



DIVISION OF MPA GROUP

Plumbing Work in Remote Communities

Paper to the Minister for Commerce

8 July 2016

Report	Plumbing Work in Remote Communities
Date	08 July 2016
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Related Documents	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. MPGA - Response to the Building Commission: Basic plumbing repairs in remote aboriginal communities (April 2015) 2. Plumbing Trades Employees Union (Federal Branch) – Letter to Plumbing Review team, Building Commission (17 April 2015)
Recipients	Michael Mischin, Minister for Commerce Paul Miles, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Commerce Peter Gow, Building Commissioner

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1. Situation analysis

There is strong anecdotal evidence suggesting the Western Australian State Government has progressed plans to introduce reduced licensing requirements for some plumbing works in remote communities.

During the initial consultation period in early 2015, the Master Plumbers & Gasfitters Association of WA (MPGA) expressed its objections to the implementation of a plumbing permit allowing this work to be conducted for a variety of reasons and is extremely concerned for the continuing stability of the industry and wellbeing of residents in remote communities. The reasons raised in April 2015 included:

- The necessity for high standards of plumbing in remote communities
- The risk of deepening a 'second-class citizen' mindset
- Practical realities relating to community populations
- Potential for confusion over training requirements
- Setting a precedent for the weakening of plumbing regulations
- Compliance costs
- Lack of cost-benefit analysis
- Knowing how to fix 'basic' problems is not enough

As a key representative body for the plumbing industry, the MPGA stands by these concerns and is further disturbed that the State Government would take action without consideration for the Association's previously raised issues or further consultation.

In addition to the outlined risks to public health and safety, as well as the long-term viability of the industry, there has been no definition of the meaning of "remote community". Some communities are located only a few kilometres from towns. Are these to be included under the umbrella of remote?

The MPGA fully promotes a highly trained plumbing industry, safeguarding the health and wellbeing of all Western Australians, wherever they may live.

Plumbing practices have evolved in WA over more than 100 years to ensure the state has some of the best plumbing standards in the world.

When regulations are not followed, health and safety issues do occur and the fallout can be significant. Such issues have been evidenced and highly publicised in regards to the recent Elizabeth Quay contamination problem and the discovery of non-compliant plumbing work.

We are supportive of indigenous environmental assistants liaising and working with qualified plumbers to ensure all plumbing systems installed at remote communities are safe and efficient. This does not equate to these operatives attempting to conduct regulated plumbing work themselves.

2. Issues and impacts

The current plumbing maintenance system for some communities is flawed in the management practices of the controlling agency because it is totally reactive and costly.

A serious issue is that travel time and distance makes smaller maintenance tasks uneconomical for service providers. The outcome is that work is not completed in a timely manner, charges for travel are excessive and/or providers are carrying out unnecessary work to make trips to site economically viable.

Another issue is that of aging infrastructure in many remote communities. Old pipes and installation practices can present risks ranging from blockages and backflow problems to asbestos exposure.

Sustainable, long-term solutions must be implemented to ensure improved living standards and greater cost efficiency in remote communities.

3. Recommendation

A more effective and cost-efficient maintenance regime would be to conduct regular planned visits to these communities – the MPGA would suggest on a three-month cycle.

In addition to repair work, the visiting professional should carry out 'preventative maintenance' to ensure cost effective use of time on site and the elimination of potential future problems.

This includes upgrading aging infrastructure. The short-term cost of investing would be easily offset by the longer-term benefits of reduced repair and maintenance requirements.

The resident environmental assistant would serve as the community liaison representative to communicate with the maintenance contractor on plumbing related issues before, during and after scheduled visits.

Service providers for such a program would be remunerated a far more sustainable and mutually beneficial fixed fee basis plus reimbursement for certain agreed costs (eg parts and onsite living expenses).

The MPGA also supports trained environmental assistants being able to perform basic preventative maintenance duties to enhance and promote a healthy environment for residents. There are many ancillary duties that can be carried out in support of good plumbing practices and which would not be violating current regulatory requirements.

To facilitate these needs, the MPGA would be happy to participate in the development of such a training program.

4. Conclusion and Next Steps

The MPGA strongly advises all State Government stakeholders, and any other Local Government and community stakeholders to reconvene discussions and a practical consultation process on this matter and future decisions on the plumbing industry.

This should commence with a meeting between the relevant Ministers, Department representatives and the MPGA forthwith to address intended actions and required outcomes in detail.

The MPGA is also prepared to convene/participate in a committee to develop appropriate programs to fast-track implementation of revised remote community plumbing services.

Once again, the MPGA reiterates that the perceived solution to allow environmental assistants to conduct plumbing work other than in an ancillary capacity is not viable or sustainable and an urgent meeting is needed to move these matters forward to a sensible and mutually agreeable solution.