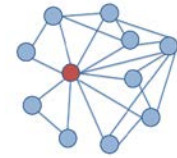# Inaugural LoGoNet Meeting Summary

Held on Wednesday 2nd November 2016 at the Tudor Hotel, Redfern NSW

ATTENDANCE

Sarah Artist, Martin Bass, Ally Dench, Andrew Kelly, Andrew Hollows (by phone), Alex Gooding, John Lavarack, John Martin (by phone), Lauren Oakey (by phone), Stefanie Pillora, Tim Robinson, Valerie Seidel, Glen Walker, Peter Rufford, Ronald Woods, Geraldine O'Connor, Graham Sansom, Grant Leslie.

1   WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS (TIM ROBINSON)

Tim Robinson welcomed everyone to the meeting and outlined the program for the evening. He noted that the LoGoNet initiative had so far involved a small core working group and that the gathering was the first step in seeking wider engagement. He said that the invitation to attend had caused a lot of interest and that a number of people who were unable to attend had expressed strong support for the initiative.

A number of expressions of interest and support were received from invitees who were unable to attend, including:

Chris Aulich, Chris Berry, Martin Brennan, Chris Champion, John Comrie, Marianne di Giallanardo, Namoi Dougall, Mark Evans, Ruth Goldsmith, John Hennessy, Greg Hoffman, Dominic Johnson, Robert Kelly, Stephen Mayne, Robyn Morris, Dale Quinlivan, Shayne Silcox, Su Fei Tan, Gabrielle Watterson, Christine Winning.

2   VALUE OF A NATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT NETWORK (STEFANIE PILLORA)

2.1   Initial comments

Stefanie Pillora discussed the significance of the former Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government's engagement in research and in particular the importance of its annual research forums. This had shown some of the benefits of a national network model, which appears to have been lost with the demise of ACELG.

Tim Robinson noted that the research forums had provided some examples of how easy it is to generate new ideas and opportunities for innovation. They also provided a good mix of local government practitioners and other participants and provided valuable time away from coal face to reflect and discuss ideas.

Martin Bass said that the discussion of a range of models had led to the idea of a network rather than a university or other institutional centre and that in initiating the project the core group had wanted to do something that was genuinely different. He said he had one message for those attending: talk about the LoGoNet network and spread the word. It is important to realise how important but forgotten local government is. We need to develop a community of interest in local government, but not one that only involves people in local government.

There were several comments from the floor. These included that the development of the LoGoNet network would be especially valuable to local government because the sector is under great stress. People in the industry increasingly felt like the "deer in the headlights" at a time of great change. It was also suggested that the network would be a great way to develop an interest in research in the sector, and in particular the idea of practitioner research.

2.2   Phone-in contributions

The meeting received phone calls from several prominent local government people interstate who were very supportive of the LoGoNet concept but who were unable to attend in person.

2.2.1   Andrew Hollows (CEO at the Victorian Local Governance Association)

- Andrew started with some content and process issues from a Victorian perspective.
- Current key "content" issues in Victoria include rate capping, the recently-elected councils with many new councillors and as a consequence some new CEOs.
- Medium term agenda issues include the current review of the Local Government Act. The directions paper has foreshadowed potentially significant changes in practice regarding long term planning, financial management, community engagement etc. As a result there is a need to be able to tap into insights of practitioners elsewhere in Australia and overseas regarding ideas, pitfalls and traps.
- Process is equally important: the ability to drive a reform agenda in the Victorian context and what that means to stakeholders. What are the implications for new councils and CEOs, what is going to be the vehicle to engage with councils and to provide advice and rigour?
- The situation is interesting in Victoria because a substantial part of the reform process is being pushed by the Essential Services Commission, which has carriage of rate-capping. There is a need to tap into a broader network, otherwise the reform process may stall.

Graham noted that a similar story of the need for a broader perspective can be told in every state, a story that is self-evident but unfortunately not always to State governments and ministers. Andrew concluded by noting some key stumbling blocks to a national network: how to provide practical support, and who is going to pay for it?

2.2.2   John Martin (Emeritus Professor, La Trobe University)

- Question: how can we create a forum from a council staff perspective to discuss what others are doing and to learn things from each other?
- John discussed the example of a major local government CEOs group. The group has restricted membership so once a CEO joins there is enormous pressure to participate. However this group does not do much for the majority of councils, or for other staff.
- We need increased opportunities to learn from each other. This could be through a thought leadership model, for example, the preparation of short issues papers as basis for conversation.
- He noted Kathy McGowan's speech in Federal Parliament on the lack of a geographical perspective in the current federal Government's regional policy.
- We also need to tap into the key issues people are talking about. The LoGoNet network could take the initiative to influence decision-making by developing a number of position papers on specific issues which could be rolled out systematically for comment.

2.2.3   *Lauren Oakey (CEO Local Government Professionals Australia)*

- Lauren stressed the role in the national conversation that the LoGoNet network could have and its ability to impact the sector by providing thought leadership to underpin advocacy, and practice-led research.
- A research network also has the potential to develop support in writing policy through the preparation of leadership papers and by providing the ability to log into a network that can help with the policy agenda in conversations with government.
- She also discussed how the LoGoNet network could develop, supporting the idea of a group of organisations working together.
- On example is the Local Government Professionals' "Resource Hub" which was launched recently to facilitate communication across the sector. This involves articles, professional development, case studies and other content as well as an open access forum.
- Not all the content available through the hub is being driven by LG Professionals – rather it acts as a clearing house. There has been a good response so far but to develop this further there is interest in partnering with other people who support this approach as well as linking to other events.
- Lauren discussed the associates model the organisation is using and the importance of developing a network of people to provide content and expertise. The framework is already there but the organisation does not want to go it alone and so is looking to facilitate strategic partnerships.
- Stef asked if the clearing house had already been established. Lauren said it had, with a part-time person coordinating the content schedule. This process needs to be refined, however.

3   LOGONET – VISIONS FOR A LOCAL GOVERNMENT NETWORK (TIM ROBINSON AND GRAHAM SAMSON)

Tim noted that the phone conversations demonstrated the need to bring together and leverage collective capacity in the sector. Graham then summarised the key points of the phone conversations:

- There are lots of things happening already but the question is the extent to which these efforts are delivering results. It seems this is occurring only to a limited extent and the development of an effective national and multi sectoral network would be one way to improve this.
- Local Government Professionals could be a key node, but the organisation needs partners in this process. Similarly, John Hennessy from the Municipal Association of Victorial has been holding annual Future of Local Government conferences for more than a decade but is finding it difficult to take the issues and ideas generated through this initiative to the next stage, so he is also very interested in the network concept.
- Initially, such a network doesn't have to be very complicated. A starting point could be a few people prepared to put a bit of time into preparing short discussion papers to generate further discussion – and there appears to be no shortage of interested and talented people with goodwill around the country who would be prepared to be involved.

4   NEXT STEPS (ALEX GOODING)

4.1   Comments from attendees

The meeting then heard from the attendees, including several representatives from private sector organisations which are involved with local government. Some of the key points raised are summarised below.

- We need people to both "shout and whisper" to the sector regarding the benefits of research. We need a loud principled voice to "shout" to CEOs in support of commissioning research, and about research benefits, but also to "whisper" in the ear of practitioners. In this context there is a vast reservoir of knowledge in middle management which needs to be tapped.
- SmartGov is being reshaped and is launching a new website. It is linking more with private enterprise around best practice in local government and is looking to be a knowledge base to showcase the best of private enterprise, including a number of practical tools. This approach could be relevant to LoGoNet.
- Similarly a lot of the Balmoral Group's work deals with local government issues, as well as natural resources and policy issues. The discussion around best practice is consistent with the approach that the group has adopted in linking resources to councils. In addition much of what LoGoNet is trying to do around sharing knowledge is also compatible with what Balmoral Group does with its clients.
- LoGoNet needs to look at creating something like the initiatives in the not-for-profit sector. In the Water Services Association, for example, member organisations have the resources to spend on research, but often do so in isolation, so the Association created a "network of networks" involving a number of special interest groups.
- People should not underestimate the value of simply having collective conversations. For example, learning from the mistakes other organisations have made can save millions. When you create a truly non-political national network you can get that creative collaboration which can be extraordinarily valuable, to the extent that from an economist's perspective you can put a number on the savings generated.
- The journey that LoGoNet has started on is going to be quite interesting. The position paper idea is a good one and a cheap approach but it will get to a point when it will need people on the ground. If we can obtain grant or other funding to support the staff needed to help facilitate the outcomes we are looking for, the concept has a lot of potential.
- The Centre for Local Government at the University of Technology is exploring the idea of a sabbatical for LG staff to come in to do research at the centre when they have a good idea.
- Research and innovation is often done in isolation. Perhaps we should ask people to circulate a paragraph on what they are currently engaged in.
- A question about the LoGoNet network initiative: many of us can produce short position papers but will it be difficult to get people with the computer skills required to service the network pro bono?
- The LoGoNet network initiative is important because there is nothing currently like it. There is a real appetite in Local Government NSW (LGNSW) to do new things and to think differently. It has been a very hard year in local government with councils in crisis and people struggling. LGNSW has done what it can to produce new products, services and ideas.

- Metropolitan governance is a real issue for local government with councils "losing the argument", but it is hard to find a place to discuss this amid all the change. The great ideas the NSW local government review panel had about change management have been ignored and councils now have to implement the many changes taking place.
- In terms of national structures, there are possibilities through the Australian Local Government Association and with some existing national networks, for example the industrial relations people within the associations in all states have formed an active group. We also need a conversation around the differences between the states.
- A peri-urban council network was established in 2013 as a result of a reference in the NSW local government review panel report. Thirteen councils originally were involved and there are 12 current members. The group has worked in partnership with the Institute of Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology on food security issues in the Sydney basin. The peri-urban network can offer a "therapy session" for practitioners but has also made some inroads into the Greater Sydney Commission which is now discussing peri urban issues.
- The LoGoNet network has to provide practical benefits. What we can do, what ideas can we borrow? It's also important to undertake strategic planning informed by research but this is not going to happen unless there are practical outcomes on the ground.
- A lot of networks and online facilities between government agencies have come and gone because while one or two people have driven them the actual participation has been low. Some have survived so it would be interesting to look at why. Looking at the concept of an overarching "network of networks" pulling in these existing initiatives could be an interesting approach.

4.2   Where to from here?

Alex noted that there seemed to be a lot of support from those present for the LoGoNet initiative and suggested that people should also encourage their colleagues to become involved. The small core organising group would also welcome additional participation. People were asked to send expressions of support and suggestions for other potential members with contact details to Tim Robinson at: timothyrobinson@optusnet.com.au

The organising group is also looking where next to hold an event both in NSW and interstate. Graham said that he was doing work in South Australia, Queensland and Victoria and indicated that there is the potential to collaborate with some of the interstate speakers tonight and others to hold events in these states. Alex also said that commitments to support or auspice future events in NSW around specific themes would be very welcome.

Martin said that a lot of the feedback was that people would love to support networking events but were not in a position to travel outside their state or even their council area. Is there a way to participate without gathering in person? Council leaders are not prepared to leave their local patch, which means that staff are not able to do so either. As a result collaboration at the state level is limited yet there is so much to share.

Martin also noted that the private sector people present in room had had experience in the public and NFP sector so they knew the landscape, which is invaluable. It is also invaluable for the private

sector to give back – it has been difficult to get people within the sector to contribute altruistically so it is heartening to see the private sector in attendance.

Alex said that face-to-face contact was an important component but LoGoNet will develop an online presence. A modest web site will be created initially to act as a central contact and information point and to provide additional information on the LoGoNet initiative. It will also act as a clearing house to exchange material, initially through links to existing sites but also in the longer term hosting some of the position papers and other material that may be developed through the network.

5   CLOSE (TIM ROBINSON)

Tim said the outcomes of the meeting would be sent out reminding people to suggest potential events He concluded the meeting by thanking everyone for coming, noting that the event marked the official beginning of LoGoNet.