



Effectively Communicating Resource Sharing

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Resource sharing is a much needed life line for many Local Governments offering benefits such as improved economic viability and increased access to specialised services and skills. Barry Easter, your association president, commented in the November 2009 LGAT newsletter that for many councils, resource sharing was the only way to make them viable into the future as sustainable units.

But while resource sharing is a useful approach to the provision of local government services and in many cases is the only way to stave off a forced amalgamation, it is not without its dangers.

One of the potential minefields when councils start resource sharing is local community representation - when assets and positions, including positions such as the General Manager role (as we've seen Circular Head and Waratah Wynyard Councils do), are shared, to ensure that each individual council community understands what it is getting out of the process, particularly whether it is receiving the same level and equality of representation.

Much of the success of resource sharing relies on open communication both within councils and with your respective communities at all stages of the planning process.

While resource sharing usually means a better standard of service for the local governments involved, it is likely that some people in the community will have concerns. These concerns could include thinking that resource sharing means that their council is losing its autonomy, that they won't have the same access to services, representation, input into decision making or that it is the beginning of an unwanted amalgamation of councils.

Councils need to communicate with their communities to allay these fears and bring them along as part of the journey.

This communication cannot be ad hoc, after the decision has been made, or when the first signs of public unhappiness and resentment begin.

As part of the process towards reaching a resource sharing agreement, there needs to be a systematic communications plan to make sure that all stakeholders and most especially the ratepayers are fully aware of the costs and benefits of resource sharing and why it is being considered and some reassurance the Local Governments involved understand the communities' needs and wishes.

In actuality, it is the application of sound project management practice: strategic communications as a component of stakeholder and issues management, engendering trust and credibility.

Resource sharing between local governments is the future and properly managed, will be an experience that builds communities.

With over ten years experience as a journalist and media adviser, Becher Townshend is now a leading issues and crisis management consultant in Tasmania and managing director of Font Public Relations. Formerly the chief political reporter and commentator with The Advocate newspaper and prior to that, state political reporter for Southern Cross Television, Becher has extensive experience in print and electronic media. Becher has delivered media training to managers and professionals for eight years and he has won awards for journalism excellence in areas of business and tourism and received a Tasmanian gold award in Marketing Communications in the PRIA State Awards for Excellence.

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