

*Showcasing Local Government LGA Conference - Session K
Council/Regional Partnerships (Friday 7 October 2005)*
MERO Group of Councils Shared Resources
Regional Rates Administration Manager (RRAM)

Background

The Metropolitan Eastern Regional Organisation (MERO) Councils are sharing the resources of a Rates Administration Manager. Four councils are participating in this initiative with services being provided to Prospect, Campbelltown and Burnside Councils with Tea Tree Gully being the host council. This initiative came about as a result of a number of these councils requiring the skills of an experienced Rate Administrator. With a shortage across the region and Local Government in general and to reduce the domino effect caused by staff movement, it was decided in December of last year to share the skills and knowledge base across the region.

Role & Responsibilities of the RRAM

The role of the RRAM is to provide advisory support to senior management and elected members at the strategic level and support and guide the Rate Administrators on operational issues.

The RRAM is responsible for procedural and staff development, continuous improvement and to facilitate by way of testing plans, system enhancements and providing information to council on rating issues.

Specific responsibilities of the role include:

- Review of Annual Rating Policy.
- Rate Modelling.
- To compile and complete rating information such as ABS, Grants Commission returns, LGA surveys and submissions to changes in legislation.
- Preparation for the generation of rates and analysis of software performance.
- Administration of Sale for Non-Payment of Rates.
- Develop and enhance knowledge and skills within each Council.
- Develop and Monitor processes to ensure efficiencies, cost effectiveness and best practice.
- Develop and monitor Internal Controls to ensure accountability, data integrity and compliance.

Each Council has at least one Rate Administrator locally who is responsible for all operational duties, with guidance and support as necessary from the RRAM

Benefits of Resource Sharing

Over the first 10 months of this collaborative approach the following benefits have been identified:

- Sharing of common policy and procedural documents which maintains consistency, best practice and industry standards.
- Opportunity for staff pooling in times of Local peak workloads or emergency situations.
- Sharing ideas in relation to software usage.
- Strengthened and consistent decision-making practices in regards to Rebate applications.
- Developing and fostering networks.
- Most cost-effective approach to providing senior/policy level advice.
- Improve efficiency and consistency of rating functions across the region.
- Staff retention and retaining the knowledge across the region, inturn reducing the domino effect created by staff movement out of the region.

- Improved ability to cope with legislative or environmental change.
- Increased influence over decisions made externally to the region (eg change to legislation, Valuation SA etc)
- Share costs associated with legal advice.
- Demonstrates commitment by the eastern region to reduce operational costs and utilise available funds responsibly.

Examples of Benefits to date

Already this initiative has identified some specific benefits which can be summarise as follows:

The recent release of the Local Government (Financial Management and Rating) Amendment Bill 2004, provided opportunity for a collaborative and consistent approach across the eastern region councils for a stronger submission.

The time required to assess the Bill and collate information, by each individual council, was significantly reduced due to this collaborative approach.

In April of this year, all four councils implemented the IBIS Rate Modelling & Valuation Analysis System. The collaboration and resource sharing approach paved the way for a seamless implementation at a reduced cost to each council.

A Regional Rate Administrator Forum, for rating staff in the eastern region has been initiated. The aim of this forum is to share ideas, knowledge and initiatives, to communicate current industry issues and to facilitate training.

The sharing of similar documentation and procedure manuals is reducing time that would otherwise be needed to produce these documents.

Considerations and Barriers

The project also highlighted that sharing staff resources can have barriers that need to be overcome. Some of these barriers included:

Email – web based email is best suited for the flexibility of email access any where anytime, however it does have its limitations in terms of scheduling meetings.

Document storage – Responsibility needs to be assigned in relation to the storing of corporate records that are shared.

Working documents – Access to Laptop, USB sticks or a memory card needs to be available for the portability of documents in progress.

Different IT systems – 4 councils with 3 IT rating systems created its own challenges. To ensure the success of such resource sharing, Time Management and Organisational skills are equally important as the Technical Skills and Knowledge. In addition to this, an attitude conducive to wanting to make it work is imperative in order to overcome the barriers that exist.

Summary

With limited access to skilled staff in the rating profession, councils are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain staff with the appropriate Local Government knowledge.

This collaborative initiative of the MERO Councils has demonstrated the benefits of resource sharing. This approach has ensured a cost effective, consistent approach in addressing rating issues, provided for a stronger influential approach when dealing with other organisations and allowed for improved efficiencies and consistency of rating functions across the region

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