



## Regional Governance Update

Welcome to the latest updates on the Review of Regional Governance in the Northern Territory.

### Review of Regional Governance: Local Authorities

This newsletter is the next in a series of reform updates which aim to keep residents, staff and councillors informed on the ongoing reforms to local government in the remote areas of the Northern Territory. Following my December update on the changes to the *Local Government Act*, the new guidelines and the creation of Regional Councils, the purpose of this newsletter is to provide an update on the establishment of Local Authorities.

The establishment of Local Authorities is the next critical step in the continuing improvement to local government in the Territory. All eight regional councils have started the process of establishing local authorities. So far the feedback received by my regional staff from regional councils and constituents has been very positive. It will be good to see **increased local input on local issues** to ensure council plans, budgets and services better reflect local priorities.

### Local Authorities Providing a Strong Local Voice

An issue raised in several communities is the difference between Local Authorities and Local Boards. **Local Authorities are not Local Boards under a different name** and it is very important to ensure that constituents are clear about this. Councils should highlight the strengthened governance arrangements in particular the role local authorities play in council planning and budgeting and the clear process of communication between councils and their local authorities. And, importantly, all of our main population centres **MUST** have a local authority and members will be paid for their input!

Constituents need to know that this is real change that will make a difference in terms their involvement in local governance. Local authorities are now an essential and central part of the operation of regional councils.

It is clear that some of our largest Aboriginal towns have not had adequate representation nor adequate responses to significant issues raised with their shire councils. Many of these major centres have had no local board or boards that have met infrequently. The absence of resident senior staff, the **decision makers**, has left many constituents feeling disconnected from the operation of their councils. Local authorities

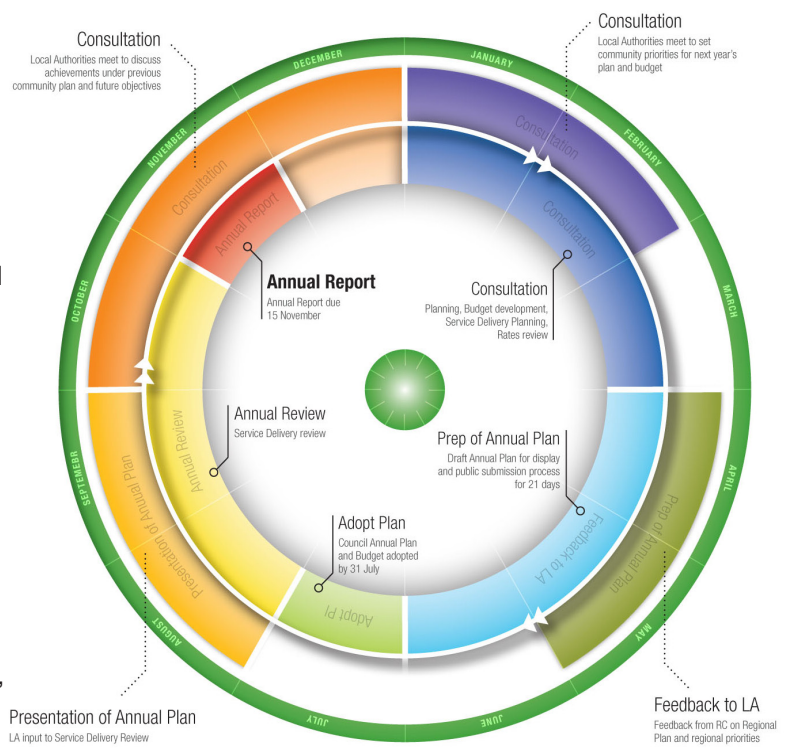
and the administrative support provided will begin to address this issue but only with the support and goodwill of councils.

Ongoing engagement with constituents will be required to ensure that they fully understand the role of local authorities and how they operate and councils will need to continue working with constituents once local authorities are established. DLGR is able to assist Regional Councils to support their local authorities and we need to do this together to make sure it works for everyone's benefit.

### Annual Planning Cycle

Local authorities will improve local representation and provide input to the annual planning and budgeting cycles. Before March each year local authorities will work with councils and communities to decide on priorities for consideration in the preparation of the regional council budget. By April, it would be expected that councils would provide feedback to local authorities on regional priorities and the inclusion of local priorities in the regional plan.

**Getting local authorities up and running must be a high priority for councils.** The development of Regional Council plans and budgets for 2014/15 will be one of the first items that local authorities address. It is therefore of critical importance that local authorities are established and operating as soon as possible.



## Local Authority Policies

All regional councils have now created draft policies or have endorsed policies but this will need to be the start of an ongoing process of refinement. Assistance with further policy development is available to councils from DLGR but most councils now have policy details on their websites.

## Nominations

The nomination process is mandatory. A number of councils have already completed the 28 day nomination period. Feedback provided to DLGR staff indicates that where nominations have commenced there has been a positive response.

Where nominations are low this may indicate that further engagement activities are required. Sorry business, weather events and community activities may all impact on the nomination process. Councils deal with such events on a regular basis so it may be the case that nomination periods for Local Authorities with a council vary.

Nominations for local authorities have closed in East Arnhem, MacDonnell, Victoria Daly, Tiwi Islands, Barkly and Roper Gulf Regional Councils.

## Appointment

The appointment of local authority members is the next step for regional councils who are coming to the end of the nomination period. It is essential that councils ensure the process is transparent and fair. Perhaps most important will be the communication of this decision to the local communities.

Many councils have included information in their local authority policies on how this selection and appointment process will occur and the principles that councils will use to guide their decisions on appointment. This will assist councils to explain any decisions, especially in large communities where there are many different clan groups and where some nominees may miss out on appointment to the Local Authority.

## The Role of Local Authority Members

It has been great to see that councils have created what are essentially job descriptions for local authority members and listed the attributes a member should have. Councils are seeking people who can listen and respect others, contribute ideas, obtain feedback from the community, are strong, resilient, undertake training, have a good knowledge of their community, who participate and represent families.

MacDonnell Regional Council Guide to Local Authorities states:

*“The better the Local Authority members are at talking and working together, the better off the community will be because they are working out important issues and getting good things done for their community.”*

## Snap Shot from Regional Councils

East Arnhem Regional Council created a timeline for the establishment of Local Authorities that aligns the process

with ordinary council meetings. This is a great tool for keeping the establishment process on track. EARC has also conducted a “roadshow” to inform communities and there has been significant interest.

MacDonnell Regional Council developed a range of materials to promote and explain the role of Local Authority members and the nomination process. This includes posters, nomination forms and having this on their website.

West Arnhem Regional Council has endorsed Local Authority policies and developed promotional materials for the nomination process. A dedicated consultant will implement the reforms and the CEO, Mayor and key staff have been visiting communities to discuss and promote the upcoming changes leading up to an April nomination period.

Tiwi Islands Regional Council requested that there be two Local Authorities for their council rather than three as was the case with local boards. A council sub-committee, with representatives from the council’s current local boards, is informing council on local authority policy, assessing nominations and recommending appointments

Victoria Daly Regional Council has used radio announcements, posters, large banners and community information sessions to promote Local Authorities.

Roper Gulf Regional Council has developed a Local Authority Policy, nomination forms and posters inviting nominations. The Roper Gulf Governance Unit and Councillors continue to have a strong presence throughout all Roper Gulf communities promoting the Local Authorities and engaging with community members.

## Getting It Right

Embracing the “local voice” through Local Authorities is pivotal for improved local governance. It is critical that we get it right and have Local Authorities that are functioning effectively within each Regional Council. Once again it is anticipated that there will be Local Authority participation in the 2014/15 budget process.

It is pleasing to hear about the enthusiastic responses of Regional Councils in the establishment of Local Authorities.

## Overview of Regional Governance Reform

My next newsletter will address some of the other issues that are being considered as part of the current review of regional governance. As you are aware the demerger of Victoria Daly Regional Council is currently being worked through with a Transition Committee comprising representation from across the entire council area. It is expected that a new West Daly Regional Council will be up and running by 1 July 2014. However, for the moment, no other changes to boundaries are being considered in other regional council areas.

Warm regards,

Allan McGill