



A Special Culture in Small Councils.

Adam Wilson is the Deputy General Manager at Central Highlands Council and he has worked with Brighton, City of Hobart, Break O’Day, Flinders, Northern Midlands, Southern Midlands, Sorell, Tasman and Glamorgan Spring Bay Councils. He was invited to reflect on if there were any particular strengths and opportunities in the way smaller councils do business. A small rate base, small population, limited local services, the need for council officers to take on multiple tasks, and numerous separated small towns are typical features for many Tasmanian Councils. Adam talked about the ways these realities influence the culture of decision making in ways that make them valuable strengths.

High levels of trust and collaboration between Councillors and council staff are essential to the way they work together. Adam noted that “everyone has to get involved in the day to day work on important issues.” This was a strong theme in Adam’s observations, coming as they did not long after the most recent fire emergency in the Central Highlands and at a time when the region faced the loss of a General Practitioner (GP). The Councillors and staff were out on the roads during the emergency checking on residents and helping the efforts of residents to support each other. When it looked like the region would be without a GP the Mayor and the General Manager took on the challenge of finding one. In small communities such as the Central Highlands, keeping a GP is a shared responsibility, including making sure that a good fire wood supply is part of the local support.

“We don’t have to jump through as many hoops as larger councils to get things done. We can quickly make decisions.”

Adam says that small councils are “lucky enough to be small enough” that decisions can be made quickly. The processes he described involve a lot more than luck of course. Central to that process is the role of facilitator between community members and Councillors. This facilitation requires a clear understanding of council officers’ role, informed by respect for the Councillors’ connections with their community. Adam described the role as “facilitating suggestions from the community to the Council. I describe the avenue of how to get it to Council and putting suggestions in the format required for Councillors to make a decision”. He added that “Councillors really are the community, they are the community spokespeople, that’s what they’ve been elected for.” He also noted that:

“all the Councils I’ve worked for have been quite switched on. They understand what should be a priority in their community, much more than I would be able to do. Councillors understand what the community is going through in ways that officers can’t see. They understand hardship in the community and this is a way they can play their role.”

This faith in elected member wisdom is particularly important in smaller councils. Detailed written strategic and operational plans are often not their resourcing priorities and technical expertise may not be as available as it is in large councils. That can mean that the Councillors are more involved in deciding priorities on behalf of their communities. That decision making can often include discussion

about how to best manage the budget and what opportunities there may be to get money from other sources.

The small rate base means that attracting grant funding is very important to smaller councils and the Elected Members are often involved in strategic thinking about what projects to support with what funding. That can involve pragmatic decisions about trialling a project and then making judgements about the capacity to continue it, and that depends on judgements about its value to the community, finding new money, and contributing council resources. Again, Councillor knowledge of their community's history and needs are vital ingredients in the practical decision making. This adaptive and flexible approach based on continual review of community needs is part of what can make small council decision making and leadership special.

The immediacy of local community member contact with both officers and Councillors is a driver of this responsive and adaptive approach. As Adam noted, "the Councillors are out in the community and so are council officers." Rather than interest groups representing community views, the individuals themselves have their say.

This ability to work directly with the individuals in the community and to develop shared understanding about what they agree and disagree about is foundational to some of what Adam values most about the ways that the council works. That foundation includes collectively determining what is a "common sense" in the community. That common sense involves a belief that contributing to the community, looking after others, and being looked after is an accepted part of the culture of what it means to be a community.

That belief seems to be represented in actions that lead to both social and economic benefits. Projects such as fencing the showground can just get done. Some folks decide it's a good idea and can supply the materials if the Council can help with some equipment and organisation. The fence gets properly built as a community/ council partnership. Council and community members agree on the value of a local vegetable garden. The Council provides some land, some materials and a modest budget and community members take it over and run it. "You can spread a little bit of money around in small communities to make a big difference," Adam said. "People can see the difference it's making."

Council officers and Councillors have a deep understanding of their communities and this informs how they go about deciding rates and charges. Adam observed that rates are "struck in the context of what people can or will contribute in other ways." His experience is that rates that are set too high limit the ability or the willingness of people to contribute in other ways – the fence posts for example! Volunteering can also be difficult if people are not as keen or if they need to do extra work to pay the rates bill. "Volunteering goes down if cost pressures are up" Adam noted. Circulation of money in the immediate community also influences decisions about rates and charges. The local shops are very important part of the community, as was demonstrated during the fires. Local folks need to spend money in them to make sure they stay and the Council has a direct impact on that. Adam summarised his understanding this way.

In my past I've wanted to put rates up but I realized that people have their own way of contributing. I learned to ask myself how the council can best play a part in the community. The Council could be better off financially because people have the capacity to pay and an increase could be justified. But, you need to leave enough so people can contribute themselves to the community.

In Adam's experience across a variety of small councils they do.