *Alga News Archive 2015*, <http://alga.asn.au/news.aspx?Type=Summary&Year=current&Menu=35,402>.

¹⁷ Brown, A.J. 2014, Australian Constitutional Values Survey 2014, Griffith University, Griffith.

about addressing the issue of regionalism (inclusive of localism), not a ‘clean lines’ approach to Australian federalism. ACELG discussed the work of Professor Brown comprehensively as part of our Background Paper released last year.¹⁸

But I digress. The ‘Discussion Paper’ canvasses six options for reform of Australia’s fiscal federalism: three to address Vertical Fiscal Imbalance (VFI) and three to change Horizontal Fiscal Equalisation (HFE).

For VFI (p. 91) these are:

1. Consolidate existing payments into an **untied service delivery stream** using a revised and reaffirmed Inter-Governmental Agreement;
2. **Increase State and Territory access to tax revenue**, by:
 - a. Allocating a share of personal income tax to the states by either [i] ‘making room’ in the tax base for the states and territories to set their own income taxes (which would be collected by the Commonwealth) or [ii] the Commonwealth transferring a fixed share of income tax to the States and Territories;
 - b. Expanding the GST; or
 - c. Expansion of state and territory own-source revenue (e.g.: payroll tax or land tax) offset by reductions;
3. Reallocate expenditure responsibilities to the Commonwealth (i.e.: increase Commonwealth responsibilities).

We can reflect upon the various virtues – or indeed otherwise – of these options for reform to VFI, (as indeed the Discussion Paper does, alongside reminding us of the benefits of high VFI in the first place). Nevertheless, noticeably absent from these possible reforms is any mention of local government. As such, both a heightened assumption that local government will be self-financing *and* that they become even more beholden to the states is clearly envisioned.

¹⁸ Grant, B. & Ryan, R. 2014, *The White Paper on the Reform of the Federation: Implications for Australian Local Government*, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, Sydney.

With respect to HFE, the Discussion Paper (p. 100) canvasses the view that per capita equalisation, while serving the goal of equity, ‘implicitly discourages the economically efficient movement of individuals or investment to States and Territories with better economic opportunities or lower costs’. The three options for reform are:

1. Maintain the status quo, with changes to improve transparency;
2. Less comprehensive equalisation through changing the current methodology. This would be achieved by:
 - a. Establishing a GST relativity ‘floor’, where a minimum level (50%) GST revenue to which any State or Territory is entitled is set [and per capita equalisation is presumably dispensed with]; or
 - b. Apply a discount on all revenue and expense assessments used by the Commonwealth Grants Commission (CGC) [in other words, ring-fence some revenues from the individual jurisdictions from the calculations of the CGC]; or
3. Less comprehensive equalisation **through a transition to an equal per capita distribution** of the GST, with top-up grants to recipient States and Territories.

Again, we can reflect upon the relative virtues – or indeed otherwise – of these options, with options 2 and 3 seeing less equalisation (option 3 radically less so). Again, noticeably absent from these possible reforms is any mention of local government. Again, we can envisage both a heightened assumption that local government will be self-financing *and* that beyond their own revenue-raising powers they become – even more so – supplicants of the states. Make no mistake about it: Local government is, at present, off the table in the current considerations of reforming the federation. To pursue a reform agenda devoid of its consideration is to ignore the robust debate on the issue represented by the work of the ALGA, A. J. Brown (above) and others (including ACELG). It is to hollow-out the Federation.

The alternative to council amalgamations: Taking IPART for its word

Bligh Grant and Nicole Campbell, UTS Centre for Local Government

20th May 2015



This week the regulatory body charged with making recommendations on the fate of the 152 NSW councils and their communities, the Independent Pricing and Regulations Tribunal (IPART), called for submissions to its 'Methodology for the Assessment of Council "Fit for the Future" proposals'. This methodology is the instrument by which the fate of NSW local government will be decided under the Government's 'Fit for the Future' program.

At the first of several Public Forums in Sydney on Monday 11 May the Chair of the IPART 'Expert Panel', Peter Boxall, declared that he was still deciding whether or not to set a numerical target on a minimum population size as part of the 'threshold test' for local government. If such a numerical target is set, it will likely be higher than 100,000 people and, as such, signal the dissolution of many councils in metropolitan Sydney and across the state.

It will also signal that any semblance of reason has finally been expunged from the debate. Numerous studies, deploying a variety of economic and econometric techniques, have demonstrated that there is no necessary correlation between council as size measured by head of population and council efficiency – or indeed any other qualitative criteria one

chooses. In essence, councils are too diverse by their very nature for such equations to hold, and at a certain point diseconomies of scale are generated due to councils being too big to be efficient. The 'Final Report' of the Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP) equivocates on the issue, stating on the one hand (p. 72): 'amalgamations offer the surest way to achieve efficiency and economies of scale, service improvements and strategic capacity'. On the other hand, on the next page (and citing the same research) it stated: 'The Panel accepts that there is no simple relationship between council size and efficiency, and hence no guarantee amalgamations will produce the benefits sought, especially cost savings'. The IPART would do well to keep this consideration in mind.

However, as was also made clear in its Public Forum on Monday, the 'starting position' for the recommendation of reforms to be used in the IPART methodology is derived from the Independent Local Government Review Panel's 'Final Report', 'Revitalising Local Government', published in October 2013. On this basis the IPART has devised four criteria to measure councils as 'Fit for the Future':

1. 'scale and capacity to engage effectively across community, industry and government';
2. 'sustainability';
3. 'effectively managing infrastructure and delivering services for communities'; and
4. 'efficiency'.

Given what is hanging in the balance, the important question is: What precisely is meant by these criteria? We will confine our observations to the first measure and leave the assessment of the other three to our economist friends.

That councils will be assessed according to their 'scale and capacity to engage effectively across community, industry and government' sounds like a very big ask indeed. How is this criterion measured? How are 'scale' on the one hand and 'capacity' reconciled? The answer is that they aren't – not in any precise way, at least. Nor is this a bad thing: In the ILGRP's 'Final Report' (p. 5) the idea of 'strategic capacity' is initially defined as 'ensuring that local government has the right structures, governance models, skills and resources to discharge its responsibilities and realise its potential'. The 'Final Report' (p. 32) then lists no less than ten components of 'strategic capacity', including 'more robust revenue base and increased discretionary spending'; 'knowledge, creativity and innovation'; 'high quality political and managerial leadership', 'scope to undertake new functions projects', and 'resources to cope with unexpected change'.

This broad definition presents an opportunity for local governments: In making their respective cases for their preferred reform options, councils ought to take full advantage of the latitude afforded by the criterion of 'strategic capacity': Many councils will be able to argue that they possess 'strategic capacity' in terms of leadership and innovation, a demonstrated ability to undertake new projects, as well as a robust revenue base or any of the other 10 criteria for 'strategic capacity' listed in the ILGRP's 'Final Report'.

In deciding the fate of NSW local government it remains for IPART – and the Government –

to keep its word and consider these important qualitative criteria as developed by the ILGRP and dispense with such rough-hewn benchmarks as population size.

We offer a final observation on the concepts of both 'strategic capacity' and 'scale' as they are rhetorically deployed by both IPART and the ILGRP. Away from the methodology that both these documents engage in, one of the ways that we can effectively define 'capacity' is legislatively – in terms of the rule of law. In this regard, local governments in NSW (and in Australia generally) are extremely limited: As creatures of statute they can be over-ruled almost whimsically by state government. Further, even after the amalgamations which seem likely to happen in this current round of reforms, local government in NSW, but especially in Sydney, will still not operate on a scale required for city government of the kind exercised by the Greater London Authority and in many cities in the U.S. and indeed more broadly. If this is the 'scale' that the ILGRP really wishes to achieve – and there are plenty of indications that this is the case (see ILGRP 'Challenges and opportunities for Change', p. 25 of the 'Final Report') – its recommendations are underdone. On the contrary: Emboldened, larger, 'Fit for the Future' local governments may well resist strategic city planning by state government (the tier of government that is meant to undertake this responsibility in Australia's federation) more strongly than is now the case. In the minds of many, for example the Committee for Sydney and its constituents, this would be most unfortunate.

The role of local government in addressing the social determinants of health

Bo Li, City of Darebin

15th April 2015



Social determinants of health

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines the social determinants of health as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels”.¹⁹ In other words, the communities in which individuals live, work and socialise directly contributes towards one’s health.

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that demonstrates that one’s health status and health outcomes, particularly in relation to lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, are heavily influenced not only by medical and genetic factors, but also by the social determinants of health. Factors such as safe and secure housing, access to education and information, meaningful employment, and community connectedness can all contribute toward the positive health outcomes of individuals. The reverse is also true; lack of housing, employment and education, and social isolation can all have detrimental effects on one’s health.

¹⁹ World Health Organization n.d., *Social determinants of health*, http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/.

The role of local government in addressing social determinants of health

Local governments are intimately involved in addressing many social determinants of health, directly or indirectly. In Victoria, councils have a legislated requirement to produce health and wellbeing plans, thus explicitly recognising and linking social determinants of health with council activities.²⁰ Other aspects of council operations can also influence and impacts on individuals’ health at a macro level. These include, but are not limited to:

- Urban planning: adequate access to open space and areas for social gathering
- Road and transport: accommodating multimodal transport (walking, cycling, public and private transport) and minimising hazards through passive road safety measures
- Children’s services: immunisation and child and maternal health nurses, mothers’ groups to increase health literacy and to minimise social isolation and post-natal depression
- Libraries: as centres of learning and accessing information, and as community spaces for socialisation and events
- Youth services: employment and support services, access to health information and services without the stigma associated with traditional health centres and clinics (e.g. mental health, sexual/reproductive health, drug and alcohol)
- Migrant/asylum seekers services: accessing social and health information in non-traditional settings

²⁰ *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* (Vic).

- Sporting clubs and playgrounds: encouraging active sports and recreation while building social inclusiveness and breaking down barriers for people experiencing disadvantage.

The WHO definition of social determinants of health provided above can be examined in the context of social equity and inclusion. Specifically, it can be argued that addressing social equity as an overarching objective in provision of council services and infrastructure may be beneficial in the long term health and wellbeing outcomes of residents.

Relevance and benefit to local government

One major challenge for local governments in improving the social determinants of health is the lack of a systematic and detailed understanding of best practice models and critical success factors. Currently, there are a very few examples of how councils are using a whole-of-organisation approach in identifying and addressing underlying social determinant of health factors in their programs and initiatives. One possible exception is the Equity and Inclusion Planning and Audit Tool (EIPAT) developed by Darebin council. This tool has been identified as a leading example of how councils can address social inclusion and equity in their activities, and has won recognition and awards at the local government level. EIPAT is used whenever council officers are drafting a new policy, or designing a new program or initiative.²¹ The tool prompts officers to actively consider the 'bigger picture' and take into account the needs of groups in the community who could be at risk of being excluded or being further disadvantaged if they used a traditional approach. This approach promotes cross-collaboration between council teams and directorates in order to achieve equitable outcomes for community groups. For example, the open spaces team charged with revamping a children's playground will be encouraged to

consult not only with the child and maternal team of council, but also work with the aged care team to ensure access by the elderly, as many of them access the playground with their grandkids.

However, tools such as EIPAT are the exception, rather than the rule among local government in Australia; and being a relative new tool, the long-term benefits of such a whole-of-council approach on the health outcomes of residents are poorly understood. Moreover, there has been no systematic study regarding whether or not tools such as EIPAT are indeed the best practice models for local governments to plan and deliver services using social determinants of health approach, or the critical success factors in ensuring their ongoing success.

Conclusion

Local governments in Victoria have the legislated responsibility to consider and address the health and wellbeing of their residents. However, there is very little evidence of how councils are applying a whole-of-organisation approach in addressing the equity and inclusion of all their residents – which contributes to their health and wellbeing. This is an area that will require further research to establish models of best practice and critical success factors in the role of local government in addressing the social determinants of health of their residents.

²¹ Darebin City Council's Community Planning and Customer Service Department won a 2014 LGPro Award for Excellence in the area of 'organisational diversity'.

Approaching leadership in contemporary local government

Sophi Bruce, UTS Centre for Local Government

8th April 2015



All organisations want staff who are able to lead effectively, and for local government in particular this has been an area of great focus and activity.

Councils invest time and resources into leadership programs and initiatives designed to develop the capacity of talented and aspiring senior staff. For a recent ACELG research project, 'Council Approaches to Leadership',²² I spoke with eight different councils across Australia to find out what makes for a successful in-house leadership program and also uncover some of the key themes and challenges for contemporary local government leadership.

Telephone interviews were held with representatives from council learning and development departments, including: Fairfield City Council, Knox City Council, Logan City Council, Maroondah City Council, City of Marion, City of Melville, Randwick City Council and City of Salisbury. Each were asked the same series of questions regarding individual and organisational perspectives on leading in local government, the types of leadership programs offered by council, and common

²² Bruce, S. 2015, *Council approaches to leadership: Research into good practice*, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, Sydney.

challenges faced, as well as what advice they would offer to sector peers.

In my conversations I was struck by each interviewee's passion for leadership and commitment to raising the capability and credibility of local government employees. The conversations were stimulating, intelligent and insightful, and engaging in this type of leadership dialogue is important for sharing knowledge, identifying opportunities for improvement, and validating the good work that is being done across many councils in Australia. Through this research, we intend to provide some discussion prompts for debates on leadership in local government and encourage councils to reflect on and review their leadership practice.

The three main areas highlighted in the interviews as foundational to a good practice approach to a council leadership program were:

A leadership ethos that is 'values-based':

An established ethos (this could also be considered a philosophy, attitude or belief system) of leadership and leadership development clearly influences the overall culture of the organisation. When this ethos is 'values-based', core values are considered as fundamental to guiding behaviours, staff wellbeing and organisational potential. For the ethos to be sustainable it must be championed by senior management, in particular the Chief Executive/General Manager, and connect back to the local context and underlying purpose of local government.

A support structure: A good leadership program will have strong and robust structures and be supported by tailored content and methods of learning. The use of particular leadership development models and/or capability frameworks can help strengthen the

structure of a program, but “off the shelf” products are not recommended – a program will work best when tailored to the organisational context. In times of limited funds, councils are looking for both effectiveness and efficiency of leadership programs and are exploring ways to be smarter with their resources and keep the program strong and sustainable.

Measuring progress: The area of measuring and evaluating the impact of leadership programs is highlighted in the interviews as an important consideration of a leadership development program in terms of understanding the impact of such programs and assessing the return on investment. While much work is being done by councils to demonstrate progress and impact of learning and development initiatives, the interviewed councils indicated that this can be a challenge, and all were keen to develop and improve in this area.

In addition to these foundational areas, examples of innovation and ideas for

leadership programs for local government are outlined within the report. These include the total in-house design of a customised leadership methodology by one council; ways to connect staff wellbeing with quality of service to the community; the exploration of partnerships and exchanges across councils; and utilising and investing in existing staff capital. Interviewees also placed an emphasis on building leadership capability across local government as whole – both within individual councils and across the sector.

While this research is based on a small sample of councils, the outcomes provide a range of areas for consideration and the report includes many direct quotes from the interviewees as food for thought. This is an exciting time to be engaging with leaders in local government, with new ways of thinking and working emerging, stimulating contextual change, executive teams with belief and vision, and a national cohort of committed leadership enthusiasts.

Declining voter turnout in local elections: what can be done?

Andy Asquith, University of New Zealand

20th November 2014



There is a flippant statement in 'Yes Prime Minister' where Jim Hacker – the fictional British PM – is commenting on the inadequacies of local government. He says:

Only about 25% of the electorate vote in local elections. And all they do is treat it as a popularity poll on the political leaders in Westminster ... Nobody knows who their local councillor is. And the councillors know nobody knows who they are. Or what they do. So they spend three totally unaccountable years on a publicly subsidised ego trip, handing out ratepayers' hard earned money to subsidise lesbian awareness courses and borough pet watch schemes to combat cat theft. They ruin the schools, they let the inner cities fall to bits, they demoralise the police, and undermine law and order.

I would argue that, irrespective of the geographic setting – be it the UK, New Zealand or Australia, these issues are both entrenched and deeply concerning to those of us with an interest and concern for local democracy. Constantly decreasing rates of electoral turn out in local elections intensifies the heightened levels of disconnect between the institutions of local government and the citizenry. In New Zealand for example, the last three local electoral rounds have resulted in

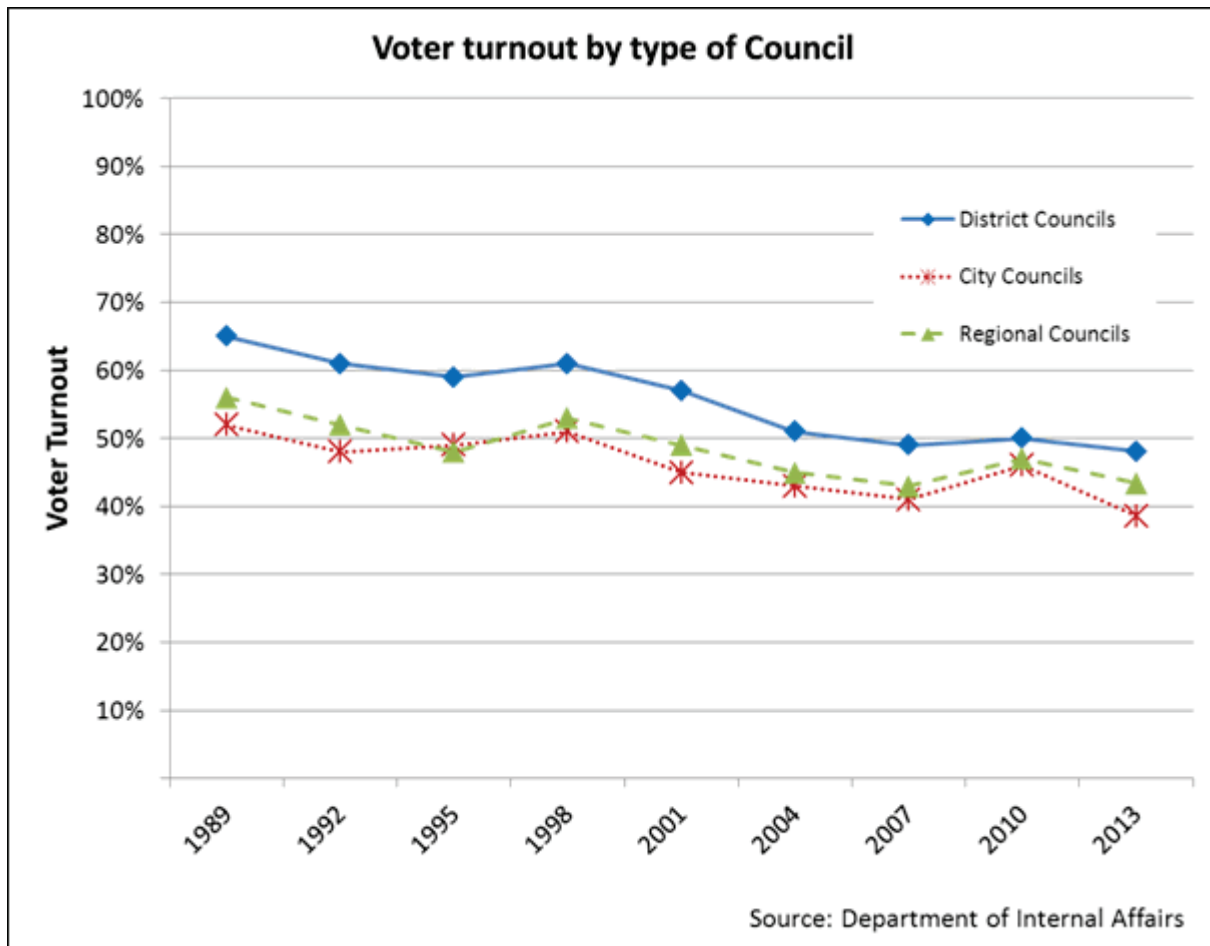
turnouts of 47%, 45% and 43% respectively – a downward spiral. Local government has proven slow to address the reasons why this is the case. The core issues which need to be addressed relate to:

- The generally low calibre of councillors (and more widely, of those seeking election to council). The Samson Review of local government in NSW sought to focus attention on this key issue. The quality of candidates might be improved, for example, through a competency test.
- The levels of engagement between councillors and those they claim to represent. All too often councillors are elected then seem to vanish into the council offices until they emerge to seek re-election.
- Far too many of us fail to see the relevance of local government to our own lives. Local authorities can do far more to engage citizens – at all ages – by emphasising the everyday relevance of local government.
- The possibility of the formalisation of political party roles in local government. Many candidates for local elected office run as 'independents', yet elsewhere in formalised political arenas, have sought office wearing a clearly definable party political 'hat'. In theory, such formal politicisation can both increase the calibre of those seeking elected office, and can also increase the level of debate. The latter it is hoped would result in increased connection between the citizenry and the local authority.

On a concluding, very sobering note. The New Zealand Local Government Commission published research findings which showed that

if young people – age 18-21 – do not vote in either of the first two elections (either local or general) for which they are eligible – they will NEVER vote. It is time to stop maintaining the status quo – and to really act outside of our comfort zones. Neglecting the causes and consequences of declining engagement in

local elections will not only undermine the value and legitimacy of local democracy, but also higher levels of government, be it at either State or Federal/National level, who may well take it upon themselves to intervene – in no one's best interests.



Voter turnout in New Zealand councillor elections by council type

Source: NZ Department of Internal Affairs

Local Government reform in NSW: Seeing past the ‘cash flash’

Bligh Grant and Roberta Ryan, UTS Centre for Local Government
24th December 2015



The Baird Government's announcement of the 'Fit for the Future' reforms to local government has left many observers focussing on the cash incentives for reform. But the Government has also responded to the Independent Local Government Review Panel's (ILGRP) 65 recommendations, agreeing at least in principle to the overwhelming majority. Focusing on the incentive payments ignores several other dimensions of the reforms.

First, the recommendations for amalgamations of the Review Panel are radical, including (for example) 32 local governments in Sydney being reduced to just seven. Just who might merge with who in this scenario makes for interesting reading, although there are signs that some councils, for example Many and Warringah, might be embracing the opportunity.

Second, the process of reform is *prima facie* consultative: Councils are initially required to undertake a self-assessment based on a 'toolbox' that will be made available in October, then to prepare a 'roadmap' by June 30 2015 that will be reviewed by a 'Ministerial Advisory Group'. The (presumably) returned Coalition Government post the election of 28 March

2015 can spend political capital implementing significant reform.

Third, reforms to finance have been embraced. Government has supported the Auditor General assuming responsibility for auditing all councils from mid-2016 and commissioning a review of the rating system by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Review Panel (IPART). It has also supported NSW Treasury Corporation establishing a state-borrowing facility for local governments.

Fourth, a minimum two-year term for mayors elected by their fellow councillors (as opposed to 'at large') has been endorsed, as has preventing councils from renewing the contract of General Managers six months out from an election: Unfortunately the GM's place will remain as precarious as it has recently proved to be in NSW. Yet it has *not* supported increased remuneration for councillors and mayors who complete professional development.

Finally, the process now initiated is a not-so-subtle reminder that local governments are vassals of the state. The work that has gone in to developing 10-year Community Strategic Plans, while not rendered redundant, is nevertheless placed in the relief of communities themselves being rapidly redefined.

The 'cash-flash' ought not to blind us to the fact that it's busy times for local government in NSW, or to the substance, or potential value, of the proposed reforms. Spare a thought for those in the local government sector that have to organise it all.

Public librarians: doing research and enabling research

Jessie Lymn, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government

29th July 2014



Hugh Rundle's provocative piece 'What we talk about when we talk about public libraries' sets out a challenge for the sector: to increase the amount of research being done (and distributed) about public libraries in Australia. He suggests that there isn't a culture of research within the public library sector, and that this in turn creates a self-perpetuating 'positive feedback loop':

Since so little research seems to be of benefit to their daily practice, librarians from the public library sector are less likely to prioritise reading and contributing to the body of professional research. Because public librarians make up such a small proportion of those producing library science research, the body of research in turn continues to concentrate mostly on other areas, particularly academic library practices. And since so little research seem to be of benefit to their daily practice... (repeat)

He goes on to critique the rigour of research done by public librarians, giving examples of public librarians doing easily quantifiable, data-driven research regarding loan numbers, door counts and branch comparisons, rather than research that is led by broader research questions such as 'how [do] our services actually affect people's lives?'. He also

proposes a number of reasons why the research culture in public libraries might be limited, such as few workplace incentives, and a closely watched and critiqued council budget cycle that discourages staff from travelling to conferences and other research activities.

Rundle proposes a series of actions that can be taken by public librarians, councils, academics and professional associations to improve public library research. For example, he suggests 'friendships' be developed between academics and public librarians, encouraging collaborative research papers: 'a partnership between practitioners and academics can only benefit both, and will help both to normalise research within public libraries and increase the scope of academic research'. Other examples include affirmative action when publishing and at conferences, and thinking differently about data and research in the sector.

I'm interested in what Rundle is challenging the library sector to do here, and want to extend this to the local government sector more generally, who, it can be argued, face many of the same self-perpetuating loops when doing research. ACELG's Research Practitioner Program is one area that focuses on developing the research skills of local government practitioners (including public librarians) in Australia, and forthcoming papers discuss findings from the program (see for example Pillora (2014)). This program is just one effort to redress a bigger, sector-wide need to value rigorous, evidence based research, done by the sector, not just on the sector. It's not just up to academics to come in and do research; we also need to be furthering an appreciation of research by practitioners, which, as Rundle's positive feedback loop demonstrates, relies on the production of quality research from within.

And this is where I want to build on Rundle's suggestions. Not only do we need to be doing rigorous research as public librarians, but as trained information professionals, public librarians need to be promoting and supporting evidence based research to their workmates across the whole council, including elected members. Providing research and reference support to other council staff and furthering the research culture *across the local government sector* should be a given for public librarians, whose training and experience puts them in prime position to be agents and activists for generating a strong, evidence based research culture.

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Unlocking the democratic value of localism

*Tanveer Ahmed, Canada Bay Council
2nd May 2014*



As I reflect on my first eighteen months being a local councillor, my key memories relate to the passions and proximity of local residents while they argued their views and interests. It is like watching pure democracy in action, as a wide range of voices passionately put forth their views directly adjacent to their elected representatives. There is no equivalent at federal or state levels of government. I am thankful that I have not yet been embroiled in corruption scandals, so often the public face of local government, particularly in New South Wales. But there is a broader potential of local government and the ties to their communities that is not being fully unlocked.

Throughout the Western world, in particular Britain, there is something of an experiment to devolve greater responsibility to locally derived, citizen driven initiatives as part of the so called "Big Society" push so championed by Prime Minister David Cameron. This notion of localism, while not necessarily an extension of local government, has significant relevance to Australia with the emergence of a Conservative-led government sprouting the slogans of greater individual responsibility and smaller government. The notion has been linked closely to food culture through movements surrounding locally sourced organic food and gatherings like farmer's markets which have become ubiquitous.

But localism has far more potential than great produce, as lovely as that might be. In an age when many of us live a significant portion of our psychological lives in the virtual world or on social media, and many commute across cities and countries to work, the importance of the 'local' is under question.

In many dense urban areas, people may never interact with their neighbours. Modern networked societies are less tied to geography and spatial neighbourhoods than to communities of interest, be it around ethnicity, profession or leisure pursuits. But there is a growing sense that, amidst the broad disengagement, many people still value the mechanisms of politics and civic engagement, with a flourishing democracy being dependent upon people being able to take part in what happens in their own backyards. If they feel they lack a power to influence decisions over the street they live on, what chance is there of having a say on climate change or our interactions with foreign powers?

Unlike our English and American cousins, local government in Australia has no firm roots. It rose haphazardly, lacks real authority, and regularly endures corruption scandals. The weakness of local government is reflected in its limited funding. The local government share of the Australian tax base has fallen from about 6 per cent in the 1970s to about 4 per cent today, making it the fourth-lowest among the 30 industrialised nations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. It is essentially dependent upon grants from state governments.

I have been pleasantly surprised by the breadth of work my role has entailed, from environmental spills in the local estuary to water recycling projects to discussions and decisions over the future of public libraries. Constituents often feel more empowered to get involved in decision making when they feel that their local representative is more

accessible. I have already seen several reactions from ratepayers of utter joy and surprise that a request or concern has been acted upon, however trivial. It has often been their first experience of responsive government and encouraged some to expand their involvement and newly discovered sense of civic engagement into other spheres. In this respect, local government's great strength lies in its proximity to the people. It is the most transparent, responsive and accountable form of democracy we have. At its best local government delivers services and facilities on a human scale. It is responsive to local needs, provides leadership and advocacy, fosters civic pride and reflects local priorities in a way state and federal governments never can. It is the most accessible form of democracy, for candidates and for citizens.

Economist Oliver Marc Hartwich argues in a report for the Centre for Independent Studies in 2009, titled *Beyond Symbolism; finding a place for local government in Australia's constitution*,²³ that municipal governments have enormous potential to enliven policy. "Local government with more decision-making powers can generate more competition and diversity. It is conceivable, for example, that a political system could assign primary and secondary education to the local level. In other countries there are local school boards administering the school, thus giving parents a greater role. This would leave considerable scope for tailoring schooling solutions to the needs of local communities—which is far better than providing them with a one-size-fits-all solution for the whole state."

There are some potentially positive signs towards more decentralised, localised decision making, such as the movement towards local school boards. But overall, from where I am sitting, the potential of local governments and the localism for which they can be a conduit is drastically under-utilised, be it in schools, health or law and order.

²³ See <http://www.cis.org.au/publications/issue-analysis/article/794-beyond-symbolism-finding-a-place-for-local-government-in-australias-constitution>.

Creating a legacy – the knowledge challenge of practitioner research

Tim Robinson, UTS Centre for Local Government
27th February 2014



I enjoy photography and was struck recently by a series of photographs of blackboards showing very faint chalk writings and drawings. The photographer presented his work under the theme of *The Impermanence of Knowledge*. His accompanying story referred to knowledge once writ large but inevitably wiped clean. While I think he wanted to emphasise the more romantic idea of knowledge being refreshed, it struck me as a rather apt metaphor for the way we in local government often manage our knowledge. The only difference is that the blackboard has been replaced by the ubiquitous PowerPoint presentation!

The aptness of the blackboard metaphor lies in its impermanence. I have been to many seminars, conferences, special interest group meetings and so on and seen presentations from local government practitioners. In most cases there is an evident passion and energy driving the desire to share valuable practical wisdom. Momentarily the white screen is bursting with knowledge, but the session inevitably concludes, the PowerPoint presentation evaporates and an empty white screen prepares itself for another impermanent experience.

The small group of people who saw the presentation were lucky enough to receive and

interact with the knowledge, but where is that knowledge one month, one year or one decade later and is it in a form that can be applied effectively? As a sector I believe one of our key knowledge challenges is to care more about ensuring the value, endurance and availability of knowledge. If we do not care enough about what we know and understand, we will not create a sufficient and permanent legacy of knowledge and insights about our practice.

I am sure that the French philosopher, sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu had local government in mind when he observed 'Practice has a logic which is not that of logic'.²⁴ Certainly the idea resonates with many in local government in Australia (and probably beyond) given the uniqueness of the sector as a level of government. And while there are many fora for sharing knowledge and insights about practice within this unusual tier of government, they are all too often defined by their impermanence and not strongly enough buttressed by disciplines to strengthen the robustness, endurance and availability of the knowledge.

I am not suggesting that nothing is happening in the sector in relation to knowledge creation and retention. There are a number of activities such as the development of guides and toolkits by peak sector bodies as well as regional groups of councils doing research drawn from practitioner knowledge and published through various means. Some in the sector are involved in the more traditional forms of academic research and do have work published in theses and journals. However there remain many untapped opportunities.

²⁴ P. Bourdieu (1990) as cited by B. Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

I would argue that practitioner research is able to make a strong and distinctive contribution to knowledge for three key reasons. First is its inherent capacity to explore, describe and explain from the viewpoint of the lived experience of practice. This tends to give practitioner research a well-grounded and practical sense, focused on informing practice and decision-making.²⁵

Secondly, because it has the potential to be ‘...a form of inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective [and] critical...’²⁶ it helps to build and sustain professional communities of interest who have a genuine commitment to self-examination and learning. Thirdly, practitioner research is characteristically inclusive of many avenues of inquiry.²⁷ This means that knowledge from a diverse range of discovery activities such as conducting a program evaluation, undertaking and interpreting a community survey, developing a regional submission to another tier of government or writing a case study to be shared at a conference, can become, when combined with a measure of review and permanence, part of the knowledge legacy of the sector. Enter the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG).

The remit of ACELG is to enhance professionalism and skills in local government, showcase innovation and best practice, and facilitate a better-informed policy debate. The knowledge, understanding and insights of practitioners are critical to this mandate. It is a commitment of ACELG to encourage and support practitioners to record their practice in a variety of different ways and to provide opportunities/platforms to develop, share and retain this knowledge. Some of this work has already been undertaken.

²⁵ W. Lawrence Neuman James, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 4th ed (Needham Heights, Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, 2000).

²⁶ G. McCutcheon and B. Jung, “Alternative Perspectives on Action Research,” *Theory into Practice*, 29(3) (1990): 144-51.

²⁷ Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) as cited by C. P. Lim and H. M. Cheah, “Situating Practitioner Research in Future Schools.” In *Research by Practitioners for Practitioners: A Schoolis Journey into the Future*, ed. L. Y. Tay et al. (Singapore: Pearson, 2010), 2-14.

However right now ACELG is shaping a specific program to encourage practitioner research and is looking at what resources can be marshalled to better enable practitioners from the sector to develop their ideas and insights using a diverse frame of applied research approaches. The intention is to support a wide range of research outputs. We are considering a variety of strategies such as:

- A mentoring program to assist practitioners to develop and structure ideas
- Staging small-scale research forums especially for practitioners to discuss and present their work
- Publication of practitioner papers on ACELG websites to ensure their availability across the sector
- Assistance from a practical, plain English guide which describes approaches to developing and documenting research.

Shifting baseline syndrome

Stefanie Pillora, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government
23rd January 2014

British journalist and environmentalist George Monbiot in his new book *Feral*²⁸ (p. 69) writes about the way people of every generation perceive the state of the ecosystems they encountered in their childhood as normal. He cites the example of the treeless hills of England and Wales being promoted as wilderness, and the memory of the forests that covered that land and the animals that lived there as long forgotten. Monbiot says that there is a name for this forgetting; 'shifting baseline syndrome', which was coined by the fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly.

Drawing on decades of international experience, Pauly has written extensively about the collapse of global fisheries and the failure of management methods such as the 'maximum sustainable yield' and 'annual total allowable catch'.²⁹ Pauly says that there is limited accounting for shifting baselines, with each generation of fisheries scientists accepting as a baseline 'the stock size and species composition that occurred at the beginning of their careers', resulting in the gradual accommodation of the loss of resource species.³⁰

Pauly says that fisheries science doesn't have a framework for accommodating early accounts of 'large catches', which are seen as anecdotal. He also argues that such a framework would help, at least in part, in overcoming shifting baselines. Curious to investigate this idea in the Australian context, I checked the marine environment section of the *Australian 2011 State of the Environment*

(SoE) report.³¹ I learned that, where possible, comparisons are made with the time of European settlement and oral histories referenced, for example records of the abundance of reef cod populations around Ningaloo Reef in WA, which no longer exist.

So how could the idea of shifting baselines be useful to local government? There are natural resources that are part of large-scale commons (such as fisheries), and the management of these requires a multi-level governance response. However, councils have a direct responsibility for long-term strategic plans for local places, which include small-scale commons, and for measuring progress against these plans. The consultation for these plans provide an opportunity to revisit the underlying assumptions and the data that informs the vision. As in the SoE report, the use of historic records and the knowledge of long-term residents of the area could be valuable in reviving our collective memories and challenging what we have accepted as normal.

In this current political climate, where 'cutting green tape' is an oft-repeated mantra, councils play an important role in preventing the creeping degradation of resources and the shifting of baselines, whether through preventing the clearing of habitats of endangered species or protecting aquatic breeding grounds from polluting development. While acknowledging the value of regulation, Monbiot argues for a positive environmentalism - explaining not just what we are against but what we are for. A more ambitious vision for nature will also benefit people, now and in the future.

²⁸ Monbiot, G. 2013, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding*, Penguin.

²⁹ Pauly, D., Christensen, V., Dalsgaard, J., Froese, R. & Torres, F. Jr. 1998, 'Fishing Down Marine Food Webs', *Science*, Vol. 279, No. 5352, pp. 860-3.

³⁰ Pauly, D. 1995, 'Anecdotes and the shifting baseline syndrome of fisheries', *Tree*, Vol. 10, No. 10, pp. 430.

³¹ See <http://www.environment.gov.au/science/soe/2011>.

Waste: to recycle or dump? Unfortunately it is a red tape decision

*Troy Green, Tweed Shire Council
14th January 2014*



The Productivity Commission in 2006 identified the high cost of dealing with non-hazardous waste and recommended the development of a national “waste” classification system and a review of the appropriate balance between prescriptive and risk based management systems for “waste”.

Most Australian jurisdictions define “waste” as any material that is discarded, rejected or surplus to current requirements, whether or not it is intended for recycling or reprocessing. As a consequence, a huge range of non-hazardous materials destined for recycling are captured by the respective States’ “waste” regulatory systems which are inefficient, costly, and have considerable record keeping and compliance overheads. Perversely, this cumbersome regulatory framework often has the unintended consequence of materials originally intended for recycling being conveyed to landfill because of the compliance and administrative regimes which in turn makes recycling less economically attractive and places additional, unnecessary pressure on limited landfill site airspace which is a challenge for future generations.


At a local level, Tweed Shire is reviewing its compliance costs for disposal of surplus

material from road works that have traditionally been reused elsewhere on council works. The NSW “waste” system has a complicated set of “exemptions” for reuse of these surplus materials which imposes limits on tonnages that can be dealt with, require expensive laboratory testing, and make it very difficult to process the materials at regular council depots. In Tweed’s case, which is located on the NSW/ QLD border, the high cost of NSW waste compliance encourages dumping of perfectly acceptable material into QLD landfill sites which do not attract the NSW Waste Levy of \$53 per tonne.

Historically, Council had used surplus fill from road works to convert old landfill sites to sports fields. However, the cost of compliance testing of non-hazardous road material required by the NSW waste exemption system under the Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997 now makes this a marginal proposition. It is ironic that the system that has an objective of encouraging recycling in effect discourages the recycling of road material for alternative community uses.

Other consequences of the system are that Council cannot economically remove aquatic weeds from storm water canals as the regulations make it impractical to lawfully store and treat this material anywhere except at a licensed landfill. The problem with the landfill option is that the saturated weed is very heavy and the NSW waste levy of \$53 per tonne makes dumping unaffordable, and the QLD landfills do not accept saturated material. The result is the weed stays and rots in the canals, which is a poor environmental and amenity outcome.

Perhaps the most significant impact of the complex regulatory framework manifests



during natural disasters involving floods and landslips. The waste system places tonnage limits on the amount of landslip material and flood debris that can be disposed of on nearby rural properties. Land owners are generally very cooperative in assisting Council in providing disposal sites as it can be used to improve their properties. However, because of the tonnage limits, Council is generally forced to transport this material long distances to land fill sites, making the recovery effort longer and more expensive which in turn requires additional Disaster Recovery Funding from other tiers of government.

It seems perverse that legislation that is supposed to be designed to protect the

environment and encourage recycling actually places impediments for doing so, both at a cost and compliance level. The end result is that perfectly good material is being sent to landfill, and virgin non-renewable material is being quarried to replace it, simply because it is cheaper and simpler to do so.

Australia needs to develop a national “waste” definition and compliance framework that is risk-based rather than prescriptive, and minimises unnecessary red tape and compliance costs. In doing so, better environmental outcomes will be achieved and the reuse of our limited natural resources will be optimised.

INTERVIEWS

Interview: Susan Jones, Gore District Council (NZ)

Interview by *Melissa Gibbs*, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Govt.
14th August 2015



Melissa Gibbs: I'm here with Susan Jones, human resources and administration manager at Gore District Council in New Zealand. Susan, tell us a little bit about Gore District Council.

Susan Jones: It's a small rural local authority servicing a large agricultural area with dairy and sheep farming primarily. We have 12,300 residents in our district and about 7,500 in the Gore township.

MG: What are some of the key attractions in Gore?

SJ: Gore is renowned for its art gallery and extensive art collections donated by a lot of well known people. It's also known for its fly fishing on the Mataura River, and there are some nice golf courses. The recreational facilities are suburb for a town of our size.

MG: Can you briefly describe your role.

SJ: My role predominantly involves recruiting and overseeing the employment for our 70 full-time staff.

I also have a close interaction with the elected members of our council. We're small; we tend to wear several hats. We all pitch in and help with different council functions from time to time. No two days are ever the same.

MG: So what are the major challenges that you face in your role?

SJ: In my role probably the biggest challenge is keeping young people in a job. We have a lot of people at our Aquatic Centre especially, and it's a useful experience for them to have before they finish high school and then head off to university.

The other issue is attracting management level staff to come to a smaller rural authority. The challenge is not necessarily finding a suitable candidate, but being able to find a position for their spouse. Often suitable candidates for senior roles will decline positions if their partner cannot find employment, or if the local schools aren't up to spec for their family.

MG: What are the challenges facing Gore district more generally?

SJ: Population decline is an ongoing problem for the district, as it is throughout provincial New Zealand. Provincial New Zealand is suffering population decline as more people relocate to the cities for employment

opportunities and, in some cases, tertiary education. Attracting people back to provincial and rural areas is now becoming a priority for many local governments.

Also attracting new businesses to our area is a challenge. Council is very much focused on providing sustainable opportunities for new businesses to come to our area in order to create employment and build our local economy, and in turn drive up the population.

MG: So how is the council going about dealing with that challenge?

SJ: It is very receptive to any approach from a new business or company wanting to relocate or set up in Gore. Council is actively looking for new businesses to come to Gore by having well maintained assets and a sustainable rating base. This has been successful. In fact we're currently very active in building links with the dairy industry.

That's one thing that has brought a lot of new people to our district; the boom in the dairy economy. A lot of people have come to Gore district from Romania and the Philippines and they're working on the dairy farms. They add another dimension to our workforce and to the colourful characters of our town as well.

Gore generally is an agricultural servicing town, with many sheep, beef and dairy farms in its district. New Zealand is a food producing

country and is seen around the world as "clean and green." Local government works hard to maintain that image through protecting the environment, waterways and having robust regulations so that the reputation of New Zealand globally is not threatened. All local government has a responsibility for this outcome and many work together and share services.

It is also mindful of keeping the businesses that are already here and ensure they stay in our district rather than relocate and leave an empty building and take our people away to another town or city.

So the council's not closing anybody out. They will welcome business from anybody to see if they can make it happen.

MG: Where do you go to get information to help you in your role?

SJ: Well I guess local government is a unique sector. We have a lot of sharing forums through the Society of Local Government Managers (SOLGM) in New Zealand and various other get-togethers. We have regional meetings or national meetings about human resources and general issues facing local authorities, but most of that is fed through SOLGM.

Interview: Laurie Mundt, Ipswich City Council

Interview by *Melissa Gibbs*, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Govt.
16th December 2014



Melissa Gibbs: I'm with Laurie Mundt, economic developer manager at Ipswich City Council in Queensland. Laurie, can you tell me a little bit about what you do in your role.

Laurie Mundt: Over the years our initial focus was on attracting people to come and live in our city and we've now been able to achieve that and we're getting the population growth that we wanted.

So the challenge for us now is to create jobs for those people that are coming so that they don't have to travel for work. It's all about lifestyle as far as we're concerned. So we've got the people coming; now we're trying to create some jobs for those people that are coming.

MG: What's your role in facilitating that?

LM: My role in that is basically to attract businesses and industries. So we have a promotional role where we actively promote Ipswich as a great place to do business, and we do that through a number of mediums. We have a number of expos that we attend, and a number of seminars and workshops that we hold around the country.

We're very lucky; we've got a mayor who's a very effective promoter and he's put us on the

map nationally. So the job has changed a bit over the years to one now where we're reacting to opportunities. We have a mayor who's let everyone know where Ipswich is and it's our role to facilitate those inquiries.

MG: So what are some of the challenges you face in your role?

LM: Our primary challenge is that we're just outside a capital city, so for a lot of the businesses that come to the region their first instinct is to have a look at the capital city, and we have to get them to also consider Ipswich. We are well positioned though; we've got a product that they can use. We've got plenty of cheap land that's fully serviced.

MG: So what are the top challenges facing your council more generally?

LM: When you have such massive growth as we have had over the last couple of years, the main challenge for council is financing the infrastructure required to service that growth. In other words, there's a big gap between council financing the delivery of the infrastructure to when the land is finally subdivided and we can start collecting rates. So the challenge for us is to find the finances to fill that gap.

MG: How do you typically do that, through borrowings?

LM: Through borrowings, yes.

MG: Do you think you're making the most effective use of borrowings?

LM: I think we are. We have to make it work. I mean we make the most effective use of the borrowings and we also try to minimise the time between actually paying for the infrastructure and it being subdivided and receiving rates.

We're also very fortunate that we've got a lot of partnership deals with developers who will fund infrastructure agreements thereby helping us finance some of the infrastructure in exchange for development credits.

MG: Where do you go to get information to help you in your role?

LM: That's been a challenge over the years. There is no truly effective source – there are no university courses or lectures or seminars that deal directly with economic development issues. There are a couple of people that write books, but they tend to be at a very high level.

The most effective source for me over the 20 years that I've been in local government has been my network of colleagues around the country. I've met them at various functions or I just phone them up out of the blue; I find they're a very valuable source. By talking to other people about issues they're facing and how they've addressed them it stops me having to re-invent the wheel with every new challenge.

And it works both ways. I have those people phoning me too to find out what does and doesn't work for us, and I find that a very valuable network.

MG: I think local governments are very good at learning from each other. They're usually not afraid to ask for help or to ask someone how they dealt with a particular challenge, and are also willing to offer help in return.

LM: Yeah, that's right – we're very fortunate. People are always willing to share and discuss ideas, and these days it's easy to pick up the phone or send someone an email if you've got a particular inquiry.

I'm also a member of the Economic Development Association and they have a blog on their website where you are able to register an issue that you are facing and you'll often get colleagues come back with responses.

MG: That's very helpful.

LM: Yes.

MG: During this study visit to Sakaide and Japan, what do you think was the most memorable thing that you'll take away from the experience?

LM: I'm going to go back with a lot of different experiences, some of them professional, some of them social. Professionally what I'll take back from this is how organised and how welcoming the city is. I think that's very important; I think that's something we can all learn from.

We've got a mandate to develop tourism in our city and we do focus on customer service, but this country takes that to a whole new level and I think that we can learn from that.

MG: What about the local government sector generally? Obviously your role is focussed on your activities at Ipswich, but you're connected to the sector through your personal networks and professional associations. What do you think the sector needs to make it more sustainable?

LM: I think the challenge we face, and it's often quoted, is that local government receives four per cent of the taxes in this country, and by comparison the state governments collect 16% and the Federal Government collects 80%. The percentages to me are way out of proportion when you look at the services we're required to deliver. We're very close to the people who use those services. There's often a lot expected of local government, but we're given a very small amount to deliver on these expectations.

We are fortunate to receive Federal and state government assistance for a number of programs, but I think it'd be far better if we had more direct input into how that money is directed and how it's spent .

MG: Thanks Laurie.

Interview: Edwina Marks, Barkly Shire Council

Interview by *Melissa Gibbs*, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Govt.
17th February 2014



Melissa Gibbs: I'm with Edwina Marks from Barkly Shire Council in the Northern Territory. Edwina, can you just tell me in just a couple of sentences, a bit about your role?

Edwina Marks: Hi Melissa. I'm the Executive Director of Communities and my role is to oversee the municipal and essential service delivery in six of our remote communities, so it's a very broad role. It is very much about roads, rates and rubbish, but it's also about community service delivery as well. So it's aged care, childcare, and in those remote settings they can be very challenging.

MG: I can imagine. Can you nominate the major challenges facing the Barkly Shire?

EM: The Barkly Shire is about one and a half times the size of Victoria and we have 8,000 residents. So logistics and geography are our daily challenges, including everything from getting people to work or getting contractors to a job. It's also about keeping essential services such as water, power and a whole range of other essential things continuing to be supplied to communities.

MG: And what are some of the personal challenges in your role?

EM: The most significant challenge that we look at on a daily basis is just guaranteeing the delivery of services. The communities are remote, but there are also a lot of cultural reasons as to why workers might not be at work. So you work through a whole process of legitimising those services to the community, but also respecting that each community has its own way of doing things. Also, it's a cultural identity which needs to be respected.

The Barkly Shire is also only five years old, so as a new council it is important to take that step back and look at things strategically so that you're actually maximising best effort. Day-to-day life can easily consume all of your time so it's really important that we look at some of that longer term planning.

MG: I know you've only been at Barkly Shire for a relatively short period of time, but what are some of the achievements that you're most proud of?

EM: I've only been at Barkly for six months but I think in that six months what we've done is really connect with the Shire's employees and start to make our employees feel valued. We have a much larger executive team now than we did before and we're able to do more. So we're able to engage where we have a lot more connection points across council, both formal and informal, so that people know what's going on as a local government provider. But also that we're getting to know each other as people and have a bit of fun.

We have a wonderful animal management program, which is one of the best in the Territory and we're taking that to another level. We're getting recognition both at the Territory and the national level for that program. But a program like that doesn't just worry about animal health; it actually makes a big difference to population health. It actually

keeps people healthy by reducing dog numbers and looking at things as a whole. When you see a vet in the bush operating on a table on a porch to spay a dog, that's just something to be seen.

MG: So where do you most commonly go to get information and support?

EM: I think in local government, anyone with experience realises that it's not important to be original, but it's really important to network within your own and with other councils. I'm really proud of the fact that since I've been on board at Barkly I have developed a really strong relationship with the neighbouring councils; Central Desert and MacDonnell Shire. They've been invaluable support to me. Both CEOs opened up their executive to me to ask for any support that I might need. As a result, we're working right across a range of strategic issues but now we can do it from a Central Australian perspective, not just a council perspective.

MG: This is most certainly a reflection of the evolution of the shires over five years, where they are now at a mature enough stage to be looking at addressing issues on a regional basis – and it's a very large region.

EM: Absolutely. I come from local government in another jurisdiction and I think you forget that, despite all the challenges that local governments face in other states, they are generally more highly evolved. When you bring that experience back into the Territory it gives you the ability to be a time traveller, to know what the future looks like. To bring that

back and to look at where things are at a grass roots level, you can see what kind of steps you need to get there - to actually get you into a legitimate space for service delivery.

MG: What's been the biggest lesson you've learnt in your current role?

EM: I think the importance of people power. We're an Aboriginal organisation. Sixty per cent of our employees are Aboriginal. Our President, or mayor as you'd call them in other jurisdictions and councils, the majority of councillors are Aboriginal. So we're the guests in country and that's the most important lesson to learn, and it influences everything that we do.

MG: Everybody I speak with in local government proudly tells me that their council is unique. What is it that sets your council apart from others?

EM: I think that we are truly smack bang in the middle of Central Australia, so it takes a long time to get there. You can't fly in to Tennant Creek other than by charter and I think that does make us special. However, Tennant Creek is an urban area that's been a land mass for a long period of time and we've got these small remote communities we also look after. We feel like cowboys or frontiers people. I think in some ways we are a little bit more raw than other councils, but at the same time we're certainly striving to modernise and contemporise ourselves.

MG: Thanks for speaking with me Edwina. I wish you and your colleagues at Barkly Shire well.

Interview: Rosanna De Santis, Tiwi Islands Shire Council

Interview by *Melissa Gibbs*, Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Govt.
20th January 2014



Melissa Gibbs: I'm with Rosanna De Santis, Director of Corporate and Community Services with the Tiwi Islands Shire Council in the Northern Territory. Rosanna, in just a couple of sentences can you please describe your role?

Rosanna Di Santis: My role is basically working as part of the executive team for the Tiwi Islands Shire Council, so effectively I'm working very closely with the CEO and councillors to make decisions on delivery of services and also manage a significant number of staff beneath me. I now have three departments; I have community services, corporate and community development as well.

MG: Tell us about your transition from the NT police into local government, how did that come about?

RDS: That came about from me identifying an opportunity of having a change, because I'd been policing for 23 years straight and straight from school too. So I was looking for something different. One of the significant reasons for me taking up the challenge, or applying, was the fact that it took me back to remote communities. In my years of policing I went to a lot of remote communities and served away from Darwin which was by

choice, so this being the Tiwi Islands, the fact that it was going to take me out remote again was one of the two reasons.

The second reason being that that's where my mother originates from, Tiwi Islands, so effectively I'd be doing or providing services for my own mob and I don't think I've been quite as satisfied in a job elsewhere.

MG: Tell us about the top three challenges for you in your current role.

RDS: The first – and it still is a challenge – is the fact that I've been policing for so long and in a relatively strict and regimented environment. You know, you've got chain of command and so one of the challenges for myself as a director is trying to be a little bit more flexible. Because I'm conscious of what we have to do as an organisation and our corporate image as well, and when I see that potentially being brought into disrepute or not being adhered to I know I take a strict line.

I'm not saying that's a bad thing, but what I'm trying to work my way around is to try and be a little bit less the hard task-master, and appreciating more the difficulties facing the community or the more traditional Tiwi people being employed. So that's one of them. Another challenge is the fact that whilst at our level at executive we certainly have that chain of command where we get stuff from our managers and then it's fed upward to the CEO, but it often doesn't happen - for me I feel like it doesn't happen at all levels where it should.

I know that a lot of our employees - and I'm talking about our Tiwi employees - they actually feel disrespected when someone from a different business unit tells them that they need them to do something.

MG: So I suppose an opportunity might be to take the best elements out of the policing chain of command model and applying it to local government in the Tiwis?

RDS: Yeah, that's right. I know you asked for three but they're the two main ones. I think everything else works pretty well. I guess communication would be another one. This happened particularly when we had vacancies in some of our executive structure so a lot of people were busy and doing extra work so we fell down in our communication. Instead of everyone being aware of what was going on, sometimes information didn't get to certain people.

I can remember one example where a decision was made with one of my employees and it was just to fill a gap, but I wasn't consulted about that so I was really quite angry. I then turned around and looked at it in the view of 'oh well, we have some room for improvement in our communication', rather than getting all argumentative and negative about it.

But I certainly feel as though there's been an improvement in communication, and it's because we've got those key positions filled as well.

MG: So reflecting on your time at Tiwi, what are some of the achievements that you're most proud of?

RDS: That has to be this one young Tiwi woman who was working with us in Milikapiti. She was one of the CDP [Community Development Program] participants. You know I'd see her float around, come in the office here and there, and I said to her one day 'do you want to sit down with me and give some thought to what sort of work you want to do so you're not just on CDP all the time?' True. It was like no-one had asked her that question before and she said I'd like to work with the children at the crèche. 'Alright, well if I said that I could maybe help you do that; would you be prepared to undertake training so that you get qualified?' 'Yeah of course.'

I just saw this woman that was always coming to work and thought 'I wouldn't mind giving her

an opportunity'. She was 19 - in little under two years we transitioned her into the crèche, started her off in a children services qualification at certificate II level. She's just got two more units of competency to go and she'll be the first Aboriginal woman in the Northern Territory to actually enter the diploma level.

I love bragging about those good news stories. They always form a part of my report to the Council each month, that and some photos capturing some of where we're kicking goals.

MG: It makes it all worthwhile doesn't it?

RDS: Yeah. That's the shining light for me, knowing that if I can do it with that young lady, there are bound to be others that I can do it with.

MG: There are so many opportunities in local government to do good. Did you have similar opportunities in the police force?

RDS: Yeah, absolutely. I can't remember who it was who said it this morning, but someone today talked about the opportunities for us to give training and experience and qualifications to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobs. It's irrelevant whether they stay with us because if we can help set them up for life I think that's the bonus. That's definitely how I feel and that's how I used to feel when we were in policing when we had our Indigenous employment career development strategy, which went across all streams of employment into the police force.

It had school-based apprenticeships, it had Aboriginal community police officer programs, constable programs, auxiliary programs, and we tried and achieved very well at it in terms of Indigenous employment. But that's an area for improvement. I was an integral part of that pre-development strategy being developed for the police perspective of things. I've only been here two-and-a-half years in local government, I know where there are areas that I'd love to improve on and I'm fortunate because Alan [Tiwi Islands Shire Council CEO Alan Hudson], no matter what you say about CEOs being stale, pale and male – he's not stale! He fits two of those categories being male and pale but he's certainly not stale. Because if you're

looking at measuring his performance against that stuff, I mean this old bugger gets a tick in the box in a lot of areas and that's just me talking personally where he's given us a hand and stuff. I know that I can write to him and say, 'hey look, this is a situation, I need to change this, that and whatever, can you support it?' And he goes, 'yeah'.

MG: It's good to have that... Where do you go most commonly to get information to support you in your role?

RDS: Alan's probably the most significant person that I go to. I haven't explored people at my level in other shires, not for any reason, I just refer to legislation for guidance, or I'll ask Alan, or I'll bounce it off of David Jan or Tony Tapsell from LGANT. So they're the main sources.

MG: What's the biggest lesson you've learned in your current role?

RDS: Biggest lesson? It doesn't matter if you're family, you're still going to get sworn at.

MG: That would be a challenge that you face that a lot of other people working in senior levels at local government wouldn't face.

RDS: Yeah, and that's okay. I tell my family that if I play favourites and I don't chip you for this or that, it will reflect poorly on me. It means that people can't trust me to do the job that I'm here to do.

MG: It's a big challenge facing Indigenous people working in local government because you're expected to support your family as well as the council.

RDS: Yeah.

MG: It's often difficult for family members to understand that.

RDS: Yeah, I mean I told you that shining light story. A perfect example of an opposite story is my own nephew, my own flesh and blood. Time after time after time I've put so much energy into that young fellow to help him to get a qualification in his chosen area which is mechanical, he just kept not turning up. I just

kept having to explain to him, I needed to keep onto him to try to help him realise the error of his ways and get him to work and then he'd do good for a fortnight but then just fall away. His perspective was that I was always on his case. So trying to find a happy medium in that is difficult.

MG: Would one of those mentoring programs have helped him do you think, with someone who is maybe not part of the family?

RDS: I think his current place, where he's at now, is about him. He even told me in some correspondence that he was required to write in addressing whether or not we should continue to employ him, realising that he was only looking out for himself, not caring about his work or his family and stuff like that. That still is the case and he's going to grow up, he's only 21, he's going to grow up and we can only hope that he'll wake up soon.

MG: It sounds like he's got good people around him who can support him when he does decide to wake up.

RDS: Yeah.

MG: The final question is; what's so special about the Tiwi Islands?

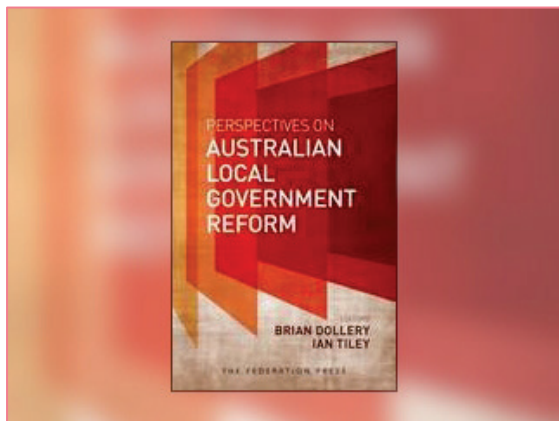
RDS: Aside from it being just the most pristine waters and beautiful country, in terms of the shire, we really pride ourselves on two things which we think make us unique. The fact that we actually practice decentralised local government. The CEO, directors and managers all live on the island. We live in the general population in our houses, and that's pretty special because I know that the current minister, when he was holding a different portfolio in Darwin, believed that all shires existed on the Stuart Highway.

The second aspect is just the number of Aboriginal women that we have, not just women but Aboriginal women. I gave you some figures before but that makes me so proud. We employ nearly 46 per cent women in our shire, and when we are talking about Tiwi women at management level or above, we're at 35 per cent. So that's pretty deadly.

BOOK REVIEWS

Looking over the fence: A review of ‘Perspectives on Australian Local Government Reform’

*Bligh Grant, UTS Centre for Local Government
3rd November 2015*



Looking over the fence: A review of Perspectives on Australian Local Government Reform, edited by Brian Dollery and Ian Tiley (The Federation Press 1 + 191pp; RRP: \$49.95).

Academic books come about in a variety of ways. Some are the result of pure serendipity. For instance, In February 2011 Brian Dollery and I were completing a report that delved into the conceptual and theoretical foundations of shared services. Brian had also co-authored several case studies of shared services in Australian local government over the years, some of which I had contributed to.

One morning while he was in my office I suggested to Brian that these two elements – the theory of shared services on the one hand, and the lived experience on the other – could be brought together to form a volume on the

topic, as opposed to the information being scattered throughout academic journals that relatively few people had access to. Brian ignored the comment at the time, but several mornings later can back in to see me at my desk. Bending down quite close to me he said:

You know that idea you had about a book on shared services ... that's a very good idea... In fact, it's such a good idea I'm surprised I didn't think of it myself...

The rest, as they say is history – and no, it's not a particularly inspiring volume, but *Councils in Cooperation: Shared Services and Australian Local Government*, by Brian, myself and our colleague Michael Kortt at Southern Cross University is a tidy little book which may – or may not – have had some influence on reform processes in Australian local government (witness, for example, the emphasis on joint organisations in the 'Final Report' of the NSW Government's Independent Local Government Review Panel's (2013) *Revitalising Local Government*.³²

Alternatively, some books – particularly edited ones (edited special editions of journals are the same) – can be organised with a military precision, involving not only rigorous project

³² See

<http://www.localgovernmentreview.nsw.gov.au/Information.asp?areaindex=LGR&index=102&mi=9>.

management but also a detailed structuring of the contents. Witness, for example, the collection *Local Government Reform: A Comparative Analysis of Advanced Anglosphere Countries* edited by Dollery, Garcea and LeSage and published by Edward Elgar in 2008. In this book the categories of structural, functional, financial, organisational and jurisdictional reform are used to analyse reform processes generally for local government systems in a variety of countries.

The most recent volume from our colleagues in Armidale is *Perspectives on Australian Local Government Reform*, edited by Brian Dollery and Ian Tiley, published by Federation Press. The motivation and execution of this book feels like neither of the two types described above. Rather, it's more along the lines of: 'A lot's been going on in the local government systems of Australia recently – we should do an edited book'.

The result of this more liberal approach is a trove of insights into contemporary local government reform across Australia's federal system of government, written by people who have been critically positioned within these diverse reform processes, alongside reflections by leading academics in the field.

Of the 11 substantive chapters, four are concerned with NSW. Ian Tiley pens a case study of the Clarence Valley Council, addressing the question of whether or not Clarence Valley constitutes an example of a successful merger. Financial reforms to local government are the focus of the contribution by John Truman of Ballina Council. Drawing on his extensive experience, Brian Bell examines a particular form of inter-regional collaboration, councils of mayors, against the backdrop of the current reforms in NSW. And, of burning interest to anyone involved in current NSW events, an account of these processes is provided by the former Minister for Local Government Don Page – one of the most humble and diligent Australian politicians I have had the privilege to meet.

However, arguably it is the chapters examining the less frequently reflected upon jurisdictions that are of particular interest, principally for

reasons of comparison into on-going reform in other jurisdictions. For instance, in their contribution examining the issue of structural reform in Tasmania, Ron Sanderson, General Manager of Brighton Council (interviewed in 2011), and long-standing servant of Tasmanian local government Stewart Wardlaw document, amongst other issues, how three councils in that state successfully challenged in the Supreme Court of Tasmania a recommendation by the (then) Local Government Board to reduce the number of councils from 29 to 14, and how the incumbent Liberal government was subsequently defeated in the ensuing state election.

In his contribution examining South Australian local government, CEO of Port Pirie Regional Council Andrew Johnson documents, amongst other issues, the comparative paucity of per capita funding for local government areas in that state. Stephen Goode juxtaposes the non-amalgamation of Perth councils with the extended processes of self-examination undertaken by the West Australian local government sector since 2006. And Michael Kortt and Joe Wallis reflect upon the strategic effects of the radical amalgamation program undertaken in Victoria in 1993.

Two contributions adopt distinctive and refreshing methodological approaches to their subject matter. In her examination of recent amalgamation and de-amalgamation in Queensland, Gabrielle Walsh argues that the concept of 'the local state', rather than local government conceived principally as an administrative arm of state government, allows an appreciation of state-local relations. Adopting this approach, Walsh takes into consideration the history of economic regionalism as an element to the political conflicts concerning the recent local government amalgamations and de-amalgamations in Queensland, and as such extends the dominant institutional sociology approach to local government studies in the Australian context.

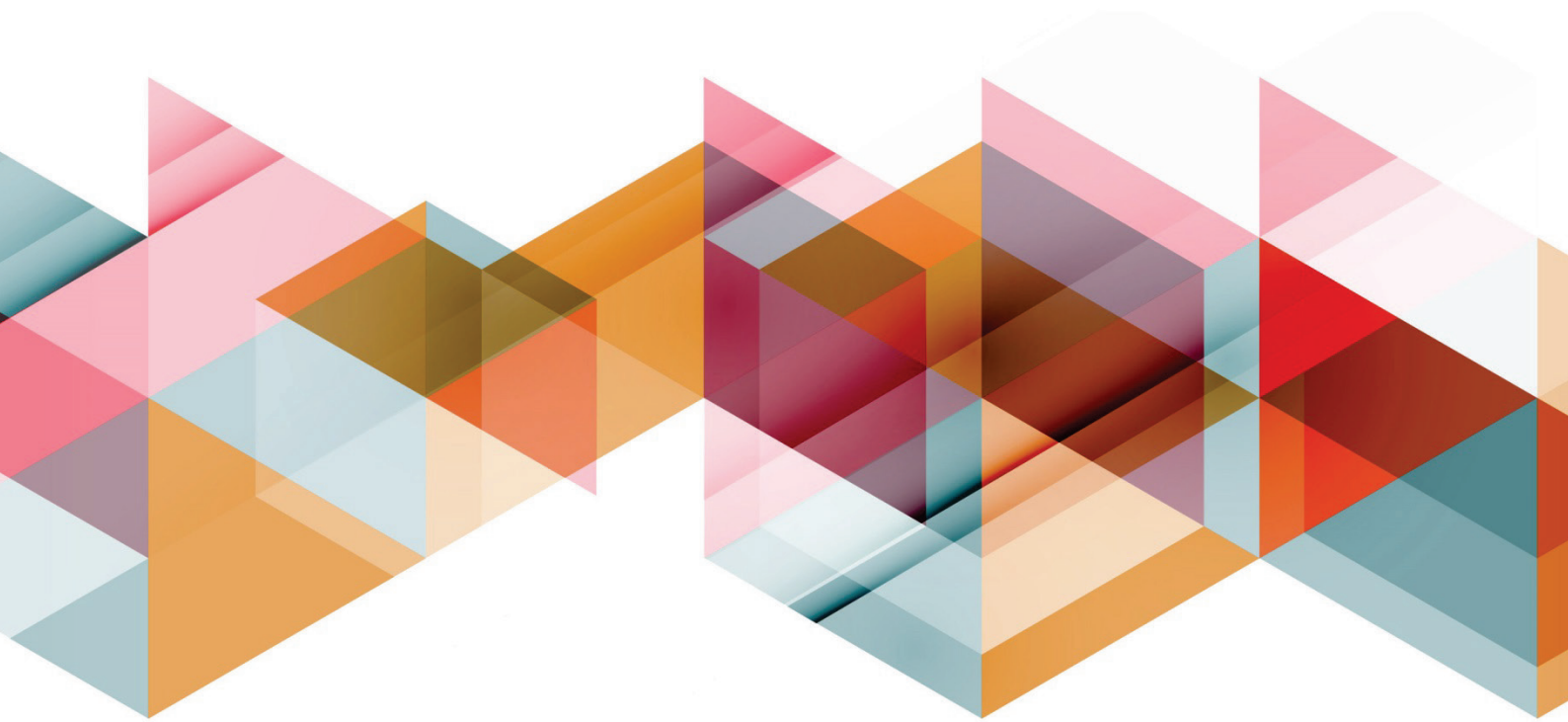
Similarly, Thomas Michel deploys both his experience in the Northern Territory's local government sector and significant scholarly work to provide an account of the

regionalisation of 53 community councils into just eight shire councils. Michel's approach is at once both critical and actuarial, as well as resting on a considerable body of ethnographic work, the latter inclusive of interviews of 831 residents in the Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shires and 77 residents of Central Desert and MacDonnell Shires. His conclusions include the observation that administrative reform, in particular structural reform, functions at least in part to allow 'difficult questions about the past and present shortcomings of modern government's role in the Indigenous domain [to be] effectively ignored'.

The final chapter by Chris Aulich canvasses the issue of options for recognition of local government by the Commonwealth – 'symbolic', 'institutional' and 'financial' types. The chapter is full of insights as to the 'awkward situation' of local governments in Australia. For instance, Aulich notes that despite its persistent refrain to be the tier of

government that is closest to the people, empirical work – such as that conducted by A. J. Brown – has correlated greater place attachment on the part of citizens' with *less* support for local government. Indeed, some of the results from the UTS:CLG's 'Why Local Government Matters' survey reflect this observation. Aulich also broaches the delicate issue of national leadership for Australian local government.

Taken as a whole, *Perspectives on Australian Local Government Reform* provides a valuable update on continuing processes of reform across Australian local government systems. The overall narrative is still one told through the lens of structural reform, or responses to the possibility of structural reform. However, there is plenty of other detail in the book. Both academics and practitioners will find it of interest for precisely this reason and the editors have assembled an enviable group of people to make the contributions.



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