

6.5. MM05: Local Government Exclusion from National Cabinet

On 13 March 2020, as the Coronavirus pandemic took hold around the world, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) met in Sydney to discuss a range of issues of national importance. At that meeting First Ministers (the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers) agreed to establish a National Cabinet to meet at least weekly to address the country's response to the Coronavirus. The focus was primarily on the health and wellbeing of Australians and managing the health response. Over time National Cabinet has broadened its agenda to include a focus on managing Coronavirus impacts across Australia. There was no Local Government representation on National Cabinet when it was established on the basis that its focus was on health.

On 29 May 2020, First Ministers, through the Prime Minister, announced the continuation of National Cabinet, which they considered to be a much more effective body than COAG for taking decisions in the national interest. Local Government was not given a seat at the National Cabinet table. However, ALGA as the national representative body of Local Government, was given a seat on the National Federation Reform Council (NFRC). The NFRC will meet once a year to focus on priority national federation issues such as Closing the Gap and Women's Safety. In addition to ALGA, the NFRC is comprised of the National Cabinet and the Council of Federal Financial Relations - Federal and State/Territory Treasurers.

The President of ALGA had been a member of COAG since it was convened by Prime Minister Keating in 1992. Local Government was included because all parties recognised that Australia has three levels of government and that the Government with most impact on people's daily lives in terms of the provision of local services and infrastructure is Local Government.

Decisions about how our Federation works and how it can be improved or reformed require all three levels of government working together to align their policies and programs. Australians expect the decisions of government affecting them to reflect their grass roots views and to be implemented at the local level as well as the state and national level. This was the case with the development and implementation of the National Competition Policy in the 1990s which included reform at the local government level as well as the National and State levels in areas such as water supply and infrastructure provision through procurement.

National Cabinet, and the Commonwealth Government in particular, are looking towards pro-growth policies to lift investment and get Australians back to work. With a focus on jobs growth they are seeking ways to enable parts of the economy to grow. Local Governments are willing and necessary partners in developing and implementing reform. Reform involving the streamlining of legislation and regulation requires all the levels of government which are involved in regulation working together to achieve the benefits of reform for everyone without imposing costs or burdens on local communities. Getting it right on the ground is Local Government's area of strength.

Councils facilitate, establish, and grow local businesses and economies. Economic development has always been at the core of every successful council. Councils support economic growth through regional development policies and initiatives, strategic and land use planning, targeted investment attraction, prioritisation of local procurement, and focusing their annual investment on infrastructure that serves the community and business alike. Many councils also provide business networking opportunities, business training, mentoring, and incubator facilities and employment hubs. It is local government that is best placed to drive locally-led recovery

The challenge facing National Cabinet over the coming months is unlike any which has faced Australian governments in recent times and it will require the concerted, coordinated and complementary efforts of all three levels of government to rebuild consumer confidence, support business and recreate millions of jobs.

Australians expect their three levels of government to be working together, and to see evidence of that. Including Local Government in National Cabinet would demonstrate a strong unity of purpose and a combined commitment to promote and implement National Cabinet decisions across the broadest implementation platform available to government.

I therefore recommend:

- 1. THAT** Council agree to send a letter to the NSW Premier, Ms Gladys Berejiklian MP, Federal Member for North Sydney, Mr Trent Zimmerman MP, Federal Member for Warringah, Ms Zali Steggall MP, and State Member for North Shore, Ms Felicity Wilson MP, which highlights the Council's disappointment that Local Government is not represented on the newly formed National Cabinet and seeks their assistance in requesting that First Ministers review the decision to exclude Local Government.
- 2. THAT** Council notes that the Australian Local Government Association, Local Government NSW and other state/territory local government associations will continue to advocate for local government representation on the National Cabinet and for Local Government's interests in all relevant forums.

**COUNCILLOR JILLY GIBSON
MAYOR**