In late June 2019 I was fortunate enough to be invited on a trip to the western side of Cape York Peninsular to visit and engage with eight Indigenous and remote councils. Led by LGAQ, the group also consisted of representatives from Peak Services, LocalBuy, LGIAsuper, Telstra, Arts Queensland and IPWEAQ. While I have worked in many and varied parts of Queensland over my 34 years in our sector, this was the first time visiting this particular part of the state. Needless to say, the experience was wonderful and provided me with a much greater appreciation of the unique challenges faced in this spectacular part of Queensland.

The adventure commenced in Cairns with a dinner on the Sunday evening to allow the group to meet each other, many for the first time. This also coincided with the second match of the State of Origin series for the year that, unfortunately, resulted in a resounding New South Wales win. It was at this point I also became aware that not everyone on the trip supported the great state of Queensland. While this was far from the ideal start to the week, things could only get better. What an understatement this turned out to be.

The seven intrepid travellers took off from Cairns airport at first light on the Monday morning on a journey that would take us to Aurukun, Pormpuraaw, Kowanyama, Normanton, Kurumba, Croydon, Doomadgee, Burketown and back to Cairns over a four-day itinerary. Given this schedule, the group was constantly on-the-go as we spent time meeting with key contacts from the various Councils and rushing to the airport to the next leg of the journey.

While this trip provided the opportunity to see and experience some amazing scenery, the highlight for me was to be able to sit down with the key Council officers or drive around the towns with them and listen to the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis to ensure the needs of the community are met. I was surprised by the unique nature of each community but not surprised by the common issues that are faced. Each community has its own unique identity that reflects not only the local population, but also the stability and experience of the Council executive.
While there have been a number of common messages that came this engagement, some of the key themes are listed below.

**Works for Queensland (W4Q)**
The W4Q program has made a very real difference in these communities. Whenever the locals talked about the projects funded by this program, their demeanour became very positive. The focus of W4Q is to provide funding that supports regional Councils to undertake job-creating maintenance and minor infrastructure projects. This initiative has been very successful across all of the communities visited. While the current program has been extended to 2020/21, it is critical that it continues in the long term.

**Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA)**
The DFRA is essential to maintain a level of service related to critical infrastructure in an area that is exposed to regular natural disasters. Due to the unpredictable nature of natural disasters, remote communities struggle to plan for and maintain a workforce to respond effectively to disaster recovery while continuing to provide the essential services required by their communities.

Another common message is the funding arrangements do not reflect the real costs or encourage efficient practices. One of the main issues communicated is that funding that only covers at-cost expenses does not allow for the depreciation of plant and equipment that has been purchase by Council to service normal construction and maintenance activities. Another issue is that the time required to apply and be approved for betterment funding does not allow for work to be completed while workers are on-site resulting in significant re-establishment costs.

The reality is that these communities are so busy responding to the immediate needs of their communities, the administration often takes a secondary place. One prime example on this trip was that I found a Director of Engineering on site laying blocks. Capacity and capability issues have a very real impact on the operational effectiveness of the Councils.
Legacy Projects

Who doesn’t like a ribbon cutting ceremony? Apparently, anyone who is involved in managing these assets despises them. All too often a large project has been instigated with good intent, but without the full understanding of the ongoing costs to maintain and manage the infrastructure. This region has a number of such projects that are a financial burden on the communities.

Council Priorities

The priorities for those responsible for managing the day-to-day operations are significantly different to what we traditionally associate with most councils. In addition to normal council activities, they also act as airline, freight depot, bank, post office, undertaker, child care agency, aged care, arts centre, social housing manager and much more. In some areas, the safety and security of the community and the welfare of children are issues that must be dealt with immediately, impacting on both financial and physical resources available for other activities.

One comment that resonated with me was that due to these challenges, the engineering team struggled to react to unplanned maintenance of infrastructure assets. To set up a workable asset management plan is a pipe-dream as they do not know what assets they have, let alone have an understanding of the condition of the assets.

Capability and capacity

Although being able to attract and retain staff with the requisite skills and experience is not unique to the Western Cape, the difference to having a stable and skilled workforce can make a significant difference to a community. This is not an issue that can be easily overcome but unless we work together as a sector to develop
strategic initiatives to address the challenges, the situation will not change.

One observation made is that while there are some highly skilled and passionate people serving these communities, there are also a few that either have the wrong skills sets or are focused on other outcomes. This raises concerns with some of the strategic and technical decisions being made that have the potential to negatively impact the sustainability of some Councils.

Next steps
While there are many and various challenges to working in these Indigenous and remote councils, we are reminded that they are a part of our sector. Following this trip, IPWEAQ has identified a number of initiatives that we can be put in place immediately to assist with some of the capability issues. We are also investigating how best we can advocate on behalf of these communities to reduce some of the bureaucratic burdens.

There is a great deal of need in all of our regional and remote areas and as a sector we are challenged to develop strategies to address the need. We have a vast amount of knowledge, skills and experience from within our public works community that can be utilised to achieve long-term positive solutions across the state. I encourage all the IPWEAQ family to consider how they can contribute in any way. If you would like to know more about this trip or would like to become involve in finding practical solutions to the areas of need, please contact me by emailing Craig.Moss@ipweaq.com