

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT HEALTH PROMOTION AND PREVENTATIVE  
HEALTH A PARTNERSHIP WORTH HAVING  
ALGA PRESIDENT SPEECH TO THE AUSTRALIAN HEALTH  
PROMOTION ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE 2010**

**Introduction**

Good afternoon everyone.

Let me begin acknowledging the Bun-er-ong people, the traditional owners of this land. I believe it is particularly fitting at a conference such as this, that we acknowledge our indigenous people who have a long and proud tradition of medicinal and health expertise.

I'm here to highlight the role that councils play today in health promotion and preventative health – and – more importantly – the role they might play in the future.

Now, I'm conscious that many of you are from local government or otherwise interact with your colleagues in local government on a regular basis. You will know much more than I ever will about local government's current role in health promotion and the opportunities for the future. Please forgive my ignorance and please overlook my shortcomings.

Given that modern local government is spread across such a diverse array of service areas, I'm always a little cautious when speaking at conferences such as these – full of the best and brightest in a given field – because as a councillor in the city of Monash or as president of ALGA, I only get to see a tiny fragment of the great work which councils do on a daily basis in service areas such as these.

For those of you who are not from local government and who do not encounter it in your professional lives, I bet it is something on which you still have an opinion. Pretty much everyone has a view on local government.

Perhaps it's based upon Bob Jelly from *Seachange*, Col Dunkley from *Grassroots* or the larger than life councillors who featured in that infamous documentary – *Rats in the Ranks*.

But I really hope that you will soon have some direct professional dealings with local government – because local government is increasingly everywhere it seems and community health is a good case in point.

Local government has always been the roads, the footpaths, the drains, the street trees, the parks and gardens, the local golf course, the public swimming pool. But in the past 50 years or so, it has popped up in many more places.

It is now typically also a provider of early childhood services, kindergartens, immunisations, aged care, libraries, art galleries, family counselling and, of course, community health, preventative health and health promotion.

It is still the authority that predominately determines the look, the feel and development of our neighbourhoods and usually it's at the heart of regional economic development and tourism strategies.

If we were to list all of the things done by councils, we would come up with a list of more than 150, although no two councils would be exactly the same.

Today, I plan to cover three things:

1. I want to give you a better appreciation of what local government in Australia in 2010 is all about, and how it has evolved in recent times;
2. I want to give you an idea of some of our key contemporary challenges – and in particular, our funding limitations which unfortunately does affect our ability to do more in areas such as health;

3. And I want cover just some of the ways in which councils are making a difference on the ground in communities in the areas of health promotion and preventative health.

I hope by the end of my presentation, you will be convinced, if you weren't already, that the role of Australia's local councils in health promotion and preventative health is one worth investing in, and that one of the best ways to do that is through the development and furthering of strong partnerships.

## **ALGA**

But before I get to any of that, let me give you some background about where I'm from. Local government has been represented at the national level since 1947 when the Australian Local Government Association – or ALGA – was formed in recognition of local government's increasing relevance in national issues. Today it remains the national peak body for local government, representing the interests of the 565 councils across Australia.

ALGA is a federation of state and territory local government associations and the ACT Government. (This reflects the unique situation of the ACT Government which undertakes a combination of state and local government functions).

As ALGA's president, I represent local government on the Council of Australian Governments – COAG – and on 13 ministerial councils. And this provides local government with unique access to key federal and state decision makers.

List any of the Rudd Government's priorities at the moment – from tax reform to the roll out of the National Broadband Network – and it's pretty much pointless beginning a conversation about them that doesn't include local government.

Local government has a key role to play in many national policy areas, and without our engagement, effective reform or rollout in any of these areas will be difficult to achieve.

In a country like Australia with our three levels of government, vast geographic areas and centralised taxation system, it is essential that all levels of government work effectively together.

Indeed, there are very few policy issues facing Australia which can be solved solely at one level of government. Issues like our ageing population, obesity and the expansion of preventative health care are good examples of where there must be meaningful buy-in from all three levels of government.

Indeed, if we rewind the clock back to 1950, and I mentioned any of these issues and local government in the same breath you would wonder what on earth I was talking about. Because the past 50 years has seen an explosion in the size, scope and role of local government.

### **Evolution of local government**

Whereas once all councils did was pretty much manage and build physical local infrastructure – the roads, drains and rubbish collection, today – as I've already said – local government is typically delivering

more than 150 services across a huge spectrum of people services.  
Council services play a big part in just about every person's daily life.

However, when we talk about local government, we are talking about a range of sizes – such as the City of Brisbane – with a population of more than 1 million people and a budget rivalling the State of Tasmania, while on the other hand – councils like West Pilbara in WA – which is the geographic land size of Japan but a population of not much more than the number of people in this room.

But regardless of size, local government is there quietly working away, around the corner, at the local park, the local swimming pool, the regional art gallery. If you or someone you know has a baby, it is typically the council which provides the first form of government support in that new baby's life prior to school – first through maternal and child health services and then through kindergarten and preschool.

For our elderly parents or grandparents, councils provide the sort of care and assistance that allows them to remain in their home for longer.

Hundreds of thousands of books are borrowed week in week out from public libraries run by councils.

This grassroots entrenchment is our point of difference from state and federal government – neither of which have anything like our imbedded presence in just about every single community across Australia. Nowhere is this more obvious but in community health services.

Now, I'm not suggesting we do it all perfectly – we certainly don't.

But local government has always been there in Australia – right in the thick of it where people live – and it always will be.

And most importantly, it offers locally tailored services and amenities.

Of course, one of the most significant and growing challenges for our nation is health:

- how to promote and encourage it;

- how to minimise the risk of disease and reduce its prevalence; and
- how to co-ordinate the many branches and components of our health system to ensure efficient and effective health system delivery.

Promoting healthier local and regional communities in every sense is something councils embed in their day-to-day business as a matter of course. The logic of promoting a system built on 'wellness' is something that very much makes sense to our sector.

Indeed, councils are fostering 'wellness' principles everyday, through:

- the design of the local built environment;
- the delivery of well-maintained local and community infrastructure like footpaths on which to walk or run and bike paths to ride our bikes;
- the provision of well-lit community spaces and places; and
- the running of physical health programs at our swimming pools or community halls.

Local government understands that investing in (and promoting) better health outcomes for our local communities will save tomorrow's taxpayers a significantly larger health bill.

As we progress further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the link between:

- health;
- recreation and leisure;
- housing; and
- the design of our built environment,

is becoming clearer.

Because councils get this, local government has always been open to the formation of partnerships with the various other stakeholders who are also working hard in this area.

## **Funding**

However, at this point I need to sound a cautionary note. While local government would like to do much more in this area, we are constrained by outdated funding structures set up three centuries ago.

Not everyone knows it, but local government has existed in Australia since 1840 (that is, prior to the establishment of some state governments and certainly the federal government).

In its early years:

- it was the local government sector that built and established roads for the newly formed colonies, including rural roads;
- it was local government that established wharves and jetties and the means to cross rivers;
- it was local government that provided community public buildings, and parks and gardens; and
- it was also local government that delivered gas and electricity and in some areas also water and water sewerage services (which still remains the case today in Queensland and parts of rural New South Wales).

When local government were first established, the broadly held assumption was that councils would predominantly deliver “property-

based services”: maintenance and building of local roads; provision of public amenities; and collection and disposal of rubbish. Reflecting this assumption, local authorities were granted a power to levy taxation on property, in the form of property rates – the further assumption being that services would be provided only to the rated properties within a specific municipality.

The provision of social and health services in these early days was not seen as a role for councils. Incidentally, it was also not seen as a role for the colonial governments at that time – with the preference being to leave it for the charities and churches to worry about.

Of course, things are very different today and the services now delivered by councils are very much aimed at people rather than just property.

However, while there’s been this exponential growth in local government roles and responsibilities in response to changing community needs and demands, there’s been no change to the way local government is funded.

Councils are still predominately funded by a property tax – rates – collected in the same way as it was 100 years ago.

There is a compelling case that the way we fund local government today is antiquated and in need of reform and rejuvenation.

While it's still the ratepayer who picks up the tab, the correlation between the people services which councils provide and property is rapidly diminishing

Simply – the tax base has not kept pace with the evolution of the local government system itself.

As services have been switched from the state to the local level – such as in a range of community health care areas, state governments have got the benefit of getting service delivery off their books but local government has had to rely on the same narrow property tax to meet these new costs.

And that's not really fair given that these new people services have little to do with property.

It would be much more equitable to meet these costs by a transfer of general tax revenue – such as income tax – from other levels of government to the local level.

But not only is local government improperly funded but it is inadequately funded too.

At present, local government only receives about 15% of its revenue from general taxation transferred from the other levels of government – predominately from the commonwealth.

Today, local government is a significant player in the national economy, with total public expenditure of \$26 billion a year and a total workforce in 2009 of almost 180,000 people. Indeed, many of those people work in health and health related positions, particularly, here in Victoria, where council delivery of Home and Community Care Services, has led to a

significantly superior level of servicing of HACC recipients compared to HACC recipients in other states which do not have direct council involvement.

However, communities have a right to expect a more solid funding base.

Given the substantial growth in service delivery over the past 50 years, local government is stretched to breaking point in meeting these demands while trying to maintain local infrastructure.

A 2003 parliamentary inquiry demonstrated that the impact of cost shifting by the states onto local government was between \$500 million and \$1.1 billion per year.

That came as no surprise to people involved in local government.

Ultimately all levels of government serve the same common stakeholder who doesn't really care who delivers a service, as long as it's delivered efficiently and effectively.

However, this lack of adequate funding for local government is significantly affecting the sector's ability to meet the demands and needs of local communities.

A recent report by PriceWaterhouseCoopers commissioned by local government concluded that as a result of this substantial growth in services delivered at the local level, the estimated infrastructure backlog across councils was \$14.5 billion which amounts to a funding gap of \$2.2 billion per year.

The report concluded that somewhere between 10 and 30% of the 565 councils across Australia are financially unsustainable.

A similar point was made by the Productivity Commission in its 2008 study into local government own-source revenue raising. It found that the majority of local government spending was no longer exclusively in the areas of 'property-related services and roads' but also in the areas of 'recreation, health and welfare services.'

It is clear that more central government funding is desperately needed if local government is going to be able to meet the broader range of services – particularly the sort of services that you all are involved in promoting and delivering – and which are now expected of the modern council.

I don't mean to appear a bit parochial on this, but I see it as something as relevant to you in the health care industry as it is to those of us in local government. Because today, virtually all functions performed by local government have some direct or indirect impact on the health of the local community. Local government's secure financial sustainability is an objective that is in all of our collective interests.

It is important that partners of local government in health and health-related activities, are conscious of these funding limitations on councils. It helps explain in many instances why local government would like to do more for communities, but simply is unable to because of a lack of financial resources.

## **Role in health**

As you know, the dimensions of this deepening involvement of local government in health services varies considerably from state to state and council to council. Anyone who has worked with or in local government soon learns that no two councils are the same:

- their geographic spread, as I have already pointed out;
- the demographic and socio-economic profile of residents; and
- the needs and desires of residents, are all very different.

To some this is frustrating, but to me it is at the heart of what makes local government special and gives it its competitive advantage over the other two levels of government.

Because of the diversity of the communities which local government serves, it is councils that can play (and inevitably do play) a lead role in identifying the needs of their communities and how best to prioritise them. Local government does this in partnership with the local community, through community consultation, planning and co-ordination.

And this is critical because without effective engagement with the community at the local level, it is very difficult to get communities on board with any new program or initiative.

For example, local government has long seen the health benefits of sport, recreation and leisure facilities. Without the billions of dollars of local government investment into our sporting fields, pavilions and community sporting organisations, community life and national health would be far worse off.

The fundamental purpose of local government at the end of the day is to help create happy and contented communities that work. This can't be realised if they are not fundamentally healthy communities too.

Really, this goal is shared by all of us involved in health promotion, health prevention and wellness.

We all hear keep hearing about how governments need to be doing much more to plan for Australia's ageing population. But there is already much happening at the local level. Through:

- council-supported initiatives like Seniors' Weeks;
- the provision of local libraries including mobile ones to the home;
- the delivery of support services such as assisted community transport (which enables seniors to get to and from appointments, attend family functions, go shopping, visit friends and attend adult learning classes); and
- a range of home and community care services which encourage people to live independently as long as possible,

local government is working very hard to ensure that older Australians are healthy and happy, and feel valued and motivated to participate in their local communities.

In addition, simple health prevention programs run by councils – such as 'falls prevention' classes and Positive Ageing programs (like the ones operating in the City of Salisbury in South Australia) – are helping to

keep older people out of hospital and independent for as long as possible.

At the other end of the spectrum, council-run programs that teach kids and parents about nutrition and the importance of healthy eating are also having an effect. A good example is the 'Stores for Better Health' program run by the Shire of Halls Creek in partnership with aboriginal communities in Western Australia, which aims to increase access to healthy foods, community capacity to prepare healthy meals and increase the nutritional knowledge of people living in their community.

We are also seeing councils now going into new territory and declaring outdoor public spaces smoke free which is something I think we'll hear more about in the coming months and years. Personally, I can't rationalise how it is that smoking in public streets and public places is still legal given the known effects of passive smoke on others – particularly children. I'm pleased it is local government leading the charge on this.

Councils have also been active in tackling obesity. In its 2009 Inquiry into Obesity in Australia report, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing recognised the role of local government in promoting healthy living and stated that it was impressed by a number of initiatives and programs that councils across the country were implementing. These programs work to increase levels of physical activity within the community and reinforce the healthy living messages which governments are sending through social marketing and education campaigns.

## **Partnerships**

I referred earlier to the importance of partnerships. There are examples across the country of effective partnerships including local government in innovative new initiatives aimed at improving community health outcomes.

Of all these partnerships – national, state, regional – bilateral, multi-lateral, intergovernmental and cross sectoral - I'd like to focus on three that provide a sense of how local government is leading the way in health promotion and preventative health.

The Healthy Spaces and Places program is a unique collaboration between ALGA, the National Heart Foundation and the Planning Institute of Australia, which have come together to develop a national planning guide to shape 'Healthy Spaces and Places'. This is all about getting our urban planning systems to focus more on healthy living. Launched in August last year, it spells out why planners and design experts must continue to plan for people and it includes evidence of the links between good built environments and people's overall health and well-being. It is hoped that implementation of the guide will play a role in helping to reduce Australia's worrying and increasing levels of preventable disease.

I won't say much more about it now because I understand that this project will be further detailed by Stephanie Knox from the Planning Institute of Australia in her presentation in one of the sessions tomorrow afternoon. But it deserves special mention because of the way the underlying partnership has brought together professional and other experts in health, local government, planning and design, to encourage the design and creation of healthy built and natural environments to nurture active and vibrant local communities.

## **Healthy Communities**

The Healthy Communities Initiative is a recently-established Australian Government program that aims to reduce the prevalence of obesity by maximising the number of at-risk individuals engaged in accredited physical activity and dietary education programs. It is a program that is run in partnership with many health players in specific Local Government Areas.

Under the pilot phase of the Initiative, a total of \$4.92 million has been awarded to 12 areas to support the delivery of community-based programs which aim to reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity within the community. Particular emphasis has been placed on targeting disadvantaged groups, such as those not in the workforce and at risk of developing lifestyle-related chronic disease. The program is in its infancy but the enthusiasm of the Commonwealth to tap into resident knowledge and experience held by councils, is a positive sign of good things to come.

## **XStrata**

Any finally, a partnership with the private sector: a few years ago, XStrata worked with the local council in Port Macquarie in New South Wales to deliver a much-needed 'all abilities' children's playground which continues to win accolades and national awards.

So, I hope you agree that partnerships are alive and well in local government in this area. Before I finish, let me deal briefly with one of the most important partnerships of all – the one between the three levels of government in this area.

## **COAG**

I'm sure some of you will be wondering whether the new COAG reforms agreed last month will impact on local government.

Everyone will recall the intense COAG meeting which stretched over two days (the first time this has happened), which ultimately reached an historic agreement between state and federal governments on health reform aimed at delivering major improvements in health outcomes while securing better funding into the future.

Although much of the reform agenda agreed upon by COAG is aimed at improving the performance of our public hospital system, which local government is not responsible for delivering or funding, local government was still an active contributor at the meeting. Indeed, COAG acknowledged the various roles played by local governments in primary care and preventative health, and the need to consult with our sector as part of the transition to the new arrangements. In many ways, I see this as a new and encouraging development in the trilateral partnership that is the Australian federation.

## **Conclusion**

In finishing up, let me reiterate that local government has a strong and proud history of partnering with industry, health professionals, and allied health professionals, other levels of government, non-government organisations, the Australian Government, and community-based organisations to help promote and drive the development of healthy and active communities.

These partnerships have been integral to the delivery of better health outcomes for all Australians. Across the country, councils are doing a lot in this area with very limited resources, and a challenge we all face is

how to get state and federal governments to resource these areas better.

With new and innovative funding – possibly through the new COAG initiatives – and with a keen appreciation of the role that can be played by the private sector, but also by individuals, the wider community and other organisations – partnerships at the local and regional level are now more crucial than ever to achieving our health promotion and preventative health goals.

I look forward to the innovations and successes to come.

Thank you.