

Empowering Local Authorities

POLICY FRAMEWORK
2016



Background

Local authorities were established by the Northern Territory government (NTG) in 2014 in response to concerns that Territorians living in regional and remote areas had lost their voice in local service delivery matters.

Following Territory-wide community consultations involving 177 community visits and 279 meetings in remote and regional centres, local authorities were established in 63 remote communities across the 9 regional councils.

With the support of regional councils, local authorities have been meeting regularly since mid-2014 and are giving communities a stronger voice in the local issues and services that affect their lives.

They typically have between 6 and 14 members who are appointed by regional councils following expressions of interest from the local community. Members also include the elected local ward councillors as well as the mayor or president of the regional council.

Local authorities are governed under the *Local Government Act* and Ministerial Guidelines for Regional Councils and Local Authorities (Guideline 8), available at www.localgovernment.nt.gov.au.

Key policy principles

Centralise consultation in remote communities

In 2016, following a decision by NTG, the Department of Local Government and Community Services is working with regional councils and across NTG agencies to broaden the focus of local authorities to become the preferred consultative body in remote communities across portfolios.

Many forms of community engagement already operate in remote communities. Different NTG agencies coordinate different forums, as does the Australian Government and other bodies. Many community members sit on multiple bodies within a small community. The proliferation of these bodies was a major problem identified in remote community consultations.

Under the new framework, there is no intention to disrupt engagement forums where they are operating successfully and are supported by their local members. However a place-by-place approach will be implemented to identify where forums can successfully transition to local authorities or where, as may be more appropriate, forums might meet concurrently, or provide regular reports to the local authority to improve the flow of information and communication within the community.

Improve coordination across government

A coordination unit has been established in the Department of Local Government and Community Services to implement the new approach, which is flexible and place-based on a community by community basis. The unit can assist NTG agencies and regional councils to take a more coordinated approach to engagement with remote communities.

The unit coordinates requests from NTG agencies to engage with local authorities as well as requests from local authorities or regional councils for information or presentations from NTG agencies. It also facilitates access to a network of officers who engage in remote communities, mostly based in regional offices. This network can be drawn on when planning and implementing community engagement activities in remote communities.

Oversight of the implementation of the new framework is through an Inter-Agency Working Group which has been operating since mid-2015. This group, convened by the Department of Local Government and Community Services, has representation from agencies with higher activity in

remote communities including the Departments of Housing, Health, Education, Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Infrastructure, Transport, and Children and Families. The group meets regularly to review the implementation of the new framework.

Policy framework and evidence base

Review of Regional Governance (2013)

The 2013 report on the Territory-wide consultation process to understand the views of remote community members on regional governance arrangements found that:

“Respondents were very strongly supportive of having one consultative body, one voice that government agencies would use for community consultation and engagement. Some respondents from larger communities commented that some existing community committees will still be required and should continue but stated that there should be a mechanism to ensure consistent information flow between these groups.”

Regional Councils and Local Authorities (2014)

Following the Territory-wide consultations, a new system of local government was implemented in 2014 and included regional councils and local authorities that were established in 63 remote communities. The initial approach involved local authorities focusing on local government service delivery issues and local priority projects, while members adapted to their new roles and regional councils established their new policies and systems. The recommendations from the review included an intention to consider broadening the role of local authorities following implementation of the initial stage of reforms.

Local Authority Snapshot (2015)

Two snapshot surveys of local authorities found that local authorities were delivering on their objectives to deliver a stronger local voice and greater accountability for service delivery.

The surveys also resulted in recommending changes to further improve local authorities:

- local authorities to become the preferred body for NT Government engagement with remote communities across portfolios, to be implemented using a flexible, place-based approach;
- the need for simpler meeting and membership requirements;
- the need for a reduction in the minimum number of meetings per year from 6 to 4; and
- the need for additional support to regional councils to manage the broader role of local authorities.

As a result, the Ministerial Guideline for Regional Councils and Local Authorities (Guideline 8) was amended to broaden the role of local authorities and simplify the meeting and membership requirements. For example, to assist achieving local authority meeting quorums, meetings can proceed where a majority of appointed members attend. This does not include elected members.

The transition of broader functions for local authorities is a flexible place-based approach on a community by community basis, and is overseen by an inter-agency working group in close consultation with regional councils.

Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy (2015)

The Department of Local Government and Community Services developed a Remote Engagement and Coordination Strategy (RECS), launched in 2015, which is intended to guide and inform public servants and others on the complexities of engaging with remote communities. An online toolkit has been developed to offer practical, hands-on advice and includes links to helpful sites that will assist in the engagement process. The coordination unit assists with the awareness and application of the RECS, the online toolkit and accessing available training across NTG agencies.

Aboriginal Affairs Strategy (2016)

An expanded role for local authorities is also reflected as an objective of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Aboriginal Affairs Strategy, launched by NTG in 2016.

The strategy states “the Northern Territory Government wants to decentralise decision making to provide significantly increased opportunities for Aboriginal people at the community level to be directly involved in and lead the design and delivery of relevant government policies programs and funding.” In particular, the strategy commits to expanding the role and number of local authorities.

Local Authority Coordination Processes (2016)

A number of new coordination processes and arrangements were developed to support the broadening of the role of local authorities. These included: coordinating requests from NTG agencies to attend local authority meetings; coordinating requests from local authorities or regional councils for information or presentations from NTG agencies; and supporting a flexible, place-based transitioning of NTG community engagement with local authorities, working closely with NTG agencies and regional councils. The department, through regional offices, provides additional support to regional councils to support and maintain local authorities.

Governance of local authorities

In 2014, amendments to the *Local Government Act* created 63 local authorities across nine regional councils. While the Act outlines a range of governance arrangements for local authorities, such as who can be included in the membership of local authorities and how a quorum is achieved, the Act also provides for Ministerial Guidelines for Regional Councils and Local Authorities (Guideline 8), which outline in greater detail the governance arrangements for local authorities.

Guideline 8 sets out: the locations of local authorities; member nomination, appointment and revocation requirements; the number of meetings per year; meeting arrangements; agenda items and minutes; the functions of local authorities; member allowances; and reports from regional councils.

Local authorities must consider other service delivery issues in the local authority area outside of local government services including broader NTG portfolio matters such as health, housing and community safety. This is aimed at improving the information provided to, and feedback from, local communities about services and issues that affect them. The new approach encourages all NTG agencies to use local authorities as their preferred consultation and engagement forum in remote communities.

A Better Practice Guide for the operations of local authorities provides further assistance to regional councils and NTG agencies in the application of Guideline 8, and strategies and tools to support the operations and effectiveness of local authorities.