

## Engaging with Queensland Communities

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### Abstract

The Queensland Government is committed to being responsive and accessible to all Queenslanders. Utilising a range of innovative community engagement mechanisms and networks, the government is striving to work with communities so they are able to develop local solutions to local problems.

In May 2004 the Queensland Government announced a regional coordination framework comprises of three initiatives designed to improve delivery of government services:

- An advisory committee to the Minister for Communities, Disability Services and Seniors — the Regional Queensland Council
- A new model for Regional Managers' Forums — the Regional Managers' Coordination Networks
- A new model for Ministerial Regional Community Forums.

The forums are conducted regularly in ten regions across Queensland. These forums develop strategies to address regional issues and are attended by cabinet ministers and parliamentary secretaries. Forums provide rural and regional Queenslanders with the opportunity to have input into state government policy development and decision-making.

Forum members are chosen based on their ability to network with their local community and develop solutions to issues.

The strength of this framework is the tangible and powerful link it provides between the community and government. The Regional Queensland Council conveys major issues and solutions raised in Ministerial Regional Community Forums directly to the minister. The Council also works with Regional Managers' Coordination Networks to address and resolve operational issues relating to government service delivery in regions.

### Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the Queensland Government's new Regional Coordination and Engagement model. The initiatives that make up this model are part of a broader agenda aiming to link government with Queenslanders by being more accessible, and listening and working more closely with regions. The model contributes to the

Queensland Government's goal of delivering responsive government throughout Queensland and building regional communities.

It is a brave new world. This Regional Coordination and Engagement Model is part of an international agenda to engage more effectively with communities and to better coordinate and target the delivery of government services at the local level. Many governments are facing similar challenges and are striving to more effectively engage their populations. In some countries in recent years, more people have voted in reality television show polls than in their national elections.

The community expects government to be efficient, solution-focused and responsive. Community members expect government to provide services that are easy to access, simple to use and meet their needs. Community engagement is one of the key strategies being utilised by the Queensland Government to build and develop more responsive policies and services.

To better engage regional communities, the Queensland Government has developed and continues to revise broad whole-of-government community engagement policies and mechanisms.

This initiative provides a way for regional communities to work directly with government and elected officials to improve outcomes on the ground, particularly in relation to service delivery.

Queensland has achieved some commendable benchmarks over the past few years. We were the first state to have Regional Managers' Forums, mechanisms where senior regional managers of state government departments met to discuss the issues impacting on their local communities. We introduced Community Cabinets, a process where cabinet meets in regional centres and provides an opportunity for individuals and groups to meet one-on-one with state government Ministers. We have advanced e-democracy in a manner that reflects international best practice. Additionally, Queensland was the first state to conduct Ministerial Regional Community Forums on an ongoing basis, a mechanism where community members and elected officials work together to develop solutions to complex local issues. The initiatives that I will speak about today have a strong commitment from the Queensland Premier. They also have strong leadership from ministers and chief executive officers of government departments. Their fundamental purpose is to improve the quality of life for all Queenslanders.

Our model of regional coordination and engagement aims to:

- strengthen the voice of regional Queenslanders
- identify priority local and regional issues

- recognise that complex community problems require partnerships to resolve them
- develop local solutions and improve service delivery.

### **The model**

In May 2004 the Queensland Government endorsed a regional coordination and engagement model. This model comprises three initiatives:

1. a council of government members of parliament to advise the Minister for Communities, Disability Services and Seniors about regional issues. This group is called the Regional Queensland Council
2. a new approach to encourage collaboration between government agencies at the regional level, through Regional Managers' Coordination Networks
3. a new model for the state government's Ministerial Regional Community Forums, which allow key community members to have direct dialogue with Ministers to resolve regional issues.

The Department of Communities coordinates these initiatives. The major benefit of the overall model is that the three initiatives are designed to work together to allow local issues to be resolved in the most appropriate and expedient way.

### **The Regional Queensland Council (RQC)**

The Regional Queensland Council is an initiative that provides a mechanism for government to listen to and engage with regional Queenslanders.

The Regional Queensland Council comprises ten members of parliament from across Queensland's regions. The council meets on a regular basis and provides information and advice about key regional issues and concerns directly to the Minister for Communities, Disability Services and Seniors.

One Regional Queensland Council member works with each of the Ministerial Regional Community Forums in an ongoing way. The council members convene and participate in joint planning sessions with Ministerial Regional Community Forum members and Regional Managers' Coordination Networks so that the collective wisdom of community, public service and elected officials can be harnessed to develop solutions to local issues.

The council also conducts tours of regional Queensland to see firsthand the initiatives some communities are undertaking to build their sustainability and also to hear their issues and concerns. During a two-day 'Listening Tour' conducted in October 2004, for example, Regional Queensland Council members met with community members of two small rural centres and visited a youth support service. This service works with school students at risk of

disengaging from education, training and employment opportunities, as well as those that have disengaged from the education system.

The council members were advised of the outcomes of the program, including strengthened family relationships; improved wellbeing of students through more supportive schools, families and communities; and the students' successes in achieving desired social and educational goals.

The Queensland Government provided funding to the project and due to its success, the service will be expanded to other rural communities. These 'Listening Tours' by the Regional Queensland Council are an opportunity for communities to showcase best practice in service delivery; and thereby enable the councillors to be better positioned to propose local solutions as they travel across Queensland, work with the Regional Managers' Coordination Networks, convene the Ministerial Regional Community Forums and represent Queenslanders in parliament.

### **Regional Managers' Coordination Networks (RMCNs)**

Regional Managers' Coordination Networks involve the most senior state government officers at the regional level. Across Queensland there are 15 Networks. Their core objectives are:

- to assist government agencies to achieve economic, social and environmental benefits for Queensland regions through coordinating priority cross-agency initiatives at the regional level
- to ensure that services align with government priorities and community needs by supporting collaboration across state government agencies, and with local government, business and communities.

Cross-government service responses to address homelessness, education and training reforms and integrated human services planning and delivery are currently being progressed through these networks.

For example, in Far North Queensland the network is implementing a project for a more integrated approach to using and managing government-owned facilities, in order to achieve greater efficiencies with government resources. In North West Queensland the network is working on a project in the Doomadgee area to create an innovative and engaging learning experience for young people who are currently not in school, work or training. The project will also provide a pathway to training and employment for those young people who did not continue school past Year 10.

Whilst on Queensland's Sunshine Coast the network has developed a protocol that will streamline the way agencies work together to deliver services to clients with complex needs.

The issue of water management is being addressed in the Ipswich area, south west of Brisbane, through a project focussed on a water re-use strategy. This strategy focuses on the sustainable development of industry, agriculture and the community by utilising re-used water from industry.

Gold Coast Schoolies Week is another example of Priority Project of the Queensland government through the Gold Coast Regional Managers' Coordination Network. Gold Coast Schoolies Week is the largest gathering of its type in the southern hemisphere, with 30,000 to 35,000 young people attending in its first week each year. It has been crucial to the success of Schoolies Week to engage with young people to develop solutions to the issues of safety, security, drug use and alcohol use. Key stakeholders have included: young people in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria; Surfers Paradise residents; Surfers Paradise businesses and traders; accommodation providers; community groups; and parents. The Regional Managers' Coordination Network participates in the planning, development and delivery of services for Gold Coast Schoolies Week. They engage with stakeholder groups to ensure that the needs of young people are met effectively and that business needs of Surfers Paradise traders are also addressed.

Gold Coast Schoolies Week continues to be a model of exemplary cross-government responses to the challenge of community engagement. These integrated community engagement strategies span local, state and federal governments, businesses, community and the non-government sector.

### **Ministerial Regional Community Forums (MRCFs)**

Ministerial Regional Community Forums aim to provide regional Queenslanders with better access to government, including the opportunity to influence decision making and policy development. The MRCFs are convened by regional Queensland councillors and regional managers of state government attend depending upon the issues under discussion.

Ministerial Regional Community Forums are meetings open to the public where cabinet ministers and appointed regional community-based leaders, known as Forum members, share information and discuss initiatives, issues and ideas relevant to the region. Government ministers make a commitment to work with the community to develop appropriate courses of action. Forum members commit to work with government and the community to achieve realistic outcomes. The MRCFs also assist cabinet ministers who attend these events, to better understand and appreciate regional needs, issues and priorities.

For example, at the Bundaberg Forum in May 2000, Forum member Barry Johnson outlined the need for dedicated agriculture training in the Wide Bay region. As a result, the Wide Bay

TAFE, Queensland Rural Industry Training Council, Department of Primary Industries, FARMBIS, and Forum members met to discuss the training needs and explore potential solutions. Through a partnership with Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers, a Horticultural Skills Development Project was developed. This project aimed to ensure farm workers and growers gained formal qualifications through the recognition of prior learning. The government contributed \$220,000 to the project. In the spirit of partnership, Forum member Jim Mullett made his citrus property available to the government (free of charge), as a training venue. By October 2002, 548 people had gained formal qualifications in one or more skills. These included chemical accreditation, computer skills, and workplace health and safety qualifications. The project went on to win the Ministers Training Initiative Award at the regional finals of the Queensland Training Awards.

The MRCFs provide Queenslanders with an opportunity to talk directly to ministers, raise issues of concern, and work alongside government to develop strategies to address them. The MRCFs are also a tool for government to obtain feedback on government programs and policies. Forums are held three or four times a year in each of the ten regions of the Department of Communities, with a total of 30 to 40 MRCFs being held each year across Queensland. One hundred and seventy-six forums have been conducted across the state since their inception in July 1999.

Forum members are selected from the community because they have consistently demonstrated leadership and have extensive networks within their community. Forum issues are identified and researched by Forum members with the assistance of local Department of Communities' staff. Forum members work collaboratively with key stakeholders such as the Regional Managers' Coordination Networks to develop strategies and responses. Forums can include site visits and workshops. Sometimes guest speakers are invited to present information to the forum. Activities are developed to ensure that participants understand the issues being discussed and develop a course of action.

As a result of the arrangements between Ministerial Regional Community Forums, Regional Managers' Coordination Networks and the Regional Queensland Council, linkages between government and communities across Queensland have been strengthened. These regional engagement and coordination mechanisms have enhanced regional service delivery and the governments' capacity for effective community engagement. Many collaborative responses to complex issues facing regions would not have been possible before the introduction of these regional coordination and engagement initiatives.

The links between the three initiatives offer numerous pathways for the resolution of complex community problems. Regional Queensland Council members can take issues directly to the minister who can discuss this with cabinet colleagues. A Forum member can lodge a formal

proposal with a minister through the Forum process. An issue can be referred to a Regional Managers' Coordination Network to be resolved locally.

The Community Engagement Initiatives I have discussed — Forums, Regional Manager Coordination Networks and Queensland Regional Council — are proving to be effective mechanisms for communities to address regional issues as well as showcase the strategies that have worked for them to improve life in their communities.

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