

Rural-Remote and Indigenous Local Government Program: Capacity Building Survey

The objective of this survey was to explore the issues surrounding capacity building in rural-remote and indigenous councils.

This survey was distributed to the Chief Executive Officers of councils in Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia that have been identified as rural, remote, indigenous. This survey will inform the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) strategy aimed at addressing the capacity needs of small rural-remote and indigenous local governments.

There were 29 responses to the survey with the majority of these being officers from Queensland councils. There are a number of recurring themes that have been expressed through this survey in relation to current issues facing councils, training and professional development and staff attraction and retention. The local governments surveyed are supportive of ACELG in undertaking this survey and have expressed an interest in the development and implementation of strategies to address the issue of capacity building in rural-remote and indigenous councils.

Survey Analysis

The 29 survey respondents were from:

- Queensland: 21
- Western Australia: 5
- Northern Territory: 3

The local governments represented by these respondents are categorised as:

- Rural-Remote (little or no indigenous population) 7
- Rural-Remote with indigenous population (mostly town based) 9
- Rural-Remote with remote indigenous communities 4
- Indigenous 9

The survey asked for the length of time the respondents have been in their current position. The results were:

- Less than 1 year 5
- 1 - 3 years 12
- 4 - 6 years 8
- 7 – 10 years 2
- More than 10 years 2

The result of this question is intrinsically linked to one of the overall recurring themes of the survey which relates to staff attraction and retention, particularly in relation to senior management positions.

Challenges

The greatest challenges over the past three years as identified by CEOs in the local government areas surveyed can be loosely divided into the following categories:

Staff

- Staff recruitment and retention
- Lack of leadership and management skills
- Skill shortages
- Lack of accommodation.

Community

- Managing relationships within local governments/engagement
- Impact of remoteness
- Managing community expectations
- Losing community organisations.

Financial Sustainability

- Financial constraints
- Ability to manage assets and infrastructure
- Balancing service needs with available resources.

Organisational

- Increasing governance and compliance requirements (including constantly changing legislative requirements);
- Service delivery - lack of community recognition and understanding of the costs of providing a larger number of services in rural-remote and Indigenous councils;
- Strategic planning;
- Asset management;
- Lack of recognition (from other tiers of government) of the plethora of operations undertaken by local governments.

Other

- Flood mitigation
- State/Federal relations
- Amalgamation.

The global economic crisis and natural disasters have affected local government operations over recent years and this was clear from the results. **Figure 1** shows the results in terms of frequency of response.

When considering the **current** pressures on CEOs, there was minimal variation from past years with the pressing issues facing local governments now reported as being:

Financial Sustainability

- Financial sustainability
- Audit issues
- Inadequate resourcing and infrastructure (water, roads)
- Balancing service needs with available resources
- Reliance on grants.

Staff

- Staff attraction and retention
- Staff stability and continuity
- Skill shortages (loss of skilled people)
- Trying to increase the number and involvement of Indigenous employees
- Attracting and retaining professional employees.

Organisational

- Instability of government due to upcoming elections
- Increasing compliance issues
- Compliance with legislative framework
- Capacity building.

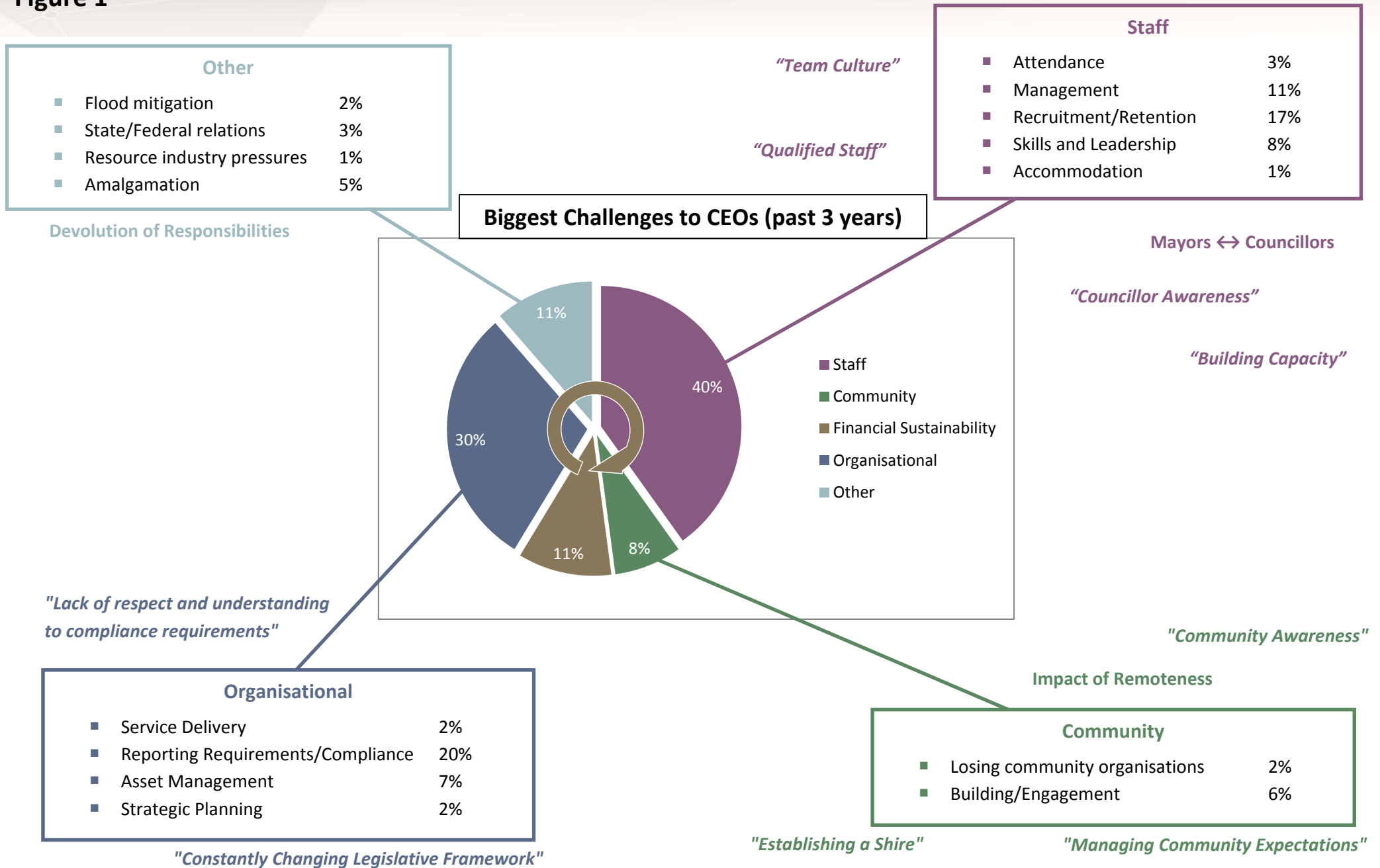
Community

- Managing community expectations
- Losing businesses from the community
- Strategic planning for the future.

Other

- Distance/remoteness
- The need to invest in essential infrastructure and services to attract potential staff to the area (housing, education, health, day care)
- Developing effective communication strategies.

Figure 1



Staff attraction and retention is a recurring theme throughout this survey. An earlier question in relation to the time spent as the CEO has indicated that this is also a position that is subject to frequent change.

Environmental pressures are more pressing currently than they have been over the past three years and financial pressures/concerns have increased in focus. Engagement with the community has reduced as an area of concern suggesting that there is stronger engagement and participation. These results are demonstrated in **Figure 2**.

Personal Challenges of working in remote councils

When asked about the least enjoyable components of being a CEO in rural-remote or indigenous local government, respondents identified these as:

Associated Costs

- Food, fuel, general shopping
- Of doing business (time, travel)
- Trying to stretch an already stretched budget
- Of accessing education and training opportunities
- Of tradespeople travelling to a small community.

Distance

- Impassable roads during wet season
- From family.

Governance

- Attempt to implement government policies not designed for small communities
- Demands placed on local government (seen to be everything to everyone).

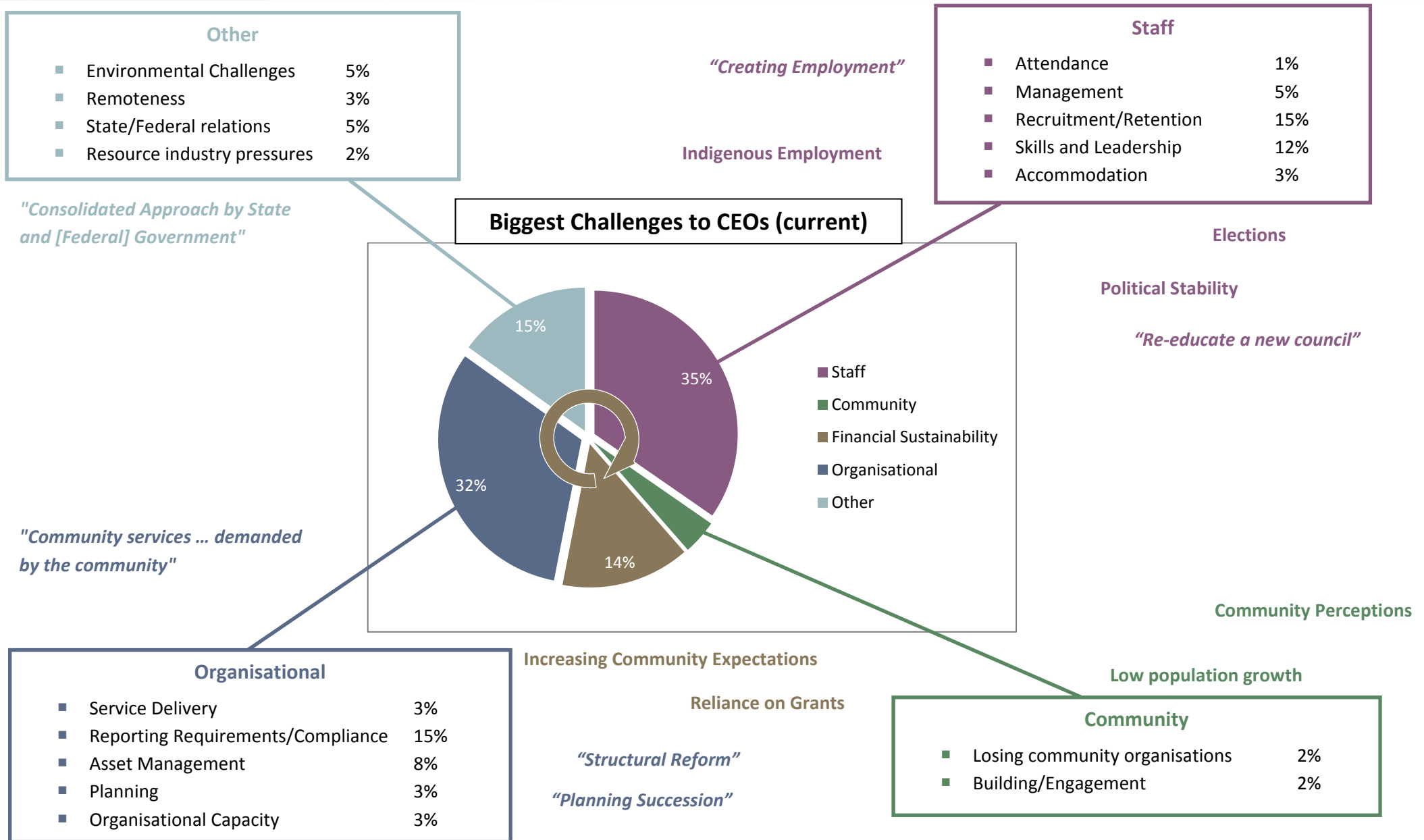
Human resources

- Need to know a little about a lot
- Lack of qualified employees
- Not having access to experienced people to seek advice
- Councillors not understanding/performing roles.

Other

- Long hours (after hours commitments that must be made)
- Limited support
- Mixing of staff politics with local community impacting in the operations of the Council
- Climate
- Lack of facilities and services.

Figure 2



The responses are outlined in terms of their priority (as identified by survey respondents) in the table below.

Issue	Tally	Weighted Tally	Key concepts
Staff Turnover and Management	10	10.0	High stress, small recruitment pool, lack of experience
Lifestyle	10	7.4	Climate, lack of facilities/services, "no social life", everything is work-related
Travel	8	9.5	Poor road networks
Isolation	8	7.9	Absence of professional colleagues, cost of doing business, difficulty of networking
Engaging community (political, elected members)	8	9.0	Local politics (small voting numbers), "Staff taking work politics into the community"
Over-reliance on councils for services	7	7.4	
Long working hours	7	9.5	Lack of qualified staff, "need to know a little about a lot of things"
Dealing with other levels of government	6	6.3	Legislating more requirements, "Who do we answer to?", Task shifting
Resource constraints	6	7.4	Training, human and financial resources
Cost of living	2	2.6	
Close-knit community - difficult to form relationships	2	3.2	
Difficulty in making a difference	2	1.6	
Financial issues	2	1.1	Dependence on other levels of government

Benefits of working in remote councils

Even with the plethora of issues facing Chief Executive Officers in rural-remote and indigenous councils, there are many benefits of being part of these communities. Some of these are:

- Opportunity to have direct input into all operations of local government
- Being Indigenous, it has been about being a real role model and putting back into the community.
- Sense of accomplishment when things go right
- Knowing the community and being a part of it
- Personally knowing the issues you are dealing with
- When the councillors and staff are united, the sky is the limit and because you come from a disadvantaged starting point there is so much that can be achieved
- Relatively high income package
- Variety of tasks and challenges
- Rewarding lifestyle.

CEO Recognition

The survey asked the question of whether there is a need to recognise exceptional CEOs in rural-remote and indigenous councils. 18 respondents (64%) answered positively. Some suggestions as to how this might occur included:

- Through peer recognition
- An LGMA Annual Award at the state and national level
- Public Service Awards
- Roles in professional development forums
- Incremental pay recognition/bursaries
- Wider promotion of existing awards
- Awards Bursaries for professional development
- Promotional Material (i.e. shirts as Qld indigenous councils and western councils have)
- Champion System: direct link between the CEO and Director-General
- Reward on achievements (use of human/financial resources and outcomes achieved)
- Methods of determining exceptional CEOs could include:
 - assessing their annual reports to determine how they are governed;
 - by questionnaire on well-chosen issues;
 - by asking some of the State Government Departments how they are performing (there is a lot of contact between State Government agencies and council CEOs); and
 - by speaking to mayors.

Other related comments included:

- Incremental pay recognition for service should be mandatory in remote areas not just at the discretion of council.
- Connecting managers to existing networks and creating new networks where none exist (e.g. CEO's Of Western Shires – COWS, Managers of Aboriginal Shire Councils - masc)
- When exceptional CEOs have been identified they could be used as role models for professionals young and old to assist them in better understanding indigenous councils.

Peer Support, Mentoring and Professional Development

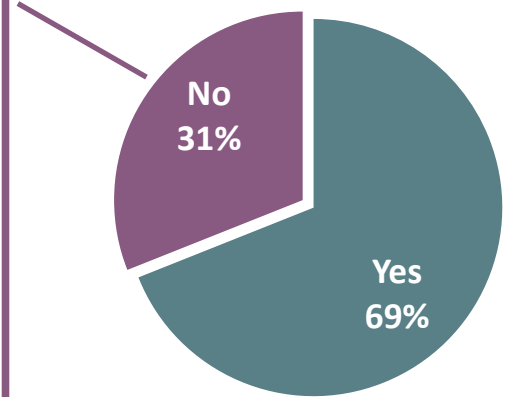
Respondents were invited to comment on access to peer support, mentoring and professional development to support them in their role as Chief Executive Officer. 20 respondents (69%) answered positively that they did have access to such assistance.

Of those respondents it was mentioned that this support was sought out or they chose to participate rather than being a direct part of their role. LGMA membership was seen to be a valuable tool for mentoring and professional development. The 9 respondents (31%) that reported they had no

access to this training to support them in their role indicated that distance and costs associated with travel were the main contributing factors. These factors are outlined below.

What is Required?

- Increased online networking and training
- Understanding of the benefits of professional development
- Appreciation of one's own professional development needs
 - Collaborative arrangements with neighbouring councils
- More training and peer networking opportunities in remote areas
- Increased resource provision from state departments (e.g. project officers)
 - Hubs of technical expertise
 - Mentoring
 - Using Skype and Facebook (access on-line)
- Subsidies to assist in utilising existing professional development programs
- Resurrection of the "Skills Bank" initiative (hub of technical experts – Qld concept)



In relation to the issue of access to training and professional development directed at middle managers, 16 respondents (55%) indicated that they did not have adequate access.

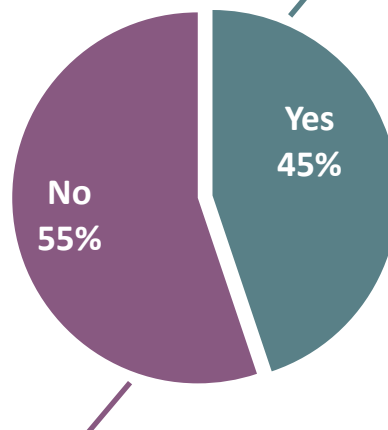
Only 13 respondents (45%) indicated that they had sufficient access to training and professional development directed at their middle managers. One respondent who does have access commented on the need to develop a "training circuit" which designed tailor made courses to build capacity in the middle management.

Councils that do have adequate access to training and professional development indicated that they access this from a number of different sources including LGMA, AIM, LGA's, ACELG, Universities and independent training consultants. One respondent indicated that they provide personal development funding as well as professional development funding for employees. As an island council, they also encourage people take leave so that it provides an opportunity for other people to act in more senior roles.

The results from this question are outlined below.

Sources of Training and Professional Development

- Professional associations: LGMA, LGAQ, ACELG, WALGA, AIM
- Fellow colleagues, internal training, seminars and management meetings
- Subsidies for tertiary education and tertiary institutions
- Internal systems to support operational performance management and reporting
- In-house training by consultants.



What is Required?

- Time and resources to allow participation in training opportunities
 - Training events for other key council positions, e.g. rates officers
- Recognition of unique challenges to rural-remote local governments in training programs
 - More cost-effective opportunities, e.g. online
 - Improved access to professional associations
 - Funding opportunities to offset costs
- A training circuit with middle-management specific training

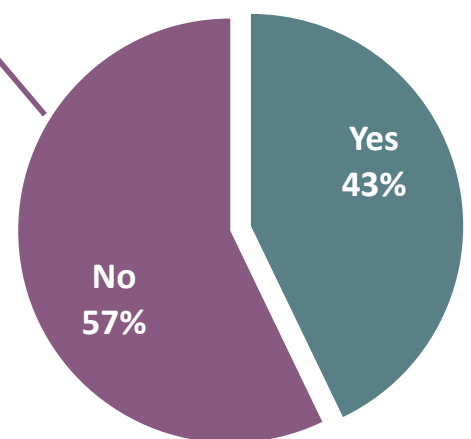
One suggestion for improved access to training was that “there is a need for a 2 tier development program to encourage middle managers in rural-remote councils to gain skills. As most staff in our communities are locals, it makes sense to encourage development of these people instead of having to source this level from outside the shire, usually at a great expense (which in turn upsets the locals as they do not see why someone should be paid large remuneration packages to live in town when they do not receive the same benefits)”.

Another respondent indicated that staff chose not to participate in training as they see their roles as temporary and incidental to where they see themselves in the future. They suggested that role models from remote communities may assist in staff taking a different approach to their jobs.

When asked about the extent to which training and professional development was customised to meet local government’s needs. Only 12 (43%) responded positively. The common response to this customisation was that prior to the commencement of any professional development the council works with the RTO to ensure the course material, course content and the presenter/s gain an understanding of the local environment and challenges facing the officers whom are responsible. 16 Councils (57%) indicated that the training and professional development was not customized and noted the points following.

Comments

- Limited skill sets of rural-remote local government staff in specialist areas (e.g. accounting) can make broadly targeted training too erudite
- Training often doesn’t take into account unique roles/responsibilities of rural-remote local governments
- There is generally a focus of metropolitan issues in training content
 - Training providers can be intransigent to modifying their products
 - Training is often specialised, whereas staff in rural-remote local governments take on a broader spectrum of responsibility

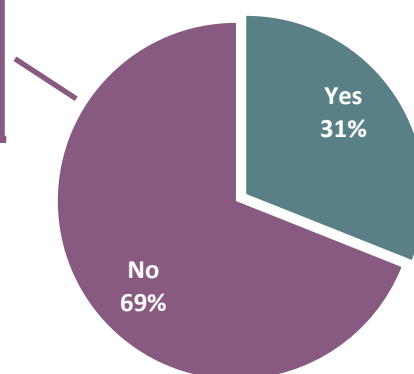


Mentoring

Mentoring and face-to-face training has previously been identified as the most appropriate training for rural-remote and indigenous communities. The survey sought information as to whether the councils had access to this type of training. 20 councils (69%) indicated that they do not have access to this type of training and development. The reasons provided for not being able to access this type of training and development are listed.

What is Required?

- More dedicated funding
- More mentors in regional centres
- Formalisation of the mentoring process (through a network or panel)
 - More resources online (to counter distance)
 - Involving rural-remote tertiary institutions (e.g. colleges)
- Partnership between councils to deliver mentoring programs
 - More management-focused training/mentoring



Succession Planning

The survey sought to gain an understanding of the training and professional development planning processes undertaken by rural-remote and indigenous councils, particularly in relation to key positions within council.

19 respondents (66%) indicated that they have not developed succession planning for key positions.

Comments in relation to succession planning include:

- Positions and officers were identified to be mentored or groomed for the future and then they leave
- Some councils are undertaking a systems and positions audit with a view to improving business succession planning
- Question whether succession planning is viable in small councils?
- Remote councils often do not have a defined senior management team
- Not formalised in a document but contingencies are implied
- Have incorporated career development as part of the performance appraisal system - you have to accept people need to move on to get other experiences etc.
- More interested in staff retention
- The succession plan changes due to lack of human resources available.

Staff attraction and retention

Staff attraction, retention and managing human resource issues are a common thread throughout the survey. Respondents were asked to identify any were particular positions that are hard to fill. 26 councils (90%) responded that such positions existed and they include:

- All technical roles. Key reasons relate to wages (competing with mining sector) and accommodation (limited options).
- Middle management and all technical positions. It is difficult to find suitably qualified or experienced middle managers who are prepared to leave positions in country towns or urban areas and work in remote areas.
- Accounting and engineering professionals. Difficult to attract appropriate professionals due to the inability to pay high incomes (competing with mining) and provide a suitable environment (for married couples with families) and suitable housing.
- Trades positions such as plumbers and mechanics. Due to location, tradesmen can be paid twice what council can pay at the mines.
- Community Health Nurse - trying to recruit when nurses do not wish to leave Qld Health benefits.
- It is difficult for the family unit to stay together in a remote area as they are have to go away for education or work when they gain a qualification. There will always be plenty of applicants but without prior experience in local government it is often a disaster.

As noted from the initial questions about challenges, this remains the critical issue throughout remote and indigenous councils.

Development Priorities

All respondents rated suggested training and development activities in order of importance.

	Very important	Important	Not really important	Not sure	Already exists
An exchange, secondment, mentoring and coaching program to support skills development	31%	45%	21%	3%	0%
A register of local government senior managers, professionals and relieving personnel that includes information on prior experience and performance	45%	41%	17%	0%	0%
Structured support for CEO recruitment and performance management	38%	34%	24%	0%	3%
An accredited rural-remote and Indigenous council CEO certification	21%	31%	45%	3%	0%
A rural-remote and Indigenous local government "service" to provide professional development and recognition, continuity of employment and consistency of working conditions irrespective of any particular posting	28%	38%	31%	3%	0%
A "community of practice" network to provide opportunities for peer support and networking	17%	52%	24%	7%	0%
Special rural-remote and Indigenous council forums / topics at annual local government conferences	31%	45%	14%	7%	3%
More flexible and innovative workplace arrangements that provide regular respite for senior management	38%	28%	21%	7%	7%
Strategies for creating more affordable housing	62%	24%	10%	3%	3%
Basing senior managers in larger regional centres with only part-time work on-site in remote locations	3%	24%	34%	24%	14%
Continuing with the appointment of Government champions	21%	28%	28%	21%	3%

The four points that were considered to be very important by the respondents are:

- A register of local government senior managers, professionals and relieving personnel that includes information on prior experience and performance;
- Structured support for CEO recruitment and performance management;
- More flexible and innovative workplace arrangements that provide regular respite for senior management; and
- Strategies for creating more affordable housing.

Comments from respondents in relation to the priorities outlined above include:

- There is a need to work with LG associations to ensure elected members have the required skills within 12 months of elections.
- More contact is required with rural-remote and indigenous councils from senior government officials and Local Government Department.
- Suggested the creation of a central repository where template policies and procedures can be accessed - e.g. recruitment, internal policies etc.
- The provision of suitable staff housing on indigenous communities is very important as well as the provision of suitable and appropriate council offices.
- Senior managers need to be based in the community. One council is actively re - recruiting all positions back into the local area (apart from finance).

Additional suggestions from respondents in relation to how ACELG could support senior managers in rural-remote and indigenous councils included:

Provision of information

- Information and support packages
- Keep providing the studies and information especially any templates, models etc. to help stop reinventing the wheel

Education and training

- Online, practical training modules
- Develop a professional program that deals with culture shock, requisite skills, standard contract provisions.
- Accredited training opportunities
- Provide post graduate training support.
- Continue to be available in an advisory role also if possible to offer subsidised opportunities for structured professional development.

Support

- Appoint an officer whose role it is to make contact and offer support or advice. There could be a monthly or quarterly newsletter on best practice and reference material as well as a shirt which promotes ACELG and is only issued to CEO's
- Could help with some of the professional support and succession planning required

- A formalised structured network for providing advice and assistance
- Push for more funds to support and ensure community has continuity of senior staff
- A formalised structured network for providing advice and assistance
- Pool of professional staff willing to relieve at affordable prices.

Search Conference

ACELG has proposed that a search conference be held to discuss the matters raised in more details. 44.8% indicated that they probably would attend such a conference subject to timing and cost. Reasons for not attending a conference included time, budget, location and competing priorities.

Summary

The findings from the survey support prior research about the impediments and challenges facing rural-remote and indigenous local governments. There are clearly many areas where additional support is required and, in particular, activities which will assist in the retention and development of staff will be of greatest assistance.

The findings can be summed up well by a comment from one of the respondents:

I appreciate the commitment to this area by the government and the staff at ACELG to really provide support that will make a difference. I believe there is a real opportunity for remote Australia to advance if we can keep quality CEOs in these areas; however, the high level of burnout is often a factor that prevents that. If we can support CEOs and senior management on a number of different levels and that includes a social network within a peer network that is supportive, we will gain some ground. Often, not having others in your community with the same commitment to follow through on changes that will Close the Gap in Aboriginal communities is very wearing.