



NGS GLOBAL

AMERICAS • EUROPE • ASIA PACIFIC • AFRICA • MIDDLE EAST

## Local Government Hiring Trends and Executive Skills Required for Success

*Kym Fletcher, Partner, Sydney, Australia*

**Local government is the important third layer of government in Australia. After a brief update on the sector, we explore the key senior leadership hiring trends and traits required for occupational success.**

Local government in Australia [employs 191,000 people in almost 400 occupations across 537 Councils](#), with each Council overseen by a governing body of councilors and a mayor. 55% of Australia's Councils are in regional and remote areas, and can vary greatly in size, from as small as 1.5 square kilometers (0.58 square miles), to as big as 380,000 square kilometers (150,000 square miles), which covers a geographical area larger than Egypt or Pakistan.

### **Amalgamation Trend**

In a bid for greater efficiency and to reduce operational costs through economies of scale, many local government entities (Councils) have undergone amalgamation in recent decades in different Australian states and territories, most recently in New South Wales. Local government in Victoria also went through a large consolidation process throughout the 1990s, where 210 shires were reduced to just 78.

---

“...new organizational leadership challenges exist with regards to prioritization of funding, operational execution, inclusive governance, organizational agility, digitization, and project management.”

---

As a result, amalgamated local government entities are increasingly large and complex organizations. These Councils serve an extremely wide variety of constituents (ethnically, socio-politically and demographically), and have also increased the range of services they offer. This presents new organizational leadership challenges with regards to prioritization

of funding, operational execution, inclusive governance, organizational agility, digitization, and project management.

Accordingly, Councils need to attract top executive talent with particular skillsets to help steer these larger and more diverse organizations into the next chapter. Fortunately, there has also been an increase in the sophistication of their hiring departments, so they are increasingly in a position to do so.



### Leadership Qualities Required

Currently, the qualities needed in modern senior executives in local government include:

- Deep experience and proficiency in a wide range of core professional skills, most importantly critical thinking, problem solving and team collaboration
- Exceptional stakeholder engagement skills in order to effectively meet the needs of a diverse range of grassroots stakeholders that are much 'closer to the ground' than in other sectors, including other levels of government
- Astute political antenna and the ability to develop effective working relationships with the elected Councilors who, again, are close to the ground and can access senior executives at any time with issues and requests.

### Sources of Executive Talent

Whilst Council CEOs/General Managers and hiring departments are always keen to encounter executives with deep experience in local government, they are also searching for

talent from an ever-widening variety of sources. There is an increased level of movement between the private sector and local government, although the adjustment to public sector environments for corporate individuals can be a little challenging, due to the different kind of authorizing structures and the political layer above the executive.

State government entities are another obvious talent pool for sourcing top leaders and executives, and there is currently much more porosity between these two levels of government. We are proudly involved in facilitating the movement of senior executives between different levels of government.

Many state government executives regard local government as a genuine alternative place of employment, particularly for those who see roles in Councils as an opportunity to contribute to communities more directly, and potentially more impactfully, at a micro level. State government appointees to senior local government roles often tell us they enjoy the different challenges and the level of complexity that occurs at the local government level.

### **Conclusion**

Australian local government entities are increasingly complex organizations that need ever-more capable leaders and executives. Success in the sector requires a unique mix of political mettle, dexterity and application. Councils are increasingly sourcing and recruiting talented individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and sectors, and this is having a positive impact on the ability of Councils to meet the varied and complex needs of their communities.

*Kym Fletcher is a Partner at NGS Global based in Sydney, Australia. She has particular expertise in the public sector, having held senior roles in NSW state government and served a wide variety of clients in Australian states, territories as well as the Commonwealth over the last 20 years. Ms. Fletcher also has a key focus and interest in NGO/NFP appointments and in professional services, having handled many senior legal and audit appointments.*

*Prior to working in executive search, Ms. Fletcher worked for two of Australia's leading law firms, Freehills and Allens. She was also the Principal Legal Officer with the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA), where she went on to hold the senior operational position of Director Regulation & Audit with the EPA.*

*NGS Global delivers partner-led executive search and leadership advisory services worldwide.*