



A•S•U
Australian Services Union

ASU Submission

Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration

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Introduction

The Australian Services Union [ASU] is one of Australia's largest unions, representing approximately 120,000 employees.

The ASU was created in 1993. It brought together three large unions – the Federated Clerks Union, the Municipal Officers Association and the Municipal Employees Union, as well as a number of smaller organisations representing social welfare workers, information technology workers and transport employees.

Today, ASU members work in a wide variety of industries and occupations and especially in the following industries and occupations:

- Local government (both blue and white collar employment)
- Social and community services
- Transport, including passenger air and rail transport, road, and air freight transport
- Clerical and administrative employees
- Call centres
- Information technology
- Electricity generation, transmission and distribution
- Water industry
- Higher education (Queensland and SA)

The ASU has 11 Branches and members in every state and territory of Australia, as well as in most regional centres. The Union has approximately equal numbers of males and females as members, although the proportions vary in particular industries. Local government is the ASU's single biggest membership sector.

The inquiry is of particular interest to ASU members in local government and state owned corporations delivering essential public services including electricity, water and public transport.

In some states, particularly in NSW, local government, state government and state owned corporations work closely together to provide services for local communities. For example state owned electricity corporations share depots and work operations with local government and in far western NSW the state government motor transport department services are provided by Councils through a contractual arrangement. It is normal practice in regional areas for local government to provide essential public services (that might be considered traditional state government services in metropolitan areas) in conjunction with, or in absence of the state government.

Submission

The ASU welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Blueprint for the reform of Australian Government Administration. We readily see the opportunities for local government to provide additional services and co-ordinate public interface and front line services with state and federal government.

Local government is recognised as the closest arm of government services to the community and is already a station point for many services provided by state and federal governments. There is great potential for local government to expand its traditional services and work with state and federal counterparts to consolidate and improve local access to services. The ASU believes that such partnerships would better support citizens and local communities.

The ASU also has members within the Taxation Department of the Commonwealth Public Services and they have provided a separate submission to this inquiry.

This submission makes the following comments in response to the 9 subject areas of the Blueprint report.

1. Delivery of better services for citizens.

The ASU supports a discussion around citizens and their communities, local government and state government in how to better unfold services to the community. The ASU and its membership are keen to be part of this discussion.

This is routinely undertaken in other countries where citizens meet with local government workers and their elected community to look at the best way to unfold services for the citizens.

Part of this may also involve the evaluation of how those services are delivered to the community and who is the best person or the best service provider to deliver these services.

In some cases the preferred provider will be local government, as it is the tier of government closest to the community. Where this occurs we need to be mindful of the issue of cost shifting between governments. Many of the services local government operates now were once federal or state government services, or provided on behalf of these governments. While the service is transferred to local government, the recurrent funding necessary to operate the service is not (or is inadequate), and local government is left with the communities expectation that a service is delivered but without the means to fulfill those expectations. The ASU has made this clear in its previous submissions to the Hawker inquiry around the provision of funding for local governments and cost shifting. This problem is compounded in some states where local government is restricted from determining its rates and a cap is imposed thus restricting the ability of local government to raise its own funds.

The issue of delivering better services also discussed consultation with the business community. We would believe that there is an important factor here of engagement with the community and elected officers of council as well as union representatives in consideration of these services. It is not just the business community but it also those that provide the services on a daily basis to our community. We believe there must be a voice for local government workers that provide these services directly not just their managers, not just their supervisors and not just their elected officers.

2. Creation of more open government.

The ASU has been a long-term supporter of initiatives that provide greater and more open government to the community. One such initiative is freedom of information laws that give individuals and organisations the right to access information and give them the means to hold government to account.

3. Enhancing policy capability.

We note the report calls for the APS to enhance its ability to undertake rigorous research, gather and analyse data and provide the highest quality strategic policy advice. We note this is an important aspect of federal government planning but cannot be undertaken in isolation by a federal government public service. Such undertaking of programmes must involve other arms of government to not just put forward a view on behalf of the community, but perhaps be possible participants in the roll out of such services and also be part of that wide policy debate.

For too long now we have seen policy debates take place in this country at elected officers' level and have decisions that have been made by governments and hoisted on communities.

One example of the process in this country is the lack of a citizen's voice and/or civil society's voice including unions and non-government organisations in views and decisions that are met by the Council of Australian Government, that is COAG and its derivative ministerial committees.

The ASU has concerns that all too often decisions are made at this senior level and decisions are rolled out across this Commonwealth and when such decisions are made they arrive in state government departments and/or state government legislative structures and/or federal government legislative structures and are already decided to be implemented by way of "it's a COAG decision, it's going to happen". We believe there should be greater opportunities for a voice for civil society, communities and organisations in considerations of any of these matters of policy from international trade right through to the servicing of local communities needs.

4. Reinvigorate strategic leadership.

The APS as pointed out depends substantially upon leadership reform. There are many other areas of government that also would value from reform of such leadership opportunities and/or projects.

We would suggest that should there be leadership programmes for not just senior officers of council but even down to foreman level of councils that this should be part of a strategic reform of government across the country involving leadership at a federal level, a state level and a national local government level. It is imperative that any reforms of public services adopt similar models across the country so that the leadership roll out can be important and can undertake important roles for the community. We note that there are a number of publications that have been produced by the OECD and that some of this policy area would be of significant value.

6. Clarify and align employment conditions.

Whilst the ASU holds no difficulty with the alignment of a range of conditions and rights across the public service this does not necessitate collective bargaining instrument across the entire public service. There could be a principle core sign off of minimum standards across the public services that involve core traditional items such as already are covered under Fair Work Australia's 10 core responsibilities. An additional round of responsibilities could be included for areas such as paid maternity leave and other conditions were the public service has traditionally been a leader and provided services in excess of the general community. We would see this continuing and we would see it providing an opportunity for such things as exchange of long service leave provisions, sick leave and core conditions in employment allowing other areas such as responsibility, accountability, authority and other public sector mandated responsibilities to be more closely aligned with the individual departments responsibilities to the community.

7. Strengthening workforce planning and development.

This is an important area and one that should involve not just decisions at a senior level in performance but must also involve a critical role for industry skills councils in the development of specific training packages and skills requirements for public sector workers across the country. This could be undertaken in a way such as having a core set of public sector responsibilities and subsidiary certificate levels or subsidiary diploma levels for state local government and federal government employment. Thus this would allow for core set of standards and a core set of training to be across the public sector in one training package but specific alterations for certain sections of the services provided by local government, state government and federal government.

We would also see the necessity to expand a number of the existing skills training packages that are not traditionally called public sector packages e.g. sport and recreation to include specific local government, state or national government components in their responsibilities to the community.

8. Ensuring agency agility capabilities and effectiveness.

In respect of reviews of agencies and capabilities and effectiveness this should be done in an open and transparent way and allow for those involved in the effective outcomes of the departments to be readily participants in such. No longer should we find ourselves in a position where such services reviews are undertaken without involvement of the employees affected by these services.

9. Improve agency efficiency.

In respect of driving efficiencies across public services area these efficiencies should be managed in a particular way as to not create an arduous or difficult or stressful environment for those providing services regularly. It would make little sense to undertake substantial reform and increase the services provided by the public sector if we found that those that are providing the services had difficulties reaching the goal simply because of the lack of resources, lack of support of services and/or a range of other tools that create a great difficulty in those services being provided to our communities. It is with this in mind that we would suggest that any such discussions need to be undertaken in a broad way involving all those in the community affected including the public sector services provision or providers involved.

Conclusion

The ASU would welcome an opportunity to appear before any committees that are conducting enquires in this area but feels it appropriate to at the moment outline a serious of points in respect of the nine areas currently being reviewed by the government.