Sean Rice is the Managing Director of Proterra Group, a medium sized Civil Consultancy in South-West Queensland. He has worked in local government in New South Wales and Queensland for over 20 years, and currently resides in Goondiwindi right on the border. Sean has a passion for rural and regional communities and for the continued improvement of our industry through collaboration. With a degree in Civil Engineering, MBA, RPEQ Status and a Fellow of IPWEAQ, Sean has extensive experience in working with multiple councils on secondment and continues to be frustrated with the lack of real cooperation, leading to duplication of different systems and processes where ever he goes. What a waste.

It’s time to get serious about collaboration
How many times do we hear a council say ‘but we’re a little bit unique’ or ‘we have to do things differently here’?

I say ‘what rubbish’. There are around 530 Council’s across Australia, and there aren’t 530 ‘best’ ways of doing things. There’s only one best way. We need to identify it, and then help replicate it across the Country so we can all save some time and money for our ratepayers.

To be clear, I’m talking about council’s daily operations here, not the location, industry or growth opportunities for your Local Government Area. Of course, those things are unique, and you’ve got to push that for all it’s worth with your marketing and development whilst you grow your communities.

Where focus is needed is on systems and processes, and I’ll repeat that for emphasis. Systems and processes. There are so many things we do on a daily, weekly, monthly and annual basis at councils but for some reason we generally all do it differently. We feel the need to tweak the system we borrowed from the council next door, or we’re using a hand me down system or contract that one of our predecessors developed umpteen years ago because that’s what we’ve always used. There’s got to be a better way.

Some examples that come to mind are the contracts we issue for major and minor works on a regular basis, business plans
for our water and sewerage businesses, developing asset management systems and data collection, how we inspect and condition rate our footpaths, and documents for the annual reseal program.

There are endless examples, and I guarantee you they are generally all different in one way or another between councils. I’m sure there are even consultants out there who make a bucket load by pushing that everything needs to be bespoke. That’s garbage and it’s costing our ratepayers money.

How much efficiency could be gained if we were able to pool our resources, identify the best way to implement these systems and processes and then roll them all out. There would be a bunch of benefits from this approach, and I suppose a few off the top of my head would include:

- Reduced need for highly qualified, experienced staff in all positions of council
- Reduced staff training as staff move from one Council to another, as staff would not need to learn a new way of doing things.
- Ease in keeping documents up to date with latest changes in legislation or best practice, as it could all be done centrally by people that specialise in each succinct area.
- Ease in tender preparation and project delivery for contractors and suppliers as the standards they are working to would be the same (or very similar) across their market area.

There have been a number of great attempts at achieving this approach across the years including Aus-Spec, ADAC and IPWEA Standard Drawings and there are many more, but they haven’t yet got the take up we need to provide real efficiencies to local government.

I’ve also heard some great stories from some of our water and waste businesses combining resources across several council areas with success, and even regional road groups are getting some traction in a number of areas. The take up though still isn’t where it needs to
be to provide maximum benefits to our councils. I’m sure we can do better.

At Proterra Group we’ve been fortunate recently to be able to share our own experiences in Stormwater Asset Data Collection. We’ve worked closely with the IPWEA and their documentation to develop what we believe is best practice in asset data collection for stormwater infrastructure, and we are happy to share it with everyone to implement in your own areas. The beauty is you don’t need our business, we’ll give you the systems and processes and you can do it yourself or even better get some local contractors on board to help you out. It’s been quite encouraging at the conferences we’ve presented at for council’s engineering staff to learn from our experiences and acknowledge that by adopting proven processes, they will ultimately get the outcomes they want with minimal time and effort.

Imagine if we could do this for all of the tasks required of our local government bodies without having to do our own research and come up with our own systems and processes. We’d all be in front.

So how ‘unique’ really is your council when it comes to day to day operations. I’m confident there are many areas where you don’t need a bespoke solution to get the job done efficiently and effectively. Maybe there’s a system or process out there already being used by many other councils that you can adopt and help bring some uniformity across local government.

I’d love to hear your thoughts on how we can increase take up by councils on existing systems that are out there, or the development of new systems to fill the gaps. It would have to save money, that can then go back into our infrastructure and growing our communities.

We’ve recently been privy to some excellent papers at IPWEA conferences and it was encouraging to see a number of councils take advantage of the learnings and make the next step of approaching the presenters a copy of their initiatives for implementation into their own Council areas. We are also supported in this space through tools such as Ask Your Mates, and the new web-based platforms setup by IPWEAQ to allow our members to identify initiatives we can collaborate on and encourage the sharing of information.

So, anyone keen to put up their hand with me and make a difference?