

# Reformation and Regeneration

## Drawing on the Interstate Experience

Western Australia is the last State to undergo a Local Government reform process. To help ensure that any change is sustainable, WALGA recently hosted a forum for key individuals and groups to learn from the reform experience in other States.

WALGA Chief Executive Officer Ricky Burges said the forum was aimed at those who are working with the Local Government Minister on the reform process as part of the various boards and committees.

Attended by about 50 key individuals, the forum brought together government, opposition, industry and sector representatives to help foster a cooperative approach to reform in WA.

"I believe everyone recognises there is urgent and pressing need for structural reform in Local Government," Ms Burges said.

"But to help ensure that any change is sustainable we should try to learn from previous Local Government reform processes."

The forum provided a number of key insights that were consistent between the reform process in different States in particular the need for all parties to work together; the need to communicate and support staff in the process; and for a clear process to be established.

Following are excerpts from two of the key speakers at the forum – Ian Dixon who led the reform process in South Australia and Gregory Hoffman from the Queensland Local Government Association.

## Lessons from South Australia

### From 118 to 69 Local Governments

**Local Government reform in South Australia that reduced the number of Councils from 118 to 69 was completed more than a decade ago. The process in that State was delivered by an independent board headed up by IAN DIXON. Following is part of his address to the Forum.**

In just over 12 months we received 34 proposals involving more than 81 Councils and reduced the number of Councils from 118 to 69 and there were significant projected cost savings and one off savings. We had about 78% of the Councils participated in the process and overall while many people may not have been happy with the outcome but many actually applauded the process, the fact that we managed to be independent, be consistent and acted with integrity in the whole process.

#### Key Success Factors

The Philosophy: Providing the right amount of stimulus and support. Obviously the Government did not want to go the draconian route of Victoria so it backed off but when we came in. We still had to provide that stimulus. We still had to say look if you guys don't do something well someone is going to do something at some stage but then to try to do something quickly we had to provide

as much support as we could though facilitators, guidelines and other support so that people could actually do the job and do it as easily as they could.

**Communication:** Clear and consistent messages and early and direct contact with people. You can do a lot with print media and my personal view is that we are beginning to move now to a more email age. (But) I think getting out of the office from my point of view and visiting all of the communities to me felt right and was probably the best decision I made in that time. Of course we have guidelines and we employed a PR agency and all of those techniques which worked really well.

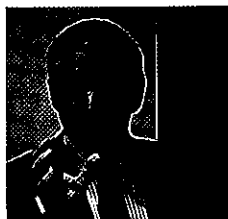
**Relationships:** There was a focus on relationships, building and maintaining relationships from the first days of engaging with the Local Government Association, doing it together as a team. It was not about us or them it was about all of us working together. When we would go and talk to a community, it wouldn't just be me. We would have representatives of the LGA and Ministers and Members of Parliament. So we tried to provide a balanced view to the community facilitated by an independent statutory body that did remove the process from a political environment. A number of politicians actually went to a number of the community meetings and looked to make

comments and they weren't very well received by the community often. A lot of local members and the Government didn't know if they needed to be in the process or put of the process.

**Teamwork:** Strong emphasis on teamwork, sharing the learning, not coming in with "I've got all the answers" but working together.

**Timing:** Trying to create that sense of urgency, keeping the momentum going. There was an inevitability that reform was going to happen so let's try to get the best possible result that we can.

As far as key messages (for WA Councils) I'd put down in these six points: It is all about people, it is about communication, its about relationships, shared ownership right throughout and working together and most importantly letting go of the past and creating the future. We did encourage Councils to celebrate the past. As in any change process, celebrate that but let go and move forward and create a new future.



Ian Dixon speaking at the recent Reformation and Regeneration forum