



## Regional focus behind fast-track career

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Joanne Soderlund

Joanne Soderlund's journey to becoming WA's youngest female local government CEO at 33 might have been serendipitous, but it took work and planning to take advantage of that good fortune.

Part of the planning was a focus on remote and regional areas.

"I'm a big advocate of the local government opportunities that regional areas can give you," Joanne said. "I wouldn't be where I am today if I'd based my career in the city. [My time at] Cocos sped my local government career up 15 years.

"Not enough people take up regional opportunities, I don't know why."

Her belief in regional communities pre-dates her involvement with local government. After completing a Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Southern Queensland she worked for KPMG in Darwin, later relocating to Kununurra, over 3,000 kilometres from Perth. She worked in the private sector for seven years, covering tax accounting, mining and construction.

She heard about the Cocos Islands as a unique and exotic holiday destination. Just as Kununurra is about as far as you can go on the mainland, the Cocos Islands are as far as you can go and still be in Australia.

Joanne and her husband Rik took a holiday to the Cocos Islands, where they fell in love with the island's natural beauty and relaxed lifestyle.

"We were on a canoe when I said, just joking, wouldn't it be great to come back here to live someday," Joanne recalled. "The tour guide heard us chatting about it and said there was a job with the local government that came up every three to five years, but it had just been filled.

"Local government had never been on my radar, but the next year the position came up and that was my opportunity to move into local government."

She started as Deputy CEO of the Shire of Cocos (Keeling) Islands in October 2014.



"It was like living in paradise, but still having a professional role," Joanne said. "Cocos was the best place for a young family, it was amazing." It was also challenging.

## Challenges

"There was a steep learning curve in the beginning, particularly being so remote," she said. "I couldn't call on neighbours.

"There is also such a different mindset in local government. That's not good or bad, but a different way of thinking. I came from a very profit-oriented company and had to start considering social outcomes, which I really enjoyed."

Perhaps less enjoyable was the far greater level of regulation at every level.

She had sometimes worried over lack of regulation in private enterprise, so she was more comfortable with the stronger focus on governance that is essential in a public setting.

"The level of regulation essential to a large-city, local government is not however always practical or beneficial in a small or remote setting," she said. "Compliance tiers based on size might be more appropriate."

## Time brings opportunities

An issue that affects many local government people working in regional areas is employment and career opportunities for their partners. For the Soderlunds, it was another case of turning serendipity to advantage.

The couple had already decided that Rik would care for their two children during their first years.

He had put his career on hold, and they were conditioned to having a single income. Career opportunity for Rik on Cocos wasn't an issue initially.

After a couple of years though he was ready for a return to work and the Cocos Keeling Islands Visitor Centre was looking for a marketing manager. He got the job.

Later, when the time came for Joanne to move on from Cocos Island, he was able to keep the Cocos job, working remotely, so that move also could be made without worrying about second career options. It wasn't long however before he was also appointed CEO of the Wheatbelt Business Network, again working remotely.

As Joanne emphasised, there are opportunities in remote areas—but it can take time, and you have to be ready to seize them.

## Being ready for opportunities

She continued to expand her own readiness through ongoing professional development, completing the CPA Program in accounting and business management in 2014 and an MBA in early 2021.

The remoteness of Cocos had a disadvantage in making access to peers and potential mentors more difficult. Recognising the importance of the collegiate culture of WA local government, Joanne made a point of attending the annual LGPA Finance Professionals Conference and fostering peer relationships.

**"You can still have the relationships, you just have to work that bit harder," she noted.**



**BELOW:** Harvesting an agricultural crop planted by Tammin community clubs on Shire-owned land. The proceeds help fund community outcomes for local clubs.







Joanne stayed seven years at Cocos, after five years in Kununurra.

"My resume shows that I am stable and committed," she said. Another preparation for opportunity.

The impetus to move came as her two children grew and wanted more sports and other extra-curricular options.

"I grew up on a farm in Queensland and I wanted to give them a similar experience," Joanne explained. "We only ever worked in regional and remote areas, and we wanted to stay regional, but to give them more opportunities to mix with kids their own age."

She started looking for a new position but emphasised there was no rush and she passed up a few possibilities. "We didn't want to jump until we felt we were ready."

When the Tammin position came up, she consulted her contacts.

"Everyone I spoke to about Tammin only had good things to say about the team and the Council. It has a reputation as a great small Local Government. That's what we were looking for."

"We had a pretty smooth transition," Joanne said. An advantage of Cocos being administered by WA was that they did not have to quarantine. One of the benefits of regional and remote work is that housing is often included and that makes the move easier."

"The community was welcoming and it's beautiful to be a part of that. The kids are settling in well, enjoying tennis, cricket, and swimming—they've made a great bunch of friends at school. And we are really enjoying fresh milk and fruit and veg—the small things that feel like a luxury after island life."

## Growing the revenue base

Tammin has one of the smallest revenue bases of any local government in WA.

"That makes it especially important that we do things right," Joanne said. "We have to find a local balance between economic growth and community value."

The Shire has 14 full-time employees, making it a major employer in a town of just 400.

"Most of the Shire is utilised for agricultural production. There is a large native plant nursery and cattle feedlot. The 24-hour roadhouse is a lifeline for us, and we get a lot of through traffic. The abattoir is just reopening, which is positive news for Tammin."

Tourism is low and this is an area Joanne wants to work on.

There is a good wildflower season and some natural attractions, but the lack of a caravan park is a restriction.

Joanne attributes a decrease in population to farms getting bigger and using bigger machines, which need less labour. The opening and closing of the local abattoir over the years has also seen the population fluctuate.

She's been studying census figures trends and is keen to see the next release of new data.

"One of the challenges for Tammin is to bring commerce back to the region. There are a lot of old and dilapidated buildings and the pub closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, though it's still operating accommodation."

The pub is on the market and she's hopeful it will reopen.

"A pub is pretty important to a regional town," she noted.



What Joanne wants to achieve is an active and engaged community that has a lot of trust in their local government, which works together to get results that deliver balanced outcomes.

## Potential and community strength

"The potential is there. Tammin has a strong sense of community and volunteerism has been increasing over the last couple of censuses, so there is a really strong community spirit.

"There are good sporting facilities that people take a lot of pride in; without that, you lose the community. They need some updating but it's clear past Councils have prioritised sports facilities.

"Each year, the community clubs come together in a voluntary capacity to plant and harvest an agricultural crop on some Shire-owned land. The proceeds from this crop help fund community outcomes for our local clubs. This epitomises the community spirit that is evident in Tammin."

Critically for her, the Council and administration and the community have a harmonious relationship. There hasn't been an election to Council for years, with Councillors being returned unopposed or retiring and their replacements being unopposed.

"People step up when they are needed. That's important. To get good outcomes you need people working together," Joanne emphasised.

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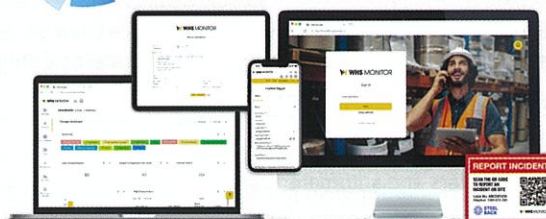
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