

# FROM THE LEADER'S CHAIR

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TRACING THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS OF  
TODAY'S LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERS



New Zealand Society of  
Local Government Managers



# FROM THE PRESIDENT

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROFESSIONALS  
AUSTRALIA



As the level of government closest to citizens, local government has the most personal interaction with people day-to-day, both within and outside of the individual organisations we serve in. It also brings with it constraints and challenges unique to the council space. This dynamic fosters a particular kind of leader – but generalisations do not do justice to the diverse leadership styles behind the local government CEOs and GMs who serve their communities and the career journeys that led to their positions.

This document is intended to not just showcase the breadth of leadership talent across Australia and New Zealand's broad council landscape, but to also provide a pathway in this landscape for aspiring leaders in local government's next generation. LG Professionals prides itself on fostering local government's emerging leaders through various programs, scholarships and awards, and this showcase is another way that we are illuminating the path to greater opportunities for local government professionals.

We share this mission with our partners across the water, SOLGM. While every local government organisation has its own unique challenges – especially so internationally – the overlap in teachable moments and opportunities for shared growth in the personal stories of leaders is extraordinary. Please enjoy – and hopefully learn from – this collection of inspiring leadership journeys.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Crawley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Mark Crawley  
National President  
LG Professionals Australia

# FROM THE PRESIDENT

NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY OF  
LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGERS



SOLGM is delighted to work with our international partner, LG Professionals Australia, to produce this series of stories showcasing our local government leaders.

These stories span a varied range of council types, each with distinct challenges- but there are some common themes.

Connection to community and fostering community well-being feature throughout these stories. Our leaders are committed to serving their community and supporting their teams to do the same. Partnerships and meaningful relationships feature strongly across New Zealand stories, particularly the importance of working with iwi.

Each leader brings a truly unique perspective and experience to their role. Some came to their roles as a planned career choice, others took an accidental path and found themselves in a sector offering diversity, creativity, challenge and reward.

SOLGM is committed to providing professional leadership, and promoting innovation and excellence in management practice. We are proud to showcase our leaders that epitomise these features.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Phil Wilson', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Phil Wilson  
President  
Society of Local Government  
Managers

# DAVID KEENAN

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
SOUTHERN DOWNS  
REGIONAL COUNCIL  
QUEENSLAND, AUS

*“As the CEO, you’re required to be never-endingly resilient, which can become challenging when circumstances are increasingly difficult.”*



David Keenan began his local government career with a focus on economic development at Melton Shire Council in the mid-90s, with this eye for local job-creation holding pride of place in his work even now in his role as CEO of Southern Downs Regional Council. His early career began under the diverse leadership styles of CEOs who “shot from the hip” versus other more “cautious” and process-driven leaders. Along the way, he has developed his own leadership style that has helped him manage the unique challenges of a region torn between drought to widespread fires. It has been these challenges, though, that have driven his leadership journey.

*What I enjoy doing is working in councils where there are challenges. Since I’ve come to Southern Downs we’ve had floods, drought, and fire, as well as de-amalgamation pressures placed on Council. Alongside all of these issues that are out of our control, there has also been the important objective of bringing Council out of financial despair.*

*As the CEO, you’re required to be never-endingly resilient, which can become challenging when circumstances are increasingly difficult. Making decisions and encouraging people to come along with me in whatever direction that may be, as well as providing frank and fearless advice to councillors, are some of the key things I do.*

*The towns of Warwick, Stanthorpe and its surrounds that house Southern Downs Regional Council have been particularly hard hit by natural disasters and extreme weather events from drought to fires, which has put this resilience to the test.*

*I think the fires and drought have both challenged us as an organisation and a community. From an innovation point of view we’ve responded exceedingly well. We’ve come up with solutions that are very much ‘home grown’ and they are working. The carting of water into Stanthorpe which commences in the next few weeks is testament to that. As are the storage and distribution facilities that we’ve set up.*

*In relation to coping with the fires, I watched as my staff rose to a new level of coordination - both of resources and people. Furthermore, staff worked at perfecting how we could best respond in the shortest timeframes and I’m particularly proud of the organisation for doing that. Whether it was one of the blokes from the grader or whether it was the person manning the evacuation centre, everyone was working to improve any speedbump they found along the way.*

*The drought, which has been affecting Southern Downs for years, has touched everyone in different but no less difficult ways.*



*Inspecting bushfire damage with Queensland Fire and Emergency Services.*

*This has been the hardest to deal with; watching people de-stock, having people come to me and say, “Dave, I’ve got no money. As in, zero. And I don’t know what I’m going to do.”*

*So I’m super proud of what my staff is doing to combat this hopelessness. We have a drought co-ordinator who is working with many of these people. However, in some instances just getting to this stage can be arduous. Many of these people are very proud and have never asked for help before - but we are now in this situation where there is nothing left. There is no feed. There is no water. There is no money. But there is council and we are doing our best to help everyone.*

*Some of these people are not young and they really don’t know what to do, so it’s important that the leadership shown by myself, the executive management team, the Mayor, and the councillors is proactive and that we’re looking for solutions and recognising where we can do more.*

**While David has thrived under pressure, releasing that same pressure has been an important part of maintaining a healthy work-life balance.**

***“I think it’s important in the CEO role that you have other activities beside local government to engage your mind and body.”***

*Personally, I still play Masters AFL and up until recently I coached as well. And in the same vein, I do a lot of mentoring through the LG Professionals International Mentoring Program. For me, it’s a matter of having time off from local government to go and have a kick of the footy or do that mentoring. These are the spaces where you realise that there is a lot you can give back to people entering the local government space.*

**So what are some of the traits that make a good leader?**

*My approach to being a leader means that I try to remember everyone’s name and I try to remember what interests and hobbies everyone is involved in. Most of my staff know my face and they know when I’m driving around in my car, but for me to know them and be able to say to them, “How are you going with your beekeeping?” or, “How are you doing with your archery club?” – that is really important to me and important to them.*

*I think the other trait is the need to be present. I’m always around and I always stop to say “G’day” to people - I think that’s really important as a leader. My belief is (and I will always say it) that success has a thousand fathers and failure is an orphan. So it’s important for the CEO to be there for the success, but it’s even more important for the CEO to be there when people don’t succeed. But not just there, to be able to support them through that - that’s really what it comes down to.*

**What about these traits is particularly important in the public sphere of local government?**

*Because we’re so much in the public view, it is important that your practising the same approach to residents as you would staff – especially in a relatively small local government area such as*

*Southern Downs (we've about 36,000 people and 380 staff). Since the CEO, along with the councillors and the executive management team, are always going to bump into someone, you've got to actively think about what you are portraying to the people around you. Make sure that you're present, available, and approachable to everyone.*

**This person-to-person approach at all levels of the organisation is something David has put into practice at Council.**

*I like surprising staff. About a year-and-a-half ago I managed to get the boxer Jeff Horn out here. Even more importantly, I managed to get him here just after he had his fight with Manny Pacquiao. Normally, the people who benefit the most from having a national sport star or credible speaker visit their town are people at a business lunch – instead, I organised to have Jeff come down and meet all the depot staff.*

*I told all the staff that they had to come in early one day. The Union had thought that I was going to do something radical in relation to changes in the workplace or get rid of staff. But I reassured them and said, "No, no, no, if you could all just be there, that would be great."*

*As a result, I got Jeff Horn to come into the Warwick depot and as he turned the corner there was a guttural roar of all the staff just seeing him. He spoke for about half an hour and he ended up getting a selfie with everyone that was there.*

*That's something people will remember and they can share the story with family and friends, and it really does go some way in lifting the psyche of the organisation - especially when times are tough.*

**As a current leader in the local government sector, David has advice for the emerging leaders and those aspiring to the next level in their local government careers and encouragement for those who haven't yet decided to take those next steps.**

*Local government is the one area where you can **do**. You can do things in conjunction with the community and deliver great, positive outcomes for everyone. So whether it's large scale infrastructure projects (such as what we're doing in Southern Downs with recycled water and water carting) or whether it's improving service delivery; local government is the area that you can make a tangible impact. Additionally, local government is the arena where you can do your future planning. It's where you can do your visionary stuff and really bring it into reality.*

*So from my perspective, local government has a great deal to offer as far as career advancement, as far as satisfaction in the role, and as far as knowing that you can do something and make a change.*

***"The other levels of government – they're big and it takes a while for that machinery to move. But in local government, we're agile in the way that we respond to emergencies. Local government is where your options are."***

*David Keenan during his 2006-2010 tenure at Hume City Council, with then-Premier of Victoria John Brumby, and present-day during Masters football training.*



# LOUISE MILLER

CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
KAIPARA DISTRICT  
COUNCIL  
NORTHLAND, NZ

*“I know I’m most rewarded and successful in roles where I’m being asked to think differently and have challenged people to think differently.”*



**Louise Miller is the Chief Executive at Kaipara District Council, located in the Northland Region of northern New Zealand. Despite a career history in and around the public sector, local government in New Zealand is a sphere Louise fell into quite unexpectedly, but she has since gone on to instigate positive change over the last decade.**

*I became a chief executive accidentally - it was never a career choice. Most of my career has been outside local government in a real variety of largely public sector organisations and consultancies in the UK. I didn't come to local government until 2009. When I think about my career, I couldn't tell you how I got here. Opportunities have presented themselves and they just felt exciting to me, and a little bit scary sometimes. I've always thought, "What's the worst that can happen? This might work. Let's give it a go."*

*I ended up in New Zealand after I was approached in the UK by a recruiter for Tauranga City Council and it happened to be at the right stage of my life where I was ready to do something different. I didn't think about coming to New Zealand before that. I've ended up here because opportunities have presented themselves and I've grabbed them. My role at Tauranga was General Manager, Community Services.*

*I came to Tauranga at a time when the well-beings were no longer a compulsory part of the local government remit. My idea about community and community engagement and the role of a local authority in this area was quite different to my experiences from the UK. However, at Tauranga, I was lucky to work with a chief executive and council which supported the establishment of a community development team. My team covered libraries, theatre, customer services, ICT, community development and cultural heritage. I was able to really think about how those services together could improve what we offered to our community.*

*A theme across all my roles – from those in consultancies to utilities and the police - has been organisational development, culture, business process improvement and a lot of work around the European quality management model. It's always been in a corporate space, driving improvement and change.*

**Inheriting a council with a difficult past has been a proving ground for Louise, and a challenge she has relished in her leadership journey.**

*I've been at Kaipara District Council now for around a year and I absolutely love it. I chose Kaipara over other roles because my passion is helping organisations get back on their feet.*

*Kaipara was in a tough place. The council had previously been under commissioners and I was the fourth chief executive in a short time period.*



Louise Miller at Kaipara's inaugural council meeting in October 2019 with the Mayor signing his declaration following a Powhiri marking with the iwi leader, marking a new relationship for the new term.

*The staff and the community had been through a constant state of change, and that's what appealed to me about coming here. The commissioners had come into the organisation with the key focus of driving down debt. The community felt let down by the previous Council and staff didn't feel proud of where they worked. Their passion for making a difference in people's lives had stayed the same but the environment in which they were trying to do this had shifted significantly.*

*My first year in the job has been to establish some stability, building trust and confidence in the staff and in the community. Internally, we've created a set of values, a culture, and given some clear direction about how we're going to work with our community. And we've involved staff in the process. We've initiated development and training for leaders and been far more present in our community.*

*Externally, we've had difficult conversations that we had shied away from in the past. I've spent a lot of time in the community meeting people and going to community meetings where things weren't necessarily going to be well-received. But we fronted up, listened, and set some expectations. I often talk to my organisation about changing perceptions of us, one conversation at a time.*

***"It's hard yards, but we do have to listen and be honest, and then we have to deliver."***

*And that's what it's all about.*

**This knack for stakeholder engagement came to Louise on the back of a history of challenging positions where a particular level of sensitivity in communication has been paramount.**

*Things can happen in a career that set you up for the future. In the UK, I worked for the Audit Commission undertaking financial and performance assessments of local authorities and giving them a rating. It's a stressful process for an organisation, and no council wants a poor rating. The conversations were challenging. Some knew they were in trouble and they just wanted help, but others didn't take kindly to the messages. So it was about trying to find a way to give the message in such a way that it would be heard but that it would still feel like a positive experience. I had to establish trust in a short period of time. I just had to listen, understand, and be really honest.*

**Drawing from past experience along her leadership journey has provided a pool of learnings for Louise to bring to her current work to deliver successes to her council.**

*I worked in local government in the UK during a period of austerity, and was required to make tough decisions around reducing important services. Rather than slicing, we thought carefully about how we might do things differently: we partnered with the voluntary sector to continue to deliver our meals on wheels aged care meal delivery service. Instead of stopping the service and disadvantaging an already vulnerable community, we were able to partner, make a saving, and continue to provide a service to the community. The key is being able to look at things differently.*

*At Kaipara, we have been able to secure some significant funding from the Provincial Growth Fund this year to strengthen transport infrastructure and food and horticulture sector.*



*This is something that I'm really proud of, but now we have to deliver. We're working hard on that, and making sure the community understands what we're doing, why we're doing it, and what will be different.*

**Relationship-building has been key to these successes, and something that she sees as integral to the future plans of the council and community she serves.**

*Relationships and partnerships are important. The UK went through a painful process of diversity and inclusion many years ago and, in my experience, diversity was valued and seen as an important part of enhancing communities.*

*The future of our economy is the Māori economy. That will be New Zealand's powerhouse in the next 10 to 15 years. It needs to be nurtured. Working together with iwi (tribe) and hapu (descent group) to share knowledge and resources and build really strong relationships will be of benefit to everyone. Our relationship with iwi runs deeper than any partnership. It's about devoting time and being present, listening, being open, and understanding the depth of feeling and where it comes from. A relationship requires maturity to be successful.*

**Louise has developed as a leader by pursuing opportunities that have pushed her into new and unknown territory; pursuing challenges that some may see as intimidating but that she rather saw as "exciting." It has been this pursuit alongside a consistent strive for organisational betterment that has made Louise the leader she is today.**

*I don't wake up each day and think, I'm a chief executive. It doesn't matter what your job title is, I'm just doing a job and I'm no more important than anyone in my team. We're all here to make a difference to our community. It's a case of being of not having a fixed mindset.*

*I know I'm most rewarded and successful in roles where I'm being asked to think differently and have challenged people to think differently. It's about picking up something that's not going as well as it could and trying to build on that. When you know what you're passionate about and what you enjoy, you'll have fun.*

***"It's important to have a good team around you. It's really rewarding to see the potential in someone, particularly if they don't see it in themselves."***

*There's nothing more rewarding than giving someone a step up because someone once saw that in you - to be a small part of someone else's journey is just great.*

**And as for newcomers to local government or those aspiring to be the next generation of council leadership:**

*You can't be good at everything and that's okay. It's about having the confidence to acknowledge that and not feeling threatened by having people around you that are. There are vast opportunities in the local government sector. You can have a career that constantly changes and you can try different things. It's a creative place of opportunity. Don't turn an opportunity down, even if you think you can't do it. Try everything, then you'll find your groove.*

*Louise Miller with her new executive team following a 2019 restructure attempting to erect a tent blindfolded during a team-building exercise.*



# GARY ARNOLD

## GENERAL MANAGER KINGBOROUGH COUNCIL TASMANIA, AUS

*“I’m tempted to say that endurance is the most important leadership trait, but there’s more to the full picture of a leader here.”*



**Gary Arnold is the State President of LG Professionals in Tasmania and General Manager of the island-state’s Kingborough Council following a career that traces much of the south-eastern corner of Australia.**

*I commenced local government life at the Shire of Melton, Victoria, in the engineering department. As Melton evolved from a small, sleepy town to a booming, outer-western suburb of Melbourne, I found myself increasingly involved in town planning matters. My final year at Melton as the one-and-only town planner involved the processing of over 600 planning permit applications. Moving to the role of City Planner at the City of Sunshine, completing a Masters in Town Planning and spending two years as Editor of Planning News, I was destined for a life in planning. Wrong! My mother-in-law insisted I complete my MBA, which I did (how could I refuse?).*

*Then along came the then-Premier of Victoria, Jeff Kennett, and local government amalgamations happened swiftly. During that exciting and turbulent period, I was given my first taste of life as a Chief Executive Officer at the Shire of Newham & Woodend for a brief few months. That council was amalgamated with three other councils, but I was now on my way in my leadership journey in local government. After working at a number of Victorian and New South Welsh regional councils as CEO/ General Manager, I commenced my current role*

*in February 2014 as General Manager at the Kingborough Council, Tasmania.*

*Our Mayor, Cr Dean Winter, is the youngest Mayor in Tasmania and great to work with. We also have nine other genuinely committed Councillors, great staff, and a wonderful community. I am also now into my fourth term as State President of Local Government Professionals Tasmania, working with a great Board and enthusiastic CEO. It’s hard to single out challenges and they are always there, but when you are fortunate to find yourself surrounded with people prepared to have a go, like I am, life is good!*

### **What have the key challenges in your local government career been?**

*I often say that the top three challenges in local government are dogs, trees and... whatever. At least, that has generally been my experience. Those two issues seem to cause more derision in the community and the chamber than any others. That said, the greatest change I have observed is the challenge of dealing efficiently with social media. We now live in an instant society where everyone is time-poor yet local government is still expected to respond to social media 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Similarly, local government is increasingly being asked by our communities to take a leadership role in addressing a plethora of challenges including the challenge of climate change.*

## What have the key successes been?

*Anything at all that has improved the quality of life for members of our community has been a success.*

***“It’s the reason why I still jump out of bed every morning and look forward to going to the office even though I am in the twilight of my career.”***

*Long gone are the days when local government could lovingly or sarcastically be described as “roads, rates and rubbish.” Today, even the smallest of councils offer multiple services to their communities and most like ours offer well in excess of 100 services.*

Throughout these challenges and successes, what leadership traits have been most important, and do these translate between private and the public service?

*I’m tempted to say that endurance is the most important leadership trait, but there’s more to the full picture of a leader here. I’d add integrity, tact, courage, agility, initiative, judgement, justice, dependability, decisiveness, enthusiasm, knowledge, unselfishness and, finally, a good sense of humour. Unlike private enterprise though, local government operates in a political environment. From that perspective, leadership in local government is a beast unlike any other.*

From the viewpoint of a storied career in local government, Gary has words of advice for any up-and-comers looking to pursue their own leadership journey in the sector.

***“Give local government a try, grab a good mentor, and enjoy the most diverse, interesting, challenging - occasionally frustrating - but most rewarding career available.”***

*Gary Arnold during his tenure at Wodonga City Council.*



# AILEEN LAWRIE

## CHIEF EXECUTIVE

### OPŌTIKI DISTRICT COUNCIL

#### BAY OF PLENTY, NZ

*“You can go on leadership courses and learn about leadership theory, but there is a lot of hard work around dotting i’s and crossing t’s.”*



**Aileen Lawrie is the Chief Executive of Opōtiki District Council, a town in the eastern Bay of Plenty in the North Island of New Zealand. Aileen has taken a pragmatic and highly practical approach to leading Council through the unique challenges faced by District councils, growing as a leader in an evolving career.**

*When I look back over my time in local government, I’ve come a long way. But it’s been less about a journey and more about taking steps. I’ve never had a career plan or a direction, I’ve just done what I enjoy doing and taken steps in the direction where I could add value.*

*I’m from a local government family and this has shaped my knowledge and thinking about the sector. My father was on the Marlborough Catchment Board so all the politics of the late 1980s played out in our lounge. At university, my Masters thesis was on ancient sea levels on the Banks Peninsula on the east coast of the South Island. I then took on an entry-level planning role at Canterbury Regional Council (now Environment Canterbury), progressing to the consents team. My next role was with Bay of Plenty Regional Council as consents officer, then as the executive officer to the chief executive, then regulatory manager..*

*I learnt a lot there and was well supported and mentored. My chief executive paved the way for women leaders.*

*I was 39 when I became a chief executive and learnt how to be a chief executive on the job.*

**The standout successes in Aileen’s career have from long-term projects and making the financially impossible possible – and relationships have been at the heart of these successes.**

*I’m driven to provide employment and improve outcomes for my community.*

*I’ve been working on a major Opōtiki Harbour project for the past decade, and this has been an important focus of my career. Part of the project has been about building an infrastructure to enable the aquaculture industry to flourish in the Bay of Plenty. The project has been developed in partnership with Whakatōhea, eastern Bay of Plenty iwi (tribe). My focus has been on securing funding. In 2013, we secured NZ\$20 million from the Bay of Plenty Regional Council, and we’re on track for another NZ\$80 million from central government. This is an amazing achievement for our district, which is one of the most deprived in the country with poor social statistics.*

*Another great success for me has been finding a cost effective and fit-for-purpose outcome for Opōtiki’s wastewater system. It may seem uninteresting, but with limited resources, contracting engineers and expensive new systems aren’t financially viable.*



*Again, I was able to draw on external technical expertise to work with councillors to ask the right governance questions and understand the options. This has resulted in a rehabilitated system that has come in under budget.*

**“For me, building partnerships is the key to getting things done.”**

*We have a great relationship with iwi, and this is a key theme of my work. This isn't about MOUs or procedures - it's about true relationships; chair to mayor, chief executive to chief executive, kaimahi to kaimahi (staff member to staff member). It's about picking up the phone and getting things done. It's a person to person relationship.*

**A recurring theme in rural District councils, maintaining the financial sustainability of the organisation can also put the council on the back-foot when seeking talent. Attracting and managing this pool of expertise has been a challenge, but creative management and co-operation have been key to overcoming these issues.**

*The Opōtiki district has the shallowest rate payer pockets in the country and this has been a major challenge. I've had to be creative. We often share services and draw on expertise from other councils.*

*With the harbour project, I established an external project team, recruiting highly skilled people from around the country. This team share my vision for the project and help to keep it moving. This means that my internal team can focus on the day-to-day business of the council. Recruitment is challenging though. I've grown a management team and, while I've been able to attract competent people, I can't compete with the salaries of larger councils.*

*The benefit of this is you get people committed to the job, not the salary!*

*Being in provincial New Zealand has its challenges. It's not easy to connect to the capital. We're a smaller council and I deal with a lot of operational issues, so it's not easy to spend time away from the office.*

**Organisational culture is often spoken about, but Aileen delves into how this is practically applied in Council.**

*Culture is driven through elected members and through the management team. We're always thinking about what's in the best interest to the community. Sometimes this puts us in conflict with the regional level government, and sometimes with central government.*

**“I don't overtly work on culture. For me it's not about vision statements.”**

*I, along with my management team, have just gone about changing the culture and just done it. We've talked about how we want the organisation to be and demonstrated the way. I talk about what the future holds and ask them to see how they fit and where they see themselves. They all have ownership and buy-in to improving the circumstances of the district.*

*We have the most fantastic team and when I sit down and talk to them, they know that the town and the district has challenges and they know that they can add value and help.*

**Councils, big and small, are complex organisations unlike many in the private sector. This has proven a particularly challenging juggling act where a leader must wear several hats.**

*We operate in a complex environment. We have 42 activities in our long-term plan, so we're not a single purpose business. We're more like 42 separate businesses glued together with different purposes, funding regimes and drivers. There are competing interests from central government, regional government, and local opinions.*

**So what leadership traits are most important in this environment? Aileen explains, with some advice for the next generation of aspiring local government leaders.**

*The most important leadership trait to me is balance. You can be visionary and create large pictures of what's going to happen, but unless you're going to do the management and delivery you will lose people. For me, it's about linking, connecting and holding stuff together. There's a lot of management in making things happen. You can go on leadership courses and learn about leadership theory, but there is a lot of hard work around dotting i's and crossing t's.*

***“I would advise aspiring leaders to do what you like doing and do it well.”***

*Do the job for the sake of doing the job, not for the title and the status. It's about getting the work done. Doing the mahi and serving the community.*



*Aileen Lawrie playing the Last Post on the cornet at an Anzac Day Parade in 2015.*

# MARK CRAWLEY

## CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER CARPENTARIA SHIRE COUNCIL QUEENSLAND, AUS

*“My bride and children are included in my leadership journey for without their love and support my leadership journey would not have been possible.”*



**Mark Crawley began his local government journey in earnest in the '70s and is today the CEO of the Shire of Carpentaria and National President of Local Government Professionals Australia. His leadership journey was long and well-traversed, seeing him move right across Queensland in pursuit of new leadership opportunities.**

*My local government career began six months after leaving school and was quite by accident. I was attending the local employment office in 1979 to see what work was available and the Deputy Shire Clerk at the Council suggested I enquire about a job at the council in the neighbouring town. Within a week, I was the new Trainee Cost Clerk at the Aramac Shire Council in Central Queensland thanks to some good advice around considering a role in local government. This marked the beginning of a decades-long career in the sector.*

*After four years at Council, I decided to move to a larger centre and started working for the State Government at the Main Roads Office in Warwick - the young, single country lad was heading for the bright lights. Within four and a half years at Main Roads, I had achieved much of what I could in the role as Cost Clerk and realised that I needed to be back in local government. I'd gone from single to married with three children in four and a half years, and I packed up the new bride and the three children and returned to Aramac Shire Council.*

*Returning to local government turned out to be the right career move, and led to one of the defining moments in relation to my wanting to take on a more leadership-oriented role in local government. Upon my return, I was encouraged by my Chief Executive Officer to undertake further study, so I started external study whilst at Aramac and continued to study after getting my first leadership role as Deputy Chief Executive Officer at the McKinlay Shire in North West Queensland. We moved quite a bit as a family to take on roles that provided promotion to the senior leadership roles as Deputy Chief Executive Officer and eventually Chief Executive Officer.*

**This constant movement saw Mark take up roles in Barcaldine, Nebo, Isaac, and Charters Towers, surviving amalgamations and capitalising on mining booms in the regional centres he has operated in.**

*There were 26 operating coal mines in the new Isaac Regional Council and this presented an opportunity for the new local government to be innovative and think outside the norm to deliver services to the larger region. It was also at Isaac Regional Council that I joined the Board of Local Government Managers Australia (LGMA) to give something back to the sector that had been so good to me through my local government career, remembering the advice I received from my CEO at Barcaldine to become more involved.*

*I would later go on to take on the role as LGMA State President for a two-year term whilst undertaking the role as CEO at Charters Towers Regional Council. It was during my term as President that I encouraged all Councils in Queensland to undertake a service review in 2013, some five years after the amalgamations in 2008.*

*Fast forward a couple of years I'm still working as a local government Chief Executive Officer delivering service to the community of Carpentaria Shire and I am humbled to be representing the sector as the National President of Local Government Professionals Australia.*

*My bride and children are included in my leadership journey for without their love and support my leadership journey would not have been possible.*

***“The support of family is paramount to the success of any leadership journey and we should never lose sight of that.”***

**Looking back over a 40-year career in local government has brought to mind some key challenges, but also memorable successes.**

*The local government that we are working in at present is very different to the local government I started in back in 1979. Some of the changes have been welcomed and offer better service for the communities that we serve, however legislative change and environmental compliances have had an impact on the costs to provide and deliver service to our ratepayers.*

*Retaining staff in a mining-rich area was particularly challenging, and we had a staff turnover rate closer to 40 per cent when I worked in that region. Most of our staff were partners of those working in the resources sector and when the partners moved our staff moved on also, adding to the turnover rate.*

*Looking back and reviewing what my teams have achieved over the years though is certainly one of the key success stories from my leadership roles in local government - after all, local government service delivery is team-based and achieving for the community is not provided by one person alone.*

*One of the most rewarding comments that I received during my career that I still remember today came from a school student. When I was working with Barcaldine, one of the students that took part in the Biannual Festival of Music told me, “When I grow, I want your job if this is what you can do as a CEO.”*

*Just as rewarding is the very human dividend from investing in staff. Awards are great, but I found that my best reaction to success is when employees return from professional development courses and ask what additional value they can add to the organisation to repay the opportunity to attend the training program they've attended. This is a success not only for the local government, but the community they serve.*

**What is the most important trait in a leader?**

*A consistent and continuous reputation for professionalism, leadership and advocacy are important traits for a local government leader. In all my roles previously held, these have been managed through a positive attitude, creative and innovative approach to life, and valuing our most significant asset: our employees and their families.*

*Mark Crawley at Isaac Regional Council, as State President of LGMA Queensland, and currently at Carpentaria Shire Council.*







*Keeping a healthy work-life balance: Mark Crawley celebrating the 100th birthday of a local Karumba resident with the Mayor and councillors, spending time with his grandchildren, and being part of Mount Isa City Council's Dragon Boat Crew.*

*I remain a proactive and committed community-minded person. I believe in fairness, equity, and honesty in all dealings. I can be relied upon to take the tough decisions, always being mindful of those I work for and with.*

*Delegation is another important trait for leaders. The ability to delegate responsibility to others is very important but this needs to be backed with authority to be able to make their own decisions and carry out the tasks delegated. Providing the necessary level of delegation to allow others to undertake their roles provides confidence, especially when backed with an ability to make the occasional mistake. Senior executives should know that they have an opportunity to make occasional mistakes and be supported - this assists with ongoing learning and builds leadership qualities.*

**What is particular to leadership in the local government sector?**

*There is a great deal of diversity in the local government sector and this adds to the value of holding a leadership role in local government. My strong belief is that in leadership roles within local government we get to make decisions that impact the quality of life of all the ratepayers, residents and visitors to our region, so we should make decisions that have a positive impact.*

*One day you could be setting the direction with the elected members in a strategy meeting and the next talking the third grade students of the local school through the workings of local government and letting them sit at the big table in the Council chambers, appreciating the big smiles on all their faces as they feel important as the next generation of community leaders.*

*Leadership within the local government environment can change from day to day and sometimes from hour to hour depending on the situation. It can be a very normal day until something happens to raise the alarm and disaster strikes, and leadership skills change to manage the different circumstances. But I wouldn't change it for quids. Local government - it gets in your blood, and you just get to love it more and more.*

**What advice would you give to an aspiring leader?**

***“Make the most of every opportunity that is provided to you, continue to learn and acquire knowledge during your own leadership journey.”***

*Seek out a good mentor or two and utilise them to acquire knowledge to support you in your aspirations to become a great leader. Most importantly, find a set of values and model your behaviour on those values.*

*Local Government Professionals Australia has a good set of values and becoming a values-based leader will assist you in guiding your behaviour and decision-making in the public interest while you undertake your journey as a local government leader.*

*There is a lot of up-and-coming talent in local government and I hope that they remain within the industry and aspire to the senior executive roles that sometimes don't come around as fast as they would like.*

# KYM FELL

## CHIEF EXECUTIVE WHANGANUI DISTRICT COUNCIL MANAWATU-WANGANUI, NZ

*“It is imperative that you bring people on the journey with you, and that you build networks which will strengthen your leadership capability.”*



Kym Fell is Chief Executive at Whanganui District Council, a city on the west coast of New Zealand’s North Island. His two-decade-long leadership journey began in the hospitality industry before taking a turn into local government, where he has taken elements of commercial sector organisational culture and infused them with the business of government in his unique leadership style.

*My leadership journey began around 20 years ago, when managing hotels such as Mangapapa Lodge, a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, Scenic Hotel Group and Grand Hotels International, located throughout Australia and New Zealand. In my early days, I started out as a chef and with the drive and passion to succeed, I soon won awards and moved through to be an executive chef. I believe in being the best that I can be and was driven to move my way through the ranks. I had a drive to move my way through the ranks. Getting into hotels and hotel management was the next obvious step for me.*

*I transitioned into local government when I came back to New Zealand though and was appointed as Director Corporate for Regional Facilities Auckland, a council-controlled organisation overseeing Auckland Stadiums, Auckland Zoo, Auckland Conventions, Auckland Art Gallery and Auckland Live. Four years ago, I was appointed as the Chief Executive of Whanganui District Council with responsibility for around 300 staff.*

Since moving into the local government sector, Kym has noticed the distinct difference between leadership in the private sector versus the public and the unique challenges this presents to executives.

*Leadership within the commercial sector enables you to be much more nimble, take higher calculated risks, and make quick effective decisions. Gaining traction within the local government sector can at times be frustrating and unnecessarily complex. As a public organisation which is mandated to follow legislative processes, it could be said that opportunities pass by in the shadow of bureaucracy.*

*It is also important to remember that chief executives do not make the decisions of Council - elected members do, and it is simply your role to lead the implementation of those decisions. The more strategic and informed your governors are, the better the outcome will be for your community.*

*The relationship with the mayor and elected officials is hugely important. You need to provide them with the information they need to make decisions and ensure that the organisation is going in the right direction. Following prescriptive processes can sometimes be frustrating, but it takes diplomacy and time to guide the right decision-making.*

**This ‘diplomatic’ process to his leadership has allowed Kym to steer an organisational culture and dynamic more attuned to the needs of Council’s key stakeholders: the public.**

**“One of my major challenges has been to convince the organisations I’ve worked in that ‘change is good’ and that with change comes success.”**

*I’ve found that adapting to change and introducing agile solutions is a journey, not a quick overnight fix. Challenges come in all shapes and sizes, however your ability to turn these challenges into opportunities in a mutually respectful way is the measure of a good leader.*

*At Whanganui, we’ve recently carried out an overhaul of our customer services function. The main idea was to move from a 1970s/80s authoritarian culture to a customer-centric model. We’ve created a digital environment in which we stand alongside the customer and can handle anything from payments to consents to animal registrations. As a result, wait times decreased and staff are empowered to do their jobs. We won an award from the Association of Local Government Information Management (ALGIM) for the project just recently.*

*Engaging with mana whenua (people of the land) is important. We don’t consult, we engage. This means involving iwi (tribe) early, and ‘creating together’ is how we operate. We’ve had some historical issues with iwi in Whanganui such as the Moutoa Gardens land occupation by Te Rūnanga Pākaitore in 1995, for instance. We are incredibly mindful of this. We make sure that iwi are factored into our long-term planning process.*

**Organisations Kym has led have been propelled by his leadership characteristics, including empowering his staff as well as a number of core values.**

*To be an effective leader, you need to operate with honesty, integrity and humility. You need to have the courage to make tough decisions and an ability to form mutually supportive relationships.*

*Aside from being passionate, dedicated and focused, one of the most important things to understand is that you will be measured on outcomes, not outputs. It is imperative that you*

*bring people on the journey with you, and that you build networks which will strengthen your leadership capability.*

*I personally thrive on business improvement, especially when it comes to service excellence and delivering ‘exceptional’ rather than ‘expected’ results. I have been proud to lead organisations which have been the recipients of a number of accolades and awards. My personal measurement of success is when I reflect on the state of the organisation today versus my first day in the role.*

*My philosophy is to empower staff to make good decisions therefore removing the need for hierarchical bureaucracy which tends to hinder most levels of productivity. Good governance and oversight is important, however so is building capability within your team. If you fail to invest in the success of your people, you limit the potential of your organisation. Also, leaders demonstrating the behaviours we want in the organisation has been important.*

**Our final question for Kym: what advice would you give to an aspiring leader?**

**“We can all agree that it is great to think big, set goals and deliver, but it is also important that we take time to reflect on lessons learnt.”**

*Be prepared to welcome failure because there will be hiccups along the way, however it is important that when failure occurs, you own the issue and learn from the experience.*

*Build networks at an early stage and form long-lasting relationships, and don’t pretend you know everything - you’re not the smartest person in the room.*

*Finally, surround yourself with energetic, highly capable people and when you become a leader, be sure to invest in their development.*

