



LISTENING REPORT

2025 National General Assembly

- ✓ Emergency Management:
Capability & Capacity
- ✓ Safer Roads
- ✓ Housing & Community
Infrastructure
- ✓ Local Government
Jobs & Skills

LISTENING SESSIONS OVERVIEW

As part of the 2025 ALGA National General Assembly, four concurrent listening sessions were held to enable representatives of local councils to speak directly with policy-makers. Over 700 participants shared their stories in response to four challenging areas of public policy:

- i) Emergency Management Capability & Capacity
- ii) Safer Roads
- iii) Housing & Community Infrastructure
- iv) Local Government Jobs & Skills

As with previous events, panels made up of policy specialists from both government departments and the non-government sector were invited to attend. Their purpose was to hear first-hand from local government representatives, take in the perspectives and concerns shared by participants, and offer commentary and reflections on federal initiatives and other programs that might help address the issues raised.

The sessions were independently facilitated by Melbourne Leadership Group (MLG), who have prepared this listening report. The feedback summarised here draws on both the spoken contributions of participants and written input gathered through the audience engagement tool Slido. Rather than providing a chronological summary, this report presents insights grouped into key themes that emerged during the conversations.

It's important to note that the sessions were not structured as forums for developing solutions. As such, this report does not put forward recommendations or formal positions from participating organisations. Instead, its purpose is to reflect the tone, sentiments, and viewpoints expressed by local government leaders, their teams, and members of the community. The views in this report do not necessarily reflect ALGA policy positions or the views of MLG. The report is intended as a summary of the broad-ranging discussions.

Councils urged the federal government to take leadership on the critical issues of housing, safe roads, emergency management, and workforce skills. They expressed a desire for collaborative involvement in these challenging policy fields, which could be explored in more depth to drive even more meaningful solutions for the nation at local level.

Melbourne Leadership Group

26 June 2025

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT – CAPABILITY & CAPACITY

Survey results and responses

A survey was sent out prior to the Emergency Management Capability and Capacity session. In total, 14 responses were received from leaders in local government, some of whom were in the audience. To widen these insights, the audience in the room were also asked to indicate their responses to the questions, as the results were presented, by a show of hands. There were approximately 200 people in the room.

In response to the question “Has your council been in a declared natural disaster area in the last 24 months?”, about a third of the room indicated yes, which mirrored the pre-event survey results.

Regarding disaster recovery funding applications, many in the room indicated they had applied successfully for such funds, and they were received in a timely manner. Others applied but experienced delays, and a smaller portion did not apply at all. When asked if that funding included a betterment component, a number of people (about 25%) indicated they had successfully applied for betterment funding, while several indicated they had not.

A few councils had applied to the Disaster Recovery Fund successfully (21%), but the majority were unsuccessful in their applications. The show of hands in the room again mirrored the pre-event survey results.

When ranking barriers to responding effectively to disasters, ageing infrastructure and assets were the main blocker, followed by a lack of funding for preventative new infrastructure.

Participants in the room indicated in fairly even numbers that their council’s emergency management capacity and capability had either improved or declined. Only a small number felt it had remained the same over the past three years. Pre-event survey responses to this question were very different, with 79% responding that it had improved and just 7% that it had deteriorated.

When asked what councils needed in order to improve their emergency management capacity and capability, the survey showed that funding was the dominant need, with 64% of the vote. Those in the room agreed with this, followed by the need for training, and clearer roles and responsibilities.

Panellists acknowledged that funding remains a significant issue for many councils. The need for greater clarity and consistency across the nation would be helpful, with

emergency management legislation, plans, and arrangements varying between states and local governments. They observed that the landscape of emergency management is changing, from councils experiencing none or one disaster per year, to concurrent or co-occurring events affecting communities, which in turn is reducing the window for recovering from disasters.

KEY THEMES

Early warning systems and communication gaps

The conversation opened with a council explaining the challenges with boil water notices, due to ageing water treatment systems and the issue of communicating rapidly with transient populations. Currently, councils may get less than four hours' notice to inform the community. The platform for this alert is passive – an announcement on their website. A text message alert system would at least allow councils to reach people with more assurance.

A panellist shared that early warning SMS systems haven't evolved as quickly as required and that we should not rely on just one system; rather, multiple channels are needed. The current national SMS system is at the end of its lifespan, and while alternatives are being worked on, currently emergency alerts are only available to limited numbers. New national messaging systems (like cell broadcast) are in development, with discussions about local council-level access in progress. Panellists felt that the development of the technology is not the part that takes significant time, but rather analysing the access and process issues, the construction of the messages, and the responsibilities that sit with this.

One council shared a concern that after significant rain, there can be up to 12 days' between one area flooding and flood waters reaching the next area. However, they can only go into response mode when the flood hits, rather than being proactive in their response. It was felt that there is a missed opportunity here to alert the community early, enable the adjustment of levies, and ensure that property is kept safe. A panellist noted that disaster declarations are not used in the particular state referenced, and that there may be misunderstanding about how and when support can be accessed.

Disaster recovery funding and access

A participant questioned why there is not a nationally consistent approach across states and territories for betterment funding, as similar projects have received different levels of support across jurisdictions, resulting in inequity. A show of hands

in the room echoed that this national approach would be helpful, however the conversation that followed highlighted the view that national consistency may not be possible nor desirable, given the nature of disaster management being led by states and territories. In an era of growing frequency of national disasters, there is an increase in significant fiscal requests impacting budgets, and long-term investments are needed to match the long-term need. This pressure is also felt across other areas of government such as health, defence and transport.

Some panellists felt that while national consistency is desirable, the federated model in Australia means that local governments will remain best placed to review situations and understand local community needs. It was suggested that federal level support would be helpful in providing evidence and data to enable more informed local decision making.

The Resilient Homes Fund was shared as an example of success following the 2022 floods in Ipswich. Participants were interested to know if these programs will be continued. The issue that many councils face is that the same communities are impacted on a recurring basis.

The importance of comprehensive flood studies, along with well-documented community consultation, was discussed as a way to develop a sound business case for funding and support. A panellist observed that there isn't one right way to respond to flood disasters – some states have offered programs that allow people to move to an alternative block in the same community area and that this was crucial for local resilience, giving residents meaningful choice rather than forcing relocation.

A panellist shared that more funding may also be needed in energy resilience, as half of all faults come from energy disruption. The Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) program was highlighted as a government initiative focused on improving telecommunications infrastructure in disaster-prone areas and was suggested as a source of support, information and data.

Role of insurance and risk mitigation

Many participants in the room felt that reforms in the insurance sector were needed. One example highlighted was that measures to protect homes are not included in the risk profiling used to estimate premiums. This means that even when local flood levies have been built, and homes are better protected, the risk reduction to individual properties is not being recognised in the insurance premiums charged.

An awareness of the implications of being underinsured was also raised as an important factor.

A panellist offered the view that insurance companies exist to make money and how they set premiums is their own decision. They suggested that the problem could be reframed as “how can local governments influence and share knowledge with insurance companies, and what is it that can be done differently to change this situation for the better?”

Another panellist indicated that there is reason to be optimistic. A recent summit on insurance and local disaster management acknowledged that the dial is shifting, and there is more focus on getting the right data and up-to-date information to inform the work of insurance companies.

There are also opportunities for better public and private sector relationships to help fund projects that enable communities to be more proactive before an emergency. Having all three levels of government working together would only reinforce this opportunity further. The integration of services and support across all levels of government, and the exploration of the other opportunities this presents, will emerge further in coming years.

First Nations

A recurring topic in the conversation was the importance of facilitating culturally-appropriate supports for First Nations peoples and communities. An extension of this was the need to embed cultural practices and knowledge, such as controlled burning and water management, in our emergency management preparations and responses.

It was observed that there is an opportunity to embed cultural engagement practices in emergency management preparation and response, as in some areas this isn't being adequately discussed. Often in periods of recovery, important cultural sites and heritage centres are affected, and community organisations are left to deal with them without adequate support. Furthermore, the impact of First Nations peoples needing to move off country during and after a disaster needs to be considered.

In response, panellists acknowledged that the level of resourcing and service provision for First Nations peoples varies across regions. In some areas, there is a need for stronger protections and restorative action, including measures such as levees around sacred burial sites. This reflects the broader need to recognise and

address the deep cultural and spiritual losses that First Nations communities often experience during natural disasters.

A participant suggested that building networks of local indigenous people in local council areas that can help embed knowledge into planning and strategies would be incredibly impactful.

The provision of better facilities and shelters on country for First Nations communities in some remote areas was seen to be important, as people may feel abandoned and expected to 'sit and wait it out'. These shelters are needed inland and along coastal as well, across many jurisdictions. These needs have been well-known and funding support has been sought for many years without response.

Broader systemic inclusion was called out as a requirement, with the suggestion that many plans were outdated and First Nations-led councillors felt frustrated with the lack of support from other levels of government.

Capacity and capability of councils

Sharing the lessons learned from flooding and other disasters at a local government area is proving hugely valuable. One council shared that their most impactful learnings in two floods was the need for a service to take care of people's pets and animals in an emergency. Community members were at risk, as they felt unable to evacuate without knowing their pets were cared for. Establishing this service locally resulted in the safe evacuation of the community during a second flood event.

The integration of local knowledge into crisis management teams is crucial. The Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS) is being updated for all fire and emergency services, with the emphasis on local and cultural knowledge, and the idea that recovery should be embedded from the start, to identify any developing impacts and ensure the best response.

Having a council representative that really knows the local area well was repeatedly highlighted as a key to success. To explore this in more detail, the establishment of strike teams that include an engineer, project manager, and community engagement professionals, who can fill the capability gap across councils would be helpful. The opportunity for this centralised support offering and 'on the ground' response would help anticipate and manage community impacts during emergencies.

Participants noted that year-round training and insight-sharing between councils is important, rather than only during the recovery phase of a disaster. There is a need

to have clear plans in place that are risk-based and evidence-informed, to help councils to seek the support needed to build and manage capacity. While states have a responsibility to lead the response, there is a chance to identify where gaps and vulnerabilities are at a local level, which enables the creation of a broader national picture and a strong case for investment where it is needed most.

Panellists asserted that role clarity for local government in emergency management is vital, given the responsibilities for councils differ under each state and territories' legislation, and emergency management acts and plans. A panellist noted that the current variability makes it difficult for the Commonwealth to fund and resource emergencies appropriately.

There was clear positive recognition for a program run by one state local government association, which facilitates councils requesting and dispatching staff to neighbouring LGAs that are experiencing a disaster. Some panellists were pleased to learn about this program.

Human resilience

The ongoing effect of historic natural disasters on mental health, social cohesion and volunteering was raised. Participants questioned if enough was being done by state and federal government to support those affected. The example was given of people still affected by 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires. Emergency management evidence shows that the long-term psychosocial impacts from these disasters are significant. Participants felt there needs to be strong investment in mental health support to help communities rebuild and sustain social cohesion in the wake of emergencies. A panellist noted communities that are better connected, and have clearly established support networks before a disaster occurs, have been proven to recover at a much quicker pace.

The need for a wider conversation about volunteering, and declining volunteer numbers, was raised as crucial to address the gaps in community resilience. A councillor offered that one reason for this was the resulting burn-out of being chronically under-resourced and under-funded. While there are strategies to reward volunteers, proper funding in this space still doesn't exist. For example, a large volunteer base requires co-ordination and the management of this is a full-time job, which includes the recruitment of new volunteers, selection for the right roles, adequate training, reward and recognition.

A panellist observed that "our country is built on volunteers, but volunteers are not free" in acknowledgement of the challenge of declining volunteer numbers. Whilst there might be pockets of outstanding volunteers, especially within grassroots

community organisations, who can pull together mass community volunteers quickly, issues around background checks of volunteers demonstrates the need to look systemically at volunteer engagement in emergency management.

Systems resilience

Exploring the language of resilience was a focus for the final segment of the conversation, including ideas around what truly holds communities together. It was observed that there is an 'elasticity' that occurs in response to the frequency of emergency events and the ongoing challenges this creates in the community.

Ideas around social cohesion were again shared. The role of education, community agency and the arts being used as a means to help mitigate impacts following an emergency was recommended.

A councillor noted the arts are often neglected in conversations about emergency management, yet artists have an important role to play in supporting social cohesion and community resilience. Visual artists, musicians, story tellers create tools that help tell important stories, share lessons learned and increase community understanding.

Ideas for the future

With more satellite technology becoming available, text messaging and satellite-enabled communications could be used more widely when telecommunication networks go down during an emergency.

Embedding local knowledge into emergency management and recovery plans, in relationship with local First Nations Peoples' cultural knowledge and practices, would create more successful and thorough plans. Additionally, the establishment of shelters in First Nations communities to enable First Nations people to stay safely on country during emergencies is key.

Panellists and participants discussed the value of water in reservoirs and levies, and the missed opportunity to manage perpetual 'spill and fill' situations differently. This would ensure water is not wasted, through giving authorities the confidence to act and make decisions quickly when needed.

Ensuring councils have multiple channels for communicating with their communities, particularly when informing them of emergency situations, and leveraging the use of developing SMS alert systems and satellite technology, would be hugely beneficial to local councils who are repeatedly having to handle these situations.

There could be more sharing of information between the insurance industry and local councils, particularly in providing updates and data that will inform more accurate risk profiling and premiums.

Further discussion around the role of volunteers and how to manage declining numbers is imperative in ensuring future success and the necessary resources to support services and initiatives.

Finally, taking a proactive approach to creating social cohesion in communities, rather than waiting for this to happen in response to an emergency, will result in stronger community resilience, which can lead to faster recovery after a disaster.

SAFER ROADS

Survey results and responses

Only 14 responses were received for the Safer Roads survey, but they provided a sound basis to kickstart discussion.

All survey respondents indicated there was a dangerous road in their local area. The majority of respondents did not have a road safety officer, whether due to funding constraints or other reasons. Panellists urged all councils to actively prioritise a dedicated road safety resource where possible.

Whilst some councils had developed a road safety strategy in response to community advocacy, others had not developed a strategy, or had partnered with road safety organisations on road safety plans and initiatives. There was a variance in undertaking road safety network risk assessments, and similarly only some councils had conducted road safety training for staff.

The biggest barriers for improving road safety were seen to be road funding and the capacity for risk assessment. The panel highlighted that there was a range of tools and resources available to councils to assist with risk assessments, which included road conditions, crash data and other variables.

Councils were encouraged to consider the primary use of particular roads and to identify treatments accordingly. The majority of council respondents considered that road safety in their area had remained static over time, without great evidence of improvement. Local solutions to this problem that were highlighted included community consultation and reviews of black spots, traffic management, dedicated cycling lanes and lower speed limits.

Participants observed the need for greater coordination between federal, state and local governments to plan and prioritise funding to meet local needs. There would be benefit in sharing case studies and practices in Australia and overseas which positively impact road safety.

KEY THEMES

Speed limits

There was a discussion around whether speed limits should be set by local councils or state governments. Interpreting road safety guidelines and applying them

consistently was also explored, along with the need for local communities to provide feedback about safety initiatives on their own roads. Periodic surveys and public forums could reflect the changing views of the community and contribute to policy making.

The importance of accurate data for network planning and speed limit setting was stressed. Methods of assessing risk and the tools available were also discussed, with participants exploring means for local councils to translate certain parameters into relevant risk ratings for road trauma.

Speed reduction as a road safety strategy

Speed reduction was explored as the simplest and fastest method to enhance road safety. Specific circumstances were considered alongside speed reduction, reflecting the varied needs in urban, rural and remote areas. Expansive and high-speed regional networks were discussed, as well as the need to find a balance between engineering solutions, law enforcement and community action.

The concept of speed reduction as a 'last resort' was explored. Elements such as road design, strategic use of funding and policy choice contributed to a broader conversation around speed reduction. Participants urged a greater focus on road design; identifying how roads will be used, and for what means, in order to determine appropriate speed settings.

Funding gaps and infrastructure

Finding the balance between the appropriate level of funding and the need for improved infrastructure was a common theme throughout the session. Despite state and federal funding, there are still gaps at local council level. Councils feel that roads cannot be maintained at the desired level, and there is still a need to concentrate funds on clear strategic priorities. These needs vary greatly between urban and remote areas, and this dichotomy was repeatedly reinforced during discussions.

The need to quantify risks and funding based on data-driven safety ratings was identified. Accurate measures of vehicle types, vehicle use and journey types, in conjunction with collective risk analysis, could better inform road safety investment. The conversation explored the experience of individual drivers, compared to the wider data sets upon which funding decisions are often made.

Practical, low-cost safety solutions were explored as priorities to help high-speed local roads, making them safer and lower risk. Upgrading roads was identified as the

most expensive option. The issue was the need to make strategic road system investments, with positive cost-benefits achieved through preventing costly crashes that are a burden on the health system and the wider community.

Changing motor vehicle landscape

The shifting use of the road network was discussed. Participants observed that our current infrastructure cannot cope with changes brought on by heavier vehicles, larger caravans and road trains. There was an appetite in the room for innovative thinking about infrastructure to support multiple road use – industry, local traffic and inter-city.

The desire for better infrastructure for Australian drivers was explored through the comparison to the standard of European networks. Engineering and design options were highlighted, especially where best practice and the opportunity for innovation might not always align. The increase of electric batteries and vehicles, their considerable weight, and the equity of petrol excise was discussed. Alternative methods of vehicle licencing, petrol pricing, and road user charges were raised.

Driver behaviour and compliance

Driver behaviour, education and law enforcement featured in much of the conversation. Road trauma has increased to its highest rate in both occurrence and real numbers since the 1970s, affecting different demographics at a socio-economic level. The group recognised a noticeable negative shift in driver behaviour and an increase in risky driving. In response, the group discussed the possibility for standardised driving tests across the nation.

Ideas for the future

The factors impacting road safety across local government areas are many and complex. Patterns of road use are changing, with a larger population necessitating more freight vehicle movements that cause road deterioration.

It was observed that the rate of crashes and road trauma is increasing despite safer vehicle design, improved traffic treatments and lower speed limits. New technology for automated and electric vehicles is seen as great advance and a challenge.

Local government does not have capacity to manage the demands for road system investments, even for the roads, bridges and cycling paths which are within their jurisdiction. Funds available at local, state and federal levels for road system upgrades, maintenance and treatments is finite.

Participants acknowledged there is excess demand for road funding across the board, where new funding streams have been significantly oversubscribed. Although representations are being made for increased federal funding, this should not be seen as the single solution. Road treatments such as overtaking lanes, larger truck stops, and slip lanes to address higher traffic volumes, could be considered. Criteria for black spot funding may require review to accommodate broader demands.

Road user behaviour and culture were cited as significant concerns. Suggestions were made that registration and licencing systems need to be overhauled to ensure better driving practice. Further, the licencing of vehicles could be standardised across states and redesigned to reflect driver and vehicle impacts on road safety. Electric vehicles, which are heavier than standard passenger vehicles, and automated freight vehicles, will require roads of greater weight capacity than current Australian standards. Therefore, an overhaul of the regulatory system was canvassed.

The need for greater engagement with local councils was underscored. Improved connections between all levels of government would assist in achieving improved road safety outcomes, with funding decisions supporting tailored local road safety solutions.

All levels of government were urged to work together and to share data on crashes, injuries, and non-compliance impacts. Local government, along with state and federal government, was strongly encouraged to use the tools, data and evidence available through the various road safety research bodies to improve safety outcomes.

HOUSING & COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Survey results and responses

A pre-event survey of local councils regarding housing issues yielded 69 responses. Increased funding for public and social housing was the top priority for unlocking more housing, according to survey respondents. Enabling works for greenfield development were also seen as critical.

When asked whether their council had received funds from the Housing Support Program or the Housing Australia Future Fund, many respondents indicated that they were not aware of these funding programs. This perhaps highlights a need to improve the understanding, awareness and reach of these programs.

The open text sections of the survey noted that a range of community infrastructure assets were needed to support liveable communities, including open space, footpaths, bike lanes, libraries, and streetscape beautification. Some respondents were also concerned about critical enabling infrastructure, including wastewater and power services.

Survey results indicated that some councils have shovel-ready enabling infrastructure projects. Other councils are wary about the financial contribution required for these projects, with a 25% funding contribution being seen by some as reasonable, but 50% being unaffordable.

Some positive examples of good practice in housing development were shared in the survey, including the establishment by councils of Affordable Housing Trusts, using air rights above council-owned car parks to construct affordable apartments, and key worker social housing projects.

Communication and coordination barriers between layers of government were highlighted, including delays in the provision of grant funding, and frustration that grant programs are competitive rather than collaborative.

Overall, these survey results resonated with the panellists. Some of the issues raised by survey respondents match themes which the federal government is working on.

Some panellists observed that there is an opportunity for the federal government to improve how programs and funding opportunities are communicated with the sector. Work could be done to communicate clear and understandable information about funding programs, improve the capacity of councils and their partners, and provide greater clarity about what stage projects need to be at in order to apply. It

was mentioned that a toolkit is being developed for local groups to help educate them on funding programs with standardised forms to use as templates.

KEY THEMES

Four of the strongest themes to emerge from the wider discussion included the failure of the private housing market to provide the right type of housing mix for our communities, difficulty of access to the materials and trade (particularly in remote areas) to deliver enabling infrastructure, lack of certainty of funding to enable a consistent housing build pipeline, and the need for greater communication and coordination between levels of government.

Some participants questioned the definition of affordability, and thought that commonly-accepted metrics of affordability were still too out of reach for low-to middle-income earners. Social housing supply was seen to be low, with long waiting times. Public and community housing efforts are fragmented, underfunded, and uneven across regions. Panellists did point out that progress has been made, and that affordability is arguably improving in some areas.

Planning system complexity

Some participants questioned whether red tape and excessive regulation were major contributors to inadequate housing supply. Panellists did not think this was the case, although they acknowledged that current planning regulations were sometimes complex.

Inconsistencies between local and state planning roles and requirements were seen to cause confusion, delays, and additional costs. Some participants described examples of developers and builders facing difficulties complying with differing regulations across multiple jurisdictions.

Regional housing targets were described by some participants as unclear or misaligned with local needs. Specific concerns were raised regarding delays at the state level in implementing inclusionary zoning.

Infrastructure delivery was identified by some participants as a significant bottleneck. One example was given of a contractor reportedly dealing with up to 50 different engineering standards for water and sewage. Paperwork inconsistencies were also noted across jurisdictions.

Delays in core services such as water and sewerage were claimed to increase the final delivery costs of housing by up to tenfold. Panellists acknowledged the complexity of these issues but noted that efforts were underway to find solutions, as such delays were halting some developments.

Public and private sector disconnect

A disconnect between the public and private sector in housing and infrastructure delivery was discussed. Participants felt the historic shortage of housing supply had reached a critical point. Some participants observed that the private sector has fallen short in meeting housing demand or prioritising quality – that the market is failing to provide sufficient housing mix and the quantity needed to meet demand.

Meanwhile, some participants saw government as hesitant to intervene in markets. Local councils reported feeling constrained by funding arrangements, fragmented policy environments, and limited support from higher tiers of government. Some participants urged the federal government to take a stronger leadership role in the coordination of the housing market.

In smaller communities, it was noted that councils often assume the role of land developer due to market failure – because there are no other providers available, council steps in. Challenges were raised around councils being asked to subsidise rates in order for affordable housing developments to be viable. Panellists suggested that such issues should be addressed during planning stages of developments, rather than at the ‘keys in doors’ stage.

Frustration was also expressed by some participants about the lack of transparency in funding processes. Councils and community housing providers reported instances of making significant upfront financial commitments (for example, the cost of preparing detailed business proposals to make grant applications) and being disappointed that clear feedback was not then given to them explaining why the grant application had been unsuccessful.

Participants and some panellists described the urgency for funding certainty to enable a pipeline of housing construction across future years.

Land supply and enabling infrastructure

Concerns were raised regarding land banking by developers, the slow release of land, and limited accountability for long-term outcomes. Zoning restrictions, insufficient incentives for mixed-use developments, and underutilisation of infill sites were cited by some as barriers.

High costs and difficulties in obtaining permits for high-density developments were identified as additional obstacles. These challenges were said to hinder affordability and project viability.

Suggestions were made to increase density in metropolitan areas and explore opportunities in peri-rural zones to meet the target of 1.2 million new homes. While land costs in rural areas were considered less of a constraint, delays were reported at gateway approval stages.

Some caution was expressed around rural housing expansion, due to potential impacts on systems such as agriculture and food production. It was also noted that although rural land costs may be low, broader building costs remained high – including freight access and lack of access to sufficient skilled trades to complete fit-outs.

The provision of enabling infrastructure in cash-strapped rural and regional council areas was observed as a barrier to land release and housing construction.

Design and liveability

Participants raised concerns about housing targets not considering urban design, limited public transport, inadequate recreational infrastructure, and car dependency. These factors were said to reduce liveability, particularly in outer suburban and rural locations.

Additional themes discussed included lengthy work commutes through traffic snarls, and challenging access to childcare services, which could not be fully staffed due to lack of nearby affordable housing for childcare workers.

State infrastructure was reported as lagging behind population growth. An example was described of housing estate access roads being repeatedly patched, rather than rebuilt, causing ongoing inconvenience and higher long-term costs.

Increased migration, freight and connectivity issues, population outflows, workforce shortages, and material supply constraints were also cited as challenges affecting regional construction and liveability.

Equity and inclusion

Planning and housing systems were seen as lacking in diversity, both in decision-making representation and in outcomes for marginalised groups. Ongoing gaps

relating to gender, age, income, and regional or rural disadvantage were highlighted.

The provision of sufficient public housing was highlighted by some participants as an obvious and critical part of the solution. Concern was expressed about adequate social housing and support options for women experiencing domestic violence and facing economic hardship. A suggestion was made that there should be a formula to determine how much social housing each local government area should have.

A focus on educating culturally and linguistically diverse communities about housing accessibility, affordability, support providers, and the social housing system was discussed. Improved understanding was seen as a way to expand access beyond conventional platforms such as online real estate listings.

The particular challenges facing remote indigenous communities in WA, NT and the Torres Strait were highlighted through a number of illustrative stories shared by participants. Panellists were urged to travel from Canberra to some of these remote areas and see the needs first-hand.

Ideas for the future – Systemic reforms and governance

Participants discussed the principle of housing as a human right, while others noted that housing was more commonly seen as a commodity to make money from.

A strongly recurrent theme throughout the conversation was cross-government cooperation at federal, state, and local levels. Suggestions included early guidance, national workshops, roundtables for each state, more consistent planning frameworks, and improved feedback mechanisms.

Policy design was encouraged to consider the full housing continuum. The panel noted that cabinet, through the National Building Reform Blueprint, was supporting collaboration between the commonwealth and states to reduce regulatory barriers and accelerate housing delivery.

It was observed that standardised funding and procurement models were not delivering for rural and regional communities. Greater flexibility and local relevance were identified as necessary to support sustainable, locally driven housing solutions.

Some participants proposed a range of reforms including capital gains tax adjustments, remote housing fringe benefit tax reviews, 'use it or lose it' land provisions, and removal of financial disincentives for local government-led

development. The revival of the National Rental Affordability Scheme, limited to local government delivery, was also suggested.

The importance of showcasing positive examples of urban change was highlighted as a way to bring developers on board. Stronger partnerships between state governments and communities were recommended to design incentives tailored to local needs.

It was strongly suggested that the National Housing Program be continued. Participants noted that three times as many applications were received as were approved, and requested transparency around the assessment of applications and provision of feedback where applications have been unsuccessful. Stronger use of local data was called for to guide housing allocations, inform decision-making, and review planning outcomes.

It was suggested that funding grant applications for housing projects needed to clearly explain who would be housed and why, to avoid oversupply in already well-serviced areas.

Land that had previously been deemed unsuitable for development was cited as potentially viable for new housing if expert advice was sought. This indicated a more open approach to site assessments could be beneficial in expanding housing supply.

Finally, some participants were firmly against local government being involved in housing programs, seeing this clearly as a state government issue.

Ideas for the future – Place-based and practical solutions

Some support was expressed for co-housing, community land trusts, tiny homes, modular construction (with enhanced quality control), and climate-appropriate kit homes for remote areas. Preference was shown for small-scale, mixed-use, and adaptive models over large, uniform developments.

Integrating active transport, and reducing parking requirements, was seen as critical to improving affordability, as provision of car parking in multi-unit development increases cost substantially. A strong case was made for designing cities around people rather than cars, to foster greener and more connected communities.

Construction of three to four-storey buildings in selected outer suburban areas with existing infrastructure and transport links was seen as preferable to concentrating growth in already dense inner urban zones.

Other reform ideas included fast-tracking approvals through the use of AI, simplifying red tape, allowing more zoning flexibility, particularly for underutilised rural land, and streamlining developer contributions while maintaining essential services.

A shift toward medium-density housing supported by cycling paths, green spaces, community hubs, and public transport, was encouraged. Poor housing design was noted to have psychological and social costs. Although higher up-front costs were acknowledged, the longer-term human, social, and economic benefits of well-planned communities were emphasised.

Emerging energy transition projects were identified as an opportunity to generate housing and employment benefits, with suggestions to ensure long-term legacy value for affected communities.

In some regional areas, it was reported that 50% of the population commuted out for work. As councils do not typically derive significant revenue from residential ratepayers, it was suggested that more commercial and employment zones could help diversify income streams.

A future sustainability model was discussed, involving commercial ratepayers contributing to major social housing projects. This was seen as a way to support communities where residents can live, work, and thrive.

Proposals to improve housing development in regional areas included freight subsidies, decentralisation incentives, skilled migration of trades, and first home buyer programs linked to housing delivery. Flexible funding for small councils was described as essential.

It was emphasised that regional and rural communities must be engaged in the design of solutions. Community engagement should be based on genuine consultation rather than top-down instruction. Increased availability of short-stay accommodation in remote areas was recommended to assist visiting staff from housing support agencies.

Whilst the nation takes action to address the housing shortage, participants urged policy makers not to forget those currently displaced, facing homelessness, or sleeping rough.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT JOBS & SKILLS

Survey results and responses

Prior to the session, a survey collected data on the current issues councils were facing with jobs and skill development. We collected responses from 29 people. The findings provide insight into the current state of recruitment, training, and staff retention for local government areas.

The results highlighted widespread shortages of qualified professionals in critical roles, the barriers councils face in attracting and retaining talent, and the growing interest in alternative training pathways such as micro-credentialing and VET provision.

The majority of councils reported being adversely affected by shortages of qualified staff across a range of professional disciplines. These workforce constraints are presenting substantial operational challenges and affecting councils' ability to maintain service delivery standards.

Recruitment difficulties are particularly acute for several critical roles. Responding councils identified engineers, urban and statutory planners, environmental health officers, building inspectors, and professionals in aged care and maternal health as the most difficult to source. Responders commented that these roles are essential for meeting regulatory obligations and delivering frontline services, and that ongoing vacancies in these areas risk current and ongoing service delivery gaps.

Councils cited a number of structural and systemic barriers to recruitment. These included a limited pool of appropriately qualified professionals within regional areas, intense competition for talent from the private sector and metropolitan councils, and salary competitiveness challenges. Further, many councils noted a lack of accessible local training pathways contributing to persistent skills shortages.

When considering workforce development, only 52% of councils reported having access to sufficient training options within their region. Juxtaposed to this, of the responding councils, only 12% have looked at micro-credentialing through becoming a VET training provider – an approach that may contribute to meeting local needs more directly. A greater proportion of organisations (some 45%) have looked at the Diploma of Local Government and its component courses.

Finally, while staff retention vary across councils, the challenge of attracting and retaining skilled staff remains a persistent concern.

KEY THEMES

Skilled migration and regional retention

Participants felt that skilled migration settings have been effective in encouraging relocation to regional communities, however long-term retention remains a challenge. Key enablers include spousal employment support, school access, and culturally welcoming programs. It was suggested that councils could better frame the value proposition for migrants. Along with reframing, career progression pathways that reflect personal and holistic needs could also be amplified and may contribute to more sustained retention.

While the Designated Area Migration Scheme (DAMS) has proven to be an effective mechanism in attracting skilled workers, concerns were expressed regarding the administrative burden and cost associated with its implementation. A more streamlined and affordable approach was suggested as a potential solution to support councils in accessing international talent.

Occupational shortages in planning, surveying and certification

Persistent shortages in professions such as building certifiers and surveyors were noted. Barriers highlighted included declining enrolments in tertiary training, difficulties securing insurance, and complex, inconsistent legislation. These factors, combined with the high-risk nature of the roles, may deter new entrants. These shortages have flow-on impacts to the ability of the nation to release land for more housing. Peak bodies were called upon to support uplift efforts. Uniform licensing schemes and clearer ethical guidance could help mitigate these issues.

Barriers to workforce attraction

A lack of available housing, and low levels of building rates in certain regions, were seen to have compounded recruitment difficulties, despite the implementation of progressive measures, including housing incentives and micro-learning pathways. For some council areas, unemployment rates remain negligible, and new arrivals face affordability barriers.

Concerns were raised in the discussion regarding the accessibility of local government employment platforms. For prospective applicants, particularly younger individuals, the complexity and inconsistency of council websites have been described as a barrier, leading to disengagement from the application process altogether.

In regional areas, the availability of early childhood educators has been highlighted as a critical issue. The lack of accessible childcare services impedes workforce participation, particularly for parents who may otherwise be willing and able to return to work or accept employment opportunities.

For councils facing many of these barriers, it was suggested that existing and traditional services could be reimagined or delivered differently, including through outsourcing, cross council collaborations, or digital augmentation.

Competition for resources

Some participants felt the competition for skilled labour from large-scale infrastructure projects of national significance, such as Snowy 2.0 and the Transgrid transmission line upgrades, exacerbated staffing challenges. Local governments are unable to compete with the salaries and employment conditions offered through such projects, thereby creating an uneven playing field for recruitment and retention.

In addition, clarification was sought regarding the potential impacts of multi-employer bargaining reforms on the local government sector. The question was raised as to whether these changes will enhance or hinder workforce stability and capability.

Workforce data, FTE growth and consultant use

Full-time equivalent (FTE) employee growth in the sector was observed to be broadly aligned with population increases, though financial and operational pressures persist. The use of consultants was seen by participants as often necessary to fill specialist or project-based roles, particularly in infrastructure.

Panellists encouraged councils to distinguish their core responsibilities from the provision of other services. It was felt there was also a recognised need to capture local talent and reduce dependence on external contractors wherever possible. Participants commented that consultant use is a prudent and effective way to flex council organisations where necessary, without the risk of overburdening head count permanently.

It was suggested that there is need to 'talk up' local government as a career option, and highlight the fulfilling careers that can be had in the sector.

Workforce strategy and planning frameworks

A panellist noted that work was underway on developing a framework or roadmap, with supporting data, for a national vision for people in regional, rural and remote areas. There would be an emphasis on place-based collaboration and evidence-based planning. Forthcoming releases, including a regional roadmap and annual workforce insights report, could be expected to highlight successful case studies and emerging solutions.

There was recognition that the sector would benefit from a more clearly defined problem statement to guide future workforce strategies. It has been suggested that thought leaders and facilitators may assist in sharpening the collective understanding of the challenges, thereby enabling a more targeted and effective response. For example, key barriers remain around childcare, housing, and access to training.

Migrant integration and diversity initiatives

The room explored how we might assist migrants to feel welcome in Australia. Nationally, workplace integration strategies for migrant workers are under development, with a focus on job readiness and two-way cultural understanding.

It was also discussed that programs that build social cohesion, such as volunteering and community participation, are instrumental. The federal government was referenced, as it has recently made high-level appointments in multicultural affairs that reinforce the importance of diversity – it was highlighted as an example of diversity done well.

Expanding responsibilities in rural and remote councils

Participants observed that local councils are increasingly required to deliver services traditionally funded or managed by other tiers of government, including mental health, aged care, and emergency response. It was discussed that these issues disproportionately affect smaller and more isolated regions. Volunteering can bridge the gap for certain councils to an extent, however, the more remote a council is, the less viable this option becomes.

Ideas for the future

Participants felt the challenges surrounding workforce attraction and retention in local government have become increasingly evident. There is a growing perception that recruitment practices within the sector are overly reliant on existing local

government networks, with limited engagement or outreach to professionals from industry and business. This insularity had the potential to narrow the talent pool and may discourage skilled individuals from considering local government as a viable career path.

Local governments were said to face particularly persistent challenges in attracting and retaining health and technical professionals, particularly in regional areas. Addressing this would require modernising recruitment practices, embracing skills-based employment pathways, and actively removing structural and cultural barriers.

Initiatives such as cadetships, school outreach, and purposeful storytelling were identified as helpful ways local government could position itself as a meaningful career option.

At the same time, it was mentioned that it would be helpful to prioritise competencies over formal qualifications. This would better support mid-life career transitions, and create more inclusive, flexible work environments that might better compete with other sectors.

Further interest was expressed in the federal rollout of programs such as Workforce Australia and Career Transition Assistance. Local councils, particularly those in regions affected by transitions in the mining sector, are eager to understand how these initiatives may be leveraged to support local employment outcomes.

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