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Process development at an international standard

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“Do more with less” a cry commonly heard in the corridors of local government across the land. But how? Rising complaint levels, dwindling communications, budgets and over stretched compliance officers make for potentially explosive mix.

This is not a new problem. Demands for greater service levels, transparent accountability and the ability for anyone to communicate anything that comes into their head under the cloak of an email account are all challenges faced by local government staff everyday.

It’s true you can do more with less but at a price. Townsville City Council met such a challenge 2008 when the state government decided that it would be a good idea to amalgamate the 157 existing council’s in Queensland and establish 72 new, “stronger” local government areas from the pieces. From this, the former Townsville and Thuringowa Council’s were reborn as the City of Townsville.

The results for service delivery, at least in theory should have been consistent. Staff and functions came together based on the presumption that we delivered a good service before so we should cope OK now. It quickly became evident that this was not to be the case.

Within twelve months requests for service being received by the Local Laws unit had risen from 7,000 per year prior to amalgamation to over 12,000 in 2009. By 2010 this figure had risen to almost 16,000. The majority related to animals attacking, barking, straying or lacking registration. Clearly the 111 operational officers were not going to be able to cope with everything within existing capacity.

The solution was obvious, get more staff. Demonstrate how many you need and put them in the budget. Simple! Calculations estimating the additional resources required concluded that 6 new officers were necessary to maintain capacity. The answer from the holder of the purse strings was swift and clear.

A long hard look at this seemingly unsurmountable obstacle concluded that finding further efficiencies

and then adopting a risk management approach was the answer. The process to be developed had to ensure maximum efficiency, with minimal if any waste. In order to achieve this, a sustainable framework was needed that could withstand scrutiny. The principals of the International Standard Organisations ISO 9000 where adopted as a starting point. There was never an intention to seek accreditation rather to develop a co-dependant process of procedural review and to develop operational documents which had solid credibility.

The established process of reviewing procedures was discarded as historically it built on existing processes rather than building new from the ground up. Draft operational procedures were subject to a rigorous test of whether the activity actually had to be undertaken at all and some were withdrawn as a result. Each step was identified and subjected to similar analysis through a systems management process before being transferred to an integrated template based on the ISO principles

Efficiencies were found in each new process developed however this fell short in freeing up sufficient resources required to meet the rising service demand and that is were we the phase “we can only do what we can do with what we have” enters the equation.

The next logical step was to utilise a process of risk management to establish priorities. Several key criteria were developed to quantify an order of priority for all services provided.

So, now we find ourselves with a prioritised service demand operating efficient integrated procedures. Sounds like the answer to every system managers dream but not so, as someone has to take ownership for the service which falls below the “can do” line and ratepayers don’t always see themselves or their issue as a lower priority to anyone else.

The human element comes into play on a number of levels. Overcoming a reluctance to engage customers on a level beyond the squeaky wheel prioritisation model is tough. Customers don’t take kindly to being second on the list so active

engagement is essential in making priorities, processes and timescales clear.

Getting relevant information recorded on computer systems, the reprioritisation and new demands on the service are no longer the challenges they once were. We are efficient and working on sound priorities. "we can do no more".



◎ BIOGRAPHY

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Rob joined local government in 1982 and pursued a career in building surveying before changing direction to Environmental Health in 1991. An active contributor to the national & professional agenda on environmental health matters in the UK, Rob relocated to Australia in 2004 and currently manages Townsville City Council's Regulatory Services section dealing extensively with animal management. Rob is a Chartered Health & Safety Practitioner, Regional President of Environmental Health Australia (professional peak body for Environmental Health), a recent finalist in the Australian Institute of Management Excellence awards and holds an honours degree together with qualifications in management, safety, auditing and environmental protection.