

# LogoNet

fresh thinking about the future of local government and governance

## Notes from Brisbane Round Table on Place-Based Governance and Local Democracy, 8 February 2018

### Present:

John Abbott, Abbott Planning  
Matt Bradbury, McCullough Robertson Lawyers  
Brett de Chastel, Noosa Shire  
Andrew Chesterman, Redland City  
Greg Hoffman, Grassroots Connection consulting  
Gary Kellar, Ipswich City (Convener)  
Scott Smith, Council of Mayors – South East Queensland  
Graham Sansom, LogoNet  
Graham Webb, Reinforcements Management Consulting

**Apologies were received from:** Denise Conroy, QUT; Alastair Dawson, Central Queensland University; Greg Hallam, LGAQ; Peta Irvine, LGMA Queensland; Steve Johnston, Bundaberg City; John Martin, Latrobe University; John Oberhardt, Redland City; Cllr Judy Peters, Bundaberg City; Darren Power, Logan City; David Solomon, former Integrity Commissioner

### Introductions

Gary Kellar opened the Roundtable. He began by introducing and thanking Matt Bradbury, Partner, McCullough Robertson Lawyers, who had generously agreed to host the meeting in their boardroom and to provide both refreshments and dinner for participants.

Matt Bradbury welcomed the Roundtable guests and provided an outline of the firm's history and wide range of clients in across Queensland local government. He also mentioned the firm's recent expansion into NSW, expressed his interest in the issues being raised by the LogoNet dialogue, and offered support for similar events into the future.

### Background to LogoNet Dialogue

Graham Sansom provided an introduction to LogoNet and the genesis of its national Dialogue on place-based governance and local democracy. He described LogoNet as an informal national network of individuals seeking a fresh look at local government and community governance. – a 'ginger group' to promote new thinking on the part of the many existing associations and institutes across the local government sector. The genesis of the Dialogue can be seen in terms of:

- A sense that local government generally is not fulfilling its potential to lead and coordinate at local and regional levels.
- An opportunity to restore lost trust in government, starting from the ground up.
- A growing need to deliver services through partnerships with other organisations and the community.

These themes are evident in the LG Professionals 2016 paper on [A Federation of Communities and Places](#) and [the Declaration](#) of the 2017 Future of Local Government Summit. Graham went on to identify examples of the practice of community-based governance in New Zealand, Britain and Canada. He concluded by suggesting that the challenge for Australian local government is to articulate a model of 'localism' that can deliver better outcomes for communities and places within Australia's federal system.

## Comments by Greg Hoffman

Gary Kellar invited Greg Hoffman, who has held a range of senior positions in Queensland local government, to give his thoughts on some of the key issues for discussion.

Greg commented on the 2007 Queensland amalgamations. He suggested they had to happen, but the question now is: how do the larger councils use the capacity they achieved whilst also maintaining local engagement and identity?

Greg also referred to the latest LGAQ survey of community expectations and satisfaction with council performance. He noted that 88% of survey respondents had not contacted a councillor, and that the biggest gap between the importance attached to a council function and the level of satisfaction achieved related to engagement, including consultation and responsiveness. Graham Sansom noted similar findings in research conducted in 2012-13 for the Independent Local Government Review Panel in NSW.

For those councils in the spotlight on these matters such findings raise questions about their values and what they really stand for as local governments. Is there a gulf between what they say and what they do? If you ask councils and councillors about their priorities, how highly would they rate community engagement and delivering on the outcomes communities value most. Do they really understand people's priorities? Populist rhetoric and promoting 'quick fixes' may get people elected, but trust evaporates when promises can't be delivered.

## Discussion

The roundtable themes generated an active and robust discussion. Key points were as follows.

- Declining trust in government and the need to strengthen local government's reputation in the community are fundamental issues that must be addressed. Without community belief and engagement in its work, local government will struggle. Councils must give voice to people who feel strongly about issues.
- Both Redland and Noosa have been seeking to enhance community engagement through panels and citizen juries – but again "you can't do any of this if you are not trusted... if people don't trust those doing the engagement they won't engage... There must be a genuine attempt to engage and not to present preconceived outcomes."
- In a similar vein, it was noted that the regional Council of Mayors of South East Queensland Council could provide even greater leadership through enhanced trust and coordination between the members.
- Noosa's experience suggests that local people want to actually **decide** what will happen to their area, and to secure community confidence councillors need to be willing to abide by the outcomes of mechanisms such as citizen juries. Councils have to be able to say, "whatever you come up with we will implement."
- Councils need to offer **stable local governance to secure community trust**. This has been Brisbane City's big success – a sense of continuity and reliability in the processes of decision-

making and implementation. In the case of Brisbane, it could be argued that stability has been achieved through a series of directly-elected, executive Lord Mayors with a mandate to pursue the projects and priorities they took to the election.

- In addition, Brisbane City's scale and capacity has enabled regular and extensive provision of information to the community on council's activities, excellent customer service systems, and high-quality project-focused community engagement. To date, Brisbane's 'package' appears to have satisfied majority community expectations around participation, democracy and accountability.
- Queensland's de-amalgamations showed that people are **willing to pay** for effective local democracy and control. Some communities did not want economic rationalism but rather localism – a voice and identity of their own.
- Fostering or maintaining that sense of local identity is important, regardless of whether the local government area is large or small. LGAs that are very large and/or diverse (in terms of population or area) need the capacity to engage with communities in a meaningful way within their local places.
- This again highlights the importance of mayors, councillors and senior managers really understanding and reflecting what communities want: does their political and personal behaviour demonstrate understanding and responsiveness, or self-interest and internal divisions?
- Mayors in particular face the challenge of managing inevitable differences of opinion within the elected council, whilst reaching out to a wide range of stakeholders and championing community priorities. Their success is crucial to local government's reputation and standing.
- Improving the knowledge and skills of its political leaders thus becomes crucial to local government's future. Are elected members disposed to a more collaborative mindset? Do they know how to engage with the community and provide leadership in this new era of communication and social media?
- Consideration needs to be given to electoral systems, especially now that councillors are well paid, control very considerable resources and are able to distribute significant benefits to communities.
- Do perspectives on decision-making and outcomes for local places and communities vary depending on whether councillors are elected at large across the local government area or from individual divisions (wards)?
- Further consideration needs to be given to how these issues play out in different types of local governments – smaller rural councils and Indigenous communities in particular.

The Roundtable concluded with a general appreciation of the opportunity to discuss these matters and a willingness on the part of participants to convene at a future date to continue the dialogue.

Graham Sansom thanked participants for their involvement and encouraged them to contribute further to the discussion by accessing the [LogoNet website](#) and forwarding information, ideas and resource material they thought appropriate for posting to [admin@logonet.org.au](mailto:admin@logonet.org.au). Contributions can also be forwarded to [Gary Kellar](#) or [Graham](#).

***LogoNet expresses sincere thanks to Matt Bradbury, Troy Webb and Kate Chaundy of [McCullough Robertson Lawyers](#) for their considerable assistance in arranging and hosting the Roundtable and offer of ongoing support for the Dialogue.***