

How to work with local governments

Quick Tips

1. Local governments work in a political, rules-based environment that values process, predictability and risk mitigation. New ideas can appear to be risky for them.
2. Permanent changes can be perceived as risky, but "temporary trials" can be easier to say "yes" to.
3. If you want to do anything more than a one-off activity, start by building positive working relationships rather than getting angry or forcing things through.
4. Find a 'place champion' - someone willing to provide advice, let you know who to talk to or help.

This is a short guide to provide some tips and ideas that we have learned along the way in working in and with local governments.

Local governments in Australia provide dozens of services in our community, many of which you may not even thought of. Despite the popular perceptions, we have found that the vast majority of local government staff are hard working professionals doing the best they can in an often challenging environment. Respect and empathy can go a long way, although we do believe this is a two-way street!

This is general advice as each local government is different. Learning a bit about how they work, who does what and how to get things through the system can make your positive doing much easier!

The culture of local government is risk-averse

There are exceptions, but most of the time the culture of your local government will be risk-averse. Don't try to sell grand, world-leading visions. Instead, focus on how you can manage and mitigate risks.

There is a tendency to say "no" unless a policy specifically allows for something to happen. Change can be perceived as risky.



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Think about why they might say “no” to an idea. This might include:

- Concerns about public liability and insurance risk
- Concerns about political backlash or controversy
- Concerns about what neighbouring businesses or residents might say. Have a chat with some of them early on if possible
- “It’s never been done before ...” (so we don’t have anything to go on)

Brainstorm some potential responses to these kinds of concerns before making contact if you can. Put yourself in their shoes.

Tip 1 - Show that risks are identified and can be managed

Firstly, understand that you are unlikely to get a “hell yeah, that’s awesome!” response. A seemingly simple idea could actually be difficult for them to manage, either internally or externally. Be respectful - it is what it is.

Learn to explain and present your ideas in a way that makes it easier for them to understand. That could include references to policies to show you have done some homework or a handy reference table.

Possible risk	Risk mitigation action

When you show them that the risks have been identified and can be managed, they will be more inclined to say yes.

Tip 2 - Start small

We often think big when we’re enthusiastic. But, big often freaks out diligent officers working in local government. One of the big advantages of starting small is building trust, confidence and possibly a relationship with people in local government. Once you show them some results and demonstrate that you can ‘make it happen’ without causing major issues, then, like any human relationship, they may trust you to do something bigger and bolder.



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For example, one time we saw a local government struggling with a community-led proposal to build an ambitious nature play area on a park. Building would've taken months and required deliveries of giant logs, plies of mulch etc. All too much for a small community group to manage, or so they thought! Luckily, the community agreed to play it small. They kept the play features to no more than 600mm above ground level (which satisfied a tricky bit of a building code), and limited the nature play area to 25m². When this smaller project became a success, they started planning extensions. The park is still in use today and everyone loves it! Work around challenges and think creatively.

Tip 3 - Call it a "trial"

This is our favourite tip. There is usually a hesitation or fear around permanent change, unless it is something that the local government does already, has approved often or feels comfortable with. Even then, there can be issues!

Pitching your idea as a "temporary trial" or "test" can really work because it means the trial can be stopped at any point if it is causing issues or risks. The "call it a trial" trick works especially well when the local government is proving more sceptical than usual, or when your idea might significantly change the status quo.

Essentially, you're promising to carefully risk-manage a temporary showcase for your concept. Trials lift everyone out of theoretical debates about what might happen and gives everyone a real-time sense of how the concept works. And that means your team can make a case for the concept becoming permanent.

Tip 4 - The 'wildcard option'

The staff of the local government play a different role to your elected councillors. You won't deal with councillors at all over routine council stuff like events paperwork or building permits. They're usually not even allowed to get involved in those things!

If you are facing real problems, or are making real progress, then making contact with your elected councillors can be a good move. They like celebrating positive doers and seeing good things happen.



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Use at your own risk!

One of our roles at Town Team Movement is to try to sell the big ideas and key messages of our movement. At a strategic level, we would say to the leaders and decision-makers in the local government that enabling positive doers can help to mitigate some of their biggest strategic risks, including:

- The continually growing expectations of what local governments can and should do
- The common misalignment of the strategic purposes and goals as an organisation, usually focused on building thriving communities and places, and its day to day actions, which are more risk, rule and process-focused.
- Disengagement, disconnection and disempowerment by staff, electors, businesses or residents.
- Poor organisational culture that affects reputation and performance.

An over-emphasis on stopping the smaller, operational risks can create much bigger strategic risks. Shifting from "No, because ..." to "Yes, if ..." can be a powerful change and enabler of good things! These strategic arguments are unlikely to work at an operational level though, so use them at your own risk!

What are the real risks to mitigate?

An over-emphasis on the small risks actually produces bigger risks

