

ACELG

Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government

The Consortium

The ACELG consortium is a unique collaboration of universities and professional bodies that have a strong commitment to the advancement of local government. All have ‘ready to go’ programs, facilities and staffing support that will be placed at the disposal of the new Centre, so that it can begin work immediately.

The Centre will be headquartered at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), with offices also in Melbourne and Canberra.

The consortium includes the long established UTS Centre for Local Government; the University of Canberra (UC), which for many years hosted the former Australian Centre for Local Government Studies; local government’s two largest professional institutes – Local Government Managers Australia and the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia; and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government – a national network of universities that offers Australia’s premier executive leadership program.

In addition, there are three initial ‘program partners’ to provide support in specialist areas and extend the consortium’s national reach: the Australian National University; Charles Darwin University; and Edith Cowan University. It is expected that further program partners will be engaged from time to time.

The consortium also has strong links to a wide range of local government organizations across the English-speaking world, including the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, UK Improvement and Development Agency, International City County Managers Association (USA), and universities in the UK, Canada, USA, New Zealand and South Africa.

Vision and Terms of Reference

Our vision highlights the pursuit of excellence. It is: ***World-class local government to meet the emerging challenges of 21st century Australia.*** At the end of its initial five years, the Centre will have brought about enduring improvements in local government’s capacity and performance.

To achieve this vision, the Centre will provide:

- A national network and framework within which local government organizations, government agencies, academic institutions, training bodies and other key stakeholders can collaborate in areas of mutual interest
- Research and development capacity to support policy formulation, drive innovation and help address the challenges facing local government
- Leadership in facilitating informed debate on key policy issues

- A clearing house for the exchange of information and ideas, identifying, showcasing and promoting innovation and best practice in local government
- Inputs to capacity building programs across the local government sector, with an initial emphasis on long term financial sustainability and asset management
- Support for workforce development initiatives including education, training and skills development for both staff **and** elected members
- A specialist focus on the particular needs of local government in rural and remote areas, including Indigenous local governance.

Guiding Principles

- To be effective, the Centre must be grounded in and serve the local government system: it must not be seen as an ‘outsider’ organisation or one pursuing esoteric academic interests
- The Centre should be practice-oriented: whilst research is essential to promote innovation and inform policy, it should be designed to lead to practical outcomes
- The Centre should focus on adding value, filling gaps and seeding new initiatives: as a general rule it should not duplicate or compete with existing programs
- The Centre should be inclusive: it should the active involvement of all those with expertise and ideas to contribute
- Given limited resources, the Centre must focus on a limited number of strategic interventions.

Activities

The Centre will operate across six program areas shown in Figure 1. It will:

- identify and build on existing networks, programs and services to ensure efficiency in its activities and operations, avoid duplication and address gaps
- ensure that its activities and operations are targeted, effective and responsive to the needs of local government
- establish a network of websites for dissemination of information to the local government sector, building on existing key resources such as the National Institute for Rural and Regional Australia
- develop an online knowledge and best practice exchange for open access by the local government sector
- provide direct industry access via practitioner partners’ existing networks, memberships and communications infrastructure (eg. newsletters, journals, websites – including related commercial media)
- convene periodic search conferences and ideas forums for the local government sector and key stakeholders
- support or provide courses and other learning programs in all States and Territories via partner organizations and/or online delivery, including delivery in rural regions
- facilitate further development and adaptation for national application of existing learning programs, including both professional development courses and graduate management programs
- undertake a national research project in its first year of operation to determine the most effective and appropriate methods for delivery of learning programs to the local government sector, particularly in rural and remote regions.

In the context of supporting national policy debate, the Centre can play two key roles:

- Act as a lead agency in facilitating and informing discussion of current and emerging issues and challenges for local government
- Provide further research and technical support to develop potential solutions to the issues and challenges that emerge through this debate.

As the Australian federation evolves, notably through the establishment and/or further development of a range of intergovernmental institutions and mechanisms, local government must be in a position to play a constructive role in informing and addressing national agendas – such as those set out by COAG. Currently it is poorly resourced to do so. It is clear, therefore, that the Centre should be available to assist the Australian Local Government Association and the Australian Council of Local Government in articulating local government’s policy positions. Through a partnership with these organizations, the Centre can be highly effective in generating discussion and debate of current and emerging issues for local government, and in exploring options to successfully address these challenges involved.

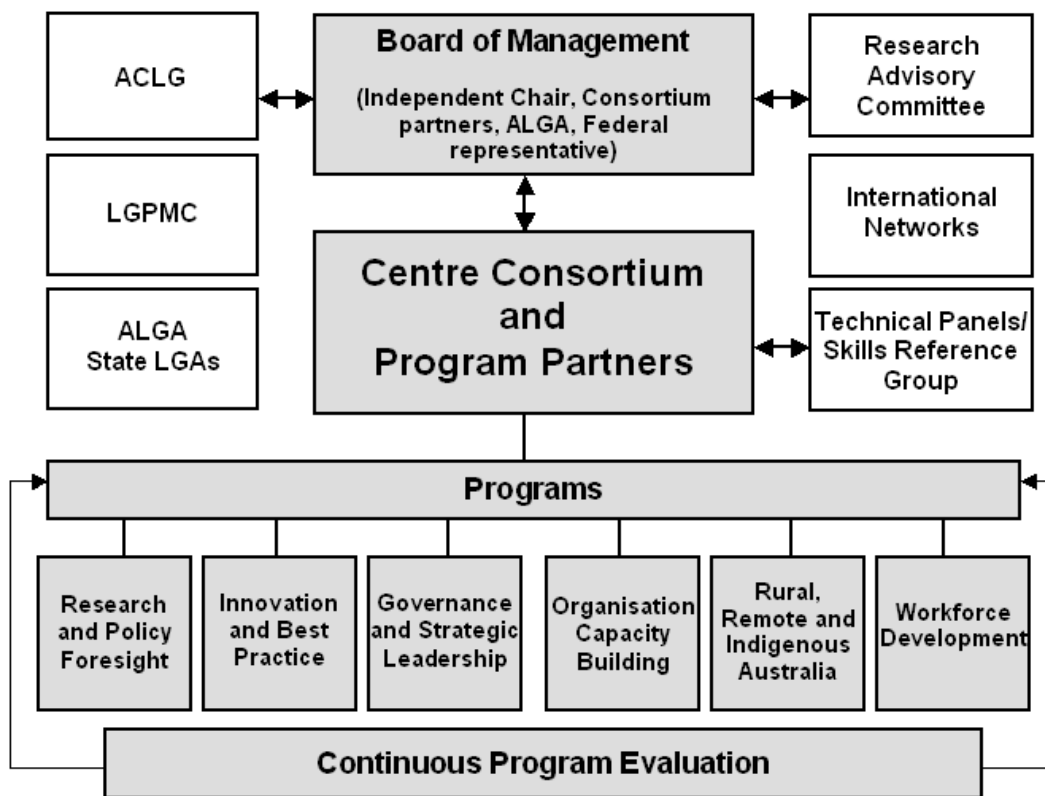
The Centre can also facilitate national reach and coverage of issues under debate through its own programs and communication channels, including conference and seminar presentations by key personnel and mainstream media attention. It is also intended that the Centre would develop appropriate resources, such as its website and a periodic newsletter or bulletin, to better inform the local government sector and other interested parties about the nature of emerging issues and challenges.

Governance and Relationships with Key Stakeholders

The proposed governance framework, including relationships with key stakeholders, is shown in Figure 1. The aim is to position the Centre as an integral part of the local government network, with effective working links to key national bodies. Important features are as follows:

- A small, manageable core consortium, supported as required by program partners in each of six key areas
- A Board of Management including an independent chair and representatives of ALGA and the federal Minister
- Reporting channels and accountability and working links to the ACLG, Local Government and Planning Ministers Council, and Local Government Associations
- Specialist inputs from ad hoc technical panels (eg to inform or validate an area of best practice), from the LGMA Skills Unit Reference Group, and from international partners
- A standing Research Advisory Committee to provide advice on priorities and commissioning of research or responses to requests for funding
- Ongoing evaluation of the Centre’s programs and achievements to identify emerging issues and needs, and to ensure continuous improvement.

Figure 1: Governance and Program Framework



Implementation Strategy

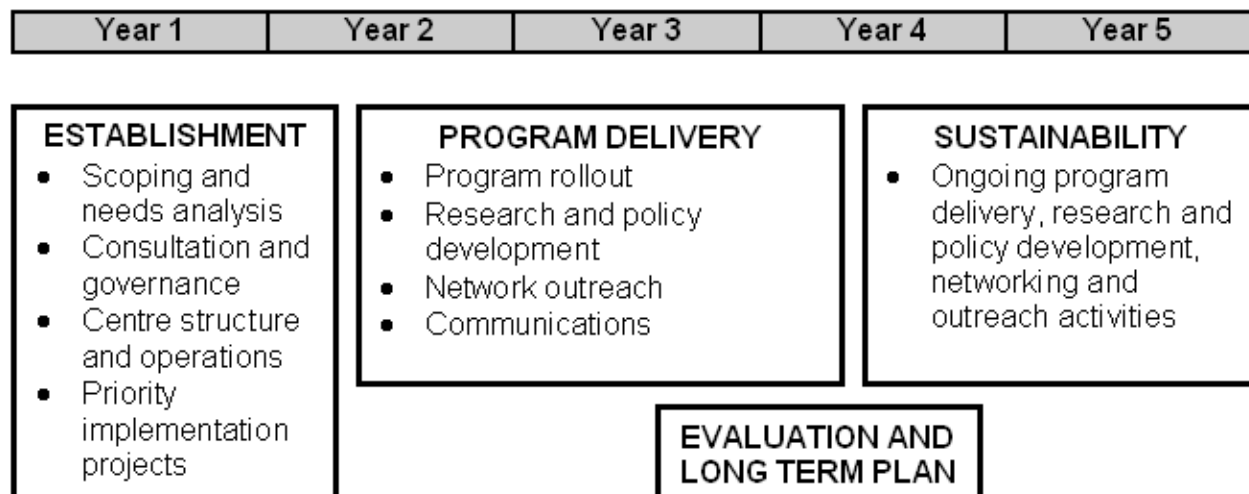
Figure 2 summarises the consortium’s implementation strategy. This is designed on the basis of the key program areas identified in Figure 1. Operation of the Centre over the first five years will be in three phases:

- **Phase 1** (Years 1-2) covers the Centre’s establishment and initial operations over the first 12-18 months. This will focus on background research and data collection, liaison with stakeholders, and launching priority activities under each key program area.
- **Phase 2** (Years 2-4) represents the peak working phase of the Centre, during which a wide range of programs will be developed and rolled out in order to bring about a substantial and lasting boost to local government capability and effectiveness. A major review will be conducted at the end of this phase.
- **Phase 3** (Years 4-5) would involve bedding down sustainable longer term operations at either the higher or lower level.

Towards the end of Phase 2 (no later than the beginning of Year 4), a major evaluation of the Centre’s progress will be conducted. This will have two principal aims:

- To determine what has been achieved and what long-term plans should be put in place
- To assess the local government sector’s willingness to support ongoing operations, **either** at a modest level that can be resourced along similar lines to the Centre’s current operation, **or** at a substantially higher level, perhaps along the lines of the UK IDeA.

Figure 2: Implementation Strategy



Project Plan

The consortium will prepare a detailed Project Plan (business plan) for approval by the Centre’s Board and the federal government. This will include a budget, KPIs and milestones. It will reflect the vision, guiding principles, programs and activities outlined above.

The Project budget will be based on the following approach:

- The Centre’s own activities will be relatively limited: mostly it will seek to **invest** in and operate through the established programs of the Consortium members and program partners
- A build-up of expenditure over Years 1-3, followed by consolidation and implementation of a sustainable long term model (unless support is generated for a larger ongoing organisation as mentioned earlier)
- Retention of up to \$3m in invested capital from the endowment to generate a permanent income stream beyond Year 5
- Matching of that income stream with ongoing in-kind contributions by the consortium members and program partners; subscriptions paid by local councils; research grants; fee income etc to generate long term sustainable revenues.

Long-term sustainability of the Centre will be supported by the guaranteed continuing operations of the consortium members, all of which are sustainable in their own right and able to make an ongoing contribution. There is no need for the Centre per se to become a large, self-sustaining entity: to do so it would almost certainly have to enter into competition with existing providers and this would be contrary to the guiding principles.

However, if the local government sector, perhaps in collaboration with the federal government, decided at the end of Year 3 to support a major new capacity building organisation along the lines of the UK Improvement and Development Agency (or something similar), the approach taken would be modified accordingly.

Key Personnel

Key personnel involved in the early development of the Centre will be:

University of Technology Sydney

Associate Professor Graham Sansom, Director, UTS Centre for Local Government

(The UTS Centre for Local Government will initially host the Centre of Excellence and Associate Professor Sansom will be interim Director)

Associate Professor Michael Paddon, Research Director, Institute for Sustainable Futures

Professor Roy Green, Dean of the Faculty of Business

University of Canberra/ANZSOG

Dr John H Howard, Director of the Innovation Research Unit

Professor Mark Evans, Director of ANZSOG Institute

Dr Chris Aulich, Adjunct Professor

Local Government Managers Australia

Mr John Ravlic, Chief Executive

Institute for Public Works Engineering Australia

Mr Chris Champion, Chief Executive Officer

Summary of Programs

The following is a brief summary of current thinking on each of the six program areas. This will be subject to further discussion with key stakeholders as part of the Project Plan, and in ongoing dialogue throughout the life of the Centre.

1. Research and Policy Foresight (Lead Partners: UTS, UC, LGMA)

This program will have two main objectives:

- To provide a strong evidence base to underpin the work of the Centre and identify areas of activity requiring further attention
- To support local government in policy development.

The first stream of research will focus on new areas of research and policy development to address gaps in the evidence base for the Centre's activities – notably promotion of best practice – and for the advancement of local government nationally. Research initiatives in this stream will underpin the Centre's policy and program initiatives and will support other research efforts undertaken by governments in partnership with industry and research organisations. It will assist in offering practical responses to current and future challenges.

The second stream will seek to identify existing research and policy initiatives at a national and international level in fields relevant to local government. This research will be compiled to form an information resource in database or other form for open access by the local government sector.

Such a resource will provide local government with insights into current and emerging issues, and provide the Centre with an effective foundation in promoting national discussion and debate on local government issues. and will offer practical solutions to address them.

2. Innovation and Best Practice (Lead Partners: UC, UTS)

Most organisations see innovation as a way to increase efficiency and productivity, often by using new methods and technologies to improve service delivery, work processes, and management practices. However, innovation is also concerned with transforming organisations and the way they interact with their constituencies – to fundamentally change the way in which resources available are used to deliver results.

The Centre will progressively identify achievements and best practice across all key areas of local government activity, both within Australia and overseas. This work will focus on developing a clearer understanding of the practices, strategies, attributes and behaviours that characterise innovative local governments and identify the specific supports, initiatives and actions that need to be undertaken to deliver innovation outcomes.

Prior work will be referenced, including work funded under the former Local Government Development Program (LGDP) and by State/Territory local government departments. New case studies will also be undertaken covering the dimensions of innovation identified above and in differing contexts (metropolitan, regional, rural, remote). *Best Practice Guides* will be prepared from this material for dissemination to councils and for use as a teaching and learning resource in other Centre programs.

This program will also support the operation of a *Knowledge Exchange*. The network will be based on the principles of knowledge management and knowledge transfer, and will involve the following attributes: referencing (an electronic ‘library’ of resources relating to innovation and best practice in local government); translation (creating meaningful information for end users—often from research results); publication (electronic access to monographs, papers, reports, guides, multimedia); and transmission and brokerage (direct communication with secondary providers and end users).

3. Governance and Strategic Leadership (Lead Partners: LGMA, ANZSOG)

Issues of governance and strategic leadership are critical areas for attention in both the administrative and elected arms of local government nationally, and the Centre will give priority to improving performance in these fields. The Centre will source existing training and education programs and develop appropriate new programs to provide local government with a comprehensive array of opportunities for skills development. The primary objective of these programs will be to foster an understanding of the paramount importance of strong strategic leadership and good governance practices and to build the capacity of local government to develop and adopt consistent and high standards in leadership and governance.

In its early stages, the Centre will develop and deliver two major national programs:

- A senior leadership program to be offered through the ANZSOG network in parallel with similar programs offered to federal and state officials
- An emerging leaders program to be managed by LGMA that will build on current initiatives such as the Management Challenge.

4. Organisation Capacity Building (Lead Partners: LGMA, IPWEA, UTS)

A principal aim of the Centre will be to build the capacity of local government to work as an effective partner in the Australian system of government. Over the initial 5 years of operations, this will require initiatives across a wide range of national agendas.

The early focus will be on the two most pressing issues currently faced by local government nationally, these being the planning, maintenance and renewal of public assets and infrastructure, and the long term financial sustainability of local councils. In this regard, the program will draw heavily on the expertise, experience and participation of our practitioner partners to provide national guidance in identifying, developing and promoting the adoption of successful models of asset management and financial planning.

Local government thrives on practical tools, case studies examples and guidance. It has, however, suffered from being fragmented into State systems and over 500 councils. The Centre will consolidate national approaches in priority areas – and deliver using practical workshops, tools, guidelines, online models and templates in partnership with the sector. It will also support strong communities of practice, networking peers and experts in the process of capacity building. These communities will also provide the practitioner reference for further enhancement and ongoing development of the programs.

In later years this program is expected to extend across other fields such as sustainability and environmental management, social inclusion and community development, urban planning and governance, economic development etc. There will be a structured approach to identifying and pursuing new priority areas, including convening technical advisory panels.

5. Rural, Remote and Indigenous Australia (Lead Partners: CDU, ANU, ECU)

Rural, remote and Indigenous councils operate in a different context to urban and provincial councils. They are typically resource-poor and highly dependent on grants. They experience severe difficulties in attracting and retaining staff. Often the key issue is not so much one of improvement, as of establishing and maintaining basic capacity in the first instance.

At the same time, their communities look to councils to ensure that adequate health services (particularly primary health care), education (including tertiary education), transport, and arts, cultural and recreational facilities are provided. They expect local government not only to be a competent service provider, but also to be an advocate, facilitator and partner in service delivery by Commonwealth and State/Territory governments. Many Commonwealth programs, for example in the environment and health care, look to partnering with local government. Given this increased burden of meeting so many needs with limited resources, resource sharing and collaboration among councils emerge as potentially key strategies.

The Rural, Remote and Indigenous Program will initially seek to identify those areas in which the Centre can most usefully assist these councils, and the best means of providing assistance. It cannot simply be assumed that extensive online provision of information and/or distance education programs, are the best options. An important area for research and policy development, building on recent studies into the financial sustainability of councils, will be to consider what other policy interventions by federal and State governments are needed to complement any assistance the Centre may be able to provide.

The program will develop case examples drawn from both previous and contemporary studies, and sharing of information and ‘lessons learned’ through the Knowledge Exchange Network to be developed under Program 2.

6. Workforce Development (Lead Partners: LGMA, UTS, ECU)

Technological and demographic changes in Australian society are dramatically changing the national workforce and this is particularly evident in local government. A key issue is the skills shortage threatening a number of areas of local government activity. However, the need for workforce development is much broader than that: continuous improvement and adaptation to change is essential for effective service delivery and to enable local government to respond to emerging challenges.

The Centre will address two key factors in implementing its Workforce Development program:

- Local government is an employment and economic driver that delivers key social, environmental and economic services to communities across Australia.
- To be effective, local government requires a skilled workforce and must compete effectively with other governments and the private sector to attract and retain suitable staff.

The Centre will therefore support a wide range of activities to enhance skills, employment diversity (including gender equity) and career paths; facilitate provision of professional development opportunities; improve the public image of local government; and showcase the sector as an employer of choice. In so doing, the Centre will work closely with the LGMA Skills Reference Group, the National Skills Shortage Steering Committee, and established providers of education and training. It will only deliver programs itself where there are gaps in provision that cannot readily be addressed in other ways.

Local government requires a balance of university graduates and technicians with a broad understanding and appreciation of theory and practice. In order to create and sustain this balance the Centre will work towards the development of programs with both theory-based and competency-based components. We envisage programs with a strong workplace-learning component, and that new or upgraded courses will be designed with a cross-disciplinary focus to deliver management and leadership components as well as technical expertise.