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**DR23/008 2023 AUSTRALIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION  
CONFERENCE DELEGATE REPORT**

**S004-  
T00019**

Responsible Officer: Alison Worthington - Councillor

Attachments: Nil

Community Goal: 5 Our engaged community with progressive leadership

Community Strategy: 5.2 Proactive, responsive and strategic leadership

Delivery Program Link: 5.2.1 Be proactive leaders with a focus on 'community better'

Operational Plan Link: 5.2.1.4 Provide professional development opportunities for Councillors

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Australian Local Government Women's Association (NSW) Conference was held on 27 April 2023 – 29 April 2023 in Forbes. The was hosted in late April by Forbes Shire Council and themed 'Disaster Resilience: Building Stronger and Resilient Communities in the wake of disaster'.

Councillor Worthington represented Council at the 2023 Australian Local Government Women's Association (NSW) held in Forbes and now presents her delegate's report on that Conference.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

THAT Councillor Worthington's delegate report on Australian Local Government Women's Association (NSW) Conference held in Forbes be received and noted.

### **BACKGROUND**

The 2023 Australian Local Government Women's Association (NSW) conference was hosted in late April by Forbes Shire Council and themed 'Disaster Resilience: Building Stronger and Resilient Communities in the wake of disaster'.

Speakers including Shane Fitzsimmons, current Chair of the State Emergency Management Committee, spoke on leadership in times of crisis and their own redefinition of resilience. Shane reminded us that not one LGA in NSW has escaped being disaster impacted since 2019, and that over 70, including ours, have been declared a Natural Disaster Area more than 5 times. Some, more than 10 in that time.

Shane Fitzsimmons also serves on the board of the NSW Mental Health Taskforce and spoke to the role we all have in destigmatising the feeling and the expression of our emotions, and in promoting the 'It's ok to not be ok' message during and after a crisis. Sadly, he told us of too many times in recent years that he has witnessed men in leadership roles preaching this to the people in their organisations, but not applying it to their own lives and work practices.

We heard traumatic stories of people grappling with bushfires and floods, including a family from flood-devastated Eugowra, and from local health and education professionals who lived through the Forbes and surrounds flooding crisis of 2022. Their efforts over weeks and weeks to just maintain their services, with staff often travelling for over 2 hours each way to get to

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work, relying daily on SES and RFS volunteers to get them through floodwaters, was a real testament to the 'can-do' resilience of the Forbes community.

We heard from one of the founding directors of Disaster Relief Australia (DRA), Dr Elizabeth Rushbrook. Founded in 2016, DRA is a relief, not response, agency repurposing the skills and experience of veterans towards disaster relief.

70% of DRA volunteers are veterans, first responders, and their families. Elizabeth mentioned that families are encouraged to volunteer on deployment together and that this has been an important part of volunteer retention for DRA.

DRA volunteers are still returning to the Bega Valley where they served after the 2019-2020 bushfires.

DRA have recently added Suicide Assist Intervention training to their register of skills and offer services to local councils including:

- Triage of work requests
- Skills audits
- Work order management and
- Spontaneous volunteer management for the mosquito brigades and mud armies

Joanne Beagle from GIVIT spoke of the impact her organisation is having in better coordinating disaster relief in the form of donations, using online technology to 'matchmake' givers with those in need, using only a virtual warehouse.

GIVIT promotes a very strong "DO NOT DROP DONATIONS HERE" message. The reduction in donations that end up in landfill in disaster-affected areas alone is testament to GIVIT's success. More importantly, Joanne told us how the effect of their 'targeted giving' and facilitation of disaster survivors asking for what they really need is reducing the dreadful after-effects of disaster in 3 key areas: Domestic and Family Violence, homelessness and poor mental health outcomes.

There were people from local businesses in Forbes who praised the way that GIVIT received cash donations then issued vouchers for use in local businesses to boost those businesses also struggling through times of natural disasters.

Heidi Stratford from the NSW Reconstruction Authority gave many conference attendees their first insight into the structure of this new evolution of what was Resilience NSW and now holds a role in 'transforming the whole-of-government approach to disaster management', supported by the Authority's own Act and Regulation.

Heidi described the 4 key functions of the RA in delivering:

- a State Recovery Plan
- a State Disaster Mitigation Plan
- Local Disaster Action Plans - working with councils here, and
- establishing the NSW Reconstruction Fund.

A small ripple of alarm swept the room when we were told the RA will act as a Planner, Funder, Advocate and... Consent Authority, covering land use decisions and land acquisition during

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disaster. Most councils will fiercely guard their role as the local Consent Authority and this generated most of the questions in the Q&A afterwards.

With natural disasters providing much of the focus of the conference, it was surprising that the role of climate change in fuelling the greater frequency and intensity of weather events causing disaster did not get a mention until that Day 2 Q&A session. This was noted with disappointment amongst conference attendees as we had heard from professionals in disaster and emergency management and none had referred to the action needed to mitigate worsening disasters by taking action on climate at all levels of government.

There can however, be no conference for women in local government without mention of the under-representation of women in both elected roles and in GM and Director roles in local government across NSW.

Tanya Jakimow, Associate Professor of the Australian National University told us that this reflects global trends, where women are underrepresented at the intra-level of local government (that is, they occupy lower positions within each level of government).

Professor Jakimow's presentation 'A Picture of Diversity and Descriptive Representation in NSW Councils', arose out of her research following the December 2021 Local Government Elections.

That research found that women have almost achieved gender parity in the north and east of Sydney (49.1%) but remain underrepresented in Western Sydney (39.6%) and regional /rural NSW (37.3%). The majority of councils in regional and rural NSW had an increase in female representation (56%) of councils, however the key finding of the report was that the increase in women's representation at the local level has benefited white women only, while the percentage of Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) women councillors has not increased.

CARM women remain grossly underrepresented relative to their numbers in the general population, making up only 5.8% of councillors in greater Sydney and 1.4% in rural/regional NSW. The biggest concern is the underrepresentation of CARM women, who comprise 13.1% of the population, but only 5.8% of councillors.

In brighter news, the ALGWA (NSW) held its AGM at the conference and noted the move of 8 women from local government to state politics in the March 2025 election.

We heard that ALGWA is a part of a consortium led by Women for Election, and including Politics in Colour and other gender-specialist organisations, which has been awarded a \$5M Women in Public Office grant from the federal government to increase the representation and diversity of women in public office across Australia. Support from the federal government is also forthcoming from the first Parliamentary Friends of Women for Election group, due to be launched in June 2023.

ALGWA and state branches of ALGWA will be running a National Mentoring Program as a part of the Women in Public Office grant, which will be active in the lead up to the 2024 NSW Local Government elections.