13. Formal collaboration, collaborative councils and community engagement

Margaret Allison

Introduction

This chapter examines the important role local government can play in the delivery of community outcomes through collaboration. It provides some examples from my own jurisdiction that illustrate the range of projects and outcomes achieved through collaboration (with a particular focus on customer and community services), and suggests some future options and possibilities for collaboration.

My central thesis is that collaboration is not merely a desirable mode of operation for local government; rather, it is fundamental to its capacity to deliver desired value for its constituents. This is especially so in Australia, where, as in many countries with federal systems of government, the *Constitution* does not recognise local government. Local government is merely a ‘creature of statute’ by state and territory legislatures. A roundtable meeting held in Australia in 2007 as part of a global dialogue on federalism noted that, irrespective of the size of local governments, ‘What unites these institutions of state is that there is no level of government below them. That is also their strength and democratic claim: they are the government closest to the people.’

The Brisbane local government context

Brisbane City Council (BCC) is the largest local government in the Asia-Pacific region and one of the biggest anywhere in the world. Brisbane is also at the centre of the fastest-growing region in Australia, with an estimated one million additional people expected in the south-east Queensland region by 2026. Brisbane City Council’s annual budget is \$2.33 billion. Like any smaller council, however, it depends on a range of formal and informal arrangements, many of which are collaborative in nature.

While size makes some difference—for example, the size of infrastructure projects managed—core functions remain the same as those of our smaller neighbours. Irrespective of size, many local government functions are characterised by a visibility and immediacy and even to the most casual observer it is apparent when things are working well—or not.

Collaborative councils: areas for consideration

I would like to highlight some of the areas for consideration where remarkable outcomes can be achieved through the synergistic effects of collaboration, illustrated with examples from BCC.

Partnering and regional collaboration

Council of Mayors

The Council of Mayors (south-east Queensland) was established in September 2005 as an independent political advocacy organisation that represented the interests of the one in seven Australians who lived in south-east Queensland. It aims to influence federal and state government policies and funding priorities. With an estimated four million residents expected by 2026, the region's future growth needs to be supported by first-class infrastructure, reliable water supply, economic development and a reduction in road congestion.

An example of a current area of work for the council is responding to the state government's proposal for transfer of water assets from councils throughout Queensland. A further example of regional collaboration is the after-hours call centre services for nine neighbouring councils and a public utility provided by BCC.

Regulation Reduction Incentive Fund (RRIF)

As part of its 2004 election commitment, *Promoting an Enterprise Culture*, the Federal Government established the \$50 million Regulation Reduction Incentive Fund (RRIF). Its aim was to provide local government authorities with incentives to press ahead with regulatory and compliance reforms that benefited small and home-based businesses—for example, through a reduction in the impact of regulation and associated compliance costs.

The Council of Mayors won \$9.7 million to streamline development-assessment processes and provide a 'toolbox' capacity to offer customers information about local laws and licensing requirements.

Customers in all these council areas can, for example, now:

- view the city plan online, plan their development online and access the council's decision-making time frames
- lodge development applications and track their progress online according to location and development type and, in some circumstances, enable a faster turnaround
- see what different requirements various local councils might have with respect to the licensing of food premises or the display of advertising signs.

Other substantial benefits are possible in the future, such as rationalising and standardising local laws; it should be the case that the licensing requirements to establish a café are no different in Brisbane than on the Gold Coast.

RRIF projects are designed to save \$90 million for small business across south-east Queensland. This project provides clear and demonstrable evidence of the benefits of collaboration in the short term and with regard to long-term sustainability in the region.

Business alliance contracts

North–South Bypass Tunnel

Between 1999 and 2007, Brisbane experienced a 34 per cent increase in private vehicle trips. Further, 250 000 motorists have to drive through the CBD every day to get to their destination. With the anticipated increases in population, the problem was expected to worsen. Brisbane City needed a solution, but clearly did not have the resources, legislation or indeed sole responsibility to overcome the problem. Collaboration with government and the commercial sector was vital.

The North–South Bypass Tunnel (NSBT), also known as RiverCity Motorway, is a \$3.2 billion toll road to be built underground between the northern and southern sides of the Brisbane River, with operation expected in late 2010. It will be Australia’s longest and deepest tunnel, comprising two parallel tunnels, each with two lanes, almost 5km long.

The NSBT is a partnership between BCC and a consortium of companies, including Leighton Contractors and Baulderstone Hornibrook. The total concession period is 45 years, including the construction period. At that point, the asset will be transferred to BCC. At its inception, the project required partnering with the Queensland Government, as it involved groundbreaking legislation to permit a local government to develop a PPP such as a toll road. (It is the largest PPP undertaken in Queensland to date.) Clearly, a project of this magnitude could not have been conceived and executed without collaboration with the state government and the businesses that tendered for the project.

For the Brisbane community, the major benefits will be the bypassing of 18 existing sets of traffic lights, and provision of an additional Brisbane River crossing. Associated with the project is a series of improvements to public transport and cycle/pedestrian paths, and a range of urban renewal measures.

Brisbane Water Enviro Alliance

Established in 2002 as a result of concerns about nitrogen levels in Moreton Bay, the Brisbane Water Enviro Alliance (BWEA) is an alliance between BCC and

private-sector companies to upgrade four waste-water treatment plants. Benefits include:

- a new biological nutrient-removal system to treat up to nine million litres of waste water a day, removing 80 per cent more nitrogen than the previous treatment system
- environmentally friendly UV disinfection, replacing the previous chlorine-dosing method, eliminating chemicals in the discharged treated waste water.

Additionally, a thermal hydrolysis system, the first in Australia, is now in operation. It treats bio-solids to a high standard and makes them readily usable for soil and fertiliser applications. This system pressure-cooks bio-solids, breaking them down to reduce the volume and improve quality. This is the first time this process has been used in Australia, after its successful use in the United Kingdom and parts of Europe.

Methane gas produced during the treatment process assists in producing energy for the plant, reducing the need to source energy from external power suppliers. A water-tanker collection area has been established at the plant to provide the treated waste water for use in construction activities, including dust suppression.

Substantial improvements have been noted in waterway health by reducing the nitrogen content of treated waste water. From an environmental perspective, the improvement has already provided tangible benefits in Cabbage Tree Creek on Brisbane's north side, where schools of fish, large mullet and prawns, which were previously absent, are now regularly seen.

Responsive community service

Local government is taking the lead in collaboration and facilitating activities and outcomes beyond its traditional roles and responsibilities.

Homeless Connect

Homeless Connect is a program run in more than 100 US cities, bringing together local government, businesses and community groups to provide free services to homeless people for a day. These services include medical, mental health, housing, dental, legal, hairdressing, social security, food, clothing and more. Brisbane held an inaugural Homeless Connect day in November 2006 and a second in July 2007. Working with Volunteering Queensland, and through business philanthropy, we plan to hold two a year.

The two events so far saw high participation levels:

- more than 700 homeless people attended
- more than 50 services participated
- more than 400 volunteers assisted.

Services provided included:

- 150 haircuts; for some people, it was the first professional haircut they had ever had
- the council's library services waived the need for an address and signed up new members or reactivated lapsed memberships
- volunteer doctors worked to deal with a range of medical issues and also signed up people for Medicare cards.

Ninety-eight per cent of homeless people surveyed said it was a worthwhile event and they would attend again. We know from feedback from some of the volunteers who assisted on the day that they found it to be a rewarding and moving experience.

SMS and MMS service requests

One of the challenges for local government today is to meet the increasing level of community expectation that we deliver expedient and responsive services in local communities. Additionally, our research and consultation highlighted that residents also wanted to be engaged and kept informed on requests for service and council business in their suburbs.

At the same time, business units within my division, including Local Asset Services (responsible for parks, roads and drainage) and customer services (including call and contact centres), were working collaboratively to reduce follow-up calls and the necessity to make site visits to assess service requests. An opportunity was identified to use SMS technology as a simple and convenient way to contact customers.

This year, we launched the Pix-o-Gram Pilot in which residents could send an MMS to us with basic information about the nature and location of an issue to request services such as tree trimming, the filling of potholes or fixing of leaky taps in parks. This gave a clear picture of maintenance issues and reduced the time needed for site inspections. Once the work was completed, residents were advised by SMS.

The pilot has been a genuine success so far. Residents are obviously pleased to be informed of work completion. A subsidiary benefit has been the engagement with young people, who have been the primary users of the service. It has been notoriously difficult for local government to engage with the young, but the use of contemporary technologies and their preferred media has brought positive outcomes.

Kurilpa Point

Kurilpa Point is a small park just south of the city centre, adjoining a space now occupied by the Gallery of Modern Art. In 2005, it was probably the most

contested public space in Brisbane. A number of older Indigenous homeless people had settled there over time. Their presence did not affect the park significantly. As the owners of public space in the city, BCC has as one of its criteria for intervention in any situation whether access by any group is being adversely impacted by the use of another group. In this case, the situation was relatively stable and peaceful.

With time, however, other people joined the original group in the park and a range of problems ensued. Complaints of assault and robbery were made to the police, the park's barbecue and toilet facilities were pretty well permanently taken over and it was clear that many former park users felt intimidated because of the atmosphere created by heavy alcohol use. Moreover, the tacit agreement between BCC and homeless people sleeping rough in parks about moving swags and sleeping gear during the day had been broken, with mattresses and other items littering the park.

At BCC's instigation, a coalition was formed with the Queensland Police and the Department of Communities (who in turn funded the NGOs providing services to homeless people) to return Kurilpa Point to its broader community use. This was not in any sense just about moving people on but about using the concerted efforts of three agencies, each of which had a unique role to play in delivering improved public space use and transition to genuine alternatives to rough sleeping.

BCC took steps to enhance the amenity of the park: lighting was improved, vegetation was trimmed to improve sight lines, toilets and barbecues were cleaned more regularly and public space liaison staff worked with people living in the park to remove mattresses and make other arrangements for storage of gear. The police increased their passive patrolling of the area—not intervening directly with park residents unless there was a specific complaint but rather aiming to improve public perceptions of the park as a safe and well-managed space. The Department of Communities, in concert with NGOs, worked to provide intensive case-management services with emphasis on assisting to other options those whose homelessness was least entrenched.

In about six months, the number of complaints recorded was reduced by more than 70 per cent and the Queensland Police Service reported fewer incidents and offences at the site. Local crime-prevention officers were advised of reduced concerns and complaints through local networks. Several of the younger Indigenous people living on the site were provided with transport home to families with additional support offered to them there. Short-term homes and shelters were provided to a small number of users who expressed a desire to move into more mainstream accommodation. Local members of the community who used the space reported increased perceptions of safety and amenity in the area.

Community engagement

Neighbourhood planning

The challenges of a rapidly growing city, along with a commitment to sustainable development, prompted BCC to start a process of neighbourhood planning. This involved a range of locally based workshops and meetings over more than six months, culminating in a City Shape workshop in August 2005 at which residents were asked to identify some preferences for the way the city should develop into the future—for example, as a multi-centred city. This input has directly shaped the city plan, and led to the establishment of a number of local neighbourhood plans.

BCC then invited interested industry and community representatives to nominate to join a Community Planning Team in their local area. These teams represented the views and interests of local communities and worked together with council officers, technical and design experts to create neighbourhood plans for the future of their local areas.

This successful collaborative planning process, involving 55 000 people, won the 2006 Australasian Award for Robust Public Participation. BCC sees it as an integral collaborative component of a planning framework that empowers the community to guide the growth of Brisbane.

Responding to the drought

South-east Queensland is in the grip of the worst drought on record, with the level of the region's significant water storages at historic lows. In mid-2007, dams were at just 18.03 per cent capacity. While this drought has extended across many parts of the state, it creates additional challenges in the south-east region, given its high population growth. The complexity and scale of the problem make it evident that only genuine and meaningful collaboration between state and local governments and residents can facilitate an effective response.

The response to the drought comprises a range of activities. BCC is drilling in more than 15 locations across the city as part of its Aquifer Project to source up to 20 million litres a day of ground water to supplement the dwindling supply. The Queensland Government in partnership with south-eastern regional councils are undertaking major infrastructure projects involving recycled water and desalination. BCC has undertaken an innovative and collaborative new venture with the international toilet company Caroma, in which BCC staff initiated and assisted in the research and development of a new toilet unit that includes a hand-wash basin and reduces water use by half.

Without significant reduction in water consumption by the community, however, these projects alone might not be enough to secure water in the region. It is clear that residents need to be genuinely engaged; they need to recognise their role

in the problem as well as the solution and achieve sustained, long-term changes to water use and behaviour.

Since May 2005, when level-one water restrictions were applied, state and local governments have undertaken a major engagement program, comprising television, radio, print and electronic communication, as well as rebates and incentives to maximise water savings. The Target 140 campaign, launched in 2007, has been demonstrably effective: water savings of more than 40 per cent are playing a substantial role in preserving this precious resource while infrastructure projects are being completed.

Local government reflections on collaboration

The days of local councils being responsible only for 'roads, rates and rubbish' are well and truly over. What, then, can we learn from these examples that could be applicable more generally?

Crisis can create a wonderful engine for collaboration. Who would have thought that Brisbane residents could change their domestic water use so quickly and so profoundly? Successful partnering with the state government and directly with the community on water use brings to mind the powerful possibilities of other issues for which sustained behavioural change is essential: energy use (inextricably linked to water consumption, of course), public transport and increasing the level of people's physical activity.

The direct and genuine engagement of local governments with their constituents produces social capital that has many possibilities. The size and agility of local government can make it quick to respond to local problems, which can be advantageous in establishing partnerships with business and philanthropic interests for which dealing with bureaucratic decision-making processes can be frustrating.

True collaboration requires a mutuality of need and benefit; local government is not averse to taking on other responsibilities but resists being treated as a junior partner because of its size. From a local government perspective, there is, unfortunately, a recent history of functions and responsibilities being shifted to local government without consultation or agreement and perhaps, most importantly, without funding. Environmental regulation is an example of this.

Future directions and possibilities for collaboration with local government

The south-east Queensland Council of Mayors is currently considering the possibility of formalised resource sharing and shared service arrangements. Such a concept could go beyond organisational services such as payroll and procurement, to vegetation and pest management and regulatory services. Perhaps we need to rethink some of the traditional boundaries of responsibility

between local and state and territory governments. New partnerships are possible but they require fundamental reconsideration of the limitations on local government revenue raising, such as occurred with BCC's collaboration with the Queensland Government in undertaking the legislative change necessary for the North–South Bypass Tunnel.

Just as Commonwealth funding is increasingly tied to special purposes, it is possible for the federal and state and territory governments to enter into specific partnerships with one or more local governments to 'dip their toe in the water' of a particular policy or project. Arguably, pilot arrangements such as these could be increasingly necessary to determine optimal methods for implementing large-scale programs or those with high community impact. Issues such as high-speed broadband connection and disaster-management arrangements come to mind as possibilities.

The need to embrace new technologies and media is evident. Although programs such as neighbourhood planning have demonstrated that residents are still prepared to turn out in their thousands to contribute to planning the future shape of their city, there are many others for whom a virtual relationship is sufficient. Use of these technologies is not merely a customer service imperative, it is a democratic one.

Conclusion

The prospects for collaboration among local governments and other parties are exciting. At the same time, a cautionary note needs to be sounded about the need for genuine partnerships. A further issue that needs addressing is whether the fiscal restraints on local government are commensurate with the increasingly diverse and complex nature of their responsibilities.

The report on the Global Dialogue on Federalism referred to above noted:

In the age of globalization, where the world is getting smaller, communities have a renewed interest in the comfort zone [that the level of] government closest to them may offer. Although the majority of local governments are still to be found in small towns and villages...the majority of the population in most countries live in cities and metropolitan regions, the governance of which is not only more complex, but also affects the health of the entire country.

Local government is inherently collaborative in structure and orientation. The extent to which other government, business and community partners can leverage this capacity is exponential, and can only benefit the communities in which we live, work and play.