

Response to Local Government Reform Commission From The Queensland Water Directorate

The local government reform process will undoubtedly have major implications for management of water services across Queensland. The Queensland Water Directorate (QWD) is a membership-driven peak body representing more than 106 Council Water Service Providers across Queensland. The QWD has been supporting the local government water industry and providing coordinated information and technical advice for over three years.

The water business of a number of QWD members has been altered forever with the recent announcement of the restructure of institutional arrangements in South East Queensland (SEQ). As might be expected, there are varying degrees of anxiety in Councils and local government owned water businesses across the State because of the uncertain future for management of water infrastructure. In all cases, however, the provision of effective and efficient water services to Queensland communities remains a priority for Councils.

Even reform of a less sweeping nature than has occurred in SEQ will have serious flow-on effects in regional Queensland. In light of the current situation of anxiety and lack of information, and the inevitable extended transition period, the QWD has provided the following advice.

1. Human Capital

Continuity of service to Queensland communities is the top priority of all Council Water Services Providers. Given the current skills shortage in the Queensland Water Industry, the current information vacuum and consequent uncertainty about the reform process is increasing the drift of skills to the overheated mining and consulting industries. The QWD has sought to mitigate this problem by providing regular information flow to the industry as a trusted information source recognising that this is an issue that extends beyond standard employment security. More needs to be done.

The QWD suggests that the State Government place a greater emphasis on maintaining the water industry assets of the State - in this case the human capital - by providing more certainty, or at the very least regular information flow to the Queensland Water Industry.

2. Small and Remote Communities

Water services of small and remote Queensland communities will be heavily impacted by the reform process. Many such councils have ageing infrastructure and limited capacity to maintain best-practice management in parallel with the increasing requirements of reporting and planning required by the State and Commonwealth Governments. The QWD acknowledges that the current reform processes are the State Governments response to these

problems but suggests that the “baby may be thrown out with the bathwater”.

The chosen approach is having immediate and long-term impacts on small and remote communities. Coupled with the continuing drought in many areas of the State and a rapid increase in legislative changes impacting the water industry, the current uncertainty generated by the reform process threatens to have a paralysing effect on small and remote Councils.

The QWD has been working with small and medium Councils for the past three years to provide support and advice on Operations and Maintenance of sewage and water infrastructure and assistance in responding to legislative requirements. Some of the progress made by Councils is now threatened. For example, over the past six months the QWD, with funding support of DLGPS&R, has undertaken training on Drought Management Planning which is a statutory requirement under the Water Act. Many small and medium WSPs substantially completed this requirement during the workshops but have yet to finalise them. These plans must be submitted by October this year under the Water Act and more importantly, are crucial to appropriate planning during the drought. With the uncertainty arising from the reform, this process, and others like it have slowed.

It is insufficient to assume that these are “teething problems” and that they will be overcome when the reform process is completed. This assumption is akin to doctors telling an ailing patient that they require major invasive surgery and then walking away to argue about which limb is to be removed first.

The QWD suggests that the Reform Commission recognise that the impacts of their process have the potential to be debilitating to an already overtaxed industry and provide greater assistance to Councils via support mechanisms such as those currently provided by the QWD.

3. Self Respect

Amid the currently reported political rhetoric and inevitable public recriminations between state and local government we are at risk of forgetting that for many decades the Local Government Water Industry has provided best-available water services to a richly diverse range of communities under often less-than-ideal situations. Despite often marginal capacity, the tyranny of distance and complex funding arrangements, the local government water industry has often reached beyond average service provision, and even best practice, to provide world-leading examples of water management.

In spite of the diversity and a often quoted complexity of cooperation among the large number of Queensland local government water service providers, Councils have often collaborated, shared resources and worked together to improve Queensland’s urban water services. The QWD itself is a good example of this sort of Council cooperation where more than 85% of Queensland’s Councils have recognised the need for improved industry-based information sharing and have annually funded this through the QWD.

Many water industry workers feel, justifiably, some pride in their township and their ability to eke out best results from (sometimes marginal) infrastructure. The current media focus on economic transparency, “distressed” communities or poorly managed infrastructure is unfortunately inevitable. However, it fails to acknowledge the strengths of the local government water industry in Queensland. Individual industry workers tend to be implicitly included in the heavy-handed criticism being leveled at local government. Perhaps in some cases this is deserved but these cases would be in the minority and it should be recognised and acknowledged that the current workers managing our water infrastructure will be the same people managing it when new institutional arrangements come into place.

The QWD suggests that instances of quality provision of water services and regional collaboration within the local government water industry should be recognised and supported to facilitate the transition to new structures during and following the reform process.

