Surveys Provide Valuable Snapshot of Tasmanian Councils

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USA Today has come out with a new survey - apparently, three out of every four people make up 75% of the population.

David Letterman

Contrary to the rather cynical quote above from US talk show host, David Letterman, there is real value in the use of surveys in the formation of policy.

This edition of LGAT News provides a snapshot of two tools, the Statewide Community Satisfaction Survey and the Elected Member Census (see page 30), used by LGAT to take stock of our sector this year, continuing our benchmarking and trend analysis in relation to community satisfaction and the demographics of our elected members. While such instruments can only ever provide a point in time snapshot, the analysis of information arising from them will contribute to the identification and development of training and resources in the future. They aren’t definitive but they are certainly indicative and therefore allow us to focus our limited resources more effectively.

Statewide Community Satisfaction Survey

The report on the Statewide Community Satisfaction Survey, conducted in April, has been released. This is the fourth such survey designed to provide a snapshot of the satisfaction residents have with local councils across Tasmania. It follows surveys conducted in October 2001, August 2002 and October 2006.

What the survey demonstrates is that while the community has very high expectations of Local Government, there is generally a high level of satisfaction with councils. Much higher satisfaction, I would suggest, than with State or Federal Government at this point in time. Nine areas of council services, incorporating some 31 distinctive service areas, were identified. 980 Tasmanian residents were interviewed by telephone, selected from all Tasmanian Local Government areas.

Average satisfaction across Tasmania, obtained by aggregating the scores for each of the 9 customer services, rose from 69% in 2006 to 70% in 2009. Most areas improved marginally. The two to fall, albeit by a small percentage, were “customer service” and “informing residents about council’s decisions”. When a single question asking for overall satisfaction with Council’s performance was put forward towards the end of the survey, the satisfaction level recorded was a pleasing 70%.

Areas with the highest level of customer satisfaction were “the standards of customer service provided by councils”, “water and sewerage”, “waste management” and “community health and safety”. The lowest levels of satisfaction were recorded for “planning and development”, “informing council residents about
council activities and decisions” and “roads, footpaths and traffic.” Once again, this replicated the results of earlier surveys.

Rural satisfaction scores are generally lower than those experienced by urban and city councils. Generally, rural councils have a lower rate base and proportionally more road assets to maintain and the lower satisfaction levels reflect a lack of community appreciation of the difference across municipality types in the standard of service that can be provided.

Interestingly, at the cusp of significant media interest and general communication about the water and sewerage reforms, respondents ranked water and sewerage as the area of most importance, the second highest area of satisfaction and only the sixth highest area in terms of need for improvement. It is likely this is a reactionary response to the State Government’s reform agenda but it does at least suggest that councils have been good custodians of water and sewerage services, and supports the decision to enter into a Local Government owned regional model for the future.

Planning and development, while not considered the most important area of council service, was the area that respondents were most dissatisfied with and was designated second in terms of need for improvement. The high levels of activity and interest related to the State Government’s planning reform agenda may have also influenced feedback on this area. Regardless, it is anticipated that projects like the regional planning initiative and the electronic development assessment (eDA) program will lead to improved satisfaction levels over time.

The findings of the Community Satisfaction Survey are available on the LGAT website at www.lgat.tas.gov.au.

Roads Forum

The area designated as most in need of improvement in this year’s Community Satisfaction Survey was “roads and footpaths” which is consistent with 2006. In April this year, LGAT hosted a road forum with the aim of canvassing an array of issues impacting the local road network and its interface with the remainder of the state’s transport networks.

The forum was held in April, with 17 councils participating. In welcoming the Minister for Infrastructure, Graeme Sturges, LGAT President, Mike Gaffney acknowledged that the involvement of the State Government is instrumental to any change in the status quo. He also stressed the need for both spheres of government to work together to improve Tasmanian’s experience of our roads.

Opening the forum, Minister Sturges said that transport infrastructure represented a significant cost to the state and, for this reason, it must be planned for the long-term and directed towards strategic policy objectives to ensure best value for the taxpayer and ratepayer dollar. However, he expressed confidence that the continuing co-operation by government at all levels would help the state realise shared goals. Participants heard from a number of interstate and local presenters on a range of topics including different jurisdictional models of State/Local Government partnership. There was plenty of opportunity for engagement with both a panel discussion and break-out discussion groups.

Key priorities that were identified included:

- Establishing Regional Road Groups to address priorities and consistency in transport planning; to identify roads of regional significance including urban/rural highways; and to learn from the QLD and WA models;
- Reviewing the heavy vehicle distribution formula to reflect use/routes/weights;
- Joint capacity building in relation to strategic asset management including capture of up-to-date reliable data;
- Sharing resources and experiences in a full partnership with DIER e.g. maintenance contracts and delivery by Local Government;
- Achieving consistency in classification of roads; and
- Pursuing cooperative arrangements between councils and the State Government regarding issues such as maintenance.

The forum not only provided a valuable opportunity to learn about Local Government transport issues and associated financing issues nationally, and the direction being taken in other state jurisdictions, but also provided opportunity for participants from both spheres of government to work collaboratively to find solutions to common problems, and pool ideas and resources to improve the management of road networks in the state.

The Association will continue to work with DIER to progress the ideas arising from the forum.

Becoming a Councillor

Polling for Tasmanian councils will take place between 13 and 27 October. During May, the Association held forums in Burnie, Launceston and Hobart for prospective candidates and, earlier this year, launched a new guide for candidates called Becoming a Councillor. The guide has been prepared to assist those considering standing as candidates to understand the purpose of Local Government, what is expected of a councillor, and the process for getting elected to council.

This resource is in addition to the Councillor Resource Kit developed in 2007 for newly elected members. This resource is available on our website. There is also a range of information available on the Tasmanian Electoral Commission website at www.electoral.tas.gov.au. Nominations close on 28 September 2009.

This year, LGAT has also been working with the Local Government Division and the Australian Local Government Women’s Association to support the entry of more women into Local Government. Women constitute 52% of the Tasmanian population, but account for less than 25% of councillors. It is important that elected members are able to represent a diverse community. Two members of LGAT’s General Management Committee, Mayors Deirdre Flint and Lynn Laycock agreed to champion the women in Local Government campaign, auspiced by the Premier’s Local Government Council.
Local Government Plays Key Role in Pandemic Response

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DELAY, CONTAIN, PROTECT. The simplicity of the words conceals the complex and coordinated harmony of action that occurred within our communities in responding so far to the Influenza H1N1 09 pandemic. But the journey isn’t over yet.

Councils have an ongoing role to maintain and further develop Flu Clinic plans in local areas, and to help deliver public health messages designed to contain the spread of the virus within Tasmanian communities – especially among those most at risk of severe illness.

The readiness of Local Government, the State Emergency Service, local business and the wider community was vital in meeting the challenges posed by the pandemic, and results had been good so far. When this new virus was first detected, effort was put into delaying arrival of the virus here and containing it when it did arrive. This was important. It bought us time to learn more about the virus and the illness it causes and further our pandemic-preparedness. It also took us weeks closer to having vaccine available.

When the virus did arrive here, volunteers and staff from all levels of government worked hard to minimise the initial impact, while the general community heeded public health advice. Together, we succeeded in delaying community transmission of the virus in Tasmania for a number of weeks.

Now, the number of people in Tasmania who have H1N1 Influenza is increasing. Thankfully, we now know the vast majority of people infected have a relatively mild illness which can be managed at home with medications like paracetamol, without needing to see a doctor. But for some people, including pregnant women and people with asthma, the illness can be severe, leading to hospitalization and possibly death. The current focus is on protecting those who may be at risk of severe illness while we wait for vaccine to become available.

Those considered most at risk include:

- Pregnant women;
- Children under 5 years of age;
- People with chronic respiratory (breathing) conditions like asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease;
- People who are very obese;
- Indigenous people of any age;
- People with other chronic conditions, including heart disease, diabetes mellitus, metabolic diseases, kidney or liver disease, haemoglobinopathies, immune system suppression (for example due to cancer treatment, HIV/AIDS or medication), or chronic neurological conditions;
- Smokers; and
- People with obstructive sleep apnoea

Since the H1N1 influenza 09 virus was detected in Tasmania, councils statewide have stepped up to the challenges posed in protecting local communities and facilitating provision of medical assistance to those in need. A number of councils have an ongoing role in the established Flu Clinics, while all councils are integrally involved in ongoing planning for escalation of local flu responses, primarily through Flu Clinics. Many Tasmanian councils are also reviewing their business continuity plans to ensure that important daily council business continues, even if there are higher than normal rates of workplace absenteeism.

In 2008, all Tasmanian councils were provided with Human Pandemic Influenza Business Continuity Guidelines, developed by the Local Government Association of Tasmania. These guidelines are designed to assist councils to approach their business continuity planning in a structured way, including risk identification, analysis, evaluation and treatment strategies.

Councils are faced with the challenge of reviewing business continuity plans while also being integrally involved in Flu Clinic management, planning and preparedness, and continuing to provide day-to-day services. The response so far is a credit to all involved, and will go a long way to ensuring appropriate pandemic responses for local communities.

For more information about the pandemic response in Tasmania, visit www.pandemic.tas.gov.au.