

Reconciliation in Local Government Project

Presentation to National Roundtable on Indigenous Employment in Local Government

Redfern Town Hall, 26 July 2011

1. Partnership

National and State Reconciliation Bodies in partnership with Local Government Peak Body and supported by State Government...interests coalesced around importance of localised commitments and approaches to improving relationships between Aboriginal and other Australians, promoting recognition of Aboriginal people and improved opportunities for Aboriginal people, and the central role Local Government can play in this.

a. Reconciliation Victoria

- Victorian peak reconciliation body. A bi-cultural organisation with Aboriginal & non-Aboriginal members
- Works toward respectful relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.
- Works to support community driven reconciliation at the local-level, including through network of Local Reconciliation Groups
- Strategic focus on Local Government over last 12 months, as this provided opportunity to support localised approaches, and included scope for making agreements

b. Victorian Local Governance Association

- Strengthening local democracy, supporting local government capacity
- Interest in supporting Councils to address Indigenous recognition, participation and reconciliation. Past projects include supporting increase in Aboriginal women's participation in local government.

c. Reconciliation Australia

- Interested to participate to further understanding of Local Government sector and usefulness of RAP tool for LGs.
- Move towards supporting community-led reconciliation, and importance of localised and holistic responses

d. Aboriginal Affairs Victoria

- Focus on community strengthening, administering Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006
- Local Government an important stakeholder in Aboriginal Cultural Heritage
- Also interested in links between Local Governments and the Local Indigenous Networks, who have been developing their own community plans
- Provided funding for the project

Formed an MoU agreeing to work together to advance reconciliation with local government.

- Reconciliation Australia brought tools and advice based on successful RAP program
- VLGA brought their strong local government networks and knowledge, and hosted the project coordinator
- Aboriginal Affairs Victoria provided funding and Aboriginal community connections, including through Local Indigenous Networks
- Reconciliation Victoria coordinated the project and drew on understanding of reconciliation in Victorian context and network with grassroots community groups

2. Project Overview

- A 12 month action-research pilot project.
- Project Coordinator employed part-time by Reconciliation Victoria, hosted by VLGA.
- Governed by Project Reference Group involving Project Partners – meets quarterly.
- Three Local Governments selected and invited to participate, required to commit to developing a Reconciliation Action Plan.
- Participating Councils are Whittlesea, fast-growing outer-metro council, Baw Baw, rural council and Stonnington, inner-city council. Councils have 5 Aboriginal staff, 1 and none respectively
- Project involves providing advice, guidance and assistance to councils developing RAPs and documenting learnings. Also involves engaging the sector to identify issues and provide support through networking and conferences/forums to improve connections with Aboriginal communities and advance reconciliation. Held large forum for Local Government officers and a second forum for Mayors, Councillors and CEOs - featuring highly regarded Aboriginal speakers talking about how to improve connections between Local Governments and Aboriginal communities.
- Aims of the project are to learn about opportunities and challenges of the Reconciliation Action Plan approach for Local Governments, and to identify needs and appropriate supports to aid the sector to re-kindle the dialogue on reconciliation


3. Learnings

a. General

- A Reconciliation Action Plan is one tool Local Governments can use, however is not the only tool and should be considered alongside a range of processes and tools Councils can consider. A Reconciliation Action Plan may include actions that result in consideration of MoUs or Agreements between the Council and Aboriginal community, as per Glenelg.
- The Reconciliation Action Planning process can take a long time for Councils given the need to meaningfully engage the community. This engagement process is as important as the outcome – respectful relationships are fundamental.
- The Reconciliation Action Plan is useful as an internal document that helps to build organisational capacity to be a culturally safe organisation. It also helps to build relationships and trust with community through engagement.

- Reconciliation shouldn't be about 'programs for Aboriginal people' – but about creating bi-cultural organisations and societies that recognise, respect and value ATSI culture and people. Acknowledging shared history, healing and recognition are fundamental.
- Key challenges for Councils are engagement and funding.
- Important to acknowledge '**engagement spectrum**' and aim towards the right ...

Consultation Decision-making / control



- Aboriginal staff working for council, particularly in a Liaison role, can make a significant contribution to Councils ability to engage the Aboriginal community in the process. This contribution includes helping community members to:
 - feel comfortable to ask questions & learn more about how local government works,
 - feel confident to walk into council as they'll be served by someone who understands their needs and concerns, and will ensure their contact with council is positive experience,
 - be willing to participate on a Council committee or agree to be 'consulted'.

This is an invaluable asset for Council and is perhaps not often recognised and valued as such. It builds communities trust with Council and greatly assists council to meet their obligation to ensure quality of service provision to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

b. Indigenous employment and retention

- Indigenous staff in a liaison role can have huge demands and pressure on them from both their community and from Council. This needs to be carefully managed to ensure the staff member is supported and expectations are realistic and reasonable. The pressure and demands can be unsustainable for staff in this position.
 - Employers should be mindful of these pressures and support the worker
 - Employers should recognise and acknowledge the huge asset that these workers are for Council, and accord those staff with the corresponding respect, support and career pathways they deserve.
- Indigenous staff can be relied on to 'let the organisation off the hook'...that is anything Indigenous-related gets handed to that person to deal with, and Council does not embark on cultural change across the organisation to ensure that all staff are equipped to respectfully engage with Aboriginal community and that Council is a place seen as welcoming and reflective of the Aboriginal community.
 - Important for Council to see value in cultural change and commit to this. This incorporates provisions for flexible work conditions for sorry and cultural business etc.
- Aboriginal staff can be pigeon-holed...only considered in Indigenous-specific roles or assumed to be interested in Indigenous-related opportunities, rather than supported to access roles across the spectrum of the organisation
 - Employment Strategies should look at opportunities across the whole organisation, horizontally and vertically

- Opportunities for career development and progression can be limited for Indigenous staff especially in Liaison roles...few Aboriginal staff in senior management positions
 - Retention strategies should support individual career plans
- Need for non-Indigenous Managers of Indigenous staff to be supported/encouraged to build understanding, knowledge and skills that will both support them in their role as Managers and ensure the staff member is appropriately supported in their roles, ie. Through Aboriginal cultural awareness training, cross-cultural management training and mentoring support.
 - Managers of Aboriginal staff need to build up their understanding and skills to provide effective management support and to gain benefits from working with Aboriginal colleagues
- Great for Councils to pursue funding opportunities and partnerships with schools/tafes etc to offer traineeships...however if no ongoing employment opportunity is made available following on from this it reinforces mistrust and disappointment that is often expected by communities of governments
 - Pursue traineeship opportunities but ensure they are linked to ongoing employment and work hard at retention strategies.
- Other model to consider instead of employing within Council- increasing support for local Aboriginal community organisations to support delivery of council services, ie funding for MCH worker position within Aboriginal health service; procurement through Indigenous organisations and businesses for works, land & heritage, catering etc.

4. Conclusion....

Imagine a Council as an employer-of-choice....

Council is a bi-cultural organisation, with mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Councillors and staff....

Council is a leader in promoting knowledge of local shared history and valuing inputs of both Aboriginal culture and non-Indigenous cultures to community, including through ways it cares for country, names rivers, roads, bridges and places, designs public spaces and displays artwork...

Council is an organisation that offers diverse employment opportunities in a welcoming and culturally safe environment, and supports career development pathways for all staff.