

Driving new perspectives

President's comment



Cr Sebastian Klein
President, Victorian Local
Governance Association (VLGA)

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) occupies a unique niche in the local government sector of Australia, one that helps drive new perspectives and reform.

Following the significant reform to local government

in Victoria, the VLGA was formed in 1994 to reinforce and protect local democracy, to give voice to local communities and to advance the role and relevance of local councils.

We do this by focussing on local governance, the activity of councils governing together with their communities to build strong, inclusive and resilient societies. This vision calls for responsiveness to community needs, effective delivery of services, efficient use of public resources and fundamentally, democratic participation in the way that local decisions are made.

As the most immediate tier of government, councils have a critical role in shaping lives for the better.

But to achieve their potential to do so, local governments must increasingly work together with the community to plan for a shared future.

The current period of uncertainty and change raises a number of challenges for effective local governance.

For instance, financial sustainability places particular pressure on local governance, affecting many types of council at a time when community needs and expectations are higher than ever.

The increased demands on Health and Community Care are just one such example.

A further challenge for local governance and for public perceptions of councils in general, is the emergence what has been termed a 'democratic deficit'.

Community expectations and perspectives on government are changing and meeting these shifts requires democratic processes that are transparent and inclusive, getting as many community members involved as possible.

Without effective engagement with local communities, levels of cynicism about local government will continue.

Community support and active participation in the activities of local government is needed if local governance is to be vibrant and strong into the future.

There are a number of 'hot issues' the VLGA is currently working on.

Recently the Local Government Electoral Review Panel, chaired by Petro Georgiou AO, released its findings.

The Panel independently reviewed the process of electing local councillors following the 2012 municipal elections in Victoria, following widespread criticism of a range of election aspects.

The Review has produced two Reports containing 55 recommendations for reform.

These include greater information disclosure by candidates (such as political party membership), broadening of the franchise to align with the definition of 'community' in the Victorian Local Government Act (1989)

and the implementation of a councillor/voter ratio.

As part of its call to parties for the State Election in November, the VLGA has pushed for the release of the Reports and a commitment by an incoming State Government to implement recommendations following an ongoing discussion with the local government sector.

The Commonwealth's review of the Australian Federation is another area of critical relevance to local government, which the VLGA is actively addressing.

First and foremost, it is disappointing that local government is conspicuous in its absence from the Government's Issues paper.

Yet, many of the issues covered in the document are directly relevant to local government and local governance.

These include the need for reform in the provision of financial assistance from the Commonwealth to modernised approaches to service delivered

directly to citizens and local communities.

One of the other issues, which might have slipped under the radar, is the focus on public sector reform.

The Issues paper discusses the need for the rationalisation of the roles and responsibilities of government, which has the 'potential to drive public sector productivity improvements' and provides the 'opportunity for driving greater contestability in the delivery of public services'.

This sort of commentary confirms our view that there is a significant productivity reform agenda that the local government sector, along with their communities, needs to address.

The VLGA is working closely with our members across the State on these, and many other, pressing issues confronting Victorian communities.

We look forward to continuing to lead the debate on the future of local governance.

Tiwi visit welcomed



West Arnhem Regional Council Mayor Lothar Siebert and Deputy Mayor James Marrawal (left and right, in dark blue) with Tiwi Islands Regional Council delegation (left to right) Cr Lesley Tungatalum, Mayor Lynette De Santis, Chief Executive Officer Alan Hudson and Cr Anita Moreen.

West Arnhem Regional Council (WARC) and the Tiwi Islands Regional Council (TIRC) have announced steps towards a new partnership.

Mayor Lothar Siebert invited the TIRC Mayor and Councillors to attend an Ordinary Council Meeting at the WARC Chambers in Jabiru during September. TIRC Mayor Lynette De Santis, Councillors Anita Moreen and Lesley Tungatalum, and Chief Executive Officer Alan Hudson attended the meeting.

Mayor Siebert said the meeting had been "a step in the right direction".

"This meeting was a chance to put into place a more formalised

arrangement in which to share ideas that will benefit both regional councils further down the line.

"I can see a lot of potential in us working on regional issues together."

Speaking after the meeting, TIRC Mayor Lynette De Santis thanked the Mayor, Councillors and Chief Executive of West Arnhem for extending the invitation. She said she felt 'a lot more empowered' after participating in the

meeting and looked forward to reciprocating the arrangement.

Both West Arnhem and the Tiwi Islands form part of the Northern Territory Electoral Division of Arafura, with Cobourg Peninsula lying adjacent to the Tiwi Islands on the Van Diemen Gulf.

Situated 100 km north of Darwin, the Tiwi Islands are comprised of Melville Island and Bathurst Island, with a combined area of 8320 square kilometres.

Creation stories suggest Indigenous Australians have

occupied these islands for at least 7000 years.

In a formal letter of thanks to the council, Chief Executive Officer Alan Hudson said it would be 'advantageous to keep this initiative on the move'.

"It was especially gratifying to share an insight into not only issues you face within your region but to be able to confirm that there are many issues where we could all benefit by concerted cooperation and acting cohesively as a body of more than a lone council."

The funding cycle is turning*

The Australian Electoral Commission website says that the earliest possible date for the next House of Representatives and half-Senate election is 6 August 2016.

That is only 21 months away.

What does the Government Federal Member of Parliament want to do in the lead up to an election?

Cut ribbons, unveil plaques, declare projects finished and maybe even announce a few more that are in the pipeline.

The lead-time between grant programs being announced and projects on the ground can be significant, up to 21 months in some cases.

Which is why grant programs from the Commonwealth are appearing again.

At the time of writing, in early October 2014, the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) grant is open, closing on Friday 17 October, which has replaced more than 150 individual programmes and activities with five flexible, broad-based programmes.

Closing on the 20 October 2014 is the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants 2014–15.

Local government are specifically excluded, except as a sponsor, which still provides a range of options on how you can get involved.

Announced multiple times, but not ready yet, is the \$1 billion National Stronger Regions Fund starting in 2015–16.

Specifically aimed at local government, as the media announcements say, this will invest in small-scale infrastructure projects at a local level and will create economic development opportunities for people living in regions.

A component of this program is the \$314 million Community Development Grants Fund, which will support key infrastructure that strengthens local and regional economies.

These grant programs are real, not speculation, and just part of the overall grants opportunities that are starting to come out of Canberra again.

The funding cycle is turning, and after 18 months of lean times from the Commonwealth, get ready for a rollercoaster 21 months.

Some things won't change though.

There will be little warning when a grant program is open, the deadlines will be ridiculously short, and the guidelines could be written in another language.

The gulf between the Commonwealth and Local Government stays the same, regardless of who is in power, simple because the outcomes they are looking for are very different to yours.

Regardless, make the most of the opportunity for your community and good luck.

Colin Steele is Managing Director of Section51, a specialist consultancy that assists local government around Australia in applying for grants and with the process and paperwork for delivery.

With over \$137 million in grants either obtained, or managed, for local government in the last 18 months, Section51 has a strong record of achievement when it comes to the grants process.

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