

# **Evaluation Report:**

**LGA SA support to councils  
during state-wide reform of the  
planning system**

**Local Government Association  
of South Australia (LGA SA)**

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## Executive Summary

The South Australian Government has significantly reformed the state-wide planning system over recent years following 2013's expert panel review.

Throughout this process, the Local Government Association of South Australia (LGA) has sought to make advice, support, and advocacy available to all South Australian councils.

The LGA's support has specifically sought to achieve:

1. A consistent understanding amongst councils of the operation of the new system and their responsibilities within it
2. Increased capacity of councils to implement the system
3. Where possible, influence upon the system in the interest of best practice outcomes for councils and their communities.

This evaluation report assesses the effectiveness of the LGA's efforts against those aims, based on data from 56 responses to an online survey delivered to 267 council staff and program stakeholders, and five semi-structured interviews with council planning staff and program stakeholders.

The evaluation found that the LGA's efforts to support councils during the State planning reform process were highly effective and valued by councils.

The LGA met its objectives to support councils' understanding, capacity to implement, and ability to influence the system to the extent possible.

The elements of the support program contributing to its success were in:

- **Meeting councils' need** for clear and consistent advice, and providing forums in which councils could raise questions and issues of concern, share information, and be heard.
- **Saving councils money** by procuring legal services on behalf of all councils to support clarity of interpretation, and provide practical tools for implementation of the new system
- **Fostering collaboration and amongst councils** in navigating this challenging process by bringing councils together regularly to share information and experiences in a genuinely participatory forum.
- **Making councils' voices heard** by effectively advocating on their behalf to the State Government.
- **Providing a high quality of materials and resources** in the form of information documents, templates, and procedural tools which made a difference to councils' ability to navigate the new system.
- **Being responsive and committed**, with the efforts of program leader Stephen Smith singled out by several respondent as of significant value to councils.

As councils embark on implementation of the new system and future policy change through Planning and Design Code amendments, there is opportunity for the LGA to continue to provide value through coordination, advocacy, and fostering collaboration amongst councils.

## 1.0 Background

The Local Government Association of South Australia (LGA) is a membership association representing the State's 68 councils. The LGA's mission is to provide leadership support, representation, and advocacy on behalf of South Australian councils, for the benefit of the community.

The South Australian Government has significantly reformed the state-wide planning system over recent years following 2013's expert panel review.

Throughout this process, the LGA has sought to make advice, support, and advocacy available to all councils.

The introduction of the new *Planning, Development and Infrastructure Act 2016*, the replacement of individual council Development Plans with a state-wide Planning and Design Code, and a centralised online e-Planning system have created significant logistical and policy challenges for all councils across South Australia, whether small or large, metropolitan or regional.

With the development and implementation of the new system, councils have needed to understand large volumes of new legislation and policy, navigate a new administrative process and interface in the State Planning platform, and establish new organisational policies and procedures to accommodate council roles and responsibilities in the new system.

In a fast-moving reform program, the LGA sought to be highly responsive in its support to councils, with efforts tailored to meet council needs and provide a constant communication channel between state and local government.

## 2.0 Program Aims

Support provided by the LGA to councils related to the following aspects of the new planning system:

- State legislation - *Planning, Development and Infrastructure Act 2016 (PDI Act) and Regulations*
- State policy – Planning and Design Code
- State online platform – SA Planning Portal and e-Planning system
- Council governance arrangements required to engage in the new state system.

Through support provided in these areas, the program aimed to achieve:

1. A consistent understanding amongst councils of the operation of the new system and their responsibilities within it
2. Increased capacity of councils to implement the system
3. Where possible, influence upon the system in the interest of best practice outcomes for councils and their communities.

### **3.0 Evaluation Method**

The evaluation posed two questions to underpin an assessment of whether planning reform support program met its aims. These are:

1. To what extent have the tools, resources, and support provided by the LGA been taken up by councils?
2. How effective have the tools, resources and support provided been in:
  - a. increasing councils' understanding of the new system,
  - b. increasing councils' capacity to implement the new system, and
  - c. increasing councils' ability to influence the new system.

To respond to these questions, data was collected by:

- Document review to determine what was done to achieve the program aims (the program effort)
- 56 responses to an online survey delivered to 267 council staff and program stakeholders (response rate 21%). Just over half of respondents were from regional councils, with the remainder from metropolitan and peri urban councils. Respondents were a mix of planning staff (66%) and executive and other staff (34%).
- Five semi-structured interviews with council planning staff and program stakeholders.

Survey and interview questions are included in Appendix A.

#### 4.0 Effort

The program effort involved five main activities:

1. Creating opportunities for councils to come together to raise and discuss issues, i.e.:  
  
Weekly webinars for all councils run as facilitated open discussions, and opportunity to provide input to LGA submissions on documents on public consultation through surveys and workshops.
2. Seeking legal and technical advice on behalf of councils, i.e.:  
  
Updated FAQ information on the implementation of the Act, Code and transitional arrangements, based on council needs, and advice on Section 7 notifications.
3. Providing written information materials, templates, and practical tools, i.e.:
  - Information sheets on key matters such as Relevant Authorities, Assessment Managers, and Public Notice Fees
  - Delegation templates for councils, Council Assessment Panels (CAP), Regional Assessment Panels (RAP), and Assessment Managers
  - Assessment Panel Terms of Reference templates and CAP and RAP model meeting procedures.
4. Training and interpersonal support for council staff, i.e.  
  
Face to face information and training for Elected Members, Assessment Managers and Assessment Panels, and Elected Member Webinars.  
  
The program manager was also available to council staff for support and advice during the reform process.

5. Maintaining a communication channel with State Government.

The LGA acted as a conduit between councils and the State Government to raise issues of concern identified by councils, and pass on clarifications and additional information from the State.



## 5.0 Impact

The evaluation data demonstrates that the LGA's efforts to support councils during the State planning reform process were highly effective and valued by councils.

The LGA met its objectives to support councils' understanding, capacity to implement, and ability to influence the system to the extent possible.

Of 55 survey respondents, 96% took up the support available to councils during the planning reform process. Those who didn't cited relying on in-house planning staff or consultants.

Each of the LGA's forms of support were well taken up amongst respondents, with the most frequently accessed being webinars for planning staff, information sheets on key aspects of the system, and regularly updated FAQ documents, as shown in Figure 1. Several survey respondents described the weekly webinars as the best thing about the LGA's program of support, citing the ability to share information and be heard, and to receive consistent advice.

Figure 2 shows respondents' rating of the effectiveness of the LGA's support in the three key areas of understanding of the new system, capacity to implement the new system, and ability to influence the new system, with the significant majority of ratings being 4 or 5 where 5 is "very effective".

Figure 1: Forms of support accessed

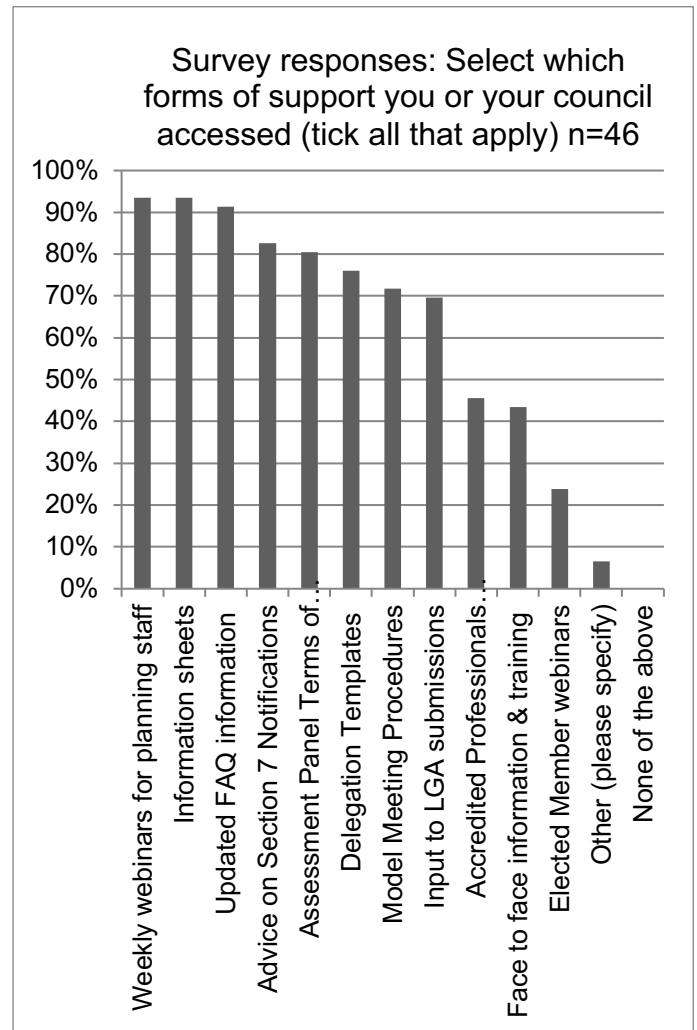
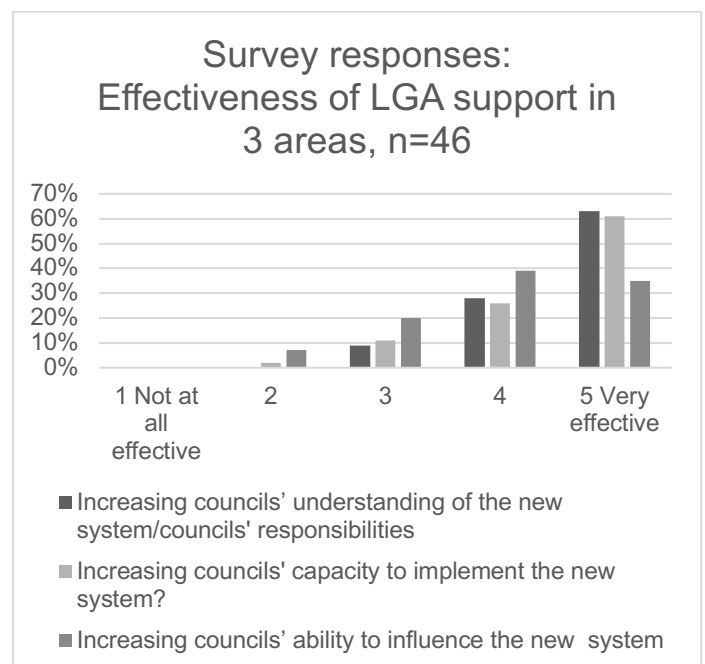


Figure 2: Effectiveness of support



Comments amongst survey respondents and interviewees revealed key themes around the program's value and impact.

### 1. The LGA's support met a need

During the planning reform process, the LGA met councils' needs for consistent advice, and to have the ability to raise questions and issues of concern in an open forum and be heard.

The pace of reform and volume of information during the process was overwhelming for many councils, and the LGA provided an important locus for providing important information and interpretation of that information, as well as the opportunity to clarify, ask questions, and have them answered.

"We could not have transitioned across to the new planning system without the ongoing support materials, advice, training and advocacy from the LGA. The materials and training from PLUS was provided very late, sometimes contained gaps and inconsistencies - so it was the LGA that filled this void for us and was a critical source of information." – Survey respondent

"At the officer level, there was (and still is) so much to keep up with that with the limited resources we have, we were bound to miss something important without the LGA's support." – Survey respondent

"[There was] always opportunity for clarification on a topic so all councils were on same page, phase 2 councils could inform phase 3. [There was] responsiveness, two-way clarification" - Interviewee

"The LGA got rural councils over the line". – Interviewee

### 2. The program saved councils money

The LGA's procurement of legal services on behalf of all councils benefited councils in terms of consistency of advice, information sharing, and removing the need for 68 councils to resource their own services. This extended to ad hoc advice on issues raised by councils throughout the reform process, and the production of documents such as templates, policies and terms of reference.

"I would go so far to say we could not have achieved the transition without LGA support unless we had engaged legal services to replicate a considerable amount of the services provided through the LGA." – Survey respondent

"This has been a very helpful and informative forum that has saved individual councils duplicating effort and expense for implementation of the new development system" – Survey respondent

### 3. The program was a vehicle for collaboration

Many survey respondents saw a key strength of the program in bringing councils together every week to share information and experiences in a genuinely participatory forum. This was essential in helping councils effectively navigate the planning reform process, and has had the additional benefit of strengthening the local government planning community and facilitating a collaborative network across council boundaries.

"Bringing Councils together during such a momentous time was critical and extremely helpful. I'm not sure planning departments of councils have worked so closely together in many many years, the level of relationship building the LGA aided was excellent." – Survey respondent

“Strong collaboration has helped share knowledge across the sector” - Survey respondent

“The regular catch ups have resulted in much more information sharing across the sector.” – Survey respondent

“As a rural councils the weekly catch ups were an outstanding source of support.” - Interviewee

#### 4. The program made councils' voice heard

Evaluation responses make it clear the LGA was an effective advocate for councils during the planning reform process, achieving a level of impact councils could not have had individually. While ability to influence the new system was not shown by the data to be the most effective aspect of the LGA's support, several respondents noted that the scope of influence upon the system was limited by the nature of the process.

“There has been strong collaboration with council's that has helped bridge a gap [with State Government] that was difficult but well managed by LGA staff” – Survey respondent

“We had a few policy and business readiness “wins”, which were made possible with the advocacy of the LGA. Individual councils often don't get their voices heard, so I feel like Stephen Smith has done an amazing job of raising and following up on all the issues that are important to councils.” – Survey respondent

“LGA has provided the strength of argument that smaller individual councils often cannot.” – Survey respondent

“Through the LGA local government has achieved some excellent enhancements to the new planning system and we hope this can continue given the scope of

further enhancements that are required.” – Survey respondent

“The LGA & Stephen Smith have been very upfront about where we as Council's and practitioners forwarded or submit our concerns, opinions, submissions to via DIT or other relevant departments to ensure our concerns or views are taken onboard to hopefully enhance the new system.” – Survey respondent

“Stephen Smith has been a very good conduit between councils and State Government ... helps to take emotion out of situation. This has resulted in genuine influence, effective diplomacy ... ability to advocate on strength in numbers.” - Interviewee

#### 5. Quality of resources

The quality of resources provided by the LGA has been a strength of the program. The facilitation of open forums and a feedback loop for key issues was translated into practical support in the form of information documents, templates, and procedural tools which many respondents identified as the best thing about the program.

“The support has been very comprehensive - very responsive and addressing all the gaps of knowledge, templates etc. that we had.” – Survey respondent

“It has standardised the operating procedures and policies needed and provided some excellent training in readiness for working in the new system.” – Survey respondent

“Having the LGA offer templates and information sheets that we could use meant that we weren't reinventing the wheel or starting from scratch. This saved us time, which was and still is in short supply during this transition.” – Survey respondent

## 6. Responsiveness and personal commitment

Many evaluation participants commented on the responsiveness and commitment of program leader Stephen Smith, with several survey respondents identifying him by name as the best thing about the program of support.

“It has been very challenging times and Stephen Smith and the LGA took a very proactive lead in directing and helping the very limited resourced Phase 2 Councils come online.” – Survey respondent

“Stephen Smith has been exceptional in his dedication and advocacy.” – Survey respondent

“Stephen Smith has been exceptionally helpful. He has kept everyone very well informed, provided information on training and opportunities to attend training. Responded to issues when they have arisen and has been willing to assist individuals.” – Survey respondent

### Looking ahead

Survey respondents and interviewees suggested there is more to do in supporting councils in the new planning system post-implementation, particularly in facilitating ongoing collaboration and coordination, for example in Code amendments.

“With Phase 3 going live in 2021 the continuation of support would be helpful as the Planning Portal evolves since going live.” – Survey respondent

“A centralised coordination between councils is more relevant than ever, as all councils are working on the Code. Because of the limitations of council led Code amendments, there is a necessity for policy coordination across councils in ways there hasn’t been before. And logistically – questions, procedures, requests for reform”. - Interviewee

### Room for improvement

Survey respondents were asked how the LGA could have better supported councils during the planning reform process.

Several responses said no improvements were necessary, others noted the program could have been better with:

More face-to-face training and workshops, especially in regional areas - noting this was not possible due to COVID-19

Negotiation of more time before implementation of the new system

More LGA resources allocated, particularly to achieve more policy advocacy on top of information and technical advice.



# **Appendix A: Survey and interview questions**

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### Survey Questions

- 1) Did you or your council take up the support available to councils provided by the LGA during the State planning reform process?
- 2) [If no] why not?
  - a) Didn't know about
  - b) Didn't need it
  - c) Was not relevant
  - d) Other – please specify
- 3) [If yes] Please select from the list below which forms of support you or your council accessed? (tick all that apply)
  - Weekly webinars for planning staff
  - Information sheets – e.g. Relevant Authorities, Assessment Manager, Public Notice fees
  - Assessment Panel Terms of Reference Templates
  - Council Assessment Panel (CAP)/Regional Assessment Panel (RAP) Model Meeting Procedures
  - Delegation Templates for councils, CAPs, RAPs and Assessment Managers
  - Accredited Professionals Notification Policy
  - Advice on Section 7 Notifications
  - Updated FAQ information on implementation of Act, Code and transitional arrangements
  - Face to face information and training for Elected Members, Assessment Managers and Assessment Panels
  - Opportunity to provide input to LGA submissions to documents on public consultation (through surveys and workshops)
  - Elected Member webinar series
  - Other – please specify
- 4) Scale 1-5 how effective has the support been in increasing councils' understanding
- 5) Scale 1-5 how effective has the support been in increasing councils' capacity to implement
- 6) Scale 1-5 how effective has the support been in increasing councils' ability to influence system
- 7) What has been the most valuable aspect of the LGA's support to councils?
- 8) How could the LGA have better supported your council during the planning reform process?
- 9) About you - optional

### Interview Questions

- 1) How have you been involved with the LGA's support of councils during the State planning reforms?
- 2) Do you think the support provided has helped councils gain a consistent understanding of the new system, and their responsibilities within it? In what ways?
- 3) Do you think the support provided has helped increase councils' capacity to implement the new planning system? In what ways?
- 4) Do you think the support provided has increased councils' ability to influence the system towards better outcomes for councils and communities?
- 5) What has been the most valuable aspect of the LGA's support to councils?
- 6) How could the LGA have better supported councils during the planning reform process?

7) How could the LGA have better supported councils during the planning reform process?



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