Variety is the Spice of Life

DR KATRENA STEPHENSON, POLICY DIRECTOR
Local Government Association of Tasmania

Our minds are like our stomachs; they are whetted by the change of their food, and variety supplies both with fresh appetites. (Quintilian)

I am constantly amazed by the diversity of issues that Local Government, and by default LGAT, have to deal with. One day last week I had six items of correspondence that varied from cats and citizenship, to planning and social issues such as homelessness and obesity. My head was spinning! This makes the task of deciding what to discuss within the confines of this article rather difficult so I have tried to capture the diversity of work, rather than aim to reflect on all our work priorities.

Financial Sustainability

LGAT has continued to analyse and act upon recommendations made by Access Economics in the report, A Review of the Financial Sustainability of Local Government in Tasmania, under the Financial Sustainability Project.

At a steering committee meeting in April, three papers were endorsed and have since been distributed to councils. These were: Debt Funding Guidelines for Local Government; a discussion paper on the use of Audit Committees in Local Government; and a Long Term Financial Plan Summary Statement Template (LGA.SA) for discussion.

In parallel to the work being progressed by LGAT, working groups and the steering committee, discussions have been underway with the Local Government Office regarding the detail of the 2008 Premier’s Local Government Council (PLGC) project, Stronger Councils, Better Services. Under this project, State and Local Government will work together to identify and address, in an integrated way, a number of issues impacting on the broad sustainability of services and outcomes for local communities.

The endorsed project framework identifies four key areas for cooperation between State and Local Government:

- Project A: Enhancing Council Financial Sustainability
- Project B: Innovation in Service Delivery
- Project C: Good Governance (Governing for the Community)
- Project D: The Future Role of the Local Government Board.

It is likely that the Local Government Office will have additional resource to support the PLGC project and some of the base work on the financial sustainability project will be used to support subsequent work under the PLGC project banner, as directed through the steering committees.

Since the release of the Access Economics Report, the Productivity Commission has also released its report Assessing Local Government Revenue Raising Capacity. The Productivity Commission found that:

- Local governments are increasingly providing services beyond their traditional role of service to property, to include greater involvement in human services, planning and regulatory functions;
- The revenue raising capacity of smaller rural councils is limited with some likely to remain highly dependent on grants;
- Urban developed councils tend to draw lightly of their fiscal capacities, whereas remote and rural councils tend to draw more heavily on their fiscal capacities; and
- The application of a set of principles to guide the revenue-raising and expenditure decisions of councils can assist them in improving the wellbeing of their communities.

The principles for revenue-raising outlined by the Commission include the following, which align strongly to the work under the Financial Sustainability Project:

- The application of a multi-year framework to financial management, asset management and planning, and spending and revenue-raising decisions;
- Improving community awareness of the short and long-term financial implications of potential service priorities and key decisions, including through the development of long-term service plans; and
- Councils should aim to recover the full costs of significant business activities and to that end, the appropriate setting of rates and prices for goods and services is essential. However, it needs to be borne in mind that economic efficiency is not the only criterion used when setting rates and prices. The other criteria commonly cited include equity, administrative simplicity, transparency and accountability.

Review of the Heritage Act

In September 2007, Heritage Tasmania released the Managing our Heritage position paper, which outlined how the State Government proposed to respond to the Mackay Report in relation to reform of the Historic Cultural Heritage Act 1995. Local Government and other planning authorities participated in forums and made submissions, generally in
support of the proposed approach, particularly in relation to removing overlap, inconsistency and duplication of effort.

Some concerns were also raised, including the need to consider the detailed process and criteria, and resource implications. It should be noted that with an increase in local listings, comes an increased number of development appraisals, which not only increases the workload of heritage personnel but also planners, administrative staff, development engineers and so on.

Since the release of the paper in 2007, Heritage Tasmania has developed draft flow charts that outline the proposed approach, working consultatively with State Government departments such as Justice, Workplace Standards, the Resource Planning and Development Commission (RPDC) and the Environment Division. They have now commenced theoretical testing of these proposed processes with planning authorities and the Heritage Council.

In April 2008, Heritage Tasmania conducted two forums, one in Ross and one in Hobart. Participants from those forums have joined to form a reference group which will have regular input into the reform process. LGAT is represented through participation of the Policy Director and council staff.

It is proposed to create a new Heritage Act, drawing on the existing Act and proposed amendments, to ensure it is logical in its layout and uses plain English. Furthermore, there will be, wherever possible, alignment with the Land Use Planning and Approvals Act (LUPPA) and the Environmental Management and Pollution Control Act (EMPCA). Embedded within the new legislation will be criteria for both State and local listings and a defined process for local listing which removes the need for planning scheme amendments. Arrangements are currently being made to hold a symposium on the proposed reforms and to release a Tasmanian Historic Heritage Strategy later in the year.

The consultation and review process undertaken by Heritage Tasmania to date suggests that a State Heritage Policy, which had been mooted, would not be necessary. In parallel to this work by Heritage Tasmania, the Land Use Planning Branch in the Department of Justice is developing a standard planning scheme schedule for heritage as part of a suite of schedules being developed. There will be an opportunity to test this and other schedules through the NW Regional Planning Initiative.

Cats and Dogs

In the March 2007 edition of LGAT News, Liz Gillam reported on proposed changes to the Dog Control Act 2000. Since that time, there has been considerable consultation with Local Government and legislative amendments have already been made in relation to dangerous dogs. The Local Government Office recently confirmed that it has completed its analysis of submissions related to restricted breeds and that a Cabinet Minute outlining proposed changes was put forward in June, with the draft Bill expected to be released for comment in July 2008.

The Department of Primary Industries and Water is currently finalising a position paper on cat management. LGAT was able to provide some comment on the draft paper and all stakeholders, including councils, will have an opportunity to comment once the paper is finalised and released. As with the restricted dogs legislation, the major concern for Local Government in relation to cat management is the responsibility to ensure compliance and consequent resource implications. Community education and clearly defined standards are vital components in addressing both dog and cat management.

For further information about these and other issues, email Katrena Stephenson at katrena.stephenson@lgat.tas.gov.au.
In 2007, the Local Government Association of Tasmania (LGAT) and the Department of Health and Human Services were successful in jointly obtaining funding from Emergency Management Australia, under the Working Together to Manage Emergencies Program. The funding enabled LGAT to host a series of two-day workshops for council staff involved in community recovery.

It has been recognised that community recovery is best managed at the local level and is very much the responsibility of the local council, that it is a complex and multi-faceted process, and one which continues well beyond the immediate emergency or disaster.

Because councils know the local community very well and already have established relationships, they have the greatest capacity to coordinate the recovery process and ensure the provision of the appropriate services to support the community. Funding was therefore used with the aim of building the capacity of people working in Local Government who had responsibility for addressing the issue of long-term community recovery following an emergency.

Two-day residential workshops, led by presenters skilled in community recovery, were held in each of the three regions of Tasmania, and were attended by 35 council employees. The program looked at the role of Local Government in the event of disasters and emergencies. It also examined how best to build capacity for an effective response, by commencing well before any such disaster, and ensuring that the response is based on the long-term needs of the community, including infrastructure, economic, psycho-social and environmental recovery.

Participants learnt about the governance arrangements around the response to emergencies and disasters within the Tasmanian context, and gained a greater understanding of the interagency approach that is put into effect to ensure a successful recovery. Real life examples were used to enhance understanding of long-term recovery processes, and there were several practical exercises during the workshop.

As a result of the workshops, participants expressed a higher level of confidence in their ability to take steps towards being better prepared at Local Government level, for a disaster or emergency. They also felt that they had a greater awareness of the questions they now need to go back and ask in their individual councils, and an enhanced understanding of how they might start to more formally approach this aspect of their role within the workplace. Previously, many of the participants were aware of having been allocated a CR ‘title’, but lacked any real understanding of how this might be developed or reflected in their day to day duties.

A large number of participants expressed their intention to share ideas with colleagues and management, and reflected a need to get their managers more involved and informed about community recovery. Likewise, they saw potential to develop stronger networks within the community, with elected members, and with other agencies. As a result of the workshops, it became clear that roles and responsibilities had been either poorly understood, or sometimes never properly explained.

Further to the residential workshops, LGAT is currently working on two related activities designed to further enhance the capacity of council staff in undertaking their important community recovery function:

1. Development of a Community Recovery Resource Kit, designed to better prepare community recovery coordinators to go straight into response mode when required. Community recovery coordinators will customise their kit to contain the municipal plan, up-to-date lists of all necessary contacts, maps of the local area and other useful information pertaining to their communities. Pro-formas and templates e.g. universal signs for use in the recovery centre will already be provided as part of the kit. The effectiveness and usefulness of the kit will depend on the addition of essential information for each municipality, by the coordinator.

2. A one-day workshop by well known psychologist and trauma expert, Dr Rob Gordon, which was held at Aurora Stadium on 12 June. Dr Gordon worked closely with council community recovery coordinators on assisting people in the immediate aftermath of a trauma, as well as throughout the recovery. He also addressed the matter of ensuring the wellbeing of staff in the recovery centre as well as self-care. Dr Gordon is widely regarded for his work in trauma recovery, and his workshop was very popular.
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