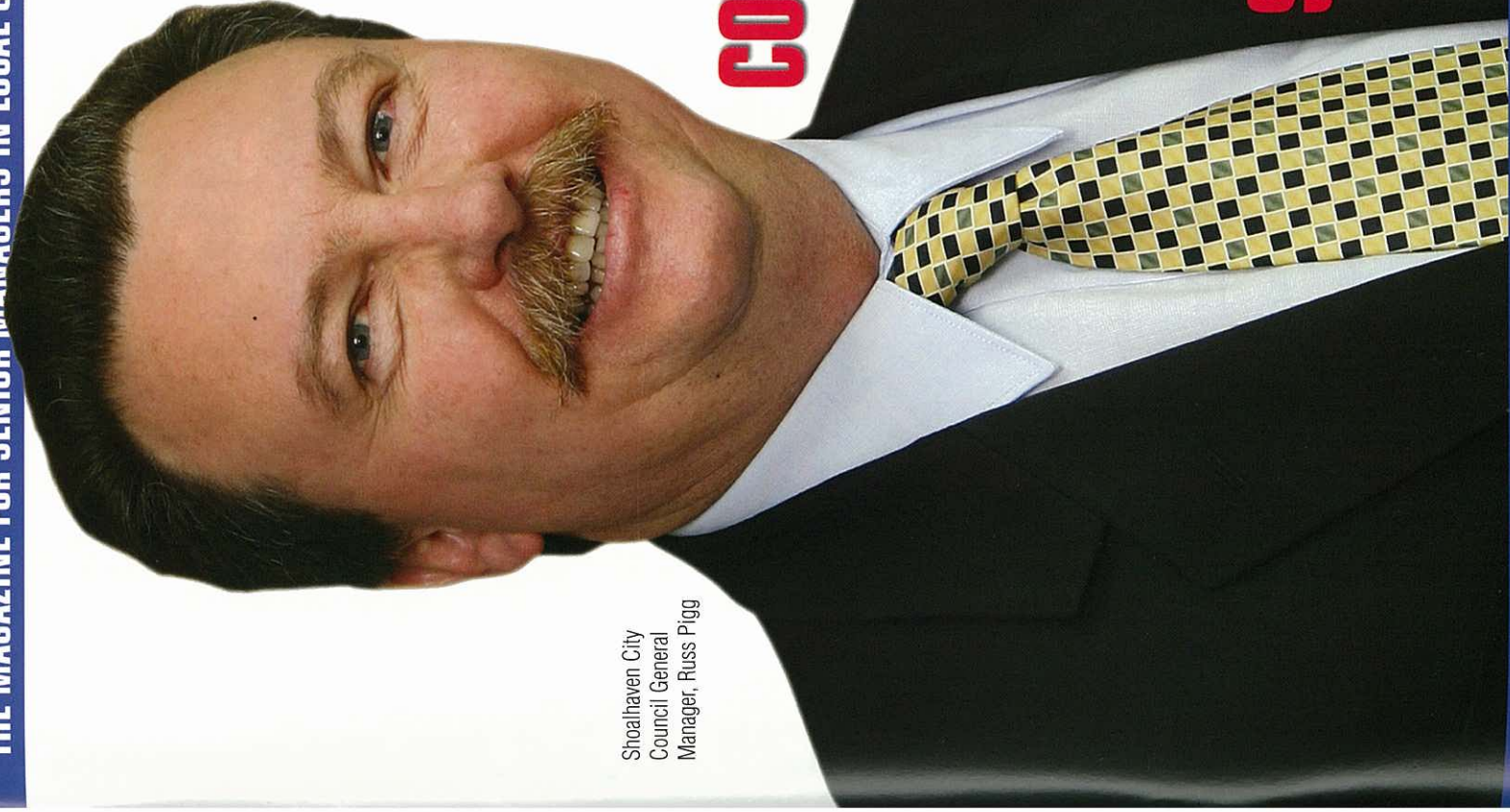


# COUNCIL MANAGI

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# Councils pursue organisational excellence

Achieving organisational excellence has been placed high on the agenda by 18 local governments across Australia. The councils are actively pursuing a joint approach to excellence in a unique learning forum called the Australian Local Government Business Excellence Network - or LGBEN.

By **Jeanine Bailey and June Shine**

Chief Executive Officers and senior practitioners from 18 councils have come together to share best practices around organisational and personal development initiatives designed to benefit the communities they serve.

The common link between these councils is that they have "signed on" to the 'Business Excellence Framework', aspiring to make their organisations live its principles in a culture of continuous improvement designed to create sustainable excellence.

Glenn Pattison, CEO of Baw Baw Shire Council in Victoria, describes why he and his LGBEN colleagues relentlessly push their organisations toward excellence.

Currently, the 18 member councils are spread across five different states including Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, NSW and Queensland.

"When I leave the organisation, the results will be a lasting legacy for the community," he said.

Pursuing excellence goes to the heart of local government, an industry that focuses on customer service and service delivery.

Members of LGBEN are demonstrating that local government is progressive in relation to business improvement.

Merv Ismay, General Manager of Holroyd Council in NSW, said network members showed how local government could compare favourably with other industries.

"Local government has held its own against the private sector in relation to the Australian Business Excellence Awards and continues to find better ways of delivering services to their communities," Mr Pattison said.

LGBEN had its beginnings five years ago with a handful of Victorian councils, and its membership has grown steadily since.

Members are attracted to the widening pool of organisations with which they can share experiences and learn from each other.

The credibility of the business excellence approach is reinforced as members tell stories of the gains they are making through its implementation.

Brent Armstrong, CEO of silver award-winning Hobart City Council, said this process is not just an academic exercise.

"Significant and tangible outcomes result from an organisation's participation in the framework, thus benefiting the communities we serve," he said.

"It is the premier business development model which allows for a focused, continuous improvement regime to be implemented."

LGBEN councils focus on developing high performance through cultural change.

They understand the link between staff performance and leadership that role models the desired culture and communicates organisational purpose.

Ian Morris, CEO at Macedon Ranges Council in Victoria, said the system had proven results.

"I have confidence that our councils use their physical, human and financial resources wisely and to the best effect," he said.

"Local government is changing as more councils recognise and build on the relationship between organisational culture and organisational performance."

A business excellence philosophy means that staff at all levels in the organisation can participate in a range of stimulating activities that create personal growth as well as gains for the organisation.

Peter Gesling, General Manager at Port Stephens Council in NSW, sees his people learning from their mistakes in a culture and environment of "no blame".

There is also personal benefit in this for Mr Gesling.

"I get to see staff strive to create solutions. Importantly for me, I get time to work on the system and have real conversations with my staff, the councillors and the community," he said.

Each member of LGBEN is committed to driving a program of business excellence within their own organisation.

Initiatives are diverse to reflect the differing nature of each municipality and its own unique culture – but they all have the common theme of improving the organisation to improve outcomes for their communities.

This year, LGBEN councils will implement a range of projects including workplace design to embrace workplace culture principles, leadership development programs incorporating key findings from staff surveys, revamping performance management and feedback systems with a behaviour and relationship focus and using systems thinking to focus on measurable improvement in systems.

In addition, when they come together at network meetings, they will share learnings from

these projects and hear from high performers in other industries, both private and public sector, as they seek out best practice.

Commitment to both business excellence and the learning network is evident among the group – it's working for them, and this can be demonstrated through results achieved in community satisfaction and staff satisfaction as well as recognition through the Australian Business Excellence awards process.

As Peter Marshall, CEO at Wodonga Council (a top performer in community satisfaction on a regular basis) says: "it's just simple common sense".

The CEOs meet in Melbourne in March, July and November each year to share their stories and learn from each other.

In the afternoons, they meet with the practitioners from each of the member councils to consider their project work and listen to keynote speakers.

The practitioners meet seven times throughout the year in full-day meetings to work on key projects for the benefit of the network, as a whole as well as projects specific for their councils.

Over the past two years, the network practitioners have completed a number of significant projects including:

- The development of a learning matrix – a guide for members to understand how to learn from other organisations;
- The development of a framework to guide member councils in how to establish a relevant learning development program for middle managers in their organisation;
- Examination of how emotional intelligence 'fits' with member councils' excellence journeys;
- The development of a corporate governance framework that encompasses the philosophy of business excellence;
- The development of a discussion paper exploring the benefits of growing the network to include other councils;
- Documentation of the network's annual planning and self assessment cycle;
- Documentation of an induction process for new network members including a buddying option; and,
- The development of a systems view for the network with tangible results that are reviewed at the annual planning meeting held in August.

One of the network's most significant achievements this year has been the development of its own website [lgben.net.au](http://lgben.net.au)

Mark Searle, CEO from City of Marion in South Australia, said the website was an exciting innovation for the network.

"It will allow member councils to capture the memory and share our learnings with other councils across Australia and around the world," he said.

"While it is in its early stages of development, over the next year all network councils are committed to placing information on to the website and hopefully this will assist others to see the benefits of using the Business Excellence framework to create sustainable excellence."

An important part of the network meetings are regular presentations from high-performing keynote speakers who have personal experience in using the Business Excellence framework to improve their business.

Rob Noble, CEO at Caboolture Council in Queensland, said one of the reasons why he enjoys being part of the network is to listen to personal stories of high-performing CEOs and practitioners in how they have successfully used Business Excellence to improve their organisations.

"Last year, we heard Dr Shayne Silcox, CEO from the City of Belmont in Western Australia, tell his best practice story," he said.

"He talked to us about how his organisation has used Business Excellence to lead cultural change and establish a strategic framework that is enabling the organisation to continually improve."

As the outgoing chairman of the LGBEN, Allan Bawden, the CEO of Bass Coast Council in Victoria, arranged last year for the network to hear from John Cairns, Executive Director, Workforce Planning and Development, State Services Authority, Victoria, on the important issue of workforce planning.

On an operational level, workforce planning is about getting the right number of people with the right competencies in the right jobs at the right time.

However, Mr Cairns believes its objective extends beyond predicting future labour demand and supply to operate as a filter through which other strategic plans need to pass.

"Workforce planning is a 'reality check' to ensure the organisation's strategic goals are realistic and achievable and when done effectively, it provides an organisation with a continuous process of shaping its workforce to ensure that it

has the capacity and capability to deliver the organisation's objectives now and in the future," he said.

In July this year, Peter Gesling was elected as chairperson of the LGBEN for the next two years.

"Part of the role of the member councils is for network members to talk with other councils across Australia to share our stories," he said.

"Next year we are hoping to hear from Kerry Sanderson, CEO of Fremantle Ports in Western Australia, to hear how they were able to achieve the gold award at this year's Australian Business Excellence Awards.

"Later this year, one of our network CEOs, Brent Armstrong at the City of Hobart, will tell us what they have been doing at their council since 2006 to close the gap between a silver award and a gold award."

For more information about the Australian Local Government Business Excellence Network, visit the website [lgben.net.au](http://lgben.net.au)

• **Jeanine Bailey is Manager, Business Excellence, at City of Wodonga. June Shine is Executive Manager at Port Stephens Council.**

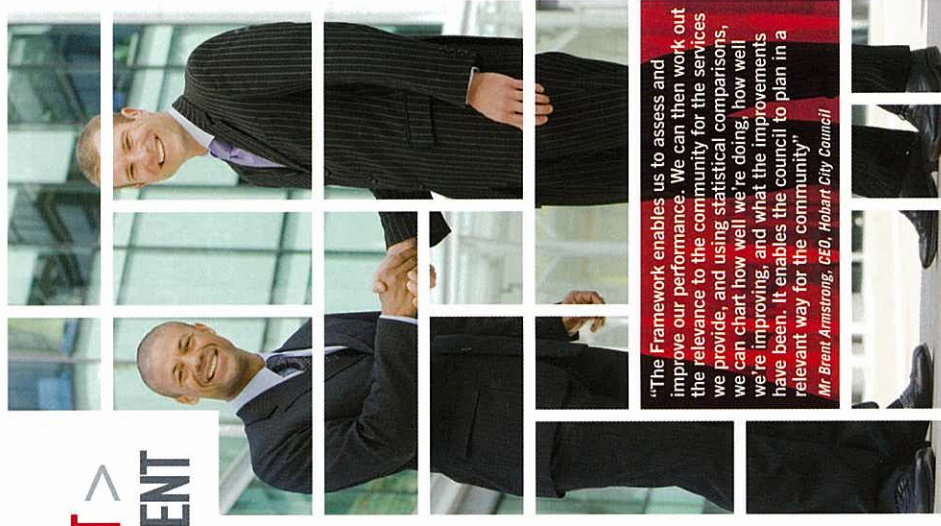
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"The Framework enables us to assess and improve our performance. We can then work out the relevance to the community for the services we provide, and using statistical comparisons, we can chart how well we're doing, how well we're improving, and what the improvements have been. It enables the council to plan in a relevant way for the community"

Mr Brent Armstrong, CEO, Hobart City Council