# How can local governments improve trust and openness in their relationships with the community?

***By Alex Gooding and Alison Dalziel***

## 1    INTRODUCTION

The Future of Local Government Declaration sees local government as reinvigorating faith in democracy and citizenship, and facilitating new forms of community-centred, bottom-up governance that inspire confidence and active participation. Many of the discussions initiated by LogoNet around Australia have highlighted trust and openness between local governments and their communities as key ingredients.

LogoNet has initiated a national conversation around the most critical issues affecting local communities and local government, which aims to stimulate fresh thinking on effective place-based governance and local democracy. As part of this Dialogue, LogoNet has invited those who are at the "frontline" – working in and with local governments and communities –to contribute their thoughts on a series of questions.

The first question in the From the Frontline series was "how can local governments improve trust and openness in their relationships with the community?" This short paper has been produced by mind mapping and synthesising the contributions received (see a breakdown of contributors in the appendix). The summary that follows doesn't include every point raised but highlights the key themes.

## 2    THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE WAY FORWARD

### 2.1    The Good

The following factors emerged as the foundations of a relationship characterised by mutual trust:

- Transparent and accessible information.
- Two-way, open communication. Some respondents highlighted the positive impact of social media use by elected members when it is done well.
- Community empowerment and real engagement.
- Visible alignment of Council priorities with those of the community.
- Mutual respect and teamwork around the Council table.

### 2.2    The Bad

The following factors emerged most strongly as ways that trust can be undermined:

- Communication that is or sounds like "spin".
- The tokenistic nature of some consultation and engagement processes, which fail to acknowledge the capacity and the diversity of local communities.
- Gaps between Council and community priorities, especially when the former are perceived to benefit Councils and Councillors.
- Increasing distance between Councillors and their constituents, resulting from amalgamations, population growth and the growing distractions of modern technology.

- Complex governance processes, which at times are hidden from the public due to legislation or commercial arrangements, and in some cases their apparent politicisation.
- The perception of some in the community that local governments are inefficient, provide poor value for money, and sometimes over-deliver without regard to what the community can afford.
- An associated perception that in some cases councils are corrupt, a perception exacerbated by probity transgressions and the recent substantial decline in the levels of community trust in all levels of government.
- The politicised and sometimes extreme nature of public and media criticism which has a deterrent effect on open governance and honesty about issues such as budget overruns.

## 2.3 The Way Forward

A wide range of proposals for action were provided in direct response to the question. These are discussed below under five themes: communication, transparency, engagement, devolution of power, and service delivery and regulation.

### 2.3.1 Communication

Three core sets of ideas emerged to improve communication as part of building trust between Councils and communities:

- Councillors need to be fully informed and engaged, communicating well together with mutual respect and trust themselves. Without this, respondents found it hard to see how a relationship of mutual trust can be formed with the community. This means that Councillors (all Councillors, not just the President or Mayor), need to be included in internal Council information flows.
- There was an emphasis on regular, honest, two-way information flows with the community about Council activities and more specifically how Councils are progressing community priorities. As one response noted, community members would then be able to "choose to become involved where appropriate and in a constructive manner with confidence that they have all of the relevant information".
- Communities need a better understanding of the roles and functions of Councils, how they operate and the services they provide. Some believed that Councils should present more accessible information to the community on the services they currently provide and the costs of these services, as well as Council infrastructure plans and budget estimates as a basis for ongoing reporting. Whilst there are obligations on all Australian local governments to do this, some respondents felt these fall well short of the level of communication required.

### 2.3.2 Transparency

There was strong support for complete disclosure and transparency with local communities, though there was acknowledgement that this needed continuous organisation-wide commitment and was sometimes hard to achieve. Practical measures included:

- Strengthening accountability both of Councillors and staff.
- Reducing the number of closed Council meetings.
- Admitting to mistakes.
- Using tools to objectively measure the transparency of local government, the level of trust of residents, and the community's perception of how the Council is performing.

- Providing an independent complaints process.

### 2.3.3 Engagement

Several responses raised the need to build strong two-way partnerships with the community, based on clear expectations:

- Councils need to recognise that communities are localised, diverse and sometimes have a range of different values and priorities. This means that engagement processes must be inclusive, meaningful and be able to deal with potential conflicts. Several approaches were proposed to deal with this, ranging from making better use of current information technology to bringing together all parties to negotiate on specific issues and/or to meet on a regular basis.
- Councils should share more information with communities about strategic decisions, options and costs, and facilitate community input to these decisions. Associated with this was the recognition that Councils must fully commit to resourcing and implementing any decisions made in partnership with the community and to monitoring and reporting on the outcomes.

### 2.3.4 Devolution of power

Several responses went further in proposing the devolution and sharing of power with the community. Some did not offer any specific processes to achieve to achieve this outcome while others suggested proposals for advisory panels, reference groups and community boards. One suggestion noted that this option would require changes to political and organisational culture and that all parties involved would need capacity-building around shared leadership and decision-making. Some proposed a stronger focus on outcomes and in particular the role of Councils as facilitating community-building for an empowered community.

### 2.3.5 Service delivery and regulation

A small number of responses were grouped under the theme "determine limits of and improve service delivery". These included calls for a review and potential simplification of the regulatory framework Councils work under; conversely another response called for better and stronger regulation, with the example given of seeking better outcomes from developers in relation to the provision of public space and affordable housing.

## 3   CONCLUSION

The first LogoNet From the Frontline question produced a strong response, both in terms of the number and quality of contributions. This short article attempts to provide a useful summary and synthesis.

The great majority of the proposed actions in these contributions fell into the themes of communication, transparency, engagement, devolution of power, and service delivery and regulation.  They provide a timely reminder that many of the solutions to the question of how to improve trust and openness in the relationship between Local Government and the community lie in Councils demonstrating all the basic elements of good governance. These include Councils committing to full transparency, engaging with their communities on the basis of mutual honesty and respect and fully implementing any decisions made in consultation with their residents.

*We would like to thank everyone who contributed a response for making the first question in the LogoNet From the Frontline series such a success.*

## APPENDIX: BREAKDOWN OF CONTRIBUTORS

TOTAL = 27

ROLE

| | |
|---|---|
| Local Government Administration | 8 |
| Consultant/Researcher | 8 |
| Local Government Councillor | 5 |
| Community member | 2 |
| Local Government Association | 2 |
| Unstated | 2 |

LOCATION

| | |
|---|---|
| New South Wales | 7 |
| Western Australia | 6 |
| South Australia | 4 |
| Queensland | 3 |
| Victoria | 3 |
| Tasmania | 1 |
| New Zealand | 1 |
| Unstated | 2 |

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