

WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

1. Purpose

To provide the Minister's State/Local Government Forum with a summary of issues regarding women's participation in Local Government, and to focus the Forum's attention on particular actions that may be usefully progressed through the Forum.

2. Discussion

2.1 Background

While women are under-represented in many areas of society, it has been apparent for some time that women are under represented in Local Government, both as elected members and within senior staffing positions, relative to other comparable bodies and organisations. Following the 2006 Local Government elections, 26.6% of elected members in South Australian councils are women, including women in a Mayoral position. Nationally, 45% of the Local Government workforce are women, however, only 20% of these women work in a professional position. This has remained unchanged since 1996. In South Australia, 16% of senior managers in councils are women, and only 2 councils from 68 have a female Chief Executive Officer.

In the past Local Government has undertaken a range of actions seeking to address the issues, often with State or Commonwealth support, and through both individual Councils, the Local Government Association or networks within Local Government such as the Australian Local Government Women's Association (ALGWA).

In November 2001, ALGWA prepared and adopted the *National Framework for Women in Local Government* (the *Framework*). The *Framework* was reviewed in 2006-07, and a report based on this review, *The Way Forward*, released. This report, based on ten months of consultation throughout the Local Government sector, identified issues that are still prominent in prohibiting better participation by women in Local Government. These issues include:

- Financial considerations for elected members
- Lack of information and support for elected members, or those considering standing for council
- Need for training and confidence building
- Need for greater consideration of family responsibilities
- Workplace cultural issues

Overall, *The Way Forward* found that, in the period between the release of the *Framework* and its review, some progress has been made in overcoming the challenges associated with increasing women's participation and their position in Local Government. However, these changes have not substantially increased the numbers of women in decision making positions. Further work is necessary to address the continuing under representation of women in the Local Government sector.

South Australia's Strategic Plan 2007 contains four targets specifically aimed at progressing women in positions of leadership in South Australia. While these targets refer specifically to the State Government public sector and State Parliament, both the targets and the State Government's contribution to their achievement may provide useful comparative information for the Local Government sector.

2.2 Elected members

As mentioned above, women now make up 26.6% of elected members in South Australia, following the 2006 Local Government elections. This is the same proportion as that following the 2003 elections. In these elections, nine women were elected to Mayoral positions, from 35 Mayoral positions contested.

While the number of female elected members has increased dramatically in the last 30 years, it now seems to have plateaued at a point short of representing the number of women in the community. It is now timely to consider further activity to address this.

Both the *National Framework for Women in Local Government* and *The Way Forward* nominated support for women considering running for council as an important issue. Work undertaken in South Australia to address this has included:

- The release of a resource kit, *Women in Local Government Works in South Australia* by the SA branch of the ALGWA. This kit is designed to encourage interest amongst women about Local Government, as a career of choice and to stand for an elected position. It contains information sheets on Local Government, council elections and gender statistics in South Australia.
- The Independent Review of Local Government Elections currently underway also has, as a term of reference, improving Local Government representation. Included in this is attracting members of under-represented groups to nominate for the 2010 Local Government elections.

It is also important to note that while increasing the number of female elected members is important to ensure that councils are truly representative of their communities, the under representation of women helps to perpetuate the image of Local Government as dominated by men. This image can dissuade younger people, men and women, from participating in Local Government, both as elected members and employees. This was recently acknowledged in the report by the SA Local Government Managers Australia (SALGMA) report by the Emerging Leaders group, *The Image of Local Government*.

2.3 Women in the Local Government workforce

While the number of women in elected positions in Local Government is low, it is comparable to the number of women in State and Federal Parliaments. However, this is not the case for women working in senior positions within councils. As mentioned in 2.0, only two councils in South Australia currently have female Chief Executive Officers. When considered along with the low numbers of women working in professional positions, it is clear that the Local Government sector does not attract or retain sufficient professional women, or promote them to senior positions within councils.

2.4 Skill shortages

While it is clear that the relatively low numbers of women in Local Government is not representative of the population as a whole, and needs to be addressed in response to this, the issue is particularly relevant given the current and future skill shortages that the Local Government sector faces. Women make up 51% of the population, and now a majority of university graduates. A sector that has difficulty in attracting and retaining female employees, particularly young skilled employees, is in a weaker position to tackle this shortage.

It is also noteworthy that many of the issues identified in many reports on attracting and retaining young employees are those that have also identified as inhibiting better participation by women in the Local Government workforce. These include:

- Enabling flexibility in the workplace, such as working from home, employees managing their own time and part time work.
- Enabling employees with flexible hours or part time positions to work in senior and leadership positions.
- Encouraging movement between positions and organisations.
- Promoting strong mentoring and professional development, particularly to encourage staff to consider working in areas that may not be considered to be their particular area of expertise.
- Ensuring that staff have access to training and development, and a workplace culture that encourages take up of development opportunities.

2.5 Further action

The ALGWA have recently established a National Steering Committee to tackle the issues identified by *The Way Forward*. This Committee is in the early stages of development, having held its first meeting by teleconference on 29 October. Ms Jane Gascoigne, Executive Officer, SA Local Government Grants Commission, is the South Australian representative on the Committee. It is anticipated that the work of this Committee will have a national focus on developing networking opportunities for women in the Local Government sector, and communication strategies to encourage better participation by women in Local Government across Australia.

It is suggested that the Minister's Local Government Forum focus on issues that would benefit from joint State and Local Government work. To this end, it is proposed that a Working Group be established that consists of representatives from:

- The Local Government Association (elected and secretariat representation)
- Local Government Managers Australia (SA Branch)
- The Office for State/Local Government Relations
- The Office for Women
- The Office of Public Employment
- The Australian Local Government Women's Association (SA)
- Senior council staff

It is anticipated that the Working Group will be chaired by a Local Government representative.

It is proposed that this Working Group will be tasked to examine overall issues surrounding women in South Australian Local Government, to identify specific projects to further women's participation in Local Government.

Preliminary discussions between the LGA, the LGMA and OSLGR have suggested that a Working Group could explore:

- A closer connection between State and Local Government on the Premier's Women's Directory.
- Further initiatives to support female elected members of councils.
- The possible application of actions that the State Government is undertaking to contribute to the achievement of the SASP targets on women in leadership to the Local Government sector.
- Possibilities for more fluid movement of staff between State and Local Governments, for example, the development of an agreed protocol for secondments between the two sectors, or exchanges as part of graduate programs or other traineeships.
- Stronger networking between the two spheres of government, possibly focusing on promoting mentoring and professional development of staff within both State and Local Government.
- Opportunities for a project on women's participation in Local Government to be sponsored by the Local Government Research and Development Scheme.

As a result of these discussions a report has been presented to the LGA State Executive Committee in November.

The Minister for State/Local Government Relations recently announced that the Office for State/Local Government Relations and the Office for Women will be jointly sponsoring an award through the SA Branch of Local Government Managers Australia, the *Award for Excellence in Promoting the Status of Women in Local Government*. It is expected that this Award will be given to a council that displays an innovative approach to furthering women in their organisation.

3. Recommendations

That the Minister's State/Local Government Forum:

- 1. Note the report,**
- 2. Endorse the establishment of a Working Group to investigate issues of women's participation in Local Government;**
- 3. Recommend that the terms of reference for this Working Group be as outlined in this paper; and,**
- 4. Be kept informed of work being undertaken to investigate and address issues of women's participation in Local Government by the Working Group.**