# Motivating and retaining local government workers: what does it take?

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**Abstract.** The capacity of local government to recruit appropriately qualified staff, motivate employees to give their best effort, and keep voluntary staff turnover low directly affects council operational performance. In addition, high staff turnover increases staffing costs and results in a loss of skill and know-how to the organisation. Yet for many years now local government managers have expressed concerns about their capacity to find, motivate and retain suitably qualified staff. This ability is critical to public service success and reform, thus needs to be a high priority if local government is to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This paper presents the findings of a rigorous empirical study that formed part of a larger research program. Data was collected from 500 employees in 12 metropolitan, regional/ rural Western Australian local governments. It examines what factors affect three critical workplace outcomes – job satisfaction, worker willingness to exert discretionary effort, and turnover intentions – all of which have important implications for workforce planning and development. The findings provide useful and usable knowledge for improving our understanding of employee motivation and retention in the public service. From a practical perspective it can enhance public sector manager capacity to maximise the potential of human resources recruited by offering a framework of mechanisms through which managers can influence employee discretionary work effort and retention. By creating an attractive place of employment local governments can better retain staff and build a greater pool of talent from which to choose.

## Introduction

This paper draws on the findings of a larger program of research that investigated the relationship between several key work outcomes, monetary reward, and non-monetary working conditions called 'perks' and 'irks' (Douglas & Shepherd 2000). Perks are the positive non-monetary work environment factors and irks are the negative non-monetary work environment factors associated with a job and organisation (Morris & Douglas 2004). This paper focuses on the impact of monetary and non-monetary factors on three

work outcomes – job satisfaction, discretionary work effort (DWE) and turnover intentions.

Put simply, job satisfaction is how much one likes his/her job (Spector 1985); the feelings employees have towards aspects of their work situation (Smith, Kendall & Hulin 1969). Turnover intentions are one's desire or willingness to leave an organisation (Bouckenhooghe 2013). Broadly, DWE is voluntarily 'going the extra mile' (Yankelovich & Immerwahr 1983; Dubinsky & Skinner 2002). No universal definition of DWE exists so for this research it was defined as the voluntary contribution of extra effort to work activities beyond what is minimally required, expected or enforceable by the organisation in a manner that is consistent with its goals and is intended to have a beneficial impact on its overall effectiveness (Morris 2009).

These work outcomes are important. Job satisfaction is an indicator of employee well-being (Noblet et al. 2005) and leads to action tendencies such as staying at an organisation or seeking employment elsewhere (Spector 1997). Evidence suggests that this attitude is related to employee turnover (e.g. Carsten & Spector 1987; Tett & Meyer 1993; Spector 1997) and exerting extra effort (e.g William & Anderson 1991). Turnover intentions are used as a proxy for actual voluntary turnover (Cotton & Tuttle 1986; Lambert 2006; Mitchell et al. 2000) as intent correlates with actual behaviour (e.g. Steele & Ovalle 1984). Staff turnover affects an organisation's staffing costs and retention of skills and knowhow. Furthermore, it affects employee willingness to contribute meaningfully to an organisation (Matz et al. 2012). Thus, turnover intent can affect organisational performance and effectiveness as can DWE (e.g. Organ, Podsakoff & McKenzie 2006), as effort is a key element in employee performance.

## The research framework

This research was embedded in the economics utility theory (Alchian & Demsetz 1972; Hicks 1963) and organisational behaviour expectancy theory (Vroom 1964) cognitive choice frameworks. These models pose that motivation to engage in a chosen behaviour results from rational choice based on subjective assessments of expected outcomes associated with that behaviour and the perceived attractiveness of the outcomes (Steel & Konig 2006). Under the utility model, a person responds to environmental stimuli in a way that provides the greatest overall satisfaction. Under the expectancy model, a person's values and beliefs determine behaviour as governed by expectancies about resulting outcomes and the value placed on them.

## Work outcomes and the non-monetary work environment

Using a combination of literature, individual interviews, focus groups and a survey, five perks (challenging work, team-oriented leadership, co-worker support, flexible work arrangements, and recognition for good performance) and three irks (autocratic leader behaviour, co-worker shirking, and power-orientation) believed to affect the work outcomes of interest were identified,.

*Challenging work* is work that provides personal challenge and opportunities to tackle new tasks, use and extend one's skills and learn new things. It promotes employee growth and skill development by providing challenge, meaning, autonomy, and variety (Hackman & Oldham 1976; Parker & Wall 1998; Skinner 2000) and is intrinsically satisfying, allowing employees to attain higher order needs like self-actualisation (Herzberg 2003; Maslow 1954; McClelland 1961). This perk should increase DWE (Amabile 1997; Bateman & Crant 1999; Chiaburu & Baker 2006; Goldsmith, Veum & Darity 2000; Ohly, Sonnentag & Plunkte 2006) and job satisfaction, and reduce turnover intentions.

*Team-oriented leadership* is leader behaviour that encourages and builds team play, and demonstrates support and concern for all team members. Amabile and colleagues (2004) called this 'positive leader behaviours', which encompassed supporting work group members, valuing individual contributions, providing a good work model, giving positive and timely feedback, and openness to team member ideas (Amabile 1997). Emphasising team play promotes feelings of fairness, cooperation, group identity, responsibility towards attaining group goals, mutual respect, confidence and trust in the leader. This evokes a perception that the leader is concerned with their personal welfare giving employees a sense of belonging. This builds high quality leader-employee relationships (Organ, Podsakoff & McKenzie 2006). According to social exchange theory (Blau 1964), this encourages employees to reciprocate through extra effort and organisational commitment, reducing the desire to leave.

*Co-worker support* is how much work group members value member contributions and show concern for group member well-being through acts of constructive support and feedback. Co-worker behaviours can influence how employees perceive and experience the work environment (Organ et al. 2006). A supportive team environment builds perceptions of being valued and cared about, fostering feelings of acceptance and belonging. This builds group commitment to attaining group goals and encourages reciprocation (Bishop, Scott & Burroughs 2000; Organ et al. 2006). Strong co-worker support should promote job satisfaction, lower turnover intentions and motivate employee DWE (e.g. Amabile et al. 1996; Parker et al. 2006; Bateman & Organ 1983).

*Flexible work arrangements* (Bolino & Turnley 2003; Shinn 2004) and *recognition for good performance* are key aspects of organisational support. Flexible work arrangements refer to an organisation's preparedness to be flexible in how it adheres to rules and procedures on how employees meet job requirements. This signals its willingness to provide employees with the help needed to perform their job well and indicates the value placed on their contributions and well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger 2002). Few studies have specifically addressed flexible work arrangements as an element of organisational support. Workaholic research, however, provides some evidence that work-life balance covaries with high effort, especially amongst workaholics who enjoy their work (Burke 2000; Burke 2001a; Burke 2001b), thus, this perk should raise job satisfaction and DWE, and lower turnover intentions.

*Recognition for good performance* is how much an organisation recognises and rewards high effort and good performance. Employees need to believe that effort and good performance lead to valued outcomes. Machlowitz (1980) argued that recognition and reward for effort and good work provides 'psychic income' (satisfaction) that motivates extraordinarily high effort. By recognising and rewarding effort and good performance, employee performance-reward expectancies, an important work motivation element (Vroom 1964), are strengthened. This communicates to employees how much the organisation values their contributions. Strong support exists for recognition of good performance increasing job satisfaction and DWE (Choi 2007; Van Dyne, Graham & Dienesch 1994; Peiperl & Jones 2001; Akerloff & Yellen 1990; Amabile 1997). Increased expectancy of valued outcomes from high effort and good performance should also decrease turnover intentions.

*Autocratic leader behaviour* refers to manager behaviours that negatively affect employees' psychological and/or emotional state, or make it difficult for them to perform their job. This is similar to non-contingent punishment and abusive supervision. Non-contingent punishment involves a manager administering punishment for reasons other than poor effort or performance (Organ et al. 2006). Abusive supervision is a leader's sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviours (Tepper 2000). Theoretically, negative leader behaviour breaches the leader-employee psychological contract and so undermines employee trust and loyalty (Frey 1993; Tomer 1981). Abusive leader behaviour that publicly humiliates an employee can lower self-esteem, create dissatisfaction and decrease DWE. Social exchange and reciprocity theory plausibly suggest that negative leader behaviour is considered unfair and creates feelings of mistrust and dislike for the leader (Organ et al. 2006). Negative or hostile leader behaviours are reciprocated with negative employee responses (negative reciprocity) such as reduced effort or leaving the organisation (Gould-Williams 2007; Uhl-Bien &

Maslyn 2003). Most leader behaviour theories focus on positive rather than negative leader behaviours (Amabile et al. 2004). Empirical research on negative leader behaviours is limited, but Amabile et al. (2004) suggested that these behaviours may be more potent than positive leader behaviours in affecting certain discretionary work behaviours. It is theoretically feasible that negative leader behaviours will lower job satisfaction and DWE, and increase turnover intentions.

*Co-worker shirking* involves co-workers not giving 100% effort or not carrying their weight on a group task. It includes co-workers neglecting their own work through frequent absence, lateness, breaks or poor quality work. Research on co-worker shirking is relatively recent. According to equity and justice theories, if employees perceive their co-workers are contributing less effort than other work group members but receive similar rewards, this creates feelings of injustice, lowers satisfaction and negatively affects work motivation (the 'sucker effect'). Employees see the work group as less cohesive and become less willing to help other work group members, especially shirkers. Theoretically, co-worker shirking will plausibly generate employee dissatisfaction and lower the DWE of affected employees since lowering one's effort re-establishes the balance between the rewards received and the effort contributed relative to shirking co-workers. Nonetheless, co-worker shirking research has found evidence of both reduced effort – a 'sucker effect' (Mulvey & Klein 1998) – and increased effort – a 'social compensation effect' (Williams & Karau 1991) – although evidence of a 'sucker effect' seems more extensive. Williams and Karau (1991) also conceded that either the 'sucker effect' or the 'exit option' (voluntary turnover) is likely to dominate over time. Thus, this irk should reduce job satisfaction and DWE, and riase turnover intentions.

*Power-orientation* is how much employees perceive their organisation is characterised by destructive internal competition, political problems and a fear of challenging people in positions of authority or influence. This involves shifting responsibilities and blame onto others, playing political power games, criticising new ideas and poor communication. Power-orientation can impede employee engagement (Amabile et al. 1996). Political problems, negative criticism and severe sanctions on failure and non-conformity increase the perceived risks of engaging in non-conforming behaviours and lower the perceived benefits. Within a social exchange and reciprocity framework, a high power-orientation fails to foster personal responsibility, loyalty, organisational commitment and satisfaction, instead creating feelings of 'negative reciprocity' (Gould-Williams 2007; Uhl-Bien & Maslyn 2003). Thus, theoretically, this irk should generate dissatisfaction, increase the desire to leave and lower DWE (Adler & Borys 1996; Cropanzano et al. 1997; Ferris & Kacmar 1992). Limited research on the effects of power-orientation on work outcomes was found (Amabile et al. 1996;

Cropanzano et al. 1997; Randall et al. 1999). The findings, however, support Adler and Borys's (1996) contention that when employees perceive an organisation as coercive, they become alienated and respond negatively.

### Work outcomes and monetary reward

The role of money as a motivator of work outcomes has long been a point of contention, especially between economists and organisational psychologists. While these researchers recognise that both monetary and non-monetary work environment factors play a part, labour economists typically emphasise money while organisational behaviour researchers emphasise non-monetary factors (perks and irks). This research tested these opposing assertions.

The positive effect of monetary reward on job satisfaction is quite well established. Pay and benefits is a common component in measures of job satisfaction (e.g. Chalykoff and Kochan 1989). Thus, monetary reward should increase job satisfaction. Also, local government managers often contend that the sector cannot effectively compete against the private sector for talented staff because it cannot offer sufficiently competitive salaries (e.g. Morris 2009; Morris, Callaghan & Walker 2010). Thus, turnover intentions should be negatively related to monetary reward.

From the preceding discussion it is anticipated that:

1. Challenging work, team-oriented leadership, co-worker support, support for flexible working arrangements and recognition for good performance are perks that will increase job satisfaction and DWE, and reduce turnover intentions
2. Autocratic leader behaviour, co-worker shirking and power orientation are irks that will lower job satisfaction and DWE, and increase turnover intentions
3. Monetary reward will be positively associated with job satisfaction and DWE, and inversely related to turnover intentions.

Figure 1 summarises these expected relationships.

## Method

### Research context

Local government is an important sector in Australia. It provides essential local services and makes a significant contribution to the economy (Aulich 1999; Commonwealth of Australia 2005; Commonwealth of Australia 2006), accounting for about 2.3% of GDP (ABS 2007; Commonwealth of Australia 2006). Despite its relative size and importance, it has attracted much less research attention on employee work

outcomes than the private sector, especially in relation to how work environment factors affect work outcomes like DWE and employee well-being (Brown & Leigh 1996; Chiaburu & Baker 2006; Drago 1991; Morrison & Phelps 1999; Stamper & Van Dyne 2001). Although a small body of public sector employee work outcome research is emerging (Albrecht 2005; Alotaibi 2001; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler 2000; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler 2002; Frank & Lewis 2004; Noblet et al. 2006; Tepper et al. 2004; Turnipseed & Murkison 2000), theory development, systematic empirical research and improving our understanding public sector work motivation still need greater attention (Perry & Wise 1990; Rainey & Steinbauer 1999; Wright 2001).

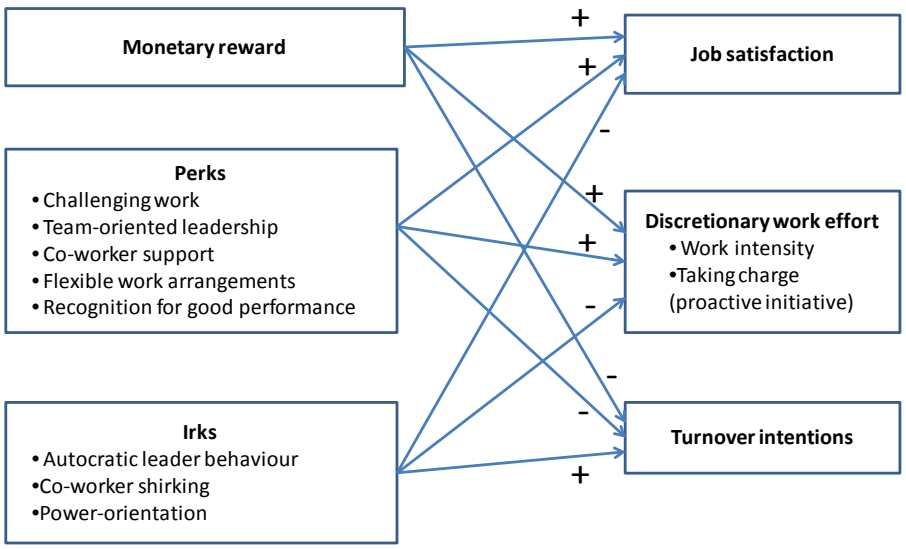


**Fig. 1.** Research model

In Australia, a national public sector reform agenda aimed at making local government more businesslike, performance oriented and focussed on high quality service delivery (Aulich 1999; Commonwealth of Australia 2006; Worthington & Dollery 2002) has exposed this sector to an environment of dramatic and continuous change (Worthington & Dollery 2002). Within this reform process, local government managers were encouraged to adopt a new public management philosophy to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public sector management (Bradley & Parker 2001; Teo, Ahmad & Rodwell 2003). This reform agenda gave local government greater authority, autonomy and flexibility while simultaneously exposing it to greater uncertainty, competition, turbulence and financial and sustainability challenges (Aulich 1999; Commonwealth of Australia 2001; Commonwealth of Australia 2006; Craven 2006; Worthington & Dollery 2002). Fiscal pressures intensified with declining revenue transfers and cost shifting by Federal and State governments. Heightened community

expectations added to these pressures. Unprecedented economic growth in some states exacerbated an already acute national labour and skills shortage creating critical shortages in technical and professional staff that are central to local government roles. Wages were driven up, rendering local government even less competitive due to regulatory and financial constraints. Poaching behaviour favoured councils better equipped to reward and support their employees (Craven 2006). This environment created major challenges for local governments (Craven 2006). These pressures have eased in recent years but local government managers still express concerns about attracting and retaining staff (Morris et al. 2010; Morris 2011).

To improve its efficiency and effectiveness, and to meet its future challenges, local government managers need to find ways to create a workplace environment that is attractive and creates a passion for ensuring efficient and effective service delivery to communities. This means identifying key motivators of work outcomes like employee well-being, DWE and staff retention is critical.

This research was conducted in the WA local government sector. Local government is WA's third largest employer with employment growing 27% from 2000-2005 (Commonwealth of Australia 2006; Craven 2006). At the time of this study, WA local government offered an interesting context for investigation as it was under pressure on all fronts – structural reform, intensifying fiscal pressures, unprecedented economic growth, tight labour markets and heightened community expectations.

## Sample participants

The target participants for this study were all non-CEO employees from three metropolitan and nine regional/rural councils (about 9% of all WA councils). This sample provided diversity rather than representativeness across some key criteria – location, size, remoteness, local government classification and reputation within the industry – and captured a wide variety of employees including supervisory and non-supervisory staff, full-time and part-time employees, and professional, clerical/administrative and blue-collar workers, as well as a broad range of occupational groups. Collectively these councils employed about 2,200 staff.

Data was collected from 500 employees. Individual council response rates ranged from 10% to 71% (median of 29%). About two-thirds of participants worked in rural/regional councils and nearly 60% were male. The median age group was 40-49 years and 61% of respondents were aged 40+ years. Most participants (84%) worked full-time and 60% had worked in their organisation for five years or less. About 40% were in a supervisory role and almost one-quarter (24%) were 'outside' staff.

## Procedure

The data was collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire distributed via either internal mail or by the researcher on a site visit. A cover letter outlined the study aims, benefits of participation, assurances of confidentiality, and highlighted the support of two peak industry bodies. Two reminders were sent via email or council newsletter after two and four weeks. Anonymously completed questionnaires were returned by reply-paid mail or directly during site visits.

## Measures

The questionnaire consisted of self-report scales designed to measure key variables that included job satisfaction, turnover intentions and DWE as dependent variables, and monetary reward and the eight non-monetary work environment factors as predictor variables. Demographic information – gender, age, job status and tenure with the organisation – was also collected as control variables. This study used a combination of established measures and new scales developed as part of the larger research program.

*Job satisfaction* was measured using four items adapted from a scale developed by Chalykoff and Kochan (1989) and two new items that captured various aspects of the workplace (job, pay and benefits, management etc.) A seven-point pictorial scale from ‘very dissatisfied’ to ‘very satisfied’ was used, with higher scores reflecting higher satisfaction. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability was 0.83.

*Turnover intentions* was measured using three items drawn from several sources. A seven-point scale from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’ was used with higher scores representing higher turnover intentions. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability was 0.92.

*Discretionary work effort* is a multidimensional concept. No established scales incorporated all the DWE dimensions so a new scale was developed using several existing sub-scales including adapted versions of Brown and Leigh’s (1996) work intensity and Morrison and Phelps’s (1999) taking charge (proactive initiative). The final DWE scale included a four-item work intensity sub-scale and a six-item taking charge sub-scale. Participants were asked to think about their present job and to indicate how much they agreed with each statement. A seven-point scale from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’ was used, with higher scores representing greater DWE. The ‘work intensity’ and ‘taking charge’ sub-scales had Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities of 0.83 and 0.87, respectively.

*Monetary reward* was measured using a single item; employee’s total yearly income inclusive of base pay, overtime pay, any bonuses or allowances, any paid time off and any other direct payments, but excluding indirect benefits forming part of a ‘package’

such as a company car, company superannuation contributions, and conference allowances. Ten response categories were provided and subsequently reduced to right categories, from under $30,000 to $100,000+, with $10,000 increments in between.

*Non-monetary work environment factors* were assessed using a 41-item scale designed to measure the salient perks and irks: challenging work (five items), team-oriented leadership (seven items), co-worker support (six items), flexible work arrangements (three items), recognition for good work (four items), autocratic leader behaviour (five items), co-worker shirking (seven items), and power-orientation (four items). Participants indicated how accurately each item described their current work environment using a seven-point scale ranging from 'very inaccurate' to 'very accurate'. These sub-scales had Cronbach's alpha reliabilities between 0.74 and 0.90.

*Demographic Measures* – gender, age, work status and organisational tenure – were all measured as absolute variables. *Gender* was binary, with 0 = male and 1 = female. *Age* was measured in 10 year blocks from under 20 years to 60+ years. *Work status* was binary, with 0 = full-time and 1 = part-time/casual. And *organisational tenure* had six categories – under 1 year, 1-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years and 16+ years – later combined into five year blocks for analysis.

## Data analysis

All scale measures were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis to assess their measurement quality prior to further analysis. Some scale re-specification was necessary to ensure an adequate measurement model fit while ensuring content validity was maintained. Scale scores were calculated by averaging the items in each scale.

To answer the research question 'what work environment factors affect job satisfaction, DWE and turnover intentions?', correlation, regression and effect size analyses were conducted. This involved four stages:

1. An inter-correlation matrix generated for all variables
2. Separate pairwise hierarchical regressions with each work outcome regressed on each individual monetary and non-monetary work environment factor after controlling for the demographics
3. Effect size correlations assessed using Cohen's cut-off criteria: small ($0.1 < r \leq 0.243$); medium ($0.243 < r \leq 0.371$); and large ($r > 0.371$)
4. Hierarchical multiple regressions with each work outcome regressed on the demographic variables in step one, then all work environment factors entered in step two. Predictors without a significant effect size were excluded.

Statistical significance was assessed at 1% to allow for possible error from repeated analyses.

# Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the key results (see the Appendix for more detailed results). Overall, there were significant correlations between most work outcomes (dependent variables) and the work environment factors (predictor variables), and some participant demographics (control variables). All dependent and predictor variables displayed reasonable variability and their inter-correlations were all in their predicted directions.

## Association between work outcomes

All the work outcomes displayed significant inter-correlations. These ranged from a high of -0.64 (strong) between job satisfaction and turnover intentions to a low of -0.20 (weak) between turnover intentions and taking charge. Job satisfaction had the strongest association with the other work outcomes (average r = 0.41) while the taking charge DWE measure had the weakest (average r = 0.27). The average correlation across all work outcomes was 0.35 (moderate).

## Association between the work environment factors

All the non-monetary work environment factors also displayed significant inter-correlations. The inter-correlations between the perks ranged from a high of 0.61 between challenging work and team-oriented leadership to a low of 0.29 between co-worker support and flexible work arrangements. The average correlation across all perks was 0.44. In contrast, the inter-correlations between the irks were only moderate and much less divergent. They ranged from 0.30 to 0.34. The inter-correlations between the perks and irks were moderate to strong. They ranged from a high of -0.67 between team-oriented leadership and autocratic leader behaviour to a low of -0.17 between co-worker shirking and flexible work arrangements. Monetary reward had weak to non-significant correlations with the non-monetary factors. Its average correlation with all perks was 0.12 and with all irks was 0.08.

## Job satisfaction and the work environment factors

As anticipated, all the perks were positively correlated with job satisfaction while all the irks had negative correlations. Job satisfaction was strongly ($r > 0.5$) to very strongly ($r > 0.7$) correlated with perks, moderately ($r > 0.3$) to strongly ($r > 0.5$) associated with irks, and very weakly related to monetary reward. The strongest significant correlation was with team-oriented leadership ($r = 0.77$), closely followed by challenging work ($r = 0.66$), recognition for good performance ($r = 0.66$) and autocratic leader behaviour ($r = -$

0.64). The weakest association was with monetary reward (r = 0.13). Overall job satisfaction was more strongly correlated with the perks than with irks and monetary reward.

Although these inter-correlation suggested that job satisfaction is significantly associated with all the work environment factors, this does not provide full insight to how much each factor impacts this work outcome since employee demographics can have confounding effects. The two-step pairwise hierarchical regressions firstly clarified the predictive capacity of each factor after controlling for participant demographics (see column 1 in Table 1). Effect size correlations were also determined to assess the relative size of the effect of each predictor on job satisfaction (see column 2 in Table 1). Further, to answer the question 'what unique contribution does each factor make to job satisfaction when all the work environment factors are considered together', the two-step hierarchical multiple regression results were examined.

Having controlled for the participant demographics, the pairwise regression results virtually mirrored the correlation results. Collectively, the control variables accounted for about 5% of the variation in job satisfaction ($p < 0.001$). Individually, each work environment factor explained between 5% and 57% extra variation in job satisfaction and was statistically significant. The largest individual predictors of job satisfaction were team-oriented leadership (57%), challenging work (41%), recognition for good performance (40%) and autocratic leader behaviour (38%), although every perk and irk had large effect sizes. Contrary to some employer beliefs, monetary reward only had a small effect size and the smallest predictive capacity explaining only 5-7% of job satisfaction.

When all work environment factors were entered together, flexible work arrangements, power-orientation and monetary reward were no longer significant predictors of job satisfaction, indicating that even though these factors are significantly related to this work outcome the significant work environment factors subsume their effect so they make no unique contribution to job satisfaction above these factors (see column 3 in Table 1).

Team-oriented leadership made the largest unique contribution to job satisfaction, followed by recognition for good performance, challenging work and autocratic leader behaviour, all being highly significant predictors ($p < 0.001$). Although co-worker shirking and co-worker support also made unique contributions to job satisfaction, their magnitude and their significance were considerably smaller. Collectively, these factors explained 71% of job satisfaction.

**Tab. 1.** Overview of the findings

| | Work outcomes – dependent variables (DV) | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Job satisfaction | | | Turnover intentions | | | Discretionary work effort | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | Intensity | | | Taking charge | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) | (10) | (11) | (12) |
| **Predictor variables** | PR % DV variation explained | Size of effect size | MR unique contribution p-value | PR % DV variation explained | Size of effect size | MR unique contribution p-value | PR % DV variation explained | Size of effect size | MR unique contribution p-value | PR % DV variation explained | Size of effect size | MR unique contribution p-value |
| **Control variables** - participant demographics | 5%‡ | | | 5%‡ | | | 9%‡ | | | 2% n.s. | | |
| Perks – non-monetary factors | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Challenging work | 41%‡ | L | ‡ | 21%‡ | L | ‡ | 13%‡ | L | ‡ | 10%‡ | M | ‡ |
| Team-oriented leadership | 57%‡ | L | ‡ | 21%‡ | L | n.s. | 7%‡ | M | n.s. | 5%‡ | S | n.s. |
| Co-worker support | 20%‡ | L | * | 5%‡ | M | n.s. | 8%‡ | M | ‡ | 6%‡ | M | ‡ |
| Flexible work arrangements | 20%‡ | L | n.s. | 8%‡ | M | n.s. | 4%‡ | S | n.s. | 8%‡ | M | ‡ |
| Recognition for good performance | 40%‡ | L | ‡ | 22%‡ | L | ‡ | 3%‡ | S | †[1] | 3%‡ | S | n.s. |
| Irks – non-monetary factors | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Autocratic leader behaviour | 38%‡ | L | ‡ | 17%‡ | L | † | 3%‡ | S | n.s. | 2%* | S | n.s. |
| Co-worker shirking | 15%‡ | L | † | 5%‡ | M | n.s. | 1% ŧ | S | ŧ | 1% ŧ | S | n.s. |
| Power-orientation | 15%‡ | L | n.s. | 11%‡ | M | n.s. | 3%‡ | S | * | 0% n.s. | n.s. | |
| Monetary factors | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Monetary reward (approx. Interval/cat. scale) | 5/7%‡ | S | n.s. | 0/2% n.s. | n.s. | | 0/1% n.s. | n.s. | | 3/6%‡ | S | ŧ |
| **MR Step 2 – $\Delta R^2$** (Total variation in DV explained by all predictors) | | | **0.71** | | | **0.32** | | | **0.19** | | | **0.17** |

PR = pairwise hierarchical regression results ($\Delta R^2$); MR = multiple hierarchical regression results
S = small effect size; M = medium effect size; L = large effect size
ŧ p < 0.05; * p < 0.01; † p < 0.005; ‡ p < 0.001; n.s. = not significant (n = 500)
[1] Unexpected reversal of sign in the multiple regression – possible confounding effect.

## Turnover intentions and the work environment factors

As predicted, all the perks were inversely related to turnover intentions while all the irks had significant positive correlations. This work outcome was moderately correlated with all perks and irks ($p < 0.001$) but was not significantly associated with monetary reward ($p > 0.05$). The strongest significant correlation was with recognition for good performance ($r = -0.50$) followed by team-oriented leadership and challenging work (both $r = -0.48$), and autocratic leader behaviour ($r = 0.44$). The weakest association was with co-worker support ($r = -0.27$) and co-worker shirking ($r = 0.27$). Like job satisfaction, turnover intentions were more strongly correlated with perks than with irks.

When controlling for participant demographics, the pairwise regression results again largely mirrored the inter-correlation results. The control variables accounted for about 5% of turnover intentions ($p < 0.001$). Individually, each non-monetary work environment factor then explained between 5% and 22% ($p < 0.001$) extra variation in turnover intentions (see column 4 in Table 1). Three perks and one irk predicted similar levels of turnover intentions – recognition for good performance (22%), team-oriented leadership and challenging work (each 21%), and autocratic leader behaviour (17%) and had large effect sizes (see column 5 in Table 1). These were followed by power-orientation (11%) which had a medium effect size. Again, contrary to the beliefs of many local government managers, monetary reward had a very small effect size and accounted for only 0-2% of turnover intentions which was not statistically significant.

When all work environment factors were entered together, only two perks and one irk made a unique contribution to explaining turnover intentions, subsuming the effects of the other predictors (see column 6 in Table 1). Recognition for good performance and challenging work made the largest unique contributions ($p < 0.001$) followed by autocratic leader behaviour ($p < 0.005$). Together, these factors explained about 32% of turnover intentions.

## Discretionary work effort and the work environment factors

All the perks were positively correlated with both DWE measures. However, while all the irks had significant negative correlations with work intensity, only autocratic leader behaviour was significantly correlated with taking charge ($p < 0.005$), and co-worker shirking was marginally correlated ($p < 0.05$). In contrast, monetary reward was significantly associated with the taking charge DWE measure ($p < 0.001$) but not with the intensity DWE measure ($p > 0.05$). Work intensity was most strongly related to challenging work ($r = 0.38$) and most weakly related to co-worker shirking ($r = -0.15$). Similarly, taking charge was most strongly related to challenging work ($r = 0.33$) and most weakly correlated with autocratic leader behaviour ($r = -0.13$).

Overall, the predictive capacity of the individual work environment factors in explaining the two DWE measures was smaller than for both job satisfaction and turnover intentions. For work intensity, only challenging work had a large effect size accounting for 13% of this component of DWE. Team-

oriented leadership and co-worker support had medium effect sizes, each explaining 7-8% of work intensity. All the other perks and irks had small effect sizes and accounted for 1-4% of variation, although co-worker shirking was only marginally significant ($p < 0.05$). The unique effects of challenging work and co-worker support on work intensity was apparent in the multiple regression as these were both highly significant ($p < 0.001$) and subsumed the effects of all other factors except recognition for good performance which, although significant, had an unexpected reversal of relationship which is difficult to explain and may simply be a confounding effect. For taking charge, the individual work environment factors had only small to medium effect sizes explaining 1-10% of the variation in taking charge behaviour. Co-worker shirking had a marginal negative effect and power-orientation had no significant effect. Together these predictors explained 19% of work intensity and 17% of taking charge behaviour.

## Discussion

These findings indicate that perks and irks have a larger effect than monetary reward on job satisfaction, DWE and turnover intentions. Further, they show that while all these work environment factors affect at least some work outcomes, the combination of factors with the greatest impact differ across work outcomes. Table 2 summarises the key factors contributing uniquely to the work outcomes examined.

**Tab. 2.** Summary of the unique factors affecting key work outcomes

| Work environment factors | Job satisfaction | Turnover intentions | Work intensity | Taking charge |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Challenging work | ↑ | ↓ | ↑ | ↑ |
| Team-oriented leadership | ↑ | | | |
| Co-worker support | ↑ | | ↑ | ↑ |
| Flexible work arrangements | | | | ↑ |
| Recognition for good performance | ↑ | ↓ | | |
| Autocratic leader behaviour | ↓ | ↑ | | |
| Co-worker shirking | ↓ | | | |
| Power-orientation | | | ↓ | |
| Monetary reward | | | | |

To create a highly satisfying workplace local government needs to promote a management style that is highly supportive and team-orientated, design jobs that are challenging and interesting, recognise hard working and well performing employees, and promote a culture in which teamwork is a premium. It needs to minimise situations in which managers adopt an overly autocratic approach to

how they manage staff, and take action to ensure all employees carry their weight. Due to the strong inverse association between job satisfaction and turnover intentions, this type of workplace should also help with retaining staff. Key factors in minimising voluntary turnover are ensuring that work is designed to be challenging and interesting, and recognising hard working and well performing employees. Autocratic leader behaviour is a key motivator for employees leaving organisations. Finally, to induce greater discretionary work effort in terms of encouraging staff to work harder and to take the initiative to find better ways of doing their job to improve service delivery, local government needs to: focus on designing jobs so that they are challenging and interesting; build teamwork amongst work groups; support flexible work arrangements; and provide a financial incentive to people who take the initiative to make improvements in their job, work unit and/or the organisation. It can be seen that job design is central to all of the work outcomes, but combined with the other key factors can potentially produce a more productive and effective local government workplace.

## Conclusions

This paper examined the role of non-monetary work environment factors (perks and irks) and monetary reward as determinants of three key work outcomes: job satisfaction, turnover intentions and DWE. It extends existing knowledge by investigating the impact of several work environment factors not previously considered (most notably irks), thereby improving our understanding of how non-monetary work environment factors and monetary rewards influence different work outcomes. Also, several scholars highlighted how relatively little is known about public sector employee motivation (Frank & Lewis 2004; Gould-Williams 2007; Perry 1997; Perry & Wise 1990; Wright 2001) –this research makes a much needed contribution to public sector motivational research.

The findings demonstrate that to more completely understand employee work outcomes, the differential roles of the job, and interpersonal, organisational and monetary reward domains of the work environment need to be recognised. Generally, perks have a stronger and more pervasive impact than irks and monetary reward on all work outcomes investigated. Further, the importance of social and interpersonal relationships in affecting these work outcomes was clearly evident. Nonetheless, focussing on only one or a few factors provides an incomplete picture and may prevent managers from maximising their human resources potential as, individually and collectively, these factors substantively affect employee well-being as measured by job satisfaction, and most factors covary with employee turnover intentions. These findings have important implications for practicing managers and local government policymakers.

## Implications for policy and practice

Job satisfaction, turnover intentions and DWE are important factors affecting organisational performance (Gould-Williams 2007; Organ et al. 2006). These research findings can guide public sector managers on what perks and irks they need to address to enhance these key work outcomes. This knowledge, along with training in this area, will be particularly important for new managers with little or no management training and experience.

As the local government sector undergoes structural reform and faces increasing pressures to improve service delivery, it is important to better understand how different factors affect public sector employee work outcomes. This is crucial to improving organisational performance and sustainability. Further, employers and managers need to recognise the role they can play in influencing these work outcomes. Organisational leaders can shape the work environment to induce employees to engage in work behaviours that improve organisational effectiveness and performance, and reduce staff turnover. Job design and interpersonal relationships play a critical role.

Managers have a greater opportunity to influence DWE, hence worker performance, by encouraging employees to work more intensively and take the initiative to proactively challenge the status quo to bring about constructive change in one's own job, work area and the organisation (Van Dyne et al. 1995). This research highlights that to most effectively utilise their human resources (HR), managers need to address workplace perks and irks, as well as monetary rewards, to influence these key work outcomes.

By showing that different work outcomes have different predictors, these findings have important management, education and HR implications. Firstly, while many organisations traditionally rely on monetary reward and benefits to attract, retain and motivate employees, this research draws attention to the importance of 'soft perks' (Budman 1994) and 'soft' HR practices (Delery et al. 1998; Wayne, Shore & Liden 1997) as motivators. This provides managers with a framework for better understanding how different work environment factors under their control can be adjusted to influence different work outcomes.

These findings also point to the importance of training both managers and non-supervisory employees in interpersonal relationships. Management education and HR training needs to include information on how best to design challenging and interesting jobs based on individual skills and abilities, and how best to build quality leader-employee relationships. Developing interpersonal skills in things like effective communication, team-building and conflict management, and an understanding of emotional intelligence will be important for both managers and non-supervisory staff to build an environment that fosters trust and transparency so that quality workplace relationships can develop (Ash 2000).

Finally, this research is timely for policy makers in State government, especially where significant labour shortages exist and a local government reform agenda is being progressed. Policy makers need

to examine the capacity for public sector managers to cultivate organisational perks that can foster the formation of high quality leader-employee relationships. They also need to consider promoting and supporting local government manager training in how to cultivate perks and to address irks in their organisations. Furthermore, they need to examine how local government managers can be given greater flexibility to reward employees for good performance through a range of monetary and non-monetary incentives. This requires a shift away from compensation practices where monetary rewards are tied to positions and industry awards and standards rather than performance.

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# Appendix

**Tab. 3.** Correlations, means, standard deviations and scale reliabilities

| | Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Job satisfaction | **(0.83)** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. | Intention to leave | -0.64‡ | **(0.92)** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. | DWE – Work intensity | 0.34‡ | -0.33‡ | **(0.83)** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. | DWE – Taking charge | 0.25‡ | -0.20‡ | 0.36‡ | **(0.87)** | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. | Challenging work | 0.66‡ | -0.48‡ | 0.38‡ | 0.33‡ | **(0.89)** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. | Team-oriented leadership | 0.77‡ | -0.48‡ | 0.29‡ | 0.21‡ | 0.61‡ | **(0.94)** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. | Co-worker support | 0.49‡ | -0.27‡ | 0.32‡ | 0.25‡ | 0.37‡ | 0.41‡ | **(0.87)** | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. | Flexible work arrangements | 0.48‡ | -0.32‡ | 0.23‡ | 0.27‡ | 0.39‡ | 0.40‡ | 0.29‡ | **(0.74)** | | | | | | | | | |
| 9. | Recognition for good performance | 0.66‡ | -0.50‡ | 0.20‡ | 0.19‡ | 0.50‡ | 0.57‡ | 0.35‡ | 0.54‡ | **(0.82)** | | | | | | | | |
| 10. | Autocratic leader behaviour | -0.64‡ | 0.44‡ | -0.19† | -0.13† | -0.50‡ | -0.67‡ | -0.27‡ | -0.31‡ | -0.39‡ | **(0.85)** | | | | | | | |
| 11. | Power-orientation | -0.41‡ | 0.37‡ | -0.20‡ | 0.06 | -0.31‡ | -0.38‡ | -0.21‡ | -0.21‡ | -0.46‡ | 0.34‡ | **(0.79)** | | | | | | |
| 12. | Co-worker shirking | -0.41‡ | 0.27‡ | -0.15† | -0.11 | -0.26‡ | -0.30‡ | -0.58‡ | -0.17‡ | -0.27‡ | 0.30‡ | 0.33‡ | **(0.90)** | | | | | |
| 13. | Monetary reward[a] | 0.13† | -0.04 | 0.02 | 0.20‡ | 0.19‡ | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.17‡ | 0.13† | -0.07 | 0.02 | -0.14† | - | | | | |
| 14. | Gender[b] | 0.16‡ | -0.14† | 0.23‡ | 0.05 | 0.12* | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.12* | 0.10 | -0.14† | -0.01 | -0.11 | -0.20‡ | - | | | |
| 15. | Age[a] | 0.05 | -0.08 | 0.14† | 0.11 | 0.07 | -0.07 | 0.05 | -0.04 | 0.03 | 0.04 | -0.09 | -0.07 | 0.13* | -0.081 | - | | |
| 16. | Work status[c] | -0.13† | 0.18‡ | -0.14† | 0.06 | -0.03 | -0.10 | -0.11 | -0.10 | -0.09 | 0.06 | 0.17‡ | 0.07 | 0.41‡ | -0.31‡ | -0.06 | - | |
| 17. | Organisational tenure[a] | -0.07 | 0.05 | -0.02 | 0.02 | -0.03 | -0.11† | -0.06 | -0.12* | -0.16‡ | 0.09 | 0.07 | 0.04 | 0.06 | -0.09 | 0.42‡ | 0.11 | - |
| | MEAN | 5.18 | 3.52 | 5.95 | 5.58 | 5.33 | 5.27 | 5.46 | 4.81 | 4.69 | 2.50 | 4.20 | 2.72 | 3.03 | 0.40 | 0.84 | 3.80 | 1.67 |
| | S.D. | 1.22 | 1.97 | 0.88 | 0.89 | 1.27 | 1.43 | 1.11 | 1.31 | 1.27 | 1.41 | 1.39 | 1.37 | 1.70 | 0.49 | 0.37 | 1.09 | 0.98 |

Significance test criteria: $\overline{\dagger}$ $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.01$; † $p < 0.005$; ‡ $p < 0.001$

Pearson correlations on the lower diagonal; Cronbach's alpha reliabilities in parentheses along the diagonal.

[a] Variable correlations approximate - variable measures treated as interval scales. [b] Coded as 0 = male and 1 = female. [c] Coded as 0 = part-time/casual and 1 = full-time.

**Tab. 4.** Pairwise regression results

| | | Predictor variables – work outcomes | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Job satisfaction | | | | | Intention to leave | | | | |
| | | $\Delta R^2$ | $\Delta F$ | $\beta_u$ [a] | $\beta_s$ [a] | ESr [b] | $\Delta R^2$ | $\Delta F$ | $\beta_u$ [a] | $\beta_s$ [a] | ESr [b] |
| ***Step 1.*** **Control Variables** | | 0.046 | 5.94‡ | | | | 0.053 | 8.67‡ | | | |
| Gender | | | | 0.33† | 0.13† | 0.16[x] | | | -0.40†̄ | -0.10†̄ | -0.14[x] |
| Age | | | | 0.09 | 0.08 | 0.05 | | | -0.18†̄ | -0.10†̄ | -0.08 |
| Work status | | | | -0.33†̄ | -0.10†̄ | -0.13[x] | | | 0.80† | 0.15† | 0.18[x] |
| Organisational tenure | | | | -0.09 | -0.07 | -0.07 | | | 0.11 | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| ***Step 2.*** **Pairwise predictor variables** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ***Model 1*** | Challenging work | 0.41 | 369.52‡ | 0.63‡ | 0.65‡ | 0.66[z] | 0.21 | 136.52‡ | -0.73‡ | -0.46‡ | -0.48[z] |
| ***Model 2*** | Team-oriented leadership | 0.57 | 710.78‡ | 0.65‡ | 0.76‡ | 0.77[z] | 0.21 | 135.56‡ | -0.64‡ | -0.46‡ | -0.48[z] |
| ***Model 3*** | Co-worker support | 0.20 | 125.18‡ | 0.50‡ | 0.45‡ | 0.49[z] | 0.05 | 26.35‡ | -0.41‡ | -0.23‡ | -0.27[y] |
| ***Model 4*** | Flexible work arrangements | 0.20 | 131.48‡ | 0.42‡ | 0.46‡ | 0.48[z] | 0.08 | 47.17‡ | -0.44‡ | -0.30‡ | -0.32[y] |
| ***Model 5*** | Recognition for good performance | 0.40 | 354.86‡ | 0.62‡ | 0.65‡ | 0.66[z] | 0.22 | 146.37‡ | -0.74‡ | -0.48‡ | -0.50[z] |
| ***Model 6*** | Autocratic leader behaviour | 0.38 | 318.18‡ | -0.54‡ | -0.62‡ | -0.64[z] | 0.17 | 108.05‡ | 0.59‡ | 0.42‡ | 0.44[z] |
| ***Model 7*** | Power-orientation | 0.15 | 94.02‡ | -0.35‡ | -0.40‡ | -0.41[z] | 0.11 | 63.41‡ | 0.48‡ | 0.34‡ | 0.37[y] |
| ***Model 8*** | Co-worker shirking | 0.15 | 90.32‡ | -0.34‡ | -0.39‡ | -0.41[z] | 0.05 | 28.94‡ | 0.34‡ | 0.23‡ | 0.27[y] |
| ***Model 9*** | Monetary reward (interval scale) | 0.05 | 24.33‡ | 0.17‡ | 0.24‡ | 0.13[x] | 0.00 | 0.47 | -0.04 | -0.03 | -0.04 |
| | Monetary reward (categorical measure) | 0.07 | 4.26‡ | | | | 0.02 | 0.83 | | | |
| ***Model 10*** | Job satisfaction | | | | | | 0.37 | 317.46‡ | -1.025‡ | -0.63‡ | -0.64[z] |
| ***Model 11*** | Turnover intentions | | | | | | | | | | |

†̄ $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.01$; † $p < 0.005$; ‡ $p < 0.001$ (n = 500)

[a] Control variables beta coefficients are for the Step 1 regression; $\beta_u$ = unstandardised beta coefficient; $\beta_s$ = standardised beta coefficient;
[b] $ES_r$ = Effect size correlation using cut-off criteria: [x] small (r > 0.100); [y] medium (r > 0.243); [z] large (r > 0.371)
Gender – 0 = male and 1 = female; Work status – 0 = full-time and 1 = part-time/casual; Monetary reward (categorical) – under $30,000 reference group.

**Tab. 4 cont.** Pairwise regression results

| | | Predictor variables – work outcomes | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | DWE – work intensity | | | | | DWE – Taking charge | | | | |
| | | $\Delta R^2$ | $\Delta F$ | $\beta_u$ [a] | $\beta_s$ [a] | $ES_r$ [b] | $\Delta R^2$ | $\Delta F$ | $\beta_u$ [a] | $\beta_s$ [a] | $ES_r$ [b] |
| ***Step 1.*** **Control Variables** | | 0.09 | 11.42‡ | | | | 0.023 | 2.87† | | | |
| Gender | | | | 0.41‡ | 0.23‡ | 0.23[x] | | | 0.17 | 0.09 | 0.05 |
| Age | | | | 0.14‡ | 0.17‡ | 0.14[x] | | | 0.10† | 0.12† | 0.11[x] |
| Work Status | | | | -0.14 | -0.06 | -0.14[x] | | | 0.22 | 0.09 | 0.06 |
| Organisational tenure | | | | -0.05 | -0.05 | -0.02 | | | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.02 |
| ***Step 2.*** **Pairwise predictor variables** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ***Model 1*** | Challenging Work | 0.13 | 78.61‡ | 0.26‡ | 0.36‡ | 0.38[z] | 0.10 | 56.64‡ | 0.23‡ | 0.32‡ | 0.33[y] |
| ***Model 2*** | Team-oriented Leadership | 0.07 | 41.41‡ | 0.17‡ | 0.27‡ | 0.29[y] | 0.05 | 24.29‡ | 0.14‡ | 0.22‡ | 0.21[x] |
| ***Model 3*** | Co-worker support | 0.08 | 46.52‡ | 0.24‡ | 0.29‡ | 0.32[y] | 0.06 | 33.75‡ | 0.21‡ | 0.26‡ | 0.25[y] |
| ***Model 4*** | Flexible Work Arrangements | 0.04 | 21.88‡ | 0.14‡ | 0.20‡ | 0.23[x] | 0.08 | 43.54‡ | 0.20‡ | 0.29‡ | 0.27[y] |
| ***Model 5*** | Recognition for Good Performance | 0.03 | 13.75‡ | 0.11‡ | 0.16‡ | 0.20[x] | 0.03 | 17.53‡ | 0.13‡ | 0.19‡ | 0.19[x] |
| ***Model 6*** | Autocratic Leader Behaviour | 0.03 | 13.92‡ | -0.10‡ | -0.16‡ | -0.19[x] | 0.02 | 7.97* | -0.08* | -0.13* | -0.13[x] |
| ***Model 7*** | Power-orientation | 0.03 | 17.71‡ | -0.12‡ | -0.18‡ | -0.20[x] | 0.00 | 1.68 | -0.04 | 0.06 | -0.06 |
| ***Model 8*** | Co-worker shirking | 0.01 | 6.27† | -0.07† | -0.11† | -0.15[x] | 0.01 | 4.77† | -0.06† | -0.10† | -0.11[x] |
| ***Model 9*** | Monetary reward (interval scale) | 0.00 | 0.54 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.02 | 0.03 | 17.12‡ | 0.11‡ | 0.20‡ | 0.20[x] |
| | Monetary reward (categorical measure) | 0.01 | 0.85 | - | - | - | 0.06 | 3.44‡ | - | - | - |
| ***Model 10*** | Job satisfaction | 0.08 | 49.02‡ | 0.22‡ | 0.30‡ | 0.34[y] | 0.06 | 31.56‡ | 0.19‡ | 0.25‡ | 0.25[y] |
| ***Model 11*** | Turnover intentions | 0.08 | 44.71‡ | -0.13‡ | -0.29‡ | -0.33[y] | 0.04 | 18.90‡ | -0.09‡ | -0.20‡ | -0.20[x] |

† $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.01$; † $p < 0.005$; ‡ $p < 0.001$ (n = 500)

[a] Control variables beta coefficients are for the Step 1 regression; $\beta_u$ = unstandardised beta coefficient; $\beta_s$ = standardised beta coefficient;
$ES_r$ = Effect size correlation using cut-off criteria: [x] small (r > 0.100); [y] medium (r > 0.243); [z] large (r > 0.371)
Gender – 0 = male and 1 = female; Work status – 0 = full-time and 1 = part-time/casual; Monetary reward (categorical) – under $30,000 reference group.

**Tab. 5.** Multiple regression results (excluding uncorrelated predictor variables)

| | Job satisfaction | | | Turnover intentions | | | Discretionary work intensity | | | Discretionary directed effort – taking charge | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Step 1:* | $\beta_u$ | SE | $\beta_s$ | $\beta_u$ | SE | $\beta_s$ [a] | $\beta_u$ | SE | $\beta_s$ [a] | $\beta_u$ | SE | $\beta_s$ [a] |
| Constant | 5.32 | 0.29 | | 3.29 | 0.47 | | 5.54 | 0.21 | | 4.94 | 0.21 | |
| Gender | 0.33 | 0.12 | 0.13† | -0.40 | 0.19 | -0.10$\bar{\dagger}$ | 0.41 | 0.08 | 0.23‡ | 0.17 | 0.09 | 0.09 |
| Age | 0.09 | 0.05 | 0.08 | -0.18 | 0.09 | -0.10$\bar{\dagger}$ | 0.14 | 0.04 | 0.17‡ | 0.10 | 0.04 | 0.12$\bar{\dagger}$ |
| Work Status | -0.33 | 0.16 | -0.10$\bar{\dagger}$ | 0.80 | 0.26 | 0.15† | -0.14 | 0.11 | -0.06 | 0.22 | 0.12 | 0.09 |
| Organisational Tenure | -0.09 | 0.06 | -0.07 | 0.11 | 0.10 | -0.05 | 0.05 | 0.04 | -0.05 | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.01 |
| *Step 2:* | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Constant | 1.33 | 0.34 | | 6.00 | 0.88 | | 3.25 | 0.43 | | 2.36 | 0.44 | |
| Gender | 0.08 | 0.06 | 0.03 | -0.12 | 0.16 | -0.03 | 0.35 | 0.08 | 0.19‡ | 0.11 | 0.08 | 0.06 |
| Age | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.03 | -0.09 | 0.07 | -0.05 | 0.11 | 0.04 | 0.14† | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.07 |
| Work status | -0.16 | 0.09 | -0.05 | 0.59 | 0.21 | 0.11* | 0.01 | 0.10 | 0.00 | 0.20 | 0.12 | 0.08 |
| Organisational tenure | 0.05 | 0.03 | 0.04 | -0.04 | 0.08 | -0.02 | -0.03 | 0.04 | -0.03 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.05 |
| Challenging work | 0.17 | 0.03 | 0.18‡ | -0.32 | 0.08 | -0.20‡ | 0.21 | 0.04 | 0.29‡ | 0.17 | 0.04 | 0.23‡ |
| Team-oriented leadership | 0.29 | 0.03 | 0.34‡ | -0.10 | 0.08 | -0.07 | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.10 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| Co-worker support | 0.09 | 0.03 | 0.08* | 0.06 | 0.09 | 0.03 | 0.20 | 0.04 | 0.24‡ | 0.16 | 0.05 | 0.20‡ |
| Flexible work arrangements | 0.05 | 0.03 | 0.05 | -0.01 | 0.07 | -0.01 | 0.06 | 0.03 | 0.09 | 0.12 | 0.04 | 0.18‡ |
| Recognition for good performance | 0.21 | 0.03 | 0.22‡ | -0.38 | 0.08 | -0.24‡ | -0.11 | 0.04 | -0.16†[α] | -0.05 | 0.04 | -0.08 |
| Autocratic leader behaviour | -0.14 | 0.03 | -0.17‡ | 0.22 | 0.07 | 0.16† | 0.05 | 0.03 | 0.08 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.07 |
| Co-worker shirking | -0.08 | 0.03 | -0.09† | 0.09 | 0.07 | 0.06 | 0.07 | 0.03 | 0.11$\bar{\dagger}$[α] | 0.05 | 0.03 | 0.08 |
| Power-orientation | -0.01 | 0.02 | -0.01 | 0.11 | 0.06 | 0.07 | -0.08 | 0.03 | -0.13* | | | |
| Monetary reward (interval scale) | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.04 | | | | | | | 0.06$\bar{\dagger}$ | 0.03 | 0.11$\bar{\dagger}$ |
| **Initial Model $R^2$** | | **0.05** | | | **0.05** | | | **0.09** | | | **0.02** | |
| **$\Delta R^2$ for Step 2** | | **0.71** | | | **0.33** | | | **0.19** | | | **0.17** | |

$\bar{\dagger}$ $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.01$; † $p < 0.005$; ‡ $p < 0.001$ (n = 500); $\beta_u$ = unstandardised beta coefficient; $\beta_s$ = standardised beta coefficient; SE = standard error of b-coefficient

[α] Unexpected reversal of sign in the multiple regression – possible confounding effect.

# Local government as a facilitator of systemic social innovation

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**Abstract.** It is widely recognised that new and innovative approaches are required to address the complex, wicked problems that communities face. To tackle these challenges, local governments are developing new and innovative products, services and processes, and replicating innovations that are promoted as having been successfully implemented in other local government areas. This paper argues that approaches focusing on separate individual product, service and process innovations, and then replicating these innovations in new contexts, are not suitable for wicked problems. Instead, it is argued that local governments need to take a systemic approach to innovation when addressing wicked problems: an approach that is informed by complex adaptive systems theory that is specific to an individual community's unique needs, and utilises the community's unique resources and collective intelligence. To demonstrate this approach, a diagnostic tool for systemic social innovation which was reasoned during a project with the City of Onkaparinga is described. This tool highlights nine areas that local governments can focus upon to facilitate systemic social innovation. Five of these areas enable communities to unlock their complex adaptive system dynamics; two areas assist government systems to undertake unplanned explorations of solutions with communities; and two areas assist government systems to exploit the knowledge, ideas and innovations that emerge from community-led activities. A new research project is then described which aims to investigate if this diagnostic tool can be used to affect systemic change in a local government area.

## Introduction

Many of societies' most pressing problems are wicked problems (Krawchulk 2008, p. 69): a term first coined by Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 155) to describe the complex social policy problems that societies face which cannot be definitively described and that do not have definitive and objective solutions. Examples of wicked problems include terrorism, environmental degradation, poverty (Krawchulk 2008, p. 69), ageing populations, energy security, affordable healthcare (Ho 2008), river catchment management (Ison et al. 2009, p. 4), climate change, obesity, indigenous disadvantage

(Australian Public Service Commission 2007) and place-based disadvantage (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2011, p. 45).

The need for new and innovative approaches to address wicked problems is widely recognised (Davies, et al. 2012, p. 2). Local governments are attempting to tackle their most pressing problems by developing a variety of product, service and process innovations (Evans et al. 2012, p. 9) and replicating innovations that have been promoted as having been successfully implemented in other local government areas (Howard 2012, p. 7). By referring to the characteristics of different types of problems, this paper argues that the current local government approach of focusing upon individual product, service and process innovations, and replicating these innovations in new contexts, is not suitable for addressing wicked problems. Instead, it is argued that local government needs to take a strategic approach that interconnects product, service and process innovations when addressing wicked problems.

## Problem types

The first step in addressing any problem should be to identify the problem's 'type', as different types of problems need to be addressed in different ways (Snowden & Boone 2007, p. 4). Several typologies can be used for analysing a problem's type. For example, Kania and Kramer distinguish between technical problems on the one hand and adaptive problems on the other hand; Westley et al. (2007) differentiate between simple, complicated and complex problems; and Rittel and Webber (1973) distinguish between wicked and tame problems.

Kania and Kramer (2011, p. 39) describe technical problems as being well defined, and having a solution that is known in advance that can be implemented by one or a couple of organisations. They contrast technical problems with adaptive problems which are complex: answers are not known in advance, and even if an answer was known in advance no single organisation has the capability to address it. According to Kania and Kramer (2011, p. 38), adaptive problems can only be addressed through a 'collective impact' approach, which they define as:

> long term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Their actions are supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization (Kania & Kramer 2011, p. 39.)

Kania and Kramer (2013) consider the collective impact approach to be an entirely new approach to social progress which recognises that complex issues and contexts

require emergent rather than predetermined solutions. They argue that to be successful in taking a collective impact approach, leaders need to embrace a new way of working that focuses on creating effective rules of interaction between diverse stakeholders in order to increase the likelihood that the emergent solutions will lead to the intended goals (Kania & Kramer 2013).

According to Westley et al. (2007), simple problems should be addressed in the way that one follows a recipe when baking a cake. This is because simple problems have clear cause and effect relationships which enable a right answer to be determined, a standardised best practice solution to be developed, and command and control management to be effective (Westley et al. 2007; Snowden & Boone 2007). Innovations which address simple problems are therefore capable of replication in other contexts – just by 'following the recipe'.

While solutions to complicated problems can also be determined in advance, complicated problems differ from simple problems in that they have many more elements and can be addressed through good practice rather than best practice (Snowden 2002, p. 106). They have clear cause and effect relationships, but because of their many parts they can have a number of right answers which not everyone can see and therefore require experts to find solutions by investigating different options (Westley et al. 2007; Snowden & Boone 2007). Westley et al. (2007) argue that complicated problems should be addressed using the same approach as sending a rocket to the moon: developing a blueprint to specify the separate component parts and the relationships by which the parts need to be assembled to ensure critical success factors are included each time a rocket is sent to the moon. While more difficult to address than simple problems, solutions to complicated problems can be replicated in other contexts by following the blueprint.

Westley et al. (2007) liken addressing complex problems to raising a child: every child is different, following rigid protocols generally does not work and is often detrimental, and raising one child successfully does not guarantee success with raising a second child. Complex problems are unpredictable, they do not have a right answer as the problem is constantly changing, and relationships between cause and effect can only be determined in retrospect (Snowden & Boone 2007). Complex problems are more than the sum of their parts (Snowden & Boone 2007): there is an essence in the interacting relationships between the people, experiences and moments in time that constitute the problem (Westley et al. 2007). Solutions to complex problems are therefore not replicable as solutions are only appropriate for the specific issue, in the specific context, at the specific moment in time in which the solution was created.

Tame problems are described by Rittel and Webber (1973) as having a clear mission, all the information required for understanding and solving the problem is available, and it

is easy to determine if the problem has been solved or not. Examples of tame problems provided by Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 160) include solving mathematical equations, chemists analysing the structure of an unknown compound, and a chess-player trying to achieve checkmate in five moves.

Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 160) argue that nearly all public policy issues are wicked problems. Characteristics of wicked problems identified by the Australian Public Service Commission (2007) include: they have no clear solution; they have many interdependencies; they are often multi-causal and have conflicting goals; they are difficult to define with different stakeholders having a different understanding of what the problem is; attempts to address them often leads to unforeseen consequences due to their multi-causality and interdependency; they are often not stable as the problem and the context of the problem evolves as attempts are made to address them; and they are socially complex, often changing their behaviours which requires stakeholders to coordinate their approaches.

## Addressing wicked problems

The characteristics of the different types of problems suggest that while the local government approach of developing separate individual product, service and process innovations, and replicating innovations in new contexts would be suitable for technical, simple, complicated and tame problems, it would not be suitable for adaptive, complex and wicked problems. According to the literature, if a wicked problem is addressed as if it were a simple or complicated problem, not only would the proposed solution not work (Venton, 2011), but there is also a risk that the wicked problem could be exacerbated, as apparent solutions for wicked problems often generate undesirable consequences (Camillus 2008, p. 100; Westley et al. 2007, p. 10) and other problems (Grint 2005, p. 1473).

In a similar manner to adaptive problems requiring an emergent, collective impact approach (Kania & Kramer 2011, p. 38), the Australian Public Service Commission (2007, p. 14) argues that wicked problems require a collaborative and holistic problem-solving approach. According to the Australian Public Service Commission (2007), stakeholders, including citizens, need to be engaged to ensure the complexity and interconnectedness of a wicked problem is understood, so that possible solutions can collectively be identified, and any required behavioural change is understood, discussed and owned by the people whose behaviour needs to change. The role of traditional leaders in addressing wicked problems is therefore not to provide the right answers, but to ask the right questions (Grint 2005 p. 1473). Grint (2005, p. 1473) provides the

following examples of problems that have been framed to encourage the progression of a collaborative problem-solving process: ‘developing a transport strategy, or an energy strategy, or a defence strategy, or a national health system or an industrial relations strategy; and developing a strategy for dealing with global terrorism’. These types of questions focus communities on developing a collaborative strategy to address a wicked problem which is specific to their unique needs, and which utilises their existing resources and collective intelligence.

The European Commission-funded Social Innovation Europe Project is promoting ‘systemic innovation’ as the most appropriate approach for addressing wicked problems, which it defines as ‘a set of interconnected innovations, where each is dependent on the other, with innovation both in the parts of the system and in the ways that they interact’ (Davies et al. 2012, p. 4). In a similar vein to Kania and Kramer’s (2013) need for effective rules of interaction to increase the likelihood that emergent solutions will lead to the intended goals, the Social Innovation Europe Project argues that enabling conditions are required to instigate systemic change and that policy makers have a critical role to play in setting these enabling conditions (Davies et al. 2012, p. 17).

Complex adaptive systems theory has also been recognised as an approach for addressing wicked problems as it provides practical insights into how to strengthen communities to make them more adaptive in addressing complex social policy problems (Klijn 2008, p. 314; Australian Public Service Commission 2007, p. 14; Bentley & Wilsdon 2003, p. 26). As with collective impact and systemic innovation, proponents of taking a complex adaptive systems approach also argue that enabling conditions need to be created. McKelvey and Lichtenstein (2007) argue that the empirical research has shown large complex systems, such as communities, require enabling conditions to be created in order to maintain the coordination required for emergent self-organisation and adaptive capability; Bentley and Wilsdon (2003, p. 26) argue that it is governments that need to take on this enabling role.

By referring to a research project undertaken in partnership with the City of Onkaparinga, this paper provides support for the assertions that wicked problems need to be addressed by taking an approach that is collaborative and holistic, that focuses on systemic innovation, that is informed by complex adaptive systems theory, and that creates the required enabling conditions to instigate systemic change. The research project aimed to investigate the impact and ways to increase the impact of the Community Capacity Builders (CCB) Community Leadership Program (CLP) which is used as the training component of the City of Onkaparinga’s Leadership Onkaparinga Program. To increase the impact of the CCB CLP, a model was reasoned during the research project to create the enabling conditions required for systemic change. This

model takes a systemic innovation approach, is informed by complex adaptive systems theory, and has the potential to be used by local governments as a diagnostic tool.

## The Community Leadership Program

The CCB CLP addresses the complicated problem of providing citizens with the knowledge and skills to effectively participate in the active citizenship activities of forming collaborative community capacity building projects, bridging their projects and activities to the strategic plans of governments, and participating in community governance processes such as community visioning and strategic planning processes. Given that the CLP addresses a complicated problem, the program's design is underpinned by a blueprint: a focussed theory of change that specifies the separate component parts of the CLP and the relationships by which these component parts need to be delivered. The term 'focused theory of change' is used to describe a theory of change where the relationship between cause and effect is linear and can be clearly understood (Ebrahim & Rangin 2010, pp. 22-23).

The program's component parts include concepts, tools and techniques from seven perspectives on how to build the capacity of communities – a health perspective, an education perspective, a welfare reform perspective, a business perspective, a sustainability perspective, a decision making perspective, and a collaborative planning perspective – and a planning process which combines techniques from the three planning processes commonly used by governments: community visioning, strategic planning, and project management. The relationships between the component parts include the seven community capacity building perspectives being embedded into the planning process, and the planning process being dived into the three sequential phases of learning about the community, taking action in the community, and sustaining the development achieved.

The CCB CLP has a complex operational strategy as it has been purposefully designed to be delivered in partnership with a government partner who provides resources and additional interventions which are required for the successful delivery of the program. An organisation's operational strategy is considered to be complex when the organisation expands its boundaries to absorb the functions of other organisations which it considers important to achieving its mission (Ebrahim & Rangin 2010, p. 23). The CCB CLP's theory of change specifies that the government partner is required to: have a community engagement strategy in place, support participants to access and use community information for decision making, support participants to connect with local community infrastructure and community stakeholders, and to have opportunities

available for participants to engage with other community stakeholders in community direction-setting. Examples of initiatives developed by the government partner that can occur alongside the delivery of the CCB CLP include: community visioning and planning forums, mentoring programs, community leadership networks, additional workshops using local guest speakers, and site visits to local community initiatives and infrastructure.

As shown in Figure 1, given that the CLP has a focussed theory of change and a complex operational strategy, it has been possible to measure the program's achievement of its target outcomes (Ebrahim & Rangin 2010, pp. 25-26). This measurement was first carried out at the completion of the program's pilot. The CLP was piloted with the City of Onkaparinga from October 2006 to May 2007 with 19 City of Onkaparinga residents completing the pilot. The evaluation of the pilot found that 46% of respondents agreed, and that 54% of respondents strongly agreed that their participation in the CCB CLP had provided them with the knowledge and skills to form collaborative community capacity building projects and to bridge their projects and activities to local, regional and state strategic plans (City of Onkaparinga 2007, pers. comm., 27 July). The evaluation also found that 35% of respondents agreed, and that 65% of respondents strongly agreed that their participation in the CCB CLP had provided them with the knowledge and skills to participate in whole of community visioning and planning processes (City of Onkaparinga 2007, pers. comm., 27 July).

## The research project

At the completion of the CCB CLP pilot, CCB had concerns that the CLP was not contributing towards the CCB mission of building the capacity of communities to manage change and sustain community-led development. While the evaluation of the program's pilot demonstrated that the program was achieving its desired learning outcomes, CCB had no evidence that graduates would be able to enact what they learned during the program. In order to determine the influence of the CCB CLP on graduates' practices, a research project was undertaken in partnership with the City of Onkaparinga to determine the program's influence on the community leadership practice of graduates, to determine if they were able to use what they had learned during the program to influence the organisation and communities with which they were interacting, to identify the enabling and blocking factors graduates experienced when they attempted to implement and disseminate what they had learned, and to reason a hypothesis of increasing the social impact of the program.

The research project investigated the *influence* of the CCB CLP on graduates' practice, rather than attempting to measure the program's *impact* on graduates' practice. Measuring influence was deemed to be the most appropriate approach because the research project was investigating the relationship between the CCB CLP and graduates' practice, and from this viewpoint: the CLP has a focussed operational strategy, and the theory of change underpinning graduates' practice is complex. An operational strategy is considered to be focussed if it concentrates on a highly specific task or intervention (Ebrahim & Rangin 2010, p. 23). When investigating the relationship between the CCB CLP and graduates' practice, the CCB CLP has a focussed operation strategy, as the program only concentrates on the knowledge and skills acquisition component of graduates' practice. A theory of change is regarded as complex when the relationships between cause and effect are only weakly understood and multiple causal factors could be at play (Ebrahim & Rangin 2010, p. 23). This is the case for the theory of change underpinning graduates' practice, as, in addition to the influence of the CCB CLP, graduates' practice is shaped by a multitude of poorly understood and non-linear factors. As highlighted in Figure 1, when an intervention has a focused operational strategy and when what is being addressed has a complex theory of change, measuring influence is an appropriate approach to measurement.

**Operational Strategy**

| **Theory of Change** | Focused | Complex |
|---|---|---|
| Complex | **Institutional results**<br>Change in societal norms and policies (on rights and freedoms, good governance, efficient markets)<br>Measures outputs and "influence" (intermediate outcomes) | **Ecosystem results**<br>Economic development, comprehensive rural development and natural resource management, collaborative development<br>Measure outcomes and impacts |
| Focussed | **Niche results**<br>Basic and emergency services, soup kitchens, crisis drop-in centres and hotlines<br>Measure inputs, activities, outputs | **Integrated results**<br>Service delivery (in health, education, employment), immunization campaigns, complex emergency services<br>Measure aggregate outputs, outcomes, and sometimes impacts |

**Fig. 1.** A Contingency Framework for Measuring Results
*Source: Ebrahim & Rangan (2010, p. 52)*

A customised methodology was used for the research project which involved embedding into Dewey's (1938) pragmatic process of inquiry principles from grounded theory and action research. During a 2½ year period, biannual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 19 graduates from the CLP. NVivo 8 software was used to transcribe the interviews and undertake line by line open coding. Theoretical reflection was then applied to the summarised data using a diverse range of theories relevant to community problem-solving to determine the influence of the program on the community leadership practice of graduates and on the ability of graduates to influence the organisations and communities with which they were interacting. Embryonic ideas for increasing the program's impact were then generated by facilitating a focus group of key stakeholders who identified interventions for addressing the enabling and blocking factors that were identified during the graduate interviews.

The most appropriate hypothesis/model for increasing the social impact of the CCB CLP was then generated using the pragmatic process of inquiry approach of converting the elements of the original situation into the unified model (Dewey 1938, p. 104) most likely to achieve the inquiry's aim (Eames 1977, p. 69). In addition to the findings from the graduate interviews and focus group, elements of the original situation included government policies, insights from the development of the CCB CLP, and theoretical literature relevant to addressing complex social policy problems.

The main analytical idea which converted elements of the inquiry's original situation into the unified model most likely to increase the social impact of the CLP was the need to improve the nature of both the interactions and the working relationships between graduates and governments, graduates and street level workers, and graduates and other community members (Zivkovic 2011). The literature explored during the research project uncovered the potential to enhance the interactions and working relationships between these community stakeholders by taking a complex adaptive systems approach when working with communities. According to complex adaptive systems theory, under certain conditions, interactions between interdependent agents produce system level order (Lichtenstein & Plowman 2009, p. 618) as agents interact and learn from each other, change their behaviour, and adapt and evolve to increase their robustness (Gillis 2005, p. 10).

Even though communities are complex adaptive systems (Catto & Parewick 2008, p. 125), the Australian Public Service Commissioner has expressed a desire for governments to gain a greater understanding of complexity (Briggs 2009, p. 7) and taking a complex adaptive systems approach has been recommended for addressing wicked problems (Klijn 2008, p. 314; Australian Public Service Commission 2007, p. 14; Bentley & Wilsdon 2003, p. 26). The literature highlights that governments are reluctant

to treat communities as complex adaptive systems (Mulgan 2001, p. 1). This reluctance is due to government challenges which are more easily met when there are clear relationships between cause and effect, such as time pressures for making government policy and the requirement of governments for simplicity, repetition, clarity, and accountability (Mulgan 2001).

## The model

The model reasoned during the research project took as its starting point the need to take a complex adaptive systems approach to improving the interactions and working relationships between graduates, governments, street level workers and other community members, and the need to address the reluctance of governments to treat communities as complex adaptive systems. Duit and Galaz (2008, p. 319) and Moobela (2005, p. 35) suggest that in order for governments to be able to take a complex adaptive systems approach to community problem-solving, government systems need to have the ability to balance unplanned exploration and planned exploitation. Given this insight, the model focused on: treating communities as complex adaptive systems; balancing government's unplanned exploration of solutions with communities, and their planned exploitation of community knowledge, ideas and innovations; and creating the enabling conditions required for systemic innovation and systemic change.

From a combined analysis of the research project's findings, background information, and the theoretical literature, the model highlights nine focus areas which need to be targeted to create the enabling conditions for systemic innovation and systemic change (Zivkovic 2012). The model takes the view that while a collaborative, holistic and emergent approach is required to address wicked problems, interconnected innovations that have specific characteristics for addressing complicated problems need to be developed at the nine focus areas in order to create the required enabling conditions. The model highlighting these nine focus areas is shown in Figure 2.

Five of the model's identified focus areas and their intervention characteristics centre on where interventions will support communities to unlock their complex adaptive system dynamics (Lichtenstein & Plowman 2009; Snowden & Boone 2007; Surie & Hazy 2006; Goldstein, Hazy & Lichtenstein 2010; Uhl-Bien et al. 2008) and enable the emergence of a new and improved way of working that address the complex social policy problem that is being targeted. These five focus areas are informed by complex systems leadership theories and focus on: creating a disequilibrium state, amplifying action, encouraging self-organisation, stabilising feedback, and enabling information

flows. The characteristics required of interventions at each of these five focus areas are listed in Table 1.

The remaining four focus areas and their intervention characteristics concentrate on enabling government systems to balance unplanned exploration and planned exploitation. Theoretical concepts that inform characteristics at these four focus areas include concepts from complex systems leadership theories (Uhl-Bien et al. 2008, p. 208; Snowden 2008; Surie & Hazy 2006, p. 17), international relations theory (Nye 2004), and public administration theory (Lipsky 1980; Jessop 1998).

Two of these focus areas centre on where interventions can be applied to assist government systems to undertake unplanned exploration of solutions with communities. These occur at the interface between elected governments and adaptive communities, and at the interface between public administrations and adaptive communities. The characteristics required of interventions at these intervention points are listed in Table 2.

The two remaining focus areas centre on where interventions can be applied to assist government systems with the planned exploitation of knowledge, ideas and innovations that emerge from community-led activities. These occur at the interface of adaptive community innovations and elected governments and at the interface of adaptive community innovations and public administrations. The characteristics required of interventions at these intervention points are shown in Table 3.

## The need for further research

While the model has been extensively peer reviewed by experts in the social innovation field, it has a significant limitation in that it has only been applied to a single case study. The model's development and application to the CCB CLP case study is described in a paper that was presented at the 3rd EMES International Research Conference on Social Enterprise, and which was later selected for publication in the EMES Conference Selected Papers Series (Zivkovic 2011). The key theories underpinning the model and the potential utility of the model for governments is described in a paper that was presented at the 4th International Social Innovation Research Conference (Zivkovic 2012). This paper received the Best Overall Paper Award at the conference.

In order to understand the broader potential of the model, it is proposed that a new research project be undertaken that investigates the use of the model as a diagnostic tool for creating the enabling conditions for systemic innovation and systemic change. It is argued that this project should be driven by local government, given it is recognised that governments should take on this enabling role (Davies et al. 2012, p. 17; Bentley &

Wilsdon 2003, p. 26) and that local government is recognised as the level of government closest to the community (United Nations 1992, p. 285). The project's research question could take the form recommended by Grint (2005, p. 1473): a broad overarching question that focuses the community on developing a strategy to address a wicked

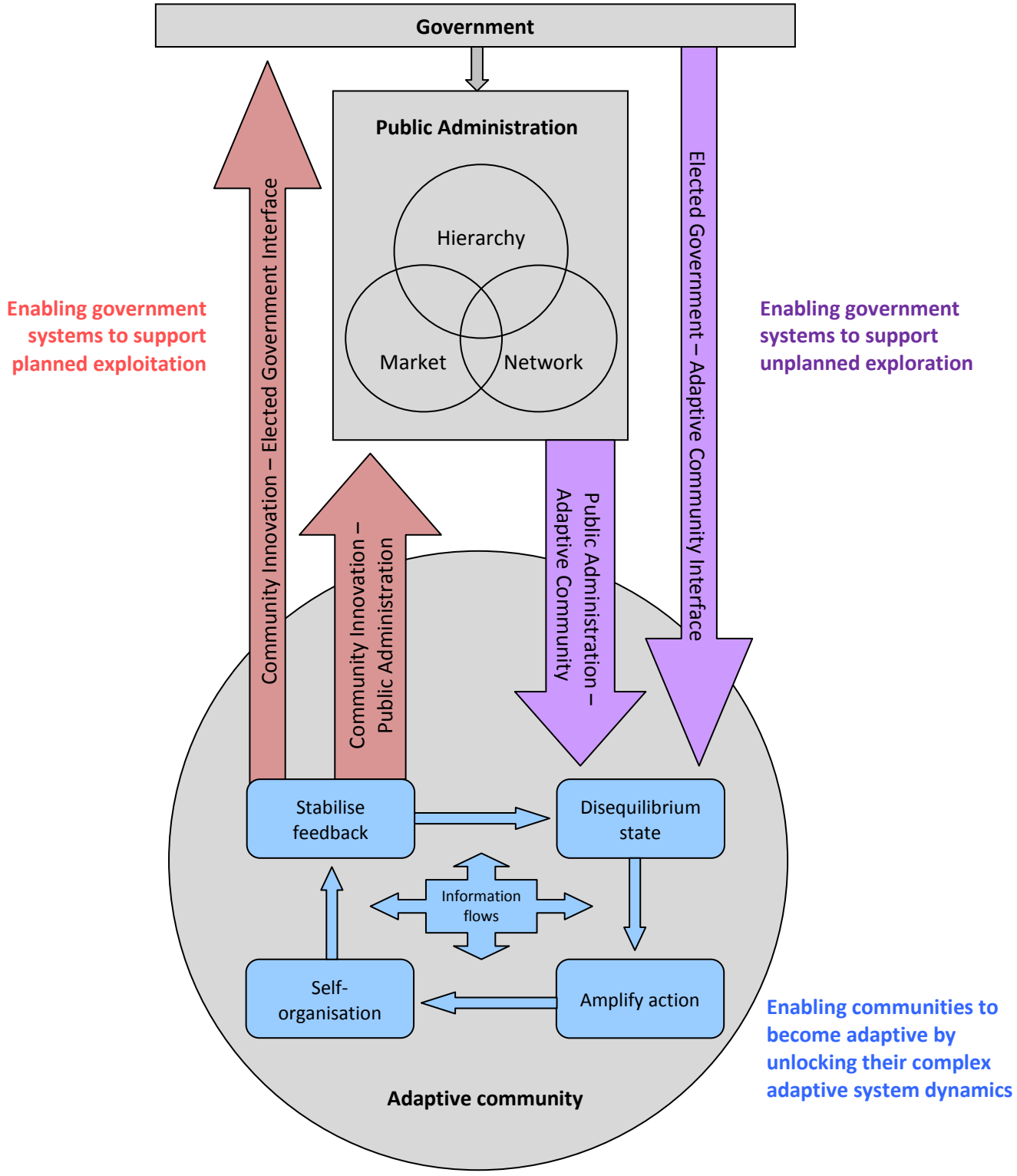


**Fig. 2.** Model to enable systemic innovation and systemic change

**Tab. 1.** Characteristics of interventions for unlocking complex adaptive system dynamics

| Unlock complex adaptive system dynamics | |
|---|---|
| **Focus area** | **Intervention characteristics** |
| Create a disequilibrium state | • highlight the need to organise communities differently<br>• cultivate a passion for action<br>• manage initial starting conditions<br>• specify goals in advance<br>• establish appropriate boundaries<br>• embrace uncertainty<br>• surface conflict<br>• create controversy |
| Amplify action | • enable safe fail experimentation<br>• enable rich interactions in relational spaces<br>• support collective action<br>• partition the system<br>• establish network linkages<br>• frame issues to match diverse perspectives |
| Encourage self-organisation | • create correlation through language and symbols<br>• encourage individuals to accept positions as role models for the change effort<br>• enable periodic information exchanges between partitioned subsystems<br>• enable resources and capabilities to recombine |
| Stabilise feedback | • integrate local constraints<br>• provide a multiple perspective context and system structure<br>• enable problem representations to anchor in the community<br>• enable emergent outcomes to be monitored |
| Enable information flows | • assist system members to keep informed and knowledgeable of forces influencing their community system<br>• assist in the connection, dissemination and processing of information<br>• enable connectivity between people who have different perspectives on community issues<br>• retain and reuse knowledge and ideas generated through interactions. |

*Source: Lichtenstein & Plowman 2009; Snowden & Boone 2007; Surie & Hazy 2006; Goldstein, Hazy & Lichtenstein 2010; Uhl-Bien et al. 2008.*

**Tab. 2.** Characteristics of interventions for undertaking unplanned exploration

| Unplanned exploration of solutions with communities | |
|---|---|
| **Focus area** | **Intervention characteristics** |
| Public administration – adaptive community interface | • assist public administrators to frame policies in a manner which enables community adaptation of policies<br>• remove information differences to enable the ideas and views of citizens to align to the challenges being addressed by governments<br>• encourage and assist street level workers to take into account the ideas and views of citizens |
| Elected government – adaptive community interface | • assist elected members to frame policies in a manner which enables community adaptation of policies<br>• assist elected members to take into account the ideas and views of citizens. |

*Source: Uhl-Bien et al. 2008, p. 208; Snowden 2008; Surie & Hazy 2006, p. 17; Nye 2004; Lipsky 1980; Jessop 1998.*

problem the community faces, and that enables the community to utilise its existing resources and its collective intelligence. The strategy could then be developed by identifying existing community interventions that align to the model's nine focus areas and associated characteristics, and by developing new interventions for the focus areas where there are not sufficient interventions that have the required characteristics.

**Tab. 3.** Characteristics of interventions for undertaking planned exploitation

| Planned exploitation of community knowledge, ideas and innovations | |
|---|---|
| **Focus Area** | **Intervention characteristics** |
| Community innovation – public administration interface | • encourage and assist street level workers to exploit the knowledge, ideas and innovations of citizens<br>• bridge community-led activities and projects to the strategic plans of governments<br>• gather, retain and reuse community knowledge and ideas in other contexts |
| Community innovation – elected government interface | • encourage and assist elected members to exploit the knowledge, ideas and innovations of citizens<br>• collect, analyse, synthesise, reconfigure, manage and represent community information that is relevant to the electorate or area of portfolio responsibility of elected members. |

*Source: Uhl-Bien et al. 2008, p. 208; Snowden 2008; Surie & Hazy 2006, p. 17; Lipsky 1980; Jessop 1998.*

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that local government needs to take a systemic approach when addressing wicked problems and describes a model which has the potential to assist local governments to take such an approach. This model supports a range of approaches being promoted for addressing wicked problems including: Kania and Kramer's (2011, p. 38) collective impact approach, the Australian Public Service Commission's (2007, p. 14) collaborative and holistic problem-solving approach, and Social Innovation Europe's systemic innovation approach. In order to understand the model's potential to be used as a diagnostic tool that assists local government to facilitate systemic innovation and systemic change in their communities, further testing of the model is required.

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# Research analysts at the City of Boroondara: the many hats

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**Abstract.** Local government is the tier of government that works most closely with the community it serves. A sound understanding of the local community is critical to local governments in the development of relevant and responsive strategies, plans and policies. The range of data sources available to facilitate such understanding is immense, and council departments benefit from access to timely analysis of relevant data to inform their work. The City of Boroondara's Social Planning Unit employs two research analysts who act as a central resource for council; identifying, collecting and analysing data about the community. The information is then disseminated in a variety of formats throughout Council and to the community. This paper provides details of five projects which highlight the work of the City of Boroondara's research analysts and outlines how their work is applied by Council staff and the community. It also highlights the range of research requests that make up the officers' day to day work, and how these inform strategic planning and service delivery. Lastly, the paper makes comment on how the location of the research analysts in the Community Development Directorate offers a unique opportunity to inform policy across the organisation. It is hoped that the information contained in this paper will promote ideas about the dissemination and application of readily available data sources among local government staff, councillors and the community.

## Aim

This paper presents examples of projects undertaken by the research analysts at the City of Boroondara including, in some cases, lessons learned from these projects. The paper is aimed at promoting ideas about how socio-demographic data might be used by officers in other Councils.

## Background

The City of Boroondara is comprised of 12 inner eastern suburbs of Melbourne and covers an area of 60 square kilometres. The municipality is home to an estimated

167,977 people (ABS 2013a). Population features vary considerably across the municipality, notably in terms of the prevalent age and cultural groups.

The City of Boroondara employs two research analysts (1.8 EFT). Both work within the Social Planning Unit of the Community Planning and Development Department, which has a diverse assortment of responsibilities that include:

- policy, plan, and strategy development (health, cultural diversity, access and inclusion, gaming, Indigenous culture and heritage, and social housing)
- administering the Annual Community Development Grants Program
- managing the Boroondara Volunteer Resource Centre
- supporting Boroondara's ten neighbourhood houses
- advocacy on a range of issues such as community safety, family violence and affordable housing
- providing skills development and networking opportunities to the local community sector.

The City of Boroondara employs approximately 1,000 staff working in 23 departments in four directorates. The research analysts work within the Community Development Directorate, which is focussed generally on policy development and external program and service provision (rather than internal service provision). The location of Boroondara's research analysts in relation to the Community Development Directorate is depicted in Figure 1.

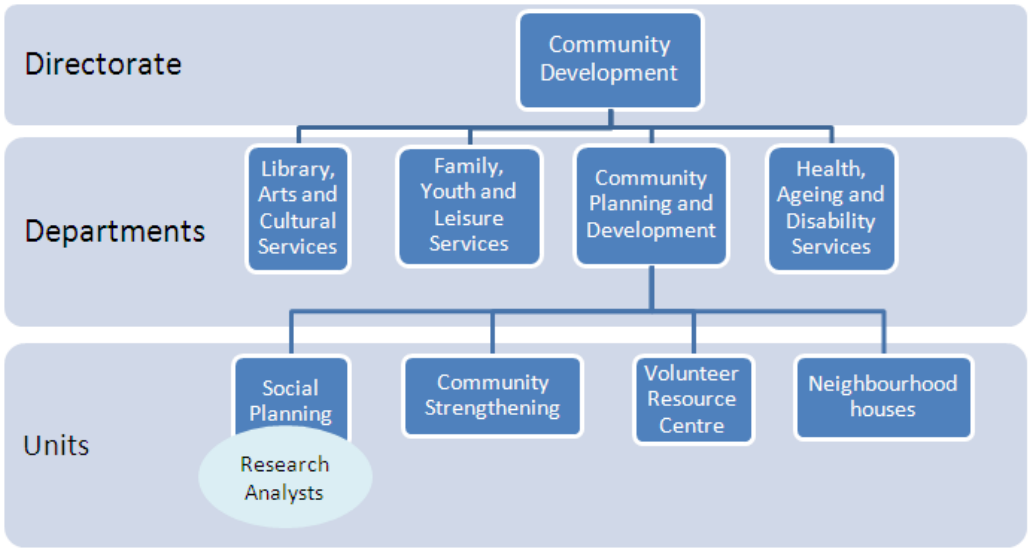


**Fig. 1**. Location of research analysts within the Community Development Directorate

The research analysts' primary responsibilities are:

- the collection and analysis of social, health and demographic data, to assist the planning, policy development and service delivery functions of Council departments
- the provision of advice on appropriate research and evaluation techniques, including survey design and results analysis
- the management of Council's online demographic profile and population forecast tools (produced by .id Consulting)
- the maintenance and ongoing improvement of the Boroondara Social Profile (a publicly available online compilation of social, health and demographic data pertaining to the Boroondara community), Boroondara's Community Services and Facilities Database (a listing which encompasses 47 service and facility categories and can be used to assist in the identification of service gaps), and the Community Information Clearinghouse (see section 'Projects and informing policy').

Information dissemination is achieved partly through 'request work', whereby Council staff request information about the local community or advice on research projects. Requests from residents or community groups are also accommodated, but tend to be more limited in scope.

Through performing the functions described above, the research analysts act as a central resource for the rest of Council and the community. Their work serves to enhance the quality of the evidence base for Council activities and helps to ensure the consistency of the socio-demographic data being used across Council projects.

The research analysts act to build Council staff's capacity to apply readily accessible information sources such as the .id Profile,[1] but many projects require complex analyses, the combination of a range of data sources, and a thorough understanding of the strengths and limitations of each source. Maintaining research analyst capacity within Council serves to reduce Council's reliance on external consultants for research and data analysis activities and means that research capabilities are built alongside knowledge of the organisation and the local community.

The location of the research analysts within the Community Development Directorate provides important opportunities for collaboration. The Community Development Directorate includes several working units that are responsible for focussing on the needs of a particular demographic segment of the community, for example older residents, or

[1] See <http://profile.id.com.au/boroondara/home>.

families with young children. Data sources like the Census of Population and Housing and population forecasts can be powerful tools for appropriately targeting initiatives that are aimed at a population subgroup and for identifying emerging trends and issues that are important for responsive policy and service development.

## Promotion and capacity building

Promoting the availability and potential uses of socio-demographic data across Council has become a core part of the research analysts' role. The research analysts are familiar with a range of data sources that can be valuable to many different Council departments and, as such, they serve as a central resource for the collation and dissemination of this information.

Internal promotion of the request work services offered by the research analysts is crucial to ensuring that Council is able to capitalise fully on their role. Promoting their services also assists to raise the status of the work performed by the research analysts, which often feeds into large and high-profile projects but is rarely presented in standalone form. The large projects to which the research analysts have contributed include the Boroondara Activity Centres Strategy[2] and the Draft Boroondara Open Space Strategy.[3]

Some socio-demographic and health data is readily available online and designed to be interpretable by an audience with limited background knowledge of the data source or of statistics. The promotion activities described in this paper incorporate a component of capacity building to assist staff access and apply such data.

### Promotion activities

The *Know Your Community* newsletter and the Social Planning Unit road show are ongoing initiatives aimed at promoting the research analysts' services and at staff capacity building.

The *Know Your Community* newsletter (Figure 2) is published biannually and produced entirely by the research analysts. The newsletter is limited to a double-sided A4 page and typically includes three or four articles and two regular features. Articles are always locally focussed and usually highlight a newly released data source, providing basic methodological information and highlighting some key results. Wherever possible, website addresses are provided to enable readers to further explore the data sources

[2] See <http://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/your_council/building-planning/strategic-planning/plans/acs>.
[3] See <http://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/your_council/building-planning/strategic-planning/plans/open-space-strategy>.

described. The newsletter always begins by providing the research analysts' contact details.

The newsletter is circulated via email to Council's Senior Management Group, Team Leaders and Coordinators. A version of the newsletter is also posted on the Council website and sent to a network of local community groups and service providers.

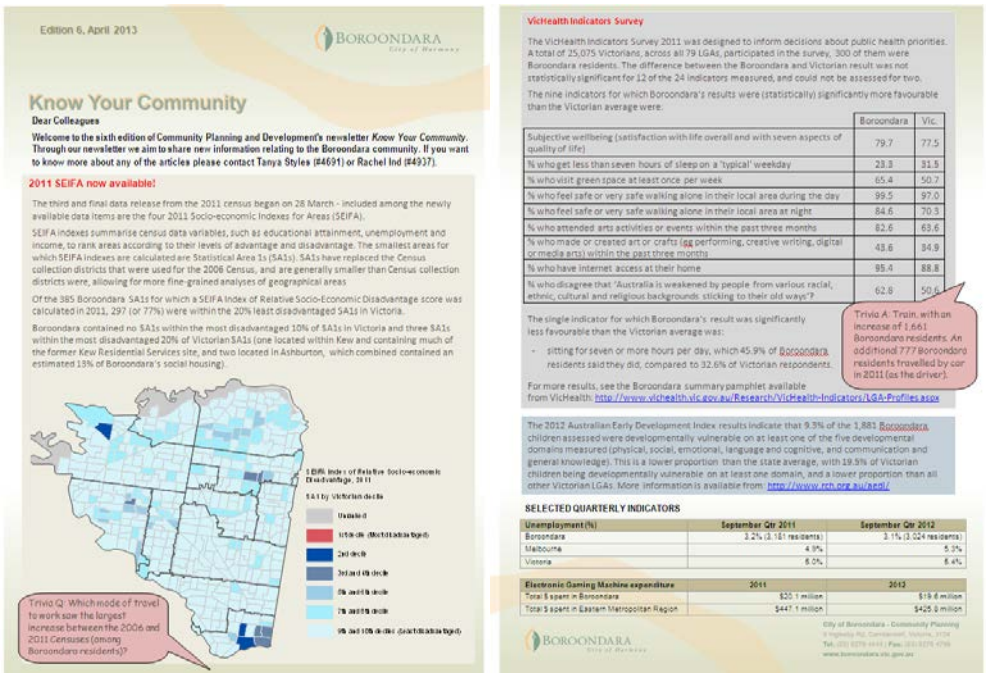


**Fig. 2.** The April 2013 edition of *Know Your Community*

The Social Planning Unit road show is a program of team visiting. A full list of the City of Boroondara's policies, plans and strategies was used to identify work units with which the research analysts did not already have strong links. Arrangements are made with coordinators or team leaders for a research analyst to attend a team meeting to deliver a presentation outlining freely available data sources that staff can access themselves, and on the request work service offered.

The presentations are customised to reflect the foci of the respective work unit, but in each case are aimed at capacity building as well as promotion. Data sources covered in all presentations include:

- the City of Boroondara's online population profile tool (produced by .id Consulting)
- the City of Boroondara's online population forecast tool (produced by .id Consulting)

- the City of Boroondara's Community Information Clearinghouse (see section 'Projects and informing policy')
- the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Census website.

### Promotion outcomes

The *Know Your Community* newsletter and Social Planning Unit road show have not been formally evaluated. Since these promotion projects commenced in 2010, the number of request work projects completed has increased considerably. For example, in 2011-12 the research analysts completed 176 requests (the majority of which took between 30 minutes to four hours to complete). The 2011-12 figure represented an increase of 90% over 2009-10 in the number of requests completed (the research analysts having become victims of their own popularity!)

The increase in requests arguably reflects an increase in the awareness of socio-demographic data and its uses in guiding the work of Council. As well as the various promotion activities undertaken, staff are aware that Boroondara councillors value evidence-informed recommendations. The observed increase in request work projects may also partially reflect a shifting of work to the research analysts from other officers, which may have efficiency benefits.

## Projects and informing policy

### The Community Information Clearinghouse

The Community Information Clearinghouse is a central point from which Council staff can access information about the local community. The Clearinghouse is designed to be the first place Council officers look when planning a research project or conducting policy background investigations. It is aimed at minimising the time that Council staff have to spend in identifying and gaining access to documents for such purposes, preventing the duplication of research, and promoting the sharing of information across departments.

#### *Clearinghouse activities*

The Community Information Clearinghouse was developed in early 2011 in consultation with staff in several departments who are now responsible for the ongoing contribution of content relevant to their area of work. Launched in August 2011, the Clearinghouse provides access to Council policies, strategies and research reports, as well as key policy documents, research, and guidelines published by other local governments, local government bodies, non-government organisations, peak bodies and

the Victorian and Australian Governments. The Clearinghouse originally covered six topic areas:

- early years
- youth
- older age
- disability
- cultural and linguistic diversity
- service research (for example community satisfaction surveys).

The Community Information Clearinghouse is accessible to Council staff via the intranet. The user first selects the topic of interest from the Clearinghouse home page, and then the type of document of interest (for example Council documents, or other policies, strategies and frameworks). Once an item of interest has been located, the user is presented with an abstract which enables them to decide whether or not to download the associated document.

### *Community Information Clearinghouse review*

The Clearinghouse was reviewed approximately six months after it was first introduced. Based on the results of a staff survey, as well as informal staff feedback, two additional topic categories were added to the Clearinghouse (‘housing’ and ‘Indigenous’). Future work will focus on:

- increased promotion of the Clearinghouse
- facilitating ongoing contributions
- adopting an auditing process to enhance user confidence in the currency of the content
- simplifying the access process (that is, removing the ‘type of document’ level so that all titles within a topic area can be viewed at once).

## A funding application

Council provides funding for a range of services and agencies. In 2013, Council prepared a joint funding submission to the Victorian Government with one of the agencies.

### *Funding application activities*

The City of Boroondara supplemented the funding submission with detailed data about disadvantage in the precinct in which the agency is located. This data strengthened

the demonstration of need for funding by highlighting the presence of disadvantage in what is, generally speaking, an affluent precinct.

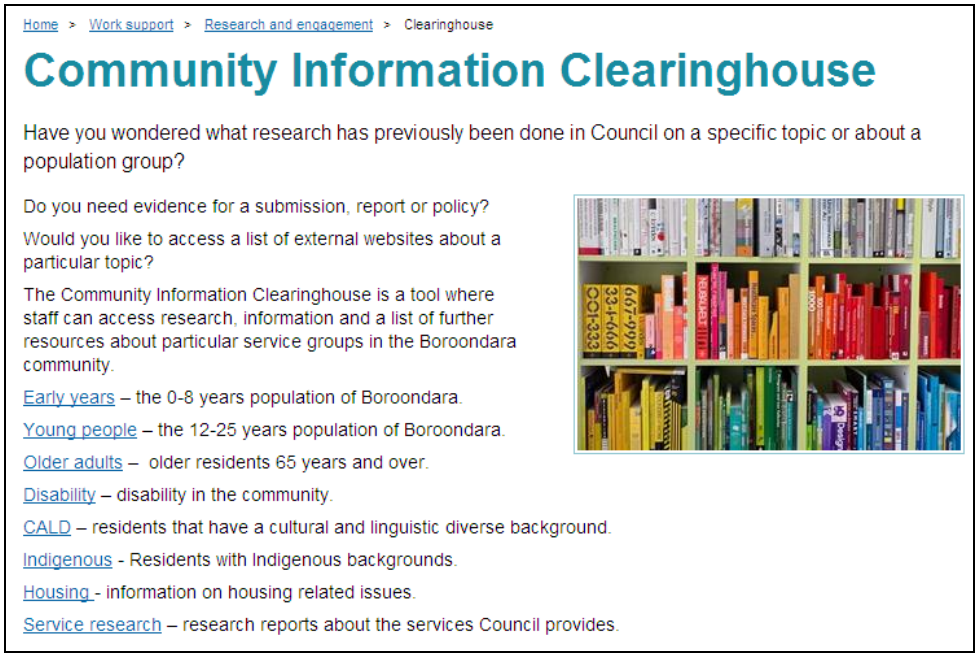


**Fig. 3**. The home page of the Community Information Clearinghouse

The precinct is characterised by a high concentration of tertiary students, including international students, and it also contains a substantial proportion of Boroondara's social housing. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) data (ABS 2013b, ABS 2013c) was used to highlight concentrations of economic disadvantage in parts of the precinct. Geographic information systems (GIS) software was used to depict the SEIFA data with maps and demonstrate the apparent correlation between economic disadvantage and the location of student residences and social housing. The characteristics of residents of the most economically disadvantaged areas within the precinct (depicted in red and dark blue in Figure 4) were examined, to reveal that a high proportion (24%) were relatively recent arrivals (less than six years) to Australia.

The high concentration of social housing in the precinct of interest (which, for example, contains 40% of Boroondara's known rooming house beds but only 22% of Boroondara's population) compared to much of the rest of the municipality was demonstrated using Census data and Council's rooming house register. Lastly, the large number of overseas students attending tertiary campuses in the precinct was highlighted using published enrolment statistics.

## 2011 rooming house survey

The City of Boroondara is, as noted, generally speaking an affluent area and was highest ranked of all Victorian local government areas on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (ABS 2013d). Nonetheless, Boroondara has scattered disadvantage as well as pockets of disadvantage, the latter often associated with tertiary student residences and/or social housing.

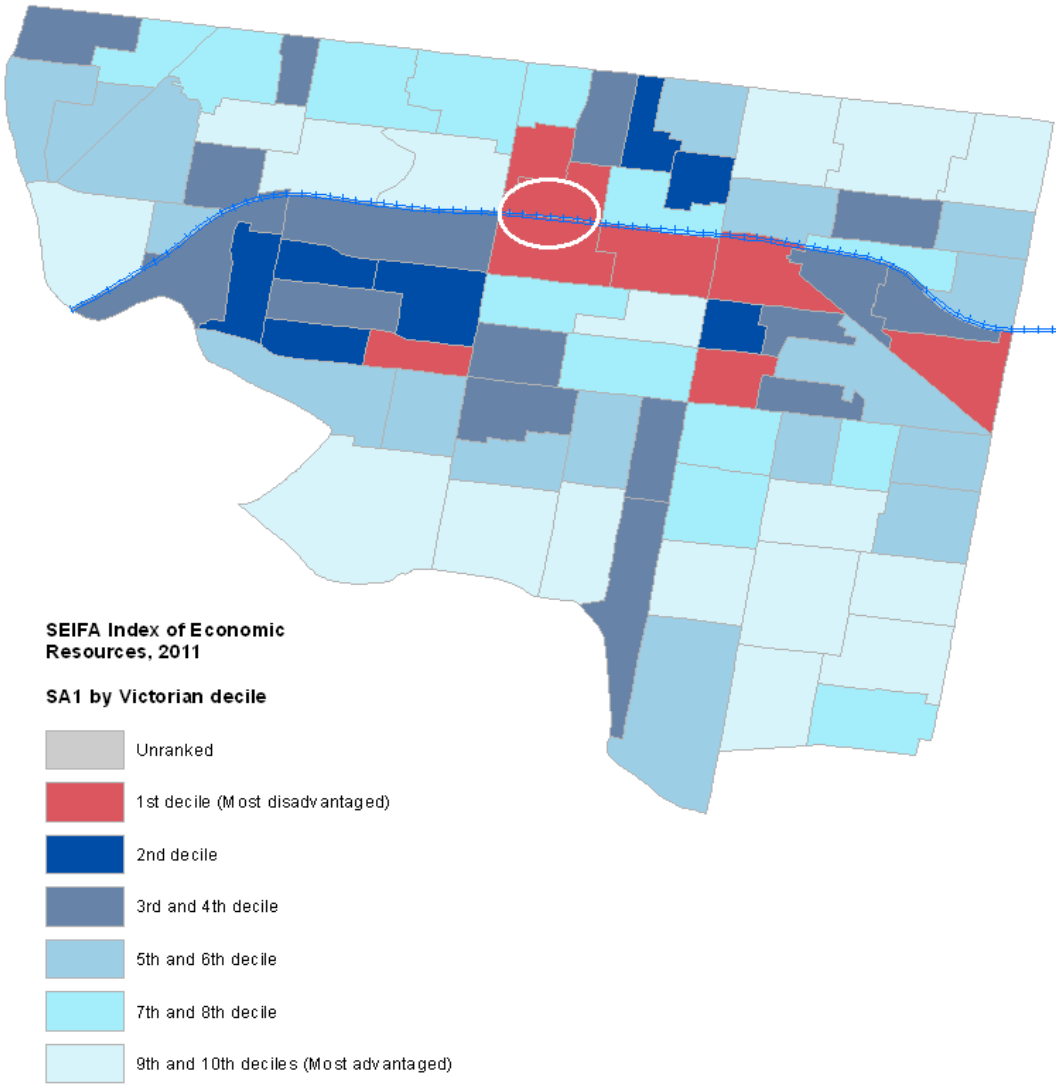


**Fig. 4.** 2011 SEIFA Index of Economic Resources, re-opened neighbourhood house precinct (university campus circled in white)

The more that is known about residents who are experiencing disadvantage, the easier it is for Council and other local services to provide appropriate support. Anecdotal evidence suggested that a shift had occurred in the demographic makeup of rooming house residents with a greater proportion being tertiary students and/or single women

with children. The 2011 Rooming House Survey was aimed at collecting information about the operation of, and tenants living in, known rooming houses in the City of Boroondara.

*Rooming house survey activities*

The survey was developed by a research analyst and social planning officer in consultation with internal and external stakeholders, and included questions about the demographic characteristics of rooming house residents, referral sources and rental fees. An effort was made to ensure that the survey assisted Council to build a relationship with rooming house operators, rather than appearing to be a regulatory activity. To this end, the survey included:

- an offer of further information on the Boroondara Registered Rooming House Subsidy, which is offered by Council to private rooming house operators for one-off safety and wellbeing projects, equipment purchases and ongoing maintenance
- a reminder about the biannual rooming house lunch that is hosted by the Council to provide a forum for discussion about issues relevant to the rooming house accommodation sector in the municipality.

The survey was mailed to all known rooming house operators. Follow-up letters and phone calls where possible, were used to achieve a response rate of 68% (23 rooming houses).

*Rooming house survey outcomes*

The 2011 Rooming House Survey revealed that more than half of the rooming houses surveyed housed students. In more than 40% of the surveyed rooming houses, at least one-in-four residents was female, and at least one-in-three residents was of a non-English speaking background in over 50% of the surveyed rooming houses. A total of 11 rooming house residents were reported as being aged under 15 years.

As a result of experience gained during the conduct of 2011 Rooming House Survey, future Rooming House Surveys will:

- include space for operators to comment on important issues such as mental health, not otherwise covered by survey questions
- include questions about what rental payments cover (e.g. a whole room or just a bed)
- be distributed to ‘de-facto’ rooming houses, such as hotels.

A summary of the results of the 2011 Rooming House Survey was distributed to local housing support services to provide them with evidence of the changing demographic characteristics of rooming house residents. The Rooming House Survey will be repeated in 2013 and the results of the 2011 and 2013 Rooming House Surveys will be used as part of a revised Boroondara Social Housing Plan.

## Small request work projects

Most request work projects are completed by the research analysts within a few hours. The following are four brief examples of the research requests that make up much of the research analysts' day-to-day work.

### *A project to encourage walking*

Boroondara's Principal Pedestrian Network Demonstration Project, currently in its planning phase, is aimed at encouraging local residents to walk rather than drive short trips to the Camberwell Activity Centre. Census data has been used to profile the population living in the immediate vicinity of the Centre, with a focus on older residents and families with school age children. In conjunction with community consultation, the population profile will be used to ensure that the actions implemented throughout the project are tailored to the local community.

### *A grant application*

A number of improvements are being progressively implemented as part of the City of Boroondara's H. A. Smith Reserve Masterplan. Council's Business Development Department applied for funding through the 2012-13 Community Facility Funding Program offered by the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development to build a beginners' skate and BMX playground in the reserve. Information on housing density, school enrolments, and resident populations of children and youth was incorporated into the application to assist in highlighting the need for the playground in the area. The application was successful and the playground, to be completed by the end of 2013, will give primary school aged children the opportunity to learn to ride and skate in a comfortable environment.

### *University of the Third Age (U3A)*

The City of Boroondara has two U3A campuses which provide courses presented by volunteer tutors for people who have retired or are not in full-time work. Demographic profiles and population forecasts for suburbs of particular interest to U3A have been

provided to the Management Committee to assist the organisation with its program planning.

*Prospective business operators*

Boroondara's local economy is based substantially on the service sector, including professional, scientific, financial, education and health services. Council's research analysts have provided demographic profiles to prospective business operators to use in guiding decisions about suitable shop-front locations, and to current business operators to use in guiding decisions about suitable products and programs. For example, a local health studio was provided with population figures by gender, age group, and by language spoken at home (based on the 2011 Census) for residents living within a 500 metre radius (approximately) of the business address.

## Conclusions and future directions

Research analysts working in local government have an opportunity to wear 'many hats'. They can be collators of information in accessible forms, such as the Community Information Clearinghouse. They can assist with data gathering projects which improve understanding of emerging trends within the local community, such as the 2011 Rooming House Survey. They can play a role in securing funding for initiatives that benefit the local community, such as the H. A. Smith Reserve skate and BMX playground. They can help community organisations, like U3A, to obtain a clearer picture of population characteristics and trends that may assist in planning.

At the City of Boroondara, promotion has proven to be an important part of the research analysts' role. Making others within the organisation aware of the data analysis and research advice services offered by the research analysts enables staff across the organisation to consider how their own work might be supported by such assistance. The City of Boroondara's research analysts also promote their work as a means of elevating the importance of evidence-based planning and programming within the organisation and the community.

It is increasingly well recognised that, despite being a generally affluent area, Boroondara includes what have been termed 'pockets' of disadvantage. Council invests substantial time and resources to ensure that the needs of disadvantaged residents in these pockets are not overlooked. The Rooming House Survey and the funding application described in this paper are examples. While continuing this work, the Social Planning Unit, guided by the research analysts, is now embarking on a work program to gain a better understanding of scattered disadvantage within the municipality. That is,

disadvantage that exists outside of the identifiable pockets. This project represents an exciting opportunity for the research analysts to wear perhaps their most important hat, that of learner.

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# *Comparisons are odious*[1]: a practitioner's view of why comparing councils is a flawed concept

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**Abstract.** Recent literature related to aspects of local government has referred extensively to various examples across all states of Australia as well as the United Kingdom and New Zealand, as well as others.[2] Such exploration of ideas (working or not working) elsewhere in the world is to be commended, provided it remains just that – a search for innovation to inform the enhancement of local government. However if it moves into attempts to identify best practice or into benchmarking best practice, such exercises become problematic, principally because of jurisdictional differences, which themselves have been born of a different culture in a different time and with different political and social agenda. This paper demonstrates how benchmarking should be used only in specific cases. The paper also explores the practice of comparing councils and uses a case study to affirm the proposition that comparisons are 'odious'.

## Concepts for measuring organisational performance – benchmarking

Port Stephens Council refers to 'good' practice rather than 'best' practice to indicate an emphasis on the search for innovation to inform opportunities for improvement. This follows the view that 'best' practice is only 'best' for the entity that owns it, and then only until a 'better' practice comes along.

As a local government practitioner charged with establishing valid measurements of performance and reporting to Council and the community, the question of validity of data is an important component of accurate, open and transparent communication. This paper is based on the experience of the author with one Council – Port Stephens in NSW.

[1] With apologies to John Lydgate, *Debate between the horse, goose, and sheep*, circa 1440.
[2] For a good representative sample of such literature, see the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government's recent publications <http://www.acelg.org.au/>.

The concept of benchmarking is predicated on comparing 'apples with apples', which is comparing two or more 'somethings' with like characteristics to draw valid comparative conclusions. Port Stephens Council has confined its benchmarking to *in-process measures* and *results measures*, and then only when a number of checkboxes can be reliably ticked – intra-jurisdictional, similarities in quantum, staff experience, budget availability, for example – to be able to extract value in improving processes using the experience of other councils. Port Stephens Council recently completed a sustainability review of all its service packages and employed the technique of benchmarking processes with other councils to inform improvements. The sustainability review achieved ongoing savings of $2.1 million and further $100,000 in efficiency savings (Port Stephens Council 2012a, p. 9). It is important to stress that this achievement was accomplished not just with benchmarking against what other councils do or how they do it, but with a complex and disciplined approach and framework – it did not just rely on benchmarking.

## Concepts for measuring organisational performance – comparing councils

When not handled well, comparisons are odious and can cause significant damage and misleading conclusions that form a poor platform for decision-making. A study of the *NSW Comparative Information for 2010-2011* with reference to Port Stephens Council demonstrates why comparing councils is an odious practice.

The NSW Division of Local Government (DLG) publish a set of tables under the heading of *Comparative Information on NSW Local Government Councils* which is based on the Australian Classification of Local Government's (ACLG) 22 categories, with the DLG further classifying councils into 11 groups (*Comparative Information of NSW Local Government Councils 2010/11* 2012, p. 11).

It should be noted that the DLG in its Circular to Councils on 8 November 2012 (12-41) indicated that it intends to revise the contents and format of these *Comparative Information on NSW Councils* before the next iteration.[3] For the purposes of this paper the underlying premise that comparing councils is an unreliable exercise – regardless of content and format – still applies.

The DLG placed Port Stephens Council into Group 4, along with 30 other councils.[4]

[3] See NSW DLG 2012. The Local Government Review Panel states that a decision has been taken to replace the Comparative Information (Local Government Independent Review Panel 2013, p. 24).
[4] For the full list of Group 4 councils, see *Comparative Information of NSW Local Government Councils 2010/11* 2012, pp. 14-6.

Figure 1 demonstrates why comparing councils is a flawed concept when Port Stephens is deemed to be validly comparable with Broken Hill in the far west of the State.

**Snapshot of Port Stephens local government area (LGA)**

Port Stephens Council is a local government area in the Hunter Region of New South Wales. The area is 168 km Northeast of Sydney and 25.8 km north of Newcastle.

The area contains prime agricultural land, valuable natural ecosystems and a high level of species diversity. Its waterway system lies at the junction of the Myall River lakes system, Karuah River and the Pacific Ocean. The western half of the area is geographically dominated by the confluence of the Paterson and Williams Rivers with the Hunter River. The eastern portion of the LGA contains the Stockton Bight dune system, which extends for 32 kilometres.

The Council area is bisected and served by the Pacific Highway. The climate is warm year round and cool sea breezes keep the temperature mild in the summer. Port Stephens is a thriving community with great diversity.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Area** | 979 square kilometres |
| **Waterways** | More than 100 square kilometres |
| **Population** | 64,807 – estimated to rise to more than 80,000 by 2031 |
| **Median age** | 42 |
| **Population density** | 66.2 per square kilometre |
| **Labour force** | 28,373 |
| **Unemployment** | 6.2% |
| **Climate** | Mean minimum temperature: 13.7 C<br>Mean maximum temperature: 23.0 C<br>Mean Rainfall: Range 1125.6mm – 1348.9mm |
| **Major population centres** | Tomaree Peninsula, Tilligerry Peninsula, Medowie, Raymond Terrace. |

*Source: Port Stephens Council 2013, pp. 3-4*

The DLG states that this publication is '…designed to help both the community and councils assess the performance of their council across a broad range of activities' (ibid, p. 3).

However, the DLG also makes some qualifying admissions that undermine its stated purpose including:

> It is important to remember that the key performance indicators, when used on their own, do not give the full picture of a council's performance. Although they show the differences between councils across a selection of specific activities, they do not explain why these differences have arisen. The figures are indicators only and conclusions should not be drawn without qualitative assessments being made (ibid).


**Fig. 1.** NSW Group 4 Councils marked in green

The document further states:

> It should be noted however, that the groupings are based on broad demographic variables. As a result, there are often large differences between councils in the same group (ibid, p. 11).
>
> When assessing or comparing the performance of councils, it is important to remember that local circumstances can influence how well a council provides its services. There are often good reasons why it is harder or more costly to provide certain services in some local government areas than in others or why a different mix of services may be delivered. In some cases, councils may have made conscious decisions to provide lower or higher levels of services depending on local needs (ibid, p. 10).

This is arguably an out-dated approach that hasn't kept up with the principles and ideas of Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R), and that the DLG intends to persist with it despite their own recognition that it has flaws raises some questions.

Aside from the DLG's own hesitation as noted above, there is a fundamental flaw in the logic of organising disparate geographical areas (LGAs) into groups then proceeding to compare the organisations that govern them.

Every council is totally unique: each has a different history, population profile, elected officials, culture, staff and organisational structure, asset base and finances. Importantly, local government boundaries are arbitrary constructs, subject to change and not necessarily reflecting shared communities of interest. Within Group 4 a superficial

case could be made for some comparison between councils. For example, both Port Stephens and Kempsey have waterways, ocean and coastal eastern areas and rural hinterland, tourism as an economic driver, with the Pacific Highway passing through both LGAs. However a deeper analysis identifies that the issues they face and how they can resource them are quite different. Port Stephens has been deemed by NSW Treasury as having a 'Moderate' financial sustainability rating and a 'Neutral' outlook (NSW Treasury Corporation 2013, p. 18). That situation is not the same for Kempsey, with ratings of 'Weak' and 'Negative', respectively (NSW Treasury Corporation 2013, p. 17). Port Stephens has a manufacturing sector that is growing, alternative revenue streams,[5] and an asset base that can be rehabilitated over a relatively short period. The NSW Local Government Independent Review Panel has stated that 'Port Stephens council appears likely to remain sustainable in its present form well into the future…' (Local Government Independent Review Panel 2013, p. 52).

The point is that some superficial geographical similarities do not make for valid comparisons of the operations and performance of the councils that govern them. This point can be further demonstrated by the variability that the DLG has admitted exists within groupings of councils (ibid). It is even more complex than just the 'mix of services', it goes to the definition of services. For example, what does 'recreation, culture and leisure services' (ibid, p. 118) mean in Deniliquin compared to Port Stephens? Recognising there is significant disparity between councils, the DLG has reduced the comparison to expenditure per capita, with a note that for some councils this expenditure does not necessarily equate to services provided (ibid).

So the case for comparing councils against each other based on some geographic and/or demographic profile has not been made and the Division's own warnings – together with its stated intent to revise these data – and its cautions throughout the document seemingly support this position.

What about using the Comparative Information to benchmark specific aspects of councils' performance? This is what the Comparative Information purports to do.[6] Yet it is at this level that the Comparative Information is at its most problematic, principally because of the inherent flaws in its design are also compounded by how data are used.

[5] For example, Council is currently accessing revenue from bio-banking, sand extraction, commercial property portfolio, half-share dividends in Newcastle Airport Pty Ltd, commercial enterprises such as Beachside Holiday Parks.

[6] The *Comparative Information of NSW Local Government Councils 2010/11* report (2012, p. 3) states that 'It is designed to help both the community and councils assess the performance of their council across a broad range of activities.'

There appears to be an assumption that everything is generally the same in council groups (services and facilities, etc.)

**Tab. 1.** Per capita expenditure on services related to recreation, leisure and cultural services in Group 4 councils

| | Group 4 Council | $ | Group 4 Council | $ | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hero** | **Dubbo** | **331.94** | Armidale Dumaresq | 172.31 | |
| | Broken Hill | 327.58 | Clarence Valley | 169.59 | |
| | Albury | 263.70 | Great Lakes | 169.36 | |
| | Bathurst Regional | 229.04 | Lithgow | 160.85 | |
| | Byron | 228.88 | Shellharbour | 158.56 | |
| | Deniliquin | 228.87 | Queanbeyan | 155.80 | |
| | Lismore | 224.58 | **Port Stephens** | **149.33** | **Poor Performance** |
| | Mid-Western Regional | 210.41 | Richmond Valley | 146.44 | |
| | Kiama | 208.55 | Goulburn Mulwaree | 145.74 | |
| | Griffith | 203.99 | Greater Taree | 135.41 | |
| | Orange | 197.49 | Bega Valley | 131.70 | |
| | Eurobodalla | 186.72 | Wingecarribee | 125.19 | |
| | **Group average** | **180.38** | Cessnock | 122.69 | |
| | Wagga Wagga | 179.13 | Ballina | 122.55 | |
| | Singleton | 178.85 | **Kempsey** | **109.71** | **Pilloried** |
| | Tamworth Regional | 177.70 | | | |

*Source: Comparative Information of NSW Local Government Councils 2010/11 2012, pp. 121-3.*

The first inherent design flaw is that it uses *averages* (mean) which is poor practice because ‘outliers’ skew the data and hide mediocrity. In each area examined the Comparative Information does provide a median but it is at a State level. Across NSW 152 councils have been grouped by DLG and ACLG into 11 and 22 categories respectively precisely because they are different, making such State median figures largely irrelevant.

Using averages allows an odious comparison to be made, with one council being lauded as a hero because of its perceived effort, whilst others are put in a position to be pilloried for not doing enough. Table 1 below illustrates this effect, using the Comparative Information for ‘Recreation, leisure and cultural services’ category for Group 4.

In this type of data series a better choice would be to use median and a cluster around a ‘typical’ spend emerges, as shown in figure 1 below.

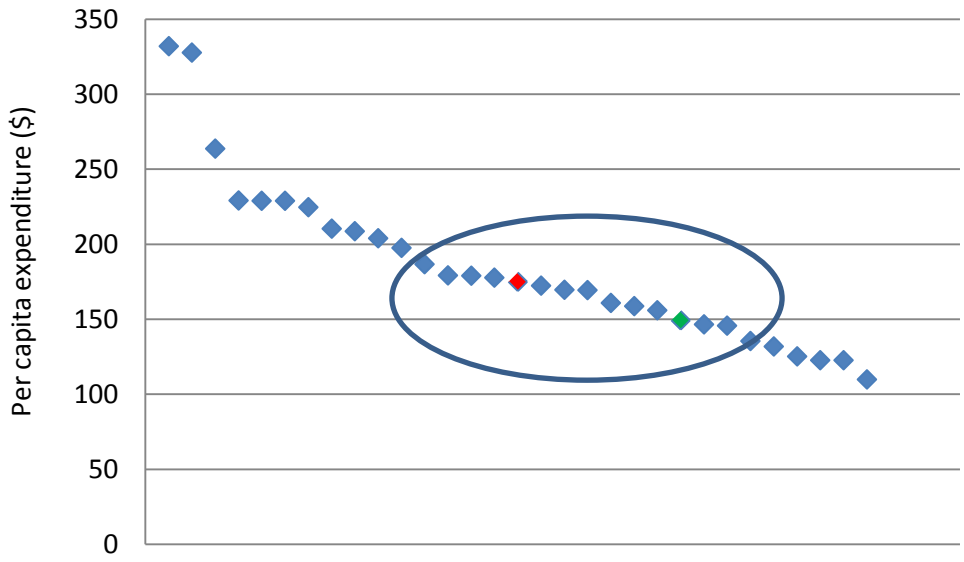


**Fig. 1.** Per capita expenditure on services related to recreation, leisure and cultural services in Group 4 councils. The group average is shown in red. Port Stephens Council’s data point is shown in green.

Using the median might have been a better choice but it is still largely irrelevant because of the second design flaw, lack of *context*. The document itself acknowledges this when indicating that some factors will affect these data for different councils (*Comparative Information of NSW Local Government Councils 2010/11* 2012, p. 18), but does not place these factors against the council’s individual data. So for a community member or a member of the press who has no detailed knowledge of the situation of an individual council, the data are unreliable for reaching conclusions about that council’s performance in any category.

To further illustrate this point using the figures in Table 1, in Group 4 Dubbo Council has the largest rate of per capita spending ($331.94). Dubbo is in the west of the State with a population of 41,763 and population density of 12.20 (ibid, p. 14). It may have any or all of the services in the ‘Recreation, leisure and cultural services’ category – ‘parks, playing fields, swimming pools, beach patrol, tennis courts and multi-purpose recreation facilities, libraries, museums and a number of other cultural facilities’ (ibid, p. 118), although given its location beach patrols are unlikely. Ultimately, one *doesn’t know* what services are provided, what factors compound their costs to provide services, what service levels they have agreed with their community (gold plated or something less) – in

fact, a myriad of intersecting issues mean that Dubbo Council is spending more than other councils in Group 4 in this category.

As well as a statistical design flaw, without context to inform the data the Comparative Information is unreliable to assess a council's performance in an individual category.

These data are also problematic when quoted out of context by time-poor, deadline-driven journalists who are often not in a position to trawl through a 147-page document to identify the pitfalls contained in the way the data are presented and what is lacking. It is easier to grab a headline figure and seek a hero or pillory the performance of a perceived lesser spending council. These data are also a trial for elected officials whose community perceptions contain an assumption that because these are 'official' figures issued by the State, that they are the real story of their council's performance; shifting that perception is very difficult to achieve once 'the genie is out of the bottle'.

Across Australia, local government practitioners need to be aware of, and examine critically all data that purport to provide valid comparisons between councils. As this case study using the *Comparison Information on NSW Local Government Councils 2010-11* data demonstrates, comparisons are odious.

Yet the community (residents and ratepayers) *do* have a right to know how well or how poorly their local council is performing. This right is established in the implied social contract that arises from local elections: 'if you vote for me, I'll do…'

It is also established in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Brisbane Declaration (Department of Communities 2005, p. 2), of which Australia is a signatory:

> Article 13 – Deliberation – when there is sufficient and credible information for dialogue, choice and decisions, and when there is space [for the community] to weigh options, develop common understandings and to appreciate respective roles and responsibilities.

In NSW the IP&R Framework has changed the landscape for local government – the community is now 'driving the train'. They set the agenda – the goals and priorities for their local area for the next 10+ years (*Local Government Act 1993 No 30*, s. 402).

Council and its partner agencies are required to report on progress towards achieving the community's priorities in an 'End of Term Report' (*Local Government Act 1993 No 30*, s. 428(2)) and, more importantly, to regularly report to the community on a council's own progress and performance – 6 monthly and annually (*Local Government Act 1993 No.30*, s. 404(5), 428).

So the whole focus of the Framework is on what the community thinks is important to them. From the survey of the Port Stephens Council Residents' Panel in April 2013,

comparisons with other councils aren't suitable. Residents Panel members were asked to answer the question*:*

> For assessing Council's performance would you prefer to have a report on Council's performance against targets agreed with its community or comparisons with other councils on the same topic e.g. amount spent on leisure and recreation?

The results are as shown in Table 2 below.

**Tab. 2.** Survey Response – Port Stephens Council Residents Panel

| Answer Options | Response count | Response rate (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Report performance against agreed targets | 83.3% | 50 |
| Report comparing councils | 16.7% | 10 |

Comments included:

> I think there are dangers in setting targets based on what is happening in another Council, unless there are relevant and common issues shared between the two entities. (12/4/13)

> No two councils are the same. There is a danger that councils may be measured a success but they are still not providing the components needed for Gross Domestic Happiness. They might for example have a great balance sheet but have failed to maintain roads or develop and maintain important sectors of their economy. (12/4/13)

Of those who did prefer a report comparing councils, some expressed the desire for a combination of the two options.

## Concepts for measuring organisational performance – a community focussed way

At Port Stephens Council, rigorous setting of performance measures that are meaningful to the community still has a way to go. However, Council is increasingly determining measures using the 'Results-Based Accountability' approach originated by Mark Friedman (2009). The diagram (figure 2) illustrates the framework in which Council is moving to measure its performance across key areas of operations, particularly service delivery.

The concept focuses on the 'is anyone better off' question. In Council's operating context, this means that unless something is statutory – that is, required by Council –

then Council needs to examine rigorously if it should still be doing it. It Council adding value or adding cost?

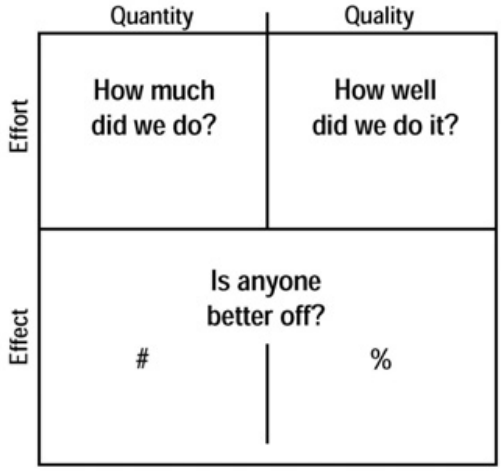


**Fig. 2.** Results based accountability
*Source: Friedman 2009, p. 68*

Of course, Council has to account for the budgets and other resources that are employed to deliver the service – did it do what it said it would do and for how much? And, did service delivery customers think that Council did it well? In many instances customers may in fact agree that Council delivered the service well, but that doesn't mean that it added any value to those customers. There is a subtle difference between customer satisfaction and customer value, as the diagram at figure 3 illustrates.

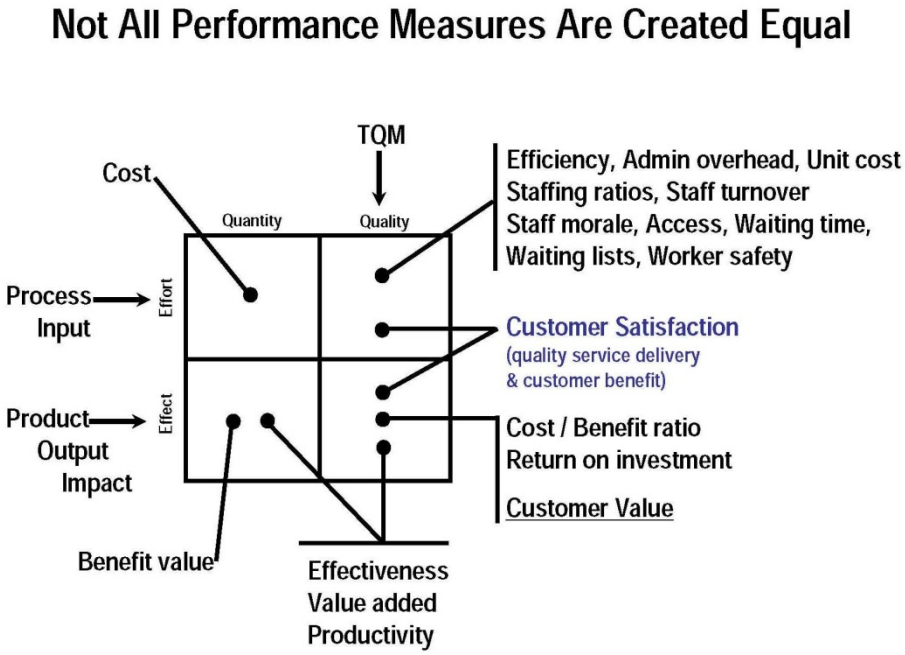


**Fig. 3.** *Not all measures are equal*
*Source: Friedman 2009, p. 73*

Port Stephens Council is moving from just reporting things like budget performance, staff satisfaction or turnover – although these are important and sit in the top quadrant – towards measuring performance against service level agreements with its customers. Council still measures customer satisfaction with the quality of service delivery but it has also moved in this year's customer satisfaction survey to questions that elicit some customer value. For example, in the survey of the long day care service Council asks the reason(s) why the parents need the service, and if it is meeting their needs (i.e. adding value). Of course, the survey also asks questions about the quality of the service (customer satisfaction) as it has done in the past, but the additional dimension of measuring customer value speaks to Council's effectiveness in delivering that service.

Customer satisfaction is important to Port Stephens Council, and customer value is important to the customer.

## Conclusion

Port Stephens Council is by no means an expert at using Results-Based Accountabilitiy to inform its performance measurement, but it has service levels established with its customers and this approach allows Council to measure the performance of the 'contract' with its community. This is where the relationship lies – between council and its community. There is no 'contract' between Port Stephens Council and the other 30 councils in Group 4 or any other council anywhere.

Therefore, if the community is the focus – and the NSW IP&R ledislation mandates that it is – then the only real measure is what the community thinks; is Council adding value or adding cost with little or no benefit? The significant level of community engagement required by the community strategic plan provisions in the NSW Local Government Act means that Council's planning must reflect what its community wants, therefore its performance measurement should be based on that as well.

If communities are okay with Council's performance what does it matter how it is going against an arbitrary group of 'unrelated' councils? This approach removes any need for 'odious comparisons'.

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# Researching with reciprocity? Meaningful participant-based research in a remote Indigenous community context

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**Abstract.** In culturally and geographically mainstream settings, evaluation and research of resident satisfaction with local government performance often relies on quantitative research methods, aimed at efficiently obtaining measurable responses and a statistically significant volume of data. Common tools include surveys conducted by phone-, online- and computer-based tools, with random sampling methods applied. This paper argues that these approaches alone are not suitable in a remote Indigenous community setting, and are likely to produce weak results for analytical purposes.

Based on their research experience between 2009 and 2013 in the Northern Territory's Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shires concerning local government service delivery and community governance issues, the authors recommend some alternative methodologies and tools for participant-based research in remote Indigenous community settings. Both a scale-based survey and open-ended questions were used, applying techniques such as flexible interviewing in culturally safe environments, deliberate strategies to overcome English language barriers, and remuneration for participants. The aim of the application of these methods was not only to obtain statistically reliable survey results and rich qualitative research data, but also to seek a mutually positive, respectful and beneficial experience between the research participants and researchers. This 'researching with reciprocity' approach may prove to be a useful research tool in other social contexts.

## Aims

This paper does not aim to report or analyse the results of participant responses during the research project. Instead, focus is on critically discussing the research theories and methodologies underpinning it.

This paper firstly aims to present an overview of mainstream or common performance measurement methods used in Australia's local government sector, and in particular

resident satisfaction measurement tools. The Victorian Government's state-wide community satisfaction survey on local government services project is treated as a salient example (JWS Research 2012a).

Secondly, this paper seeks to critique these mainstream methods from theoretical and practical perspectives. This will be undertaken by theoretically positioning mainstream performance measurement methods as an artifact of a positivist approach to social research (particularly in assessments of government programs) and discussing the shortcomings of this approach. This critique is furthered by exploration of the practical limitations of mainstream community satisfaction measurement methods in a remote Indigenous community context.

Thirdly, this paper aims to present the experiences of a three-year community satisfaction research project being undertaken in the Northern Territory's local government sector as a theoretical and practical alternative to mainstream approaches. Mixed research methods, incorporating quantitative and qualitative research tools, and informed by constructivist epistemological philosophies on social research are presented as a more robust, ethical and reciprocal approach for the non-Indigenous researcher to apply when working in a remote Indigenous community setting. This approach allows for principles of participant inclusiveness, knowledge sharing, cultural safety and research reciprocity to enter in to the research process. The authors' research experience is also presented as a practical, effective method of community satisfaction research which has integrated positivist and constructivist approaches to research. The final aim of the paper is to offer the authors' research experience as a useful template for community satisfaction research in other social contexts.

## Research setting and methods

### Mainstream methods of community satisfaction research: the Victorian government's community satisfaction survey on local government services

> In meditating on the nature of the moral sciences, one cannot help seeing that, as they are based like physical sciences on the observation of fact, they must follow the same method, acquire a language equally exact and precise, attaining the same degree of certainty (Condorcet [1782] in Hacking 1990, p. 38).

Research into council performance and resident satisfaction is not a new line of inquiry, and has been an ascendant tool of Australian local government management in recent times. Influential intergovernmental forums such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), along with most state governments, have actively encouraged

performance measurement strategies and initiatives in the local government sector (Worthington & Dollery 2007). In Victoria, the State Government's Department of Planning and Community Development has supported implementation of a large-scale community satisfaction survey project (JWS Research 2012a), and similar projects have been pursued in other jurisdictions, for example in South Australia through the Local Government Association and State Government (LGA SA 2009).

Worthington and Dollery link the rise of performance measurement in local government with broader microeconomic reforms throughout the Australian government sectors from the 1980s, and argue that application of performance measurement tools in local government (such as resident satisfaction surveys) have become construed as 'fundamental to any economy concerned with the accountability, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of [public] institutions' (Worthington & Dollery 2007, p. 4).

The annual community satisfaction survey on local government services project, facilitated by the Victorian Government's Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD), is examined here as a salient example of a mainstream approach to resident-focused attitudinal research. Data collection tools include computer-assisted, telephone-based surveys that are iterated across large representative random samples. In slightly amended forms, this survey project has been carried out annually since 2001. Its stated aim is to:

> seek insight into ways to provide improved or more effective service delivery. The survey also provides Councils with a means to fulfill some of their statutory reporting requirements as well as acting as a feedback mechanism to DPCD (JWS Research 2012a, p. 3).

In 2012, there were 29,384 participants surveyed, with each respondent completing a standard and comparable survey questionnaire. In the report on the survey's findings much emphasis is placed on the quantitatively robust methodology used, which resulted in a maximum margin of error of ±0.6 per cent at the 95 per cent confidence level for average results (JWS Research 2012a, p. 7). In empirical terms, this narrow margin of error demonstrates a high level of data reliability and implies the survey information can be meaningfully applied to compare differences in results between councils, geographic areas and sample cohorts.

The Victorian Government's local government survey project exposes both the strengths and weaknesses of positivistic, quantitative-focused social research. On its own terms, the survey provides statistically reliable and valid results, and the researchers are able to determine a relatively narrow sampling error margin. This allows for clear, summarised and authoritative conclusions to be reached from a large volume of data collected. For local government managers and statutory monitoring authorities, these

survey methods and findings indubitably provide meaningful, comparable information on council performance over time alongside areas for improvement.

Conversely, the quasi-clinical, deductive research methods employed in this social research project – iteration, large-scale random sampling, computer-assisted phone interviews, quantitative interpretation of responses – highlight the extractive and acquisitive approach taken in positivist research. In the Victorian Government's local government survey project, the role or position of the researchers is implicitly linked to the benevolent task of 'providing rational insight into improving service delivery' by 'objectively' measuring attitudinal data using a standardised and tightly scripted questionnaire tool (JWS Research 2012a; JWS Research 2012b). Explicit analysis of the researchers' own bias, subjectivity or position of authority that silently frames each stage of the research process and potentially transforms the perspective on the research matter is ignored – irrespective of the research's stated purpose as a monitoring tool by local government management and the regulatory government authority.

This lack of explicit recognition of bias or the limitations of scripted, telephone-based research by the researchers may be justified as outside the scope of the research project and irrelevant to its intended audience. It may also be critiqued as the recurrent and fundamental trappings of a positivist research approach: the researcher is never the subject of scrutiny or critique, and is assumed to hold superior knowledge, oversight and ethical intent. According to the Maori health academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith, research within this mindset becomes:

> …regarded as the domain of experts who have advanced educational qualifications and access to a specialised language and skills… that by definition is developed and supported at a distance from the community (Smith 2012, pp. 127-8).

Political scientist James Scott associates positivist research methods as an extension of modernist ideology, which he defines as a deep-seeded belief in scientific and technical progress, absolute truths and the 'rational' planning of society (Scott 1998, p. 377). The 'rational, objective' researcher and his or her own (re)production of knowledge are a product of this modernist paradigm. Through the 'rational' process of information extraction, summarisation, and standardisation of knowledge, he or she may be promoting the ideal of social order and progress. But this process may also be disallowing alternative sources of knowledge, and discounting the contingent and contestable nature of society (Scott 1998, pp. 88-93; Bevir 2010). The risk in this approach is that it can legitimise social engineering or policy interventions that are informed more deeply by ideology and preconceived, subjective intentions than by a community's own judgement or priorities (Smith 2012, p. 3).

The positivist researchers' rational approach and implicit discounting of alternative, marginal sources of knowledge may be dismissed as unimportant in the case of a state-wide survey of community satisfaction with local government in Victoria. Admittedly, a survey involving tens of thousands of respondents will necessarily lead to a summarisation of information. Arguably, in this example researchers may not be focused on providing discrete narrative space to non-mainstream cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but in finding patterns and convergences.

However, methodological problems emerge if the communities being researched include geographically remote, Indigenous-majority settlements where English is not the first language; contact with mainstream or European culture and government is historically recent and replete with negative encounters; and populations are marginalised from mainstream society in terms of access to resources and services, reflected in poor educational, employment, social and health outcomes. Deep-seeded suspicion of mainstream ideology, cultural practices and intent by government and other outsiders may also be present (Martin 2003; Eckermann et al. 2010; Smith 2012). In this setting, the rational methods employed by positivist social research must be analysed not as a 'common sense' approach, but instead within an epistemologically constructivist approach, as a manifestation of a culturally-laden belief system (Sen 1977a; Sen 1977b; Bryman 2008). The issue of the researcher's position and authority vis-à-vis the research participant becomes paramount (Eckermann et al. 2010; Smith 2012).

Smith explicitly links modernist and positivist (i.e. culturally mainstream) research within an Indigenous cultural context as a form of European imperialism and colonialism, and urges the act of research to be consciously positioned within 'a much larger historical, political and cultural context' (Smith 2012, p. 6). In her words:

> It becomes so taken for granted that many researchers simply assume that they as individuals embody this ideal [of benefitting mankind] and are natural representatives of it when they work with other communities. Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell which not only question the assumed nature of those ideals and the practices that they generate, but also serve to tell an alternative story… (Smith 2012, p. 2)

## An alternative method of community satisfaction research: beyond a measurement-based approach

In 2008, the Northern Territory's local government sector underwent far-reaching and unprecedented reform: 53 councils, mainly remote and with small and Indigenous-majority constituencies, were amalgamated into eight regional shires (Michel et al. 2010; Michel & Taylor 2012).

Structured academic research into community perceptions of this reform of the local government sector seemed pertinent and pressing: community governance and local decision-making structures regarding council services had been rapidly overhauled, official promises and expectations around improved service delivery were high (McAdam 2007), and there were many anecdotal signs that the reform was unpopular (Smith 2008; Central and Northern Land Councils 2009; Henderson 2009). This led to many research questions: How satisfied were residents with local government services and the new shires? What perceived effects would the reform have on community governance? What areas of local government operations could be improved on? Would levels of community satisfaction change over time?

The authors commenced such research by deciding on a theoretical framework that consciously addressed these subjective, culturally loaded questions. On an epistemological level, a positivist approach to research was rejected in favour of a more constructivist approach, which fundamentally recognises that reality is given meaning through social actors, and is developed and communicated through social contexts (Kayrooz & Trevitt 2005; Bryman 2008). This approach allows the researcher's own subjectivity to be drawn into question, as well as exploring what role the participants and their messages should play in shaping the research process. Within this framework, the researcher's role is able to become less about measuring truth and acquiring data from people, and more about a collaborative inquiry with people (Altrichter et al. 2002, p. 130). To this end, the authors attempted to be guided by the principles of an 'action research' methodology, and to respect the principles of cultural safety and Indigenist research (Martin 2003; Eckermann et al. 2010).

The key features of action research methodologies are collaboration, power-sharing, respect, reciprocity, and inductive research. Successful research outcomes are linked to action and change, and the process is fundamentally cyclical and continual, allowing for constant reflection, correction and development (Israel et al. 1998, pp. 178-80; Altrichter et al. 2002, p. 130; Denscombe 2008, p. 123; Taylor et al. 2008, pp. 247-8; Grimes 2011, pp. 16-7). Utmost value is placed on the voices and perspectives of participants, and on participants using the knowledge gained in the evaluation process to find their own solutions or pathways to improvement (McNiff et al. 1996; Brydon-Miller et al. 2003; Kindon et al. 2007).

Cultural safety and Indigenist research methodologies are in many ways an extension of this research framework. Their principles seek to promote Indigenous cultural safety and embed research within Indigenous knowledge by: distinctly privileging the Indigenous voice and Indigenous perspectives; recognising the historical, cultural and social contexts in which an intercultural research project is positioned; and seeking to

minimise power imbalances between the non-Indigenous researcher and the Indigenous research participant (Dodson 1995; Rigney 1997; Dodson 2000; West 2000; Martin 2003; Walter 2005; Arbon 2008; Dudgeon 2008; Eckermann et al. 2010; Ford 2010; Smith 2012). Taking guidance from this methodology was thus an acknowledgement of the ethical issues faced by non-Indigenous researchers working in an Indigenous-majority environment, as flagged by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' (AIATSIS) *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (AIATSIS 2012).

The authors of this paper began in 2009 seeking input and support from local government stakeholders to trial and implement community satisfaction research tools. This period of consultation lasted many months and involved conversations with numerous shire council elected members, local government management staff, and Northern Territory Government officials. As part of this process, efforts were made to critically understand what initiatives and methods for researching community satisfaction in local government was being applied in other jurisdictions. The result of the consultations was the selection of Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shire Councils as the two participating local government bodies. In the trial stages (during 2009 and early 2010), as throughout the entire project, the practical content and structure of the research tools were subject to consultation and amendment from research participants in these two Shires.

More fundamental epistemological and ideological questions about the research methodology and aim of the project were also addressed. Many of these concerned the sensitive and challenging intercultural issues of non-Indigenous researchers working in Indigenous communities. Some Indigenous scholars report of Indigenous people having a low regard of research and their practitioners, and feelings of exploitation by the research process born by experience: Indigenous people have generally been given the subordinate role of research subjects in the process, their communities have often been heavily researched over time, and they are able to claim that little tangible benefits have accrued for them from their involvement (Rigney 1997; Martin 2003; Smith 2012).

The practical considerations for the authors were: If the research aims and methods had first been drafted by outside non-Indigenous researchers, what input would the mainly Indigenous participants and their communities have in development of the research tools? What value, if any, would the research provide to their communities? How would their message be recorded and reported? How would participating communities be able to control or instrumentalise the research findings?

However, another important participant group and target audience for the research findings was senior management in the two Shires. This group has been responsible for

providing in-kind support including travel expenses, and logistical and operational assistance to the research work. Pragmatically, this group is potentially a key facilitator in implementing any changes that may be advocated by community participants during the research process. How could this research project maintain independence over strategic priorities and simultaneously address senior management's information requests?

Faced with these potentially competing interests and the researchers' own research agendas and cultural assumptions, what research methods should the researchers apply, and how should the research tools be designed? Could power imbalances between the non-Indigenous researchers and Indigenous participants be not only acknowledged, but challenged? How could the research project give respect and value to all participants?

The researchers' decision to consciously address these issues and adopt a constructivist methodological approach, guided by the principles of action research and cultural safety and Indigenist research – an approach already used by some academics and practitioners in Indigenous health, law and education research (see for example Dudgeon 2008; Eckermann 2010; Grimes 2011) – had a number of practical implications for how the authors conducted their research. Firstly, it became clear that many of the research methods and approaches applied in, for example, the Victorian Government's local government community satisfaction survey would be unhelpful in the remote Indigenous communities of the Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shires. Due to unreliable household telephone services, English language barriers, and other inhibiting cultural factors, a tightly scripted, telephone-based survey format was discarded as an inappropriate research tool. At the same time, it was not possible to have the evaluation transform into something that was entirely community driven, as the decision to assess the impact of the local government reforms had already been made.

In its place, the researchers decided to conduct all participant-based research in-person with adult participants in their resident communities. The researchers generally spent between two and four days in each community. Participants were interviewed either as individuals or in small groups at the discretion of participants, with emphasis being placed on making the setting as safe and comfortable as possible for participants to feel supported and strong. In most cases, only one researcher was present for each interview, and participation was confidential from Shire managers and, if necessary, from others, requiring researchers to have an awareness and sensitivity to community politics. Accessible and culturally safe locations were chosen for interviews, such as in front of the community store or in an open public area. All participants, however, were given the opportunity to choose the location of the interview to ensure their control over privacy, cultural safety, support, legitimacy and authority. The researcher only

approached participants' private dwellings if invited, and respected community protocols such as approaching, where possible, the 'right' person for permission to proceed with interviews in the community. Further, if a funeral or other cultural ceremony was occurring in a community, or if any other social-political community sentiment emerged that demanded space and privacy the researchers as a rule postponed their visit.

Language interpreters were also allowed for and used to a limited extent. Interestingly, however, most participants (and interpreters) seemed reluctant to use this facility for this particular research project. This observed reluctance may have stemmed from a number of factors, including: the contentious nature of the subject matter (and participants' desire to keep their responses confidential); local political sensitivities; gender, generational and authority differences between participant and interpreter; clan and family divisions; relationships of avoidance; and participants' pride in their English language skills. It may also be that the available language interpreters introduced new relationship complications of which the researchers were not made aware. This can be considered one of the challenges of working in cross-cultural environments: applying an ethic of inclusiveness does not erase the networks of affiliation and enmity that may be present in the social setting being researched.

However, the researchers consciously did not want to discriminate on who participated in the research based on English language fluency. In order to compensate for the lack of language interpreter use, concerted attempts and revisions were made to format and language content of the research tools, with the aim of making them easily comprehensible to most participants. Furthermore, as participants were given control to manage the interview process, many chose group interviews surrounding themselves with supportive family and kinship relations. This had some positive effects on the research: Firstly, if one participant's English language skills were weaker than others in the group, a group interview format allowed peers to effectively interpret and translate that participant's responses.[1] Secondly, it allowed for some participants to participate who might otherwise have not felt comfortable or confident enough being interviewed one-on-one by a non-Indigenous researcher. Thirdly, a group interview format served to subtly alter the power dynamic in the interview: the Indigenous participants were in the majority, and would often shape and direct communication on their own terms. The researchers often experienced groups conducting extended conversations in Indigenous languages before formulating a final response in English.

[1] In certain individual interviews, participants called on other community members outside the interview to translate or validate their responses to the researcher. This can also be interpreted as a positive sign of participants seeking control over the interview process.

Two distinct research tools were applied as components of a mixed-method approach (Bryman 2008, pp. 610-23) (see Appendix 1). The first was a list of approximately 10 open-ended questions that were aimed at exploring participants' perceptions about the Shires, how decision-making in their community had changed due to local government reform, and their perspective on the Shires as a new political institution.[2] Flexibility was adopted with this tool, and Shire Council elected members and staff were invited annually to provide feedback and amendments to the questions, and participants were given the same opportunity during and after the interview process. Emphasis in some of the questions was on being open-ended, allowing participants to raise issues or opinions as they saw fit. For example, one of the opening questions was: 'When you hear the word "shire", what do you think of?' This allowed participants to start with as broad or as narrow a response as desired, and re-create the question according to the participants' own reality and set of priorities. It also set the dynamic of the researcher as listener and the participant as knowledge holder. Some participants even embraced the control of the interview from the outset, and did not wait for questions. Instead, the interview was commenced by instructions on what the participant perceived to be the important issues and information the researcher should know on the topic.

The second research tool was a survey on service delivery, with questions grouped into seven service areas and response options structured by an ordinal scale. In order to promote research validity, comparability and the benefits of iteration, the format and content of this tool has remained standardised and relatively unchanged over the lifetime of the research project. This has enabled opportunities for more statistical-based research enquiries to be undertaken, such as t-test experiments on whether levels of satisfaction with local government services have improved significantly over time since the reform. However, in order to remove any potential abstraction or confusion with the use of a numeric scale, textual tags were used for each of the scale's digits, and the numbers were not mentioned. A score of very bad was interpreted as = 1, bad = 2, OK = 3, good = 4, and very good = 5.[3]

[2] Prior to local government reform in 2008, none of the local government councils in Indigenous-majority, rural-remote regions of the Northern Territory were Shires, and only a few local government bodies had any regional structures or geographic reach. The overwhelming majority of pre-2008 councils in these regions were single-settlement, non-contiguous community councils with populations under 1,000 residents. Therefore, the term 'Shire' was very much a new concept in governance and administrative structure in these local government areas, and represented a distinct break with past models.

[3] Adjustments were made at the time of interview to allow for different socio-linguistic interpretations of the term 'bad', due to a perceived reluctance amongst some participants to use the term. One participant explained that to say something is 'bad' means it is to be feared like a bad and unchangeable spirit. This meaning obviously had different connotations than what the researchers intended in the services survey scale. This problem of divergent meanings was mitigated through the substitution of the terms 'very bad' and 'bad' with 'really not good' or 'not good', which some participants seemed to be much more comfortable using to judge service standards.

The use of a scale-based survey tool was partly a pragmatic decision, based on local government management's appetite for quantifiable data on council performance. However, it opened another more structured pathway for participants to inform the researcher about what services were performing well in their community, and what services needed improving. This tool was also a way to focus discussion on what Shires presently do, elicit information on participants' more immediate and tangible experiences with Shires' operations, and to distinguish between attitudes towards local government services versus the more problematic and contentious issues surrounding community governance. Further, it highlighted where contrasts exist between the Shire and community perceptions, experiences and expectations of Shire services. However, the authors contend that sole use of this survey tool without being coupled with a more exploratory and inductive research tool would have been too deductive to be either a meaningful or a culturally safe and ethical tool in this research setting.

Each interview and survey took between approximately 30 to 60 minutes to conduct, based on the level of detail the participant wanted to communicate. To compensate for the time and information imparted by the participants, the researchers made the decision to remunerate participants $20 per interview. This was a somewhat contentious action, and provoked extra deliberation during the university human research ethics committee's evaluation of the research project based on the committee's concerns that financial compensation of participants may undermine the integrity and reliability of the interview process. However, for ethical and practical considerations, the researchers maintain that participant remuneration has been a sound component of the project's research tools.

On ethical grounds, a small act of financial compensation for participants was intended as an acknowledgement that a professional transaction was taking place. A small financial payment also conveyed the message that the time, information and knowledge imparted by the participant were important, respected and valuable. Over the life of this project, the researchers received some financial recompense and support for their labours. While the researchers could not offer stable income streams for participants, it was considered fair participants should receive a proportionately similar remuneration.

Practically, financial remuneration of participants facilitated a much more effective fieldwork research process than was likely without any remuneration. Little effort or time on behalf of the researchers was needed to recruit participants, and interviews could generally be intensively conducted over the entire course of a working day. This meant that during a two- or three-day visit to a community, a reasonable sample could be collected with minimal difficulty. Arguably, it also lessened the risk of non-sampling error by mitigating non-response bias. In other words, providing financial remuneration

provided a motivation to participate which arguably improved the randomness of sampling and minimised the potential effect of the 'squeaky wheel sampling syndrome', whereby a strongly opinionated minority with time on their hands would be more motivated to participate in the project, skewing results. Conversely, it should be acknowledged that providing financial remuneration for participants may have also created a sampling bias skewed towards a selection of residents motivated by monetary reward. However, despite being conscious of this risk during the research, the researchers did not note any evidence of sampling bias based thereon.

An important final step in the project's research methodology was to report back the results of the research to the affected communities, Shire staff and elected Shire Councils. This occurred through presentations to Council meetings, follow-up meetings with management staff, and, where possible, meetings with local boards or committees in participating communities. The data was presented mainly verbally and through visual presentations, with supporting documentation made available. Further, where appropriate, a short verbal summary of what their peers across the two Shires were saying was given to participants at the conclusion of the interview. This aspect of the project was an important feature in the principles of action research and culturally safe Indigenist research as a cyclical learning process: by providing research participants with a final summary of the information and knowledge gained from the project, it allowed these groups to reflect on and instrumentalise the findings for their own strategic or learning purposes.

## Findings

The authors' overall experience with the tools and methods used in this research project has been positive and productive. In almost all the communities visited, there were no problems with obtaining sufficient consenting participants for the research, and most participants seemed willing and satisfied to generously share their time and opinions. There were few negative comments from participants or community residents received about the research, and most commonly this related to suspicions that nothing would be done with the research and feedback to participants would be lacking. These criticisms may have been partly allayed by the researchers explaining when and where results would be reported back, and that the researchers would visit again in a year's time to follow up with more interviews.

When the research results were reported back to Shire elected officials, management staff or community-based local boards, the audiences were generally very receptive.[4] In certain instances, where findings suggested criticisms, the data was closely scrutinised and the researchers interrogated at length about their findings. Both of the Shire Councils have also (to varying degrees) incorporated the results of the research into their strategic and operational planning. However, some participants' responses to the feedback were critical and pessimistic: many agreed with the veracity of the reported results and findings, but remained frustrated by the lack of a clear plan of action to instrumentalise their information for change, or that the criticisms expressed about the new Shire structure were not being adequately addressed or communicated to the right kinds of audience.

The researchers have also been successful in obtaining reasonably large and detailed participant samples from the two Shire populations. Since 2009, 659 adult residents have participated in the research project, and a further round of interviews in Roper Gulf Shire communities is scheduled for 2013 with a target participant sample of 160. This translates into close to five per cent of the adult population in the Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shires participating annually in this research project (see Table 1). The authors contend that this is a reliable and statistically significant sample of these populations.

Further, these samples were able to be obtained within a relatively short timeframe. As previously stated, the researchers generally only spent two to four days conducting interviews in each community. There was little experience with a lack of availability of consenting participants, and the researchers' work schedule during their community visits was generally intensive and busy.

Conversely, the methods used in this project may be criticised for not adhering strictly to the principles of action research and Indigenist research. David Selener describes the role of research within an Action Research framework as:

> a process through which members of an oppressed group or community identify a problem, collect and analyse information, and act upon the problem in order to find solutions and to promote social and political transformation (quoted in Reason & Bradbury 2006, p. 1).

By this definition, the authors' project fell short of this role. The researchers were, and remain non-Indigenous outsiders. Although participants were able to engage in the research by controlling the content and priorities expressed during interviews, they were not directly involved in setting the research agenda or timeframe, or interpreting and

[4] However, because much of the content was critical and even negative towards the Shires, it was observed that the information did at times cause some vexation and indignation amongst Shire elected leaders and management staff especially.

distributing the findings. Fieldwork visits to participating communities remained relatively fleeting which, considered in isolation, arguably did not support the development of longer-term relationships between researchers and participants.[5] The feedback process was done pragmatically and on occasion within a limited timeframe, and the researchers did not involve themselves in fomenting politically transformational action based on the research findings.[6] It is therefore debatable whether the project participants truly became transformative agents of change through their involvement with the research, or whether they merely played the role of respected informants.

**Tab. 1.** Research Project Adult Participation Rates, 2009–13, Victoria Daly and Roper Gulf Shires.

| **Year 1: 2009-10** | Victoria Daly Shire | Roper Gulf Shire |
|---|---|---|
| Dates | Jan – Apr 2010 | Dec 2009 |
| Communities | 10 | 1 |
| Participant No. | 151 | 26 |

| **Year 2: 2010-11** | Victoria Daly Shire | Roper Gulf Shire |
|---|---|---|
| Dates | Feb 2011 | Dec 2010 – Jul 2011 |
| Communities | 16* | 10 |
| Participant No. | 138 | 174 |

| **Year 3: 2012** | Victoria Daly Shire | Roper Gulf Shire |
|---|---|---|
| Dates | May 2012 | May – Jul 2013 |
| Communities | 16* | 10 |
| Participant No. | 170 | 172 |

| **2011 Census Data** | Victoria Daly Shire | Roper Gulf Shire |
|---|---|---|
| Estimated total adult population (18 years or older)** | 3,612 | 3,898 |
| Estimated total Indigenous population** | 79.2% | 81.8% |

* This includes outstations and homelands.
** Based on 2011 ABS Census data (ABS 2013a; ABS 2013b).

[5] However, the repeated visits over three years by one of the researchers in particular, and the sharing of sometimes intimate and sensitive stories have led to some trust-based and long-term relationships developing beyond the scope of the research project.
[6] For a discussion of the tensions between political action, advocacy and the researcher that is common in action research-inspired projects, see Holcombe (2008).

## Conclusions and recommendations for policy and practice

In our experience, the suite of mixed methods and tools employed in the Victoria Daly / Roper Gulf Shires' community satisfaction research project have proven to be a meaningful strategy for non-Indigenous researchers conducting research with an Indigenous-majority group of participants living in remote and marginalised communities of the Northern Territory. It has also demonstrated a valid, practical and effective alternative to a purely positivist research approach. Reciprocity and respect was sought between the researchers and participants. The information gathered was rich, detailed, and appeared to be genuinely reflective of participants' own perspectives and priorities. The focus on qualitative-based research tools allowed participants to flexibly and comfortably convey their attitudes, and attempted to avoid a dominant non-Indigenous cultural bias in the research. A reliable and statistically significant sample was obtained. And the findings of the research were shared and followed up with participants.

Overall the project has been a positive experience for the researchers and (based on participant feedback) for the participants as well. As a direct result of this project, one of the authors has also become more closely involved with one Aboriginal community development corporation in the Roper Gulf Shire region and is developing a more deeply reciprocal and respectful co-researcher relationship with its members on the topic of governance tensions.

The core recommendation of this paper is that academic and non-academic researchers working in marginalised Indigenous communities should reject a purely positivist research approach as unsuitable, ineffective and even unethical. This is not to say that techniques for 'evidence-based policy', including those of trustworthy review, should be jettisoned. Instead, the (especially non-Indigenous) researcher should be obliged to critically reflect upon their own privileged position in the research process, and what cultural assumptions, political agendas, policy priorities and ideologies they may be inherently supporting. This is especially pertinent in Australia's Indigenous sector, where non-reciprocal, interventionist engagement (however progressive and benevolent its intentions may be) is an established approach to policy development and engagement (Altman & Hinkson 2007; Hunt et al. 2008; Lea 2008; Sullivan 2008; Lea & Pholeros 2010). Linda Tuhiwai Smith challenges all non-Indigenous researchers working with Indigenous people to 'clarify their research aims and think more seriously about effective and ethical ways of carrying out research with indigenous peoples… [and develop] ways of working with indigenous peoples… in an ongoing and mutually beneficial way' (Smith 2012, p. 17).

More broadly, this paper's critique of a positivist research approach recommends that mixed method research, consistent with a constructivist epistemology and a combination of qualitative and quantitative research tools, is generally a more robust and suitable research approach in many other social settings (and not just in remote Indigenous communities). For example, research into community satisfaction and residents' attitudes towards local government may benefit significantly from applying methods and tools beyond high-volume, telephone-based, tightly scripted survey interviews lasting five to ten minutes. The philosopher Baudrillard warns that 'like dreams, statistics are a form of wish fulfilment' (Baudrillard [1987] 1990, p. 147). This should serve as a caveat to researchers who believe measuring equates to understanding, and whose aim is to create statistics from people's ethereal attitudes, opinions and perceptions.

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# Appendix 1. Interview and survey documents

## Introductory questions

1. Which community do you normally live in?
2. Do you know who the councillor(s) is(are) in your shire or ward? What about the mayor?
3. Do you normally vote? Did you vote for someone locally to be a councillor or mayor in the last election? Would you run for council?

## Key questions

4. When you hear the word ‘shire’, what do you think of? What does local government mean to you?
5. What do you think is the role of the shire?
6. Are core local government services (rubbish, local roads, parks and gardens etc.) improving?
7. Do you think that there have been more jobs and training opportunities created in the last 12 months? Do you have a job? Would you like to see more jobs and training? What sort of jobs and training?
8. Do you think that the shire staff are listening to the issues in your community and getting things done?
9. Do you feel like you and your community find out enough about the decisions made by council?
10. Do you feel that you and your community are given enough opportunity to participate in the decisions made by council?
11. Do you have a local board? What do you think it does? Do you know a member of the board or know who the chair is?
12. What would you like to see the shire do for the community?

## End question

13. What is your vision for the future of your community? How would you like to see it in the future?

# Appendix 2. Local government survey framework, 2013

## Topic: services

*Community:* *Group:*

*Completion date:* *Evaluator:*

## Standard interval scale

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Very bad | ☹☹ | 1 |
| Bad | ☹ | 2 |
| OK | 😐 | 3 |
| Good | ☺ | 4 |
| Very good | ☺☺ | 5 |

| Category | Sub-group | Evaluation question | Average score | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Local roads and related infrastructure** | Roads | How good are the local roads inside your community?<br>Could you explain why you feel this way? | | |
| | Drainage | How good is the drainage in your community? (When it rains, does the water stay around a long time?) | | |
| | Street lighting | How good is the street lighting in your community at night? Is there enough? | | |
| | Street signage and traffic safety | How good are the traffic safety and road signs in your community? | | |
| | Pedestrian safety | How good is pedestrian safety? Why? | | |
| **Waste management** | Rubbish removal | How good is the rubbish collection from the bin outside your house? | | |
| | Litter pick-up | How good are the council and community at picking up litter around your community? | | |
| | Landfill | How well is the rubbish dump taken care of? | | |

| Category | Sub-group | Evaluation question | Average score | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Housing repairs and maintenance** | Housing standard | How good is the house you live in? | | |
| | Housing repairs and maintenance | If something in your house is getting old or something is broken, how good is the council at fixing it or putting in a new one? | | |
| | Housing program | Do you think the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program/Housing mob have done a good job? | | |
| | | Did you get a new house or a refurbishment? | | |
| **Parks, reserves and open spaces** | Parks and reserves | How good are the parks and reserves in your community? | | |
| | Playgrounds | How good are the playgrounds in your community? | | |
| | Sports oval | How good is the sports oval? | | |
| **Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP)** | CDEP (delivered in only 6 communities) | How good is CDEP? How could it improve? | | |
| **Animal welfare and control** | Domestic animals | How good is the dog (or cat) control in your community? | | |
| | Feral animals and livestock | How good is the feral animal and livestock control in your community? | | |
| **Other community services** | Sport and recreation | How good are the sport and recreation activities in your community? What could make them better? | | |
| | Night patrol | How good is the night patrol in your community? What could make it better? | | |
| | Youth services | How good is the youth engagement program? What would make it better? | | |
| | Aged care | How good is the aged care service in your community? What could make it better? | | |
| | Child care | How good is the child care service in your community? What could make it better? | | |
| | Library services | How good is the library service in your community? What could make it better? | | |
| | Rapid Intensive Brokerage Support (RIBS) | How good is the RIBS program? What would make it better? | | |
| | Cultural activities | If the council helps out with cultural activities, how good does it help out? What could make it better? | | |
| **Governance** | Local boards | Do you know about the local board? How good is the local board? Are they working? | | |
| **Overall** | Overall | Altogether, how good do you think the shire services are in your community? | | |
| **Other government departments** | Overall | How well do you think the other government departments are doing? | | |

# The lived experience of Insider Action Research in a local government setting

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**Abstract.** Insider Action Research is undertaken by researchers within their own organisation. The researcher is an 'insider', or a complete member of the organisation and not one who joins the organisation temporarily for the purpose of the research. Action research involves cyclical planned interventions or actions, study and review of the actions, then further revised action. This paper describes the lived experience of carrying out Insider Action Research as a senior manager undertaking a PhD in a large rural council in Victoria. Although the insider has access to internal intelligence which can be useful in addressing and solving practical problems in organisations, this approach is not without its difficulties which can arise from the political and personal dimensions of undertaking research within one's own organisation. Challenges arise from the tension between the need to be close to the setting and, at the same time, the need to maintain distance in order to be objective and to be able to stand back, assess and reflect. Ethical challenges and role conflict are some of the dilemmas confronted by the researcher, and in the fast moving life of the organisation, the mental and emotional energy required to work through these dilemmas is considerable. Nonetheless, Insider research can also be rewarding and has the potential to provide an avenue for self-development and self-knowledge.

## Setting the scene

The setting for this research was a large rural local government authority located in Victoria. In 2005-06, Council was not enjoying a good reputation, largely due to some unpopular governance decisions and negative media coverage. As a consequence, the staff appeared to share a siege mentality, with feelings of helplessness, victimisation and defensiveness. In 2007 Council had poor results in every key measure of performance as measured by the Community Satisfaction Survey undertaken by the Victorian Government .

I commenced a research project as part of studies towards a PhD in 2007. By this stage, I had been a senior manager with Council for two years and I was looking to

improve my professional practice and gain a better understanding of local government. Although somewhat naive, there were two things that I wanted to see happen:

1. Improvement in the way Council (as an organisation) was perceived and viewed by the residents and citizens of the shire
2. Mobilisation of the residents, citizens, organisations and agencies of all tiers of government to address the significant health and disadvantage issues of the shire.

The need to be participative underpinned my approach to this research. My intention was to 'involve all relevant parties in actively examining together current action [which they experience as problematic] in order to change and improve it' (Wadsworth 1998). My intention was to be genuinely democratic; with the Council management team acting as the critical reference group, we would examine the issues and seek solutions with all parties involved in the discussions. I had anticipated that the methodology that I would be using would be action research, and I intended that this approach would encompass a participative action research style. However, as the research evolved and I developed an enhanced understanding of methodology through the literature, I realised that it was better described as 'Insider Action Research' with an ethnographic dimension.

The process of Insider Action Research is complex, demanding and unpredictable, with many contradictions, tensions and dilemmas. In a metaphoric sense, it is an organic and dynamic journey. The action research journey can be likened to Alice's journey in 'Alice in Wonderland' (Carroll 1865). It is often a coming of age story and a story of personal growth in a land where frequently there doesn't appear to be much sense or logic.

## What is Insider Action Research?

My research objectives involved developing my skills, gaining understanding and improving aspects of the practices of Council's workforce. I chose action research as the methodology as it provides an explicit link between a systematic enquiry and changes in practice. Changes or improvements are achieved thorough 'cycles of investigation, action, and reflection, while at the same time reporting it in a way that is useful to both to the project in hand and potentially to outsiders' (Costley, Elliott & Gibbs 2010, p. 88). Insider Action Research also has the advantage of providing the researcher with the opportunity to reflect and develop their own practice, providing an added personal dimension to the research for deeper learning and self-development, and to develop real knowledge and insights into the organisation.

As noted, Insider Action Research is undertaken by researchers within their own organisations. It differs from traditional action research where the action researcher and a client collaborate in the diagnosis of a problem and in the development of a solution based on the diagnosis (Bryman 2004; Coghlan 2003). In Insider Action Research, the researcher is an 'insider', or a complete member of the organisation, and not one who joins the organisation temporarily for the purpose of the research.

According to David Coghlan, 'in Insider Action Research the researcher is not only concerned with studying some aspect of the organisation, but with changing it' (2003, p. 456). Insider Action Research also has an ethnographic dimension as the researcher is immersed in a setting, and gathers data through the acts of observing and listening to what is being said within that setting. In this project, there were times where I became more of a participant observer: watching behaviour, listening to conversations, and asking questions with additional data collected through interviews, surveys and the collection of relevant documents.

The Insider Action Research approach provides a number of advantages over the traditional research approach. Firstly, it is valuable because it reflects the experience of practitioners who are complete members of their organisations, and it has the potential to make a unique contribution to organisational research, especially in relation to how they change and how individuals understand and undertake their roles within that environment. It can also be useful in providing deeper understanding of change management and can 'enable the deeper aspects of organisational change to be uncovered and researched' (Coghlan 2003, p. 461).

Secondly, the researcher is immersed in the environment and therefore has relatively open access to the internal environment with regular interaction with the members of the organisation and even potentially an easy passage through the organisation. Bryman discusses the difficulties for researchers in gaining access to groups and closed settings (2004, p. 297), however this is not so difficult for the insider; the ongoing member of the organisation. The insider has access to internal intelligence which can be useful in addressing and solving practical problems in organisations.

## Challenges of this approach

Despite the strengths of Insider Action Research, this approach is not without its difficulties. One of the difficulties of using Insider Action Research as a methodology, particularly for a PhD, is that the often linear structure of a PhD project is generally suited to a more traditional research approach. As Sarah and others have noted, there is a tension between these requirements and 'an action research mindset of emergence where

you start with a “loose idea” that allows for outcomes to unfold and reveal themselves through cycles of action and reflection within a dynamic context’ (Sarah et al. 2002, p. 536). Action research does not necessarily involve the testing of a hypothesis; rather, it allows the researcher to develop knowledge or understanding as part of practice. The need for a nominal beginning and end point in a research project is also limiting in the continuous world of the organisation and the work of the practitioner. As Sarah and others also note, a pragmatic approach is required to accommodate the ‘project mindset’ within an ‘action research’ mindset (Sarah et al. 2002, p. 540). This does not just apply to PhDs, but also to the linear structure of most project plans within organisations.

There are also occasions when there may be an insider-outsider dichotomy in play. As a woman in a male management team, and as a researcher undertaking academic research in a community where education is not highly valued, there were times when I felt like more of an ‘outsider’ than an insider.

Other difficulties can arise from the political and personal dimensions of undertaking action research within one’s own organisation. There are a number of considerations with regard to power shifting within the organisational environment, particularly in a local government setting where there are scarce resources, and a fairly rigid organisational structure with rules and regulations. Changes in personnel and councillors often affect interpersonal alliances, networks and control of knowledge and information. This can lead to uncertainty within rapidly changing environments that ultimately affects the sustainability of the project.

Over the period of this research project, Council employed three different Chief Executive Officers. The members of the management team also experienced a 50% turnover rate during this time. Electoral cycles and political cycles can also affect the sustainability of action research projects. In November 2008, Council elections resulted in three (out of seven) new councillors. This changeover precipitated a change in the dynamics, priorities, and ways of working within Council.

Whilst organisational politics can pose challenges for the Insider Action Researcher, another real challenge results from the tension between the need to be close to the setting and at the same time maintain distance in order to be objective and to be able to stand back, assess, and reflect. The researcher and participants also come to the project with their own preconceived ideas, their own experiences, and world views. This can lead to a range of differing assumptions and sometimes misunderstandings.

Because it is undertaken by insiders, this approach to research therefore needs to be robust. Advocates of this approach, such as Brannick and Coghlan, acknowledge the need for a robust and systematic approach. They assert that it is valid and useful in providing important knowledge about ‘what organisations are really like’ (2007, p. 72).

They go on to contend that the advantages of Insider Action Research include gaining primary access to the organisational system, as well as access to the documentation, data, people and meetings (depending on the research topic and political perception of that topic). They discuss ‘preunderstanding’ of the organisational dynamics and the ‘lived experience’ of the researcher’s own organisation as advantages for the Insider Action Researcher.

## Ethics and ethical challenges

This research project was multidimensional and data was gathered from a range of stakeholders, including local citizens, elected local government representatives, senior executives from Council, work colleagues and other staff. Each stakeholder group posed particular methodological and ethical challenges. In particular, I was conscious that some of these stakeholders may have felt vulnerable.

Insider Action Research confronts particular ethical challenges (Holian 1999; Ferguson 2001; Coghlan 2007). The dilemma most frequently described in the literature is that of role conflict and the ethical issues arising from the difficulty of managing the dual roles of practitioner and researcher. When information is provided by colleagues and other members of the workplace, it may be difficult to ascertain whether it is provided in confidence to the researcher, or the senior manager in the organisation. If it is provided to the senior manager they may be obliged to act on it, particularly if it has the potential to prevent harm to others. There are occasions where this may be avoided by clarifying the role of researcher / practitioner with the person providing the information; however this may not always be possible. There is also the difficulty of maintaining the distinction when recalling this information; was this piece of information provided to the researcher or the senior manager? And what course of action, if any should be undertaken? Detailed notes and the journal entries helped. In the fast moving life of the organisation, the mental and emotional energy required to work through these dilemmas was considerable.

Holian and Brooks (2004) pose a number of ethical questions for consideration by potential insider researchers including the nature and extent of the level of informed consent, the ownership of the data, the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participants or subjects, and the nature and extent of anonymity and confidentiality for individuals and the organisation

I dealt with these issues in this research project by:

1. Informed consent

- Where data were collected through interview or survey, participants could choose to be part of the research project. They were given the opportunity to self-nominate after they had received details of the research project. I also described the project in the Council staff newsletter to create awareness of the research. Information about the project and further requests for volunteer participants were also later distributed via email to employees.
- Information about the project was presented to the management team and Council.
- All participants (staff and councillor interviews, and community surveys) were provided with a copy of the project information statement, and were given the opportunity to ask questions and then asked to sign the consent form.

2. Ownership of the data

    - Most of the organisational data was available in the public domain (e.g. annual reports or council meeting minutes). Other data was aggregated.

3. Relationships

    - Employees who reported directly to me were not included in this study.
    - Participants were asked to forward their nomination to an independent third party – this was intended to avoid any potential for employees to feel compromised and it was anticipated that this would strengthen the validity of the study. The independent third party also checked the willingness of the volunteers to participate and ensured that they felt comfortable.

4. Protection of participants

    - In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for staff members, councillors and other participants.
    - The community survey participants were unrecognised in this research. The surveys were addressed to “the householder” and the addresses were randomly selected from Council’s rates database.

In this project I also encountered a more challenging issue. As Holian and Brooks note, a potential problem for insider research relates to the potential to ‘encounter problems due to unexpected and potentially negative or even dangerous outcomes for organisations and individuals’ (Holian & Brooks 2004). There is the potential for damage to the organisation’s reputation and relationships where information is not handled

sensitively. The findings may also have political consequences and the potential to damage reputations or even end the employment of the researcher by the organisation. In this research project, where there were any ethical questions of this nature, I chose to exclude the discussion of some events and findings in order to protect the organisation and individuals within the organisation from potential identification.

## Research methods

The research methods are the vehicle for delivering a robust research project. Unlike other forms of research, an action approach can rarely be finalised at the outset since 'it is a process through which solutions and insight are generated in an explorative manner'(Williamson 2000, p. 147). There are, however, a number of techniques that can be applied in order to ensure that this type of research can be carried out in a rigorous manner to generate reliable and, to use Kemmis's notion, 'truthful' data (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000).

The following tools were utilised to collect the data:

1. Research Journal

The research journal was a key component of this project and provided four principal functions:

- To record observations. The day to day work of a practitioner–researcher is busy with many things happening, often at the one time. The journal was used to note events, conversations, and various meeting outcomes to assist with recollection.
- As a means of catharsis. The journal was utilised to vent emotions, in particular those of frustration and at times of anger.
- A place to record reflections on action. The journal was utilised to stimulate thinking about experiences based on the actions and decisions of the action research cycle.
- To analyse reflections and to connect with the relevant literature.

2. Interviews

In the qualitative interview, the researcher aims to acquire rich detailed answers (Bryman 2004, p. 320). This objective shaped my approach to the staff interviews conducted as part of this research project. Although there was a set of interview questions, the interviews were semi-structured to gain the perspectives and points of

view of the interviewees. The semi-structured interviews provided insight into what the interviewee saw as relevant and important, and enabled the interviewer to ask new questions and vary the order and, in some cases, the words of the questions.

3. Surveys

I believed that I had a responsibility to be as informed as possible before taking purposeful action. As a consequence, part way through my research I surveyed residents to gain a snapshot of their level of satisfaction with Council services, facilities, staff, and councillor performance. My intention was to use these data to identify specific areas for action. These provided me with a 'taste' of community perception and mostly confirmed what I had already perceived through other avenues of community work.

4. Informal discussion, conversations, and meetings

Throughout the course of the project, informal discussion and conversations were held via phone, email, and face to face at meetings and other forums. This was the ethnographic dimension of the project. I was also a participant observer who observed interaction, listened to conversations, examined documents, and made notes on these impressions and experiences. This was simple and unstructured; there wasn't an observation schedule and in many cases I had no influence over the situation being observed. This approach also provided me with the opportunity to observe and listen in order to inform the planning of any actions and also to gain an appreciation of the effects of any actions. Although I captured some of these events in my notes, I often relied on my memory to record conversations later in my research journal.

## A taste of doing the research

I commenced the data collection phase of my research with a plan to raise awareness of what I was doing within the organisation. This involved a series of presentations, briefing papers and articles in the staff newsletter. It was a busy time of the year with the budget process underway. I was unable to engage either the management team or councillors and they seemed disinterested, offering just a few desultory questions and expressions of good luck. At this stage I felt paralysed by indecision and anxiety, nonetheless I pushed on with the staff and councillor interviews. On reflection, it wasn't the best timing, but one can never know in local government when it is the right time. I also found myself in somewhat of a dilemma: I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself as I had received some derisory comments about 'being an academic', but I needed to promote my research in order to attract participants. This tension between not

wanting to draw negative attention and yet wanting the other managers and the councillors to engage with the research was difficult and challenging, but it was a matter of pride – I couldn't retreat.

I kept going with the data gathering but, at this stage, I could see that I wasn't going to be able to influence the organisational culture as I had planned, and it certainly wasn't the participative process as I originally envisaged. I continued with the interviews over the next two months, and became aware that data from the staff interviews in particular was skewed towards the negative as they were using my project to vent their frustrations and dissatisfaction with their work environment. I encountered another dilemma – as the staff I was interviewing were from other parts of the organisation, it was going to be difficult for me to develop 'actions' in response to what I was learning. I didn't have direct influence in other areas of the organisation and I couldn't raise specific issues with the other managers as they had been related to me in confidence.

I became alarmed and worried about some of the descriptions of perceived intimidation, unprofessional practices, and some cases of poor customer service that were being provided through the interviews. I was feeling conflicted from the tensions arising between passing on the information and the confidentiality of the information being provided. As Holian notes, 'determining and maintaining the boundaries between the roles of senior executive and researcher required constant vigilance', often causing ethical dilemmas (Holian 1993, p. 3). I did eventually act and sought ways of bringing them to the attention of the management team by obliquely referring to some things at our meetings as the opportunities arose. For example, when discussing organisational training needs, I suggested that all employees would benefit from customer service training, not just front line staff. It was in this way that I raised the issues without alluding to my research or the interviews. Sometimes it was successful, and sometimes not.

As I continued with the data collection over the next few months, I also struggled with distinguishing between what was being said in meetings and open conversations, and what I had been told in confidence. The difficulties associated with the role duality of researcher and organisational member is widely discussed in the insider research literature (Ferguson & Ferguson 2001; deGuerre 2002; Coghlan 2003; Bjorkman & Sundgren 2005; Humphrey 2007; Coghlan 2007; Brannick & Coghlan 2007; Moore 2007). I read and reflected on this literature, and as I found solidarity with other researchers who had routinely encountered this duality and other similar dilemmas, I was encouraged to continue my own work.

Over the next few months, I developed ways of dealing with the conflicts inherent in the insider research approach. I decided that the best way of dealing with the duality

dilemma was to become more circumspect and say less until I had the time and space to reflect on the responses and data and develop some objectivity. In other words, I captured it in my journal, but I didn't act on it until I had more time to think about it.

My research was taking place against the backdrop of the usual Council business of councillor briefings and meetings, and the actual business of service delivery and governance. There were times when I had to put the research project on the back burner and focus my energy and time on my work.

Part way through the project I took some time out for serious thinking and reflection. This provided me with the space to objectively consider what I had been doing and how I was going to approach the next stages of the project. Instead of focusing my energies outwardly, I decided to examine my own practice and implement what I had learnt in my own department. I was quietly hoping that, if I was successful, some of these interventions might also be taken up by others across the organisation.

And so, over the next 6 months, it seemed that it was a few steps forward and then a few steps back (and one or two sideways). Overall, there was limited progress in organisational development, but I was able to undertake some actions and interventions on the basis of my research.

## Making sense of the experience and the data

Although Coghlan and Brannick assert that writing is 'the key to synthesis; where things begin to make sense, and meanings form', I found this part to be the most difficult part of the project. I found this process far more arduous and chaotic than that espoused in much of the literature. There were countless times when I lost my way and despaired of ever finding a way to capture the essence of my research. The neat thesis writing cycles described by Coghlan and Brannick (2010, p.142) and Zuber-Skerritt and Fletcher (2007, p. 421) did not reflect my disordered and eclectic experience.

My intention had been to write a chronological account. However, I found it difficult to make sense of the research and write it as a moment by moment narrative when I was still working in the same environment, on the same projects, and with the same people. I had changed; the work-research environment had moved on and was often very different. It was challenging to work in this dynamic, demanding environment whilst having to think and make sense of a completely different place. My workplace had changed over the period of this research project. I was working in a different environment, but I was also looking backwards and trying to make sense of the earlier workplace. Moving from space to space was a struggle as I grappled with the complexity of the different

landscapes. I was frustrated and, in order to deal with this, found myself imposing order on my writing to be able to make some sense of and communicate the work and research.

This research process was also not that of a nicely staged action research project. The actual reality of the workplace contradicts the orderly cycles of action research as described by Cherry (1999, p. 2) and Coghlan and Brannick as a process of 'consciously and deliberately planning, taking action, reflecting and evaluating the action leading to further planning and so on' (2010, p. 5). Although there is discussion of the messiness of this approach in the literature, there is almost no mention of the personal and emotional aspects and their potential effects on the research. In the real workplace, when the researcher is also working with the community, councillors, and other managers, priorities change and the unexpected often occurs to disrupt any planning or planned actions.

Doing action research in one's own organisation is often muddled and convoluted. I was not autonomous and the personal nature of the approach is exacerbated in a country town. No-one can prepare you for the difficulties of research in one's own workplace.

My initial intention was to undertake action research and to write it as well formed cycles of planning, action and evaluation leading to more cycles. However, this was not my experience.

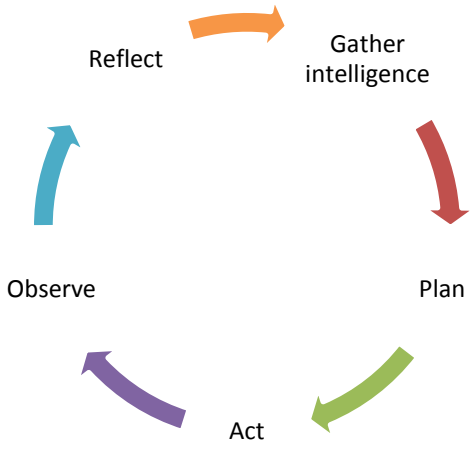


**Fig. 1.** Orderly cycle of action research

I frequently deviated from the standard action research methodology. I therefore did not write a contemporaneous account of the research, but instead worked towards imposing some order on the messy world of practice and selecting strands of related activities and events.

- Strand A described the research process and the dilemmas and emotions when things did not go as planned.

- Strand B dealt with my endeavours to work within a kaleidoscope of disadvantage, with the differing but related lenses of distance, disadvantage (both socio-economic and educational), and demographics (ageing and a shrinking population).
- Strand C focused on the community dimension and relates to my endeavours to improve the way that local government engages, communicates, and works with the community.
- Strand D described the struggle to improve the responsiveness and work practices of local government.
- Strand E focuses on the personal dimension of working as a female senior manager in rural local government.

These strands represented my accounts of activities and events, and were limited in that they represented only one part of the story; one linked segment of the whole. They were one subjective version of events, reflecting my values and understandings. In this manner, I privileged some events over others where they were significant to the research objectives.

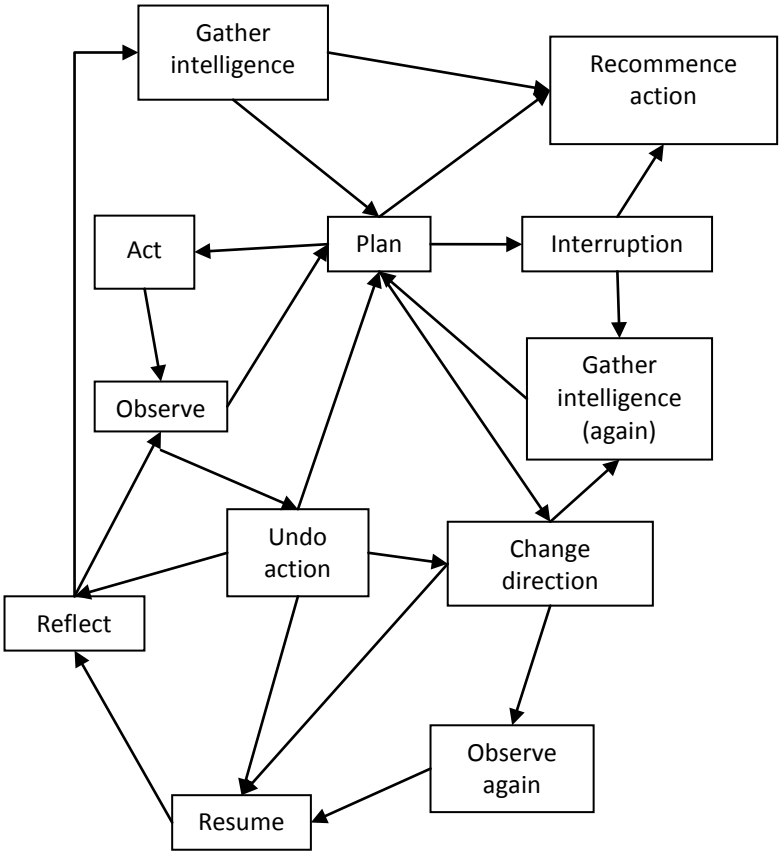


**Fig. 2.** Messy nature of Insider Action Research experience

## Reflections at the end of the journey

Undertaking full time work and study is difficult and exhausting. Undertaking Insider Action Research adds another dimension as it takes an emotional and physical toll as the researcher grapples with the challenges of thinking ‘in layers’ and dealing with the complexities of ‘acting, thinking and doing’ at several levels at once. For example, chairing a meeting, taking notes and thinking from a research perspective, as well as dealing with the meeting’s central purpose is difficult and requires concentration and a great deal of energy. The researcher needs to think: How do I manage and progress this meeting? What is going on here? Is this relative to my research? How can I capture it? What about the ethics and the politics? How can I include this without being seen to criticize an individual or organisation? There are additional tensions due to the need to accurately reflect events, actions and interventions, balanced with the need to protect and disguise individuals, groups, or the organisation.

Moving from the role of researcher back to the role of practitioner is frequently conflicting and confusing and requires great concentration. In some instances, the researcher needs to develop clear strategies to deal with the conflict.

There are often ethical dilemmas throughout the course of an Insider Action Research project. Dealing with information provided ‘in confidence’ that has ramifications from a risk management and/or legal perspective poses significant ethical dilemmas for researchers and can lead to internal conflict, feelings of guilt, and intense worry about the possible outcomes. Dealing with these emotions is also tiring and difficult.

It is important to consider and reflect on the assumptions that underpin the project design and methodology at the outset of the research. (And, of course, this reflection needs to be an integral component of the research process.) How realistic are they? At the outset, I had based my project on the assumption that the management team would undertake a participative style of action learning that would apply to the whole organisation. I made this assumption without discussing it with the team prior to the beginning of the project. It was naïve to assume that I would be able to engage them in a participative action research approach, and consequently, the project didn’t evolve down that path. Instead, I found myself having to redevelop this aspect and focus on the department that I managed. I was undertaking the action research on my own with little engagement or interest shown by the management team. It was a difficult realisation that undermined my self-confidence for a period of time and almost resulted in my withdrawal from the research program.

Insider Action Research, although very challenging, can also be rewarding. The messy nature of action research means that it is often a difficult journey, with the risk

that the researcher may not emerge unscathed from the research (Moore 2007; Humphrey 2007). One of the more stressful and difficult components of this project was the writing of the final product. Organising all the data – the transcripts of the research journal, survey results, and interview notes – was arduous and awkward. Making sense of the data, interpreting it, and extrapolating it to 'a broader context' became time consuming and confidence sapping. There were periods when I felt that I hadn't done enough work for a PhD, or that the outcomes were not significant or important enough. I struggled with the writing as I was trying to protect individuals and the organisation. It is important to allow enough time in the project plan for resolving these issues. I would also advise providing some distance from the workplace, for example taking time off work to enable objectivity and perspective at this stage of the project.

Nonetheless, Insider Action Research has provided an avenue for self-development and self-knowledge. It has enabled me to become a more knowledgeable and skilled practitioner and I have gained a greater understanding of local government. It has provided new information on the practice and experience of working as a manager in the complex and often turbulent environment of local government, and also has arguably provided real benefits for the community. Over the life of this project, a community satisfaction survey indicated a significant improvement in the community perception of Council's community engagement efforts with an increase of 17% of people rating Council's performance as good / excellent or adequate.

Through the project journey I went from an inexperienced and naïve local government manager who felt powerless and was rarely listened to, to acting chief executive officer.

In many cases, the saying by Nietzsche 'that which does not kill us makes us stronger' (1899) also applies to those intrepid explorers undertaking Insider Action Research.

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# Local public broadband – the missing link in Australia's broadband debate?

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**Abstract.** The role of local government in providing public broadband has received little attention in Australian policy debate over broadband futures. The marginal position of the Australian local government sector in broadband debates both understates local initiatives and constrains our understanding of broadband as twenty-first century civic infrastructure. Local authorities provide Australia's public internet safety net through their funding of public internet in local libraries. There is a history of experimentation with local networks in underserved regions. Several city governments, including Adelaide, are investigating public Wi-Fi networks to boost social and economic vitality, and assist with urban management. Yet, Australia lags behind many other countries in providing broadband as a local public good. Drawing on international and Australian developments in local public broadband, this paper analyses rationales, opportunities and constraints for Australian local authorities in this field.

## Introduction

Broadband is described as essential civic infrastructure of the twenty-first century (Greco 2010), yet Australian local authorities have taken few initiatives to provide it as a local public good, similar to physical facilities and community services. This situation contrasts with local initiatives in many other countries. In Europe and North America, for example, city governments are routinely involved in broadband provision, as a freely available public good, through subsidised schemes, or on a fully commercial basis (Broadband Communities 2012; Troulos & Maglaris 2011). Internationally, the involvement of municipal authorities in providing fixed line or wireless broadband within their jurisdictions has been vigorously debated (Hauge et al. 2008). In Australia, the idea that digital inclusion might also include provision of local public broadband has barely registered in national broadband debates.

Signs of change, though, can be seen in the provision of WiFi on public transport (Cities of Brisbane, Adelaide), in city parks (Brisbane), and in retail strips (City of

Darebin, inner Melbourne). Adelaide is currently investigating public WiFi provision across its central business district. Australians who can afford to travel internationally are becoming accustomed to the amenity of public WiFi. This is likely to translate into consumer or voter demand for local provision in Australia, a country with relatively high broadband and data costs. Indeed, the promise of 'free' WiFi now features in local government election platforms.[1] However, municipal initiatives in this field have a mixed record in some countries. While the association of local-level physical and digital infrastructure seems increasingly intuitive to some, it has proven difficult to achieve in political, policy and commercial terms.

In Australia, political and public debate has focussed on the rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN). There has been particular attention to technology choice, cost and roll-out, with 'last mile' delivery to households and business premises a point of disagreement between Australia's two major political parties. Intergovernmental agreements around NBN rollout have assigned the local government sector roles in planning and facilitating installation, and aggregating and promoting uptake. NBN's rollout timetable and fibre network coverage has prompted the formation of the advocacy group Broadband Today[2], with a core membership of 120 local authorities. There has also been debate over whether local authorities are prepared to follow the example of some international counterparts (for example Scotland) and co-invest in network build-out (Taylor 2013; National Broadband Network Company 2012).

However, when viewed internationally, Australia's 'demand side' focus is a restricted one. Supply side questions – whether local authorities provide public access to networks and under what terms – are little explored. I am not suggesting that Australian local authorities set up as broadband retailers. Internationally, municipal entrepreneurialism in this field has been contested by higher governments and regulatory authorities, incumbent telcos, and residents. In Australia, such a move would fly in the face of established governance and public utility arrangements, invite regulatory scrutiny, and raise questions about local authority capacity and sustainability (Purser 2011).

There is a paradox at the heart of this topic though. Australian local authorities are important institutions in Australia's digital society: the nation's public internet system is hosted by municipal public libraries. There is a case for debating whether that role should extend to providing public access to broadband, supplementing what commercial providers make available, and supporting local government responsibilities in social and economic participation, community service provision and urban management.

[1] For example, public WiFi was included in candidate platforms in the City of Melbourne and City of Moonee Valley electorates during the 2012 Victorian local government elections.
[2] See <http://www.broadbandtoday.com.au/>.

This paper contextualises and contributes to that debate by (1) discussing international developments in local broadband, (2) summarising Australia's history in this area, and (3) identifying some policy and strategic issues regarding local government participation in the wider broadband ecology.

## Municipal broadband internationally

Internationally, municipal or city governments have experimented with a range of local broadband platforms and business models for around two decades, giving rise to the term 'municipal broadband' in the literature (Middleton 2007). The term does not fully capture the range of locally oriented broadband models, which include community wireless networks, and new players such as Google and GigU. Google's entry into local fibre network installation sparked a bidding war amongst US cities[3], while its Project Loon opens a new technological frontier in using high-altitude balloons to deliver remote connectivity.[4] GigU, on the other hand, is a cooperative venture opening up local community access to the fibre networks of over 30 participating universities.[5] The term 'bottom-up broadband' is increasingly used to describe diverse and participatory approaches to local networks and connectivity, some of which involve municipal or higher government support (Feser 2007; also see Gans 2007 for an Australian perspective).

Focussing on local government, Troulos and Maglaris (2011) argue that the key determinants of municipal ventures in broadband across the globe are the structure of telecommunications markets and regulatory policies, traditions of public intervention, and the historical role of municipalities in urban planning and utility provision. The extensive international literature in this field identifies several rationales for municipal involvement in broadband networks:

- equity and digital inclusion, particularly in cases of market or higher government failure
- infrastructure and service efficiencies (e.g. leveraging existing utility infrastructure and business assets)
- civic engagement and community building
- economic development and local innovation

[3] See <https://fiber.google.com/about/>.
[4] See <http://www.google.com/loon/>.
[5] See <http://www.gig-u.org>.

- urban competitiveness and ‘creative class’ theory (Van Oost et al. 2011; Troulos & Maglaris 2011; Tapia et al. 2011; Middleton 2007; Matson & Mitchell 2006; Gillett et al. 2004).

The development of WiFi standards in the late 1990s was a particular spur to local network development. Municipal interest in WiFi was initiated in many cases through an exploration of the technology’s contribution to municipal services (Powell & Shade 2006). Broadband and mobile technologies were viewed as enablers of role sharing between local officials and residents in areas such as asset and emergency management, and community services. In some instances, the primary argument for initial city investment was framed in terms of security and public safety (Jassem 2010).

Some analysts argue there has been insufficient public debate over the rationales, forms of provision and futures of municipal broadband. Criticisms are made on several grounds:

- quality of service (especially prevalent with WiFi networks)
- unsustainability of business models
- mismatch with user needs
- political and commercial risk, including the inability to transfer risk in ‘pri-fi’ metro networks that are largely driven by commercial interests
- exclusiveness of some community wireless networks
- a high correlation between the construction of municipal networks and existing high levels of broadband uptake suggests patterns of exclusion are reproduced rather than overcome (Community Broadband Networks 2012; Hartmann 2009; Middleton 2007; Fuentes-Battista 2006; Sandvig 2004).

Evaluations of municipal broadband networks have pointed to their benefits for city economies, although the published literature in this area is not robust (Ford & Koutsky 2005; Standish, Boting & Thompson 2007). Middleton (2007) is sceptical of investment arguments framed in terms of the digital divide, suggesting, in the North American context at least, that increased competition amongst commercial providers of 3G and 4G networks may benefit low-income earners more than municipal investment in broadband.

Alternatively, over-ambitious projections for local broadband connectivity and growth, particularly in disadvantaged areas, have proved fatal to network sustainability (Troulos & Maglaris 2011; Middleton 2007). Rolling out demonstration projects or targeting low-income areas may result in low uptake and apparent lack of success. Powell and Shade (2006) observe that the sustainability of community networks in Canada has been threatened by the application of narrow performance criteria such as

cost-covering, rather than broader, if less tangible assessments of the value of these networks.

Within a few years of municipal experimentation with broadband, Matson and Mitchell (2006) observed an emerging partnership model – between local authorities and commercial providers and/or not-for-profits – in local network provision. This model has proven broadly acceptable to regulators, although it has not found universal approval with local taxpayers. Pro-market adherents have cited the collapse of metro WiFi initiatives in several US cities as proof of the wider failure of the public broadband concept (Community Broadband Networks 2012). That view is countered by many examples of successful local ventures in network and broadband service provision.

## Australian developments

Australian local government involvement in broadband provision has been strongly influenced by the dynamics of national government telecommunication and digital policy. This involvement can be roughly divided into three phases:

- a period of experimentation following telecommunications deregulation and the public release of WWW (1995-2005)
- a wait-and-see period following announcement of plans for a national broadband network (2005-2010)
- renewed interest in local broadband (2010+).

The period 1995-2005 saw local experimentation in this area, responding to concerns over liberalization of the telecommunications market (particularly its perceived threat to rural services) and exploring new opportunities presented by it. Ventures included the establishment of local telco networks, installation of fibre circuits, and several trials of WiFi and WiMax technologies. At least four electricity supply companies experimented with broadband over powerlines, conducting small-scale trials in metropolitan and country areas (Molony 2006). Other ventures investigated the particular technological, economic and cultural issues surrounding the delivery of telecommunications to remote Indigenous communities (Rennie et al. 2010). By 2005, much of this municipal experimentation appeared to have ceased. Australia missed the international wave of municipal WiFi network construction in the mid-2000s. The Australian government's 2004 *National Broadband Strategy* (NBS) now dominated the policy landscape, and commentators pointed to the commercial risks presented by a rapidly evolving telecommunications landscape (Braue 2008).

Some Australian local authorities sought to locate future investment decisions within a wider digital strategy, consistent with the direction of national and state governments. The rhetoric of ‘smart city’ and ‘connected community’ is sprinkled liberally through these documents (for example, Parramatta City Council 2010). Several quasi-public developments, for example Melbourne’s Federation Square and Perth’s Northbridge area (City of Perth 2010), paralleled the restricted WiFi provision of commercial premises such as McDonalds and Starbucks. Some Australian councils have partnered with community sector organisations to extend broadband connectivity. Three Melbourne municipalities (Yarra, Whitehorse and Darebin) joined with the not-for-profit InfoXchange to provide subsidised broadband and, in some cases, computer equipment and training to tenants on public housing estates and low-income residents. InfoXchange styles the initiatives on public housing estates in terms of digital inclusion (Meredyth et al. 2006), where the City of Darebin’s initiative also describes broadband as an essential utility and component of city infrastructure (Greco 2010).

A number of municipalities have sought to extend public library WiFi networks, particularly where libraries are located in civic centres or plazas. However, the Australian Library and Information Association’s (2011) most recent survey of public library internet services points to the limitations of library-based provision, in terms of available space for internet terminals, computer and staff resources, bandwidth and budgets. Australian public libraries and educational institutions do not enjoy broadband subsidies such as the US government’s ‘e-rate’. A recommendation by a 2003 Australia Senate inquiry into libraries to introduce such a scheme was rejected by the Australian government in favour of market competition as a means for delivering cheaper broadband (Australian Government Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2004, p. 6). Rather, market failure was a principal reason for the design of NBN as a state-delivered project. There is little doubt that NBN marks a transformative moment for Australia’s society and economy. However, the Australian Local Government Association’s (2012) ’broadband vision‘ canvasses limited options for municipal and local community initiative.

## Thinking about local broadband

How we conceptualise broadband influences the terms of government intervention, the dimensions of market provision, and the role of citizens. The final part of this paper briefly discusses some conceptual and policy settings that underpin broadband provision, and highlights some strategic implications for Australian local authorities.

Broadband policy in most parts of the globe views the electro-magnetic spectrum as a scarce or rivalrous resource, and its use is apportioned and managed through nationally regulated markets. The sale of the spectrum for mobile telephony is perhaps the clearest example of this institutional framework. The large capital outlays of mobile providers for exclusive use of spectrum bandwidth, and the revenue obtained by governments through spectrum auctions, give both an interest in protecting the market and suggests one reason why commercial and higher government interests have been so keen to litigate and legislate against municipal WiFi provision in the USA.

However, the relationship between market providers and municipal governments is rapidly evolving from perceived competition to cooperation as an increasing number of people access the internet through mobile devices. As recent developments in the UK indicate, a strategic rather than a competitive relationship is developing between the sectors as telcos seek to minimize congestion in 3G and 4G networks by subsiding local authorities to set up public WiFi networks, and paying for the use of local infrastructure assets for base station and antennae installations (Marshall 2013).

Frischmann (2012) argues that ‘infrastructure’ is any intermediate input that produces downstream economic and social value. ‘Upstream’ infrastructure decisions have significant ‘downstream’ consequences. Policy framing the ownership, management and access to infrastructure resources such as broadband and the internet is a significant ‘upstream’ decision. As it stands, municipal involvement in local broadband in many parts of the globe is strongly correlated with utility provision. Since Australian councils are generally not in the utility business, the rhetoric of broadband as a ‘fourth utility’, while raising important questions of access rights, underlines the role of higher governments in organizing universal public services, through direct provision or market regulation.

From a local service perspective, though, distinctions between physical and digital infrastructure are increasingly redundant in the provision of local services and management of the local public realm. Digital networks are essential to urban management and governance in areas such as transport, environmental management, emergency services, security, and resident consultation. Geo-location and mobile devices help residents and visitors navigate, learn about, co-manage and connect in physical space. Material and virtual worlds, and the roles and activities of local officials and local residents, are increasingly enmeshed. However, effective access and the production of relevant local content are pre-requisite inputs for such forms of engagement.

The widening role of Australian local authorities in community service provision raises important questions about digital inclusion. Public WiFi or public internet

terminals may be the only effective access that poor or homeless people have to the internet. While there is almost universal broadband access in Australia's more affluent households, almost four in ten of the lowest income group – the population cohort most reliant on local public services – do not have home broadband (Ewing & Thomas 2012; Morsillo 2012). Digital disconnection is associated with other factors of disadvantage that may have complex causes and require multi-level solutions, many of which will involve local government intervention (Eynon & Geniets 2012; Newman et al. 2010). Alternatively, are expectations that local authorities will be the prime respondents to concerns over digital exclusion from a nationally regulated market a new instance of down-shifting or cost-shifting?

However, as Powell (2009) argues, what if we also thought of broadband as a public park, as well as a public utility? The metaphor suggests a meeting place, play space, a place for community dialogue, enjoyment, social learning and activism. This metaphor locates public broadband provision firmly within the remit of the local government sector. Benkler's (2002) argument for a wireless commons, an unregulated spectrum freely open to use, moves beyond public goods theory and the provisioning role of government. Benkler draws on innovation economics to argue for the social and economic significance of open source and co-operative experimentation in the digital environment. In Australia there are few connections between local authorities and community wireless enthusiasts that might foster such initiatives. However, the increasing interest of local governments in the innovative uses of public data, seen in initiatives such as GovHack[6], heralds new opportunities for experimentation and innovation in the local public realm.

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[6] See <http://www.govhack.org>.

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# Cultural planning practices in local government in Victoria

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**Abstract.** Cultural development is a relatively new area of focus in local government, with local government areas increasingly employing staff within dedicated areas of council over the last 20 years. Practices tend to vary significantly between councils, because there is as yet no specific training nor agreed professional standards for cultural development. This paper presents results of a state-wide survey about cultural planning practices in local government across Victoria, reporting on breadth of cultural planning, amount of investment, policy influences in their development and planning processes. Findings indicate that all Victorian councils provide some kind of cultural development activity, with all but the smallest shires making considerable investment in staff, venues, programming and support for local initiatives. Cultural plans are increasingly being implemented, with more than 75% of councils having a published plan or one in progress. Scope for practice improvement was also evident, with few plans indicating any use of data, evidence or measurement strategies. In offering this picture of the current state of professional activity of cultural development in local government in Victoria, this research offers the potential for stronger practice, improved collaboration and increasingly shared standards between councils.

## Introduction

The expansion of local government responsibility over recent decades beyond the traditional roads, rates and rubbish remit has led to new areas of work becoming a stronger focus. Council amalgamations across much of Australia have resulted in larger organisations offering increasingly sophisticated services by staff with specialised skills. These two factors have contributed to a growing investment in cultural development in local government in

Australia, with LGAs increasingly employing cultural development staff within dedicated areas of council over the last 20 years.

Because there is as yet no specific standard training nor agreed professional standards for this area, practices tend to vary significantly between councils. Councils make significant investment in cultural development, but as yet, there has been little formal research on what they do or how they do it. Individual councils must undertake their own enquiry any time they seek to compare or contrast their own practice with others. This indicates significant potential for research that can help inform councils on topics related to cultural development.

This paper presents results of a state-wide survey about cultural planning practices in local government across Victoria. It opens with a literature review on cultural development planning practices around the world and current investment in cultural development in Australian and Victorian councils. Topics addressed through this research include the amount and distribution of investment of staff and resources in cultural development, how cultural development is aligned with other areas of local government endeavor, principles that inform the development of cultural plans and strategies for measurement of outcomes.

## Literature review

### Culture as a dimension of local government policy and practice

Local government entities around the world are increasingly considering culture, as the fourth dimension of public policy, as part of their remit along with social, economic and environmental considerations. This change is being promulgated by the Commission for Culture of the international peak body for local government, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). The concept of culture as a domain of human activity that should be recognized in public policy has been formally recognised since at least 1982, when the World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico City developed a series of principles to govern cultural policy. This conference came to a definition of culture as ‘the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs’ (UNESCO, 1982). This rhetoric developed up until the turn of the century, culminating in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity in November 2001.

The idea of culture as a fourth pillar of sustainability was formalised by Hawkes in 2001, in a monograph focused on the local government context (Hawkes 2001). This idea has since

been adopted by local governments internationally, with more than 200 cities now signatories to UCLG's *Agenda 21 for Culture*, which promotes the four pillars as a fundamental principle (Agenda 21 for Culture 2012). Between 2002 and 2012, New Zealand adopted culture as one of the four dimensions of well-being that local government must report against (Dalziel, Matunga & Saunders 2006).

Blomkamp (2011) observes that the local level of cultural policy is increasingly being recognised as important by scholars, politicians and practitioners (Craik 1997; UCLG 2004; Murray 2005; Choudharey 2009). She documents recent trends in cultural planning, especially in Australia (Mills 2003; Stevenson 2010), and international research that shows that the 'most well-developed and practical' policy initiatives with participatory strategies are at the local level (Murray 2005, p. 48).

However, this focus on culture is not yet a legislative requirement for local government in Victoria. The *Local Government Act* only requires local councils to report on social, economic and environmental dimensions of their activity (*Local Government Act 1989*). The Essential Services review undertaken by the State Government in 2010 determined that, as activity was so different in each LGA, there was no possibility of positing a regulation structure for planning or service provision of cultural development (Dunphy 2010).

Nevertheless, most councils in Victoria have a range of cultural development activities, varying significantly depending on their size and resources. These include dedicated staff; venues, including libraries, museums and community halls; public art; festivals; heritage; and grants to artists and community groups (Dunphy 2006; Blomkamp 2011). The independent non-profit association Cultural Development Network has been working to support this sector since 2000, and the Municipal Association of Victoria (state peak body) and LG Pro (local government professional network) both established their first Arts and Culture Committee in 2012 in response to the growing engagement of local government in this area.

## Challenges with terminology

One of the challenges in the field relates to terminology. The term culture is typically used interchangeably with the arts, such that local government departments are often entitled 'Arts and Culture', when their focus is specifically arts. This practice parallels that in other areas of public policy and scholarship. For example, Meyrick's article that promises, beguilingly 'to explain culture … the relationship between the idea of culture and the different ways it is talked about in the contemporary world' (2013, p. 1), in fact offers no

explanation of the concept of culture beyond its appropriation as a synonym for the arts. Yue, Khan and Brook's (2011) research project about cultural indicators in a local government context provides an unusual exception. In their proposed framework, these authors consider culture in relation to the arts, as well as in an anthropological sense, in relation to multi-cultural policy and diversity.

In this article, the term 'cultural development' will be applied as per its most common usage, to refer to arts services or policies offered or supported by council. These are presumed to address the function of local government 'to improve the overall quality of life of people in the local community' (Local Government Act 1989, p. 20), or, as UCLG's Agenda 21 advocates, 'to work towards a healthy, safe, tolerant and creative society (rather than merely a financially prosperous one)' (2010, p. 5).

The many other functions of councils that also have a relationship to culture, including diversity services and planning, education, indigenous issues and youth, will not be discussed. Nor does this article report on the issue that Hawkes was advocating in his *Fourth Pillar of Sustainability* (2001), the integration of a cultural dimension within all areas of council activity and reporting.

## Research about cultural development in local government in Australia

Cultural development planning practices in local government in Australia are an under-documented area of professional activity. This mirrors the situation elsewhere in the world. The Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government resource library, for example, until recently did not include any references on the theme of culture or the arts. A small number of researchers have been examining aspects of cultural development in local government, particularly related to councils' uses of indicators to measure activity in the areas of culture and the arts (for example, Badham 2009; Blomkamp 2011; Blomkamp 2012; Dunphy 2010; Dunphy 2012; Yue, Khan & Brooks 2011). Yue, Khan and Brooks (2011) comment on the value of cultural planning for local government because of its contribution to diversity, revitalisation of place, and generation of productivity.

To our knowledge, no research process has been undertaken that comprehensively examines cultural development planning practices in local government in Australia. However, Blomkamp offers a preliminary analysis of cultural plans and accountability documents from a small number of urban councils (Blomkamp 2011). She observes policy that addresses the broader cultural dimension beyond the arts, including cultural development, indigenous and multicultural/ diversity issues. Within cultural development

policies, she identifies five categories of themes, emphasised to varying degrees in different councils. These are: political discourses of rights and citizenship; economic discourses of creative industries and cultural tourism; social concepts related to identity, health, social capital, and quality of life; the environmental paradigm of sustainable development; and cultural themes such as vitality, diversity, heritage, education, and artistic or aesthetic values (Blomkamp 2011, p. 5). These roughly correspond to the four pillars of social, economic, environmental and cultural sustainability identified by Hawkes (2001), with the addition of the political dimension that Blomkamp distinguishes from the social.

## Evidence based planning and decision-making

This lack of research and data in the cultural development sector is occurring in a context in which councils are increasingly expected to undertake evidence based planning and decision-making. While not all Australian states require their local authorities to undertake strategic planning, most councils do apply it in practice (Local Futures 2006, p. 47). In their planning approaches, organisations are being encouraged to consider 'the broader changes in attitudes, behaviour or perceived well-being as a result of the intervention in question' (Johnston & Memon 2008, p. 16). A stronger focus is being made on outcomes, rather than the means to those ends. As researchers from the Community Indicators Victoria advise: 'The tool used to deliver improvement – whether services, programs, capital projects, advocacy, grant funding etc. – is far less relevant than the outcome, or real difference, experienced by the community' (West & Cox 2009).

This is a departure from earlier planning approaches which were much more concerned with inputs and outputs. Consequently, councils more than ever require data to inform their planning and policy indicators to help evaluate, measure and legitimise the impact of their work (Blomkamp 2011; Poirier 2005; Johnston & Memon 2008).

Researchers frequently call for more critical analysis of concepts and indicators in policy frameworks (Blomkamp 2011; Mercer 2002; Badham 2009; Choudharey 2009). A common criticism is that norms and goals are not explicitly stated (Darlow 1996; Dunphy 2010; Markusen & Gadwa 2010; O'Shea 2012). This makes measurements of progress difficult to establish and reduces the evaluability of cultural planning initiatives (Evans 2005).

Blomkamp observes this lack of use of strategic plans and measurement frameworks in arts and culture departments in Australian councils (Blomkamp 2011). She provides a case study of the cultural development department of a major Australian city, where the focus is primarily on service delivery, with an operational model of inputs (funding) and outputs

(grants and productions). Despite rhetoric about results-based evaluation and accountability in this council, the reality in practice is that outcome evaluation is not yet well established and systematic use of results based indicators or SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely) principles has not yet occurred (Blomkamp 2012).

One of the barriers to evidence-based planning and decision-making is a lack of relevant and available data. Ley argues for the development of a local government-specific research discipline to address this challenge (Ley 2013). The benefits he anticipates of such a development include improved understanding of local areas and communities; more informed debate about issues, policies and decisions; more effective service; and better accountability and monitoring of progress (2013, p. 9).

In an article from the USA that identifies the lack of evidence-based decision-making in local government cultural development practice, Markusen and Gadwa (2010) suggest four areas of inquiry. Firstly, they advise researchers to evaluate cultural planning outcomes according to implicit and explicit norms and goals. Second, they recommend challenging the most frequently employed rationale for cultural initiatives – the theorised causal link to economic development. Then, they suggest going beyond development of metrics to gauge whether or not a cultural plan has generated anticipated outcomes, to also examining process and its influence on product. And finally, they suggest that the merits and weaknesses of specific alternative cultural strategies be examined (p. 388).

Having introduced the context of a growing focus on culture in public policy, the move toward evidence-based policy making, and challenges with local policy development, this article now presents data collected about cultural planning processes in Victoria. This provides a picture of current practice to inform councils and related bodies, and provide impetus for further research and improvements in practice.

## Method

The research for this paper was undertaken in two stages. Internet searches of councils' websites in September 2012 and May 2013 provided the first set of data on published information about cultural plans. Information that could not be found online was sought through phone interviews with staff from the cultural development sections of LGAs across Victoria in May 2013.

# Findings

## Investment in local government cultural development activity in Australia

This recognition of culture and cultural development in local policy is reflected in increasing investment in activity. In 2010-11, local government appropriated 19% ($1,259.9 m) of the estimated total government expenditure on cultural activities (ABS 2012). These expenditure levels generally reflect the size of the population, with highly populated states spending more. In Victoria that year, local government authorities spent an estimated $354.8 million on cultural activities. The largest spending local government in Victoria, the City of Melbourne, had $14 million in its arts budget for 2013-2014, up from $12.8 million in 2012-2013**.** Other councils' allocations to cultural development include $2,069,000 for 'Arts, Culture and Venues' in a large inner-metro council to $144,147 for 'Arts and Culture' in a small regional shire.

Average local government cultural expenditure across the nation in 2010-11 was $56.80 per capita, up 4% from 2009-10. South Australia had the highest per capita expenditure at $67.00, followed by Victoria with $64.60 and New South Wales with $57.10. In Victoria, this was an increase of 10% from the year before, and more than 30% increase since 2000-1 when per capita expenditure was $50.

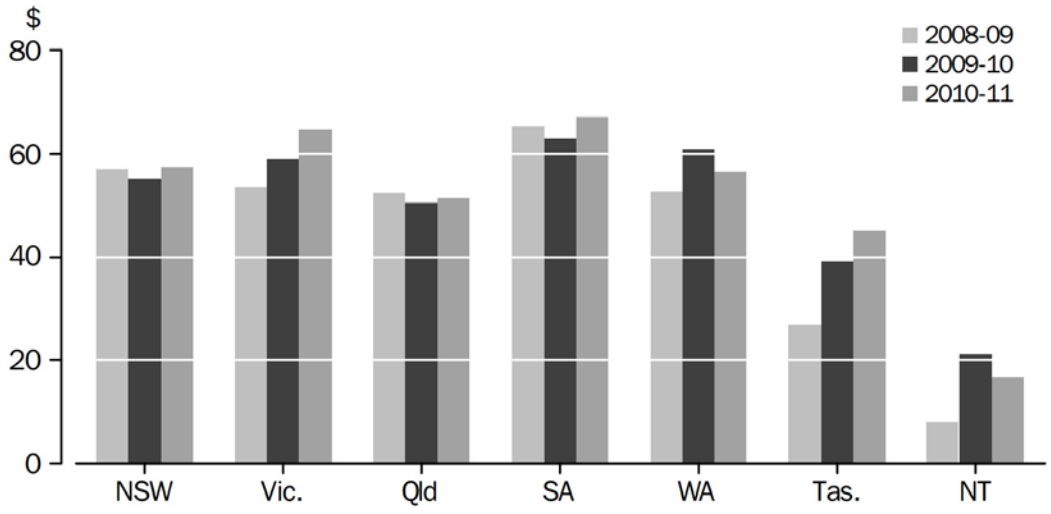


**Fig. 1.** Local government cultural expenditure per person by state and territory; 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11 (ABS 2012, p. 35)

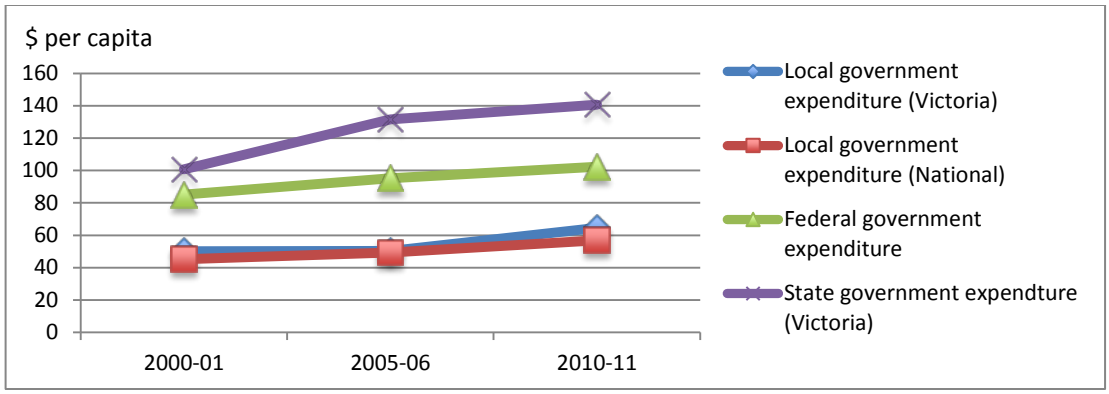


**Fig. 2.** Government expenditure on cultural activity per person 2000-2011 (ABS 2003; ABS 2007; ABS 2012)

## Size of the sector

63 of the 79 Victorian councils have specialised cultural development staff. Mostly these were situated within a stand-alone Arts and Culture Department (10). 'Community Cultural Development' and 'Cultural Liveability' were two interesting versions of that title, implying a strong development focus. In other councils, cultural development staff were sited within departments that also had other responsibilities including community development (12), libraries (5), events (4), recreation (4), leisure (3), tourism (2), youth (2), economic development (1), access (1), venues (1) and learning (1). The 16 councils that did not have specialised staff mostly had some cultural development activity undertaken or overseen by staff from departments including community services/ development (12), economic and community development (2), economic development (1) and tourism (1).

## Staffing

The number of council-employed staff in cultural development positions across the whole state was 342, with organisations employing between 20 (large regional town), 15 (outer suburban council) and one cultural development staff member. This does not include casual positions in venues such as performing arts centres and art galleries, of which there were an additional estimated 200 positions. Nor does it include library staff, which numbered between five and 95 per council, and 1,687 FTE across the state (Public Libraries Network Victoria 2012). While library staff and investment is included in figures quoted earlier re government investment in culture, the figures quoted in this section do not include library staff or resources, as they were not necessarily structurally connected with cultural development. This data is readily accessible from Public Libraries Network Victoria.

Senior positions in arts and culture departments included roles as director (4), manager (38), co-ordinator (45) and team leader (19). Arts/community cultural development officer was the most common job designation, with 62 positions across the state. Regional councils were the least likely to have a cultural development officer position, with many bigger shires and regional towns only having staff connected to venues without a broader cultural development role, and the smallest shires having no staff. Festival/events officer roles were common (45), and 33 positions were dedicated to admin/PA responsibilities. More specific roles that only appeared in a few councils included marketing (6), public art (5), heritage (4), theatre director (4), media/publications (2), and arts access (1). Only five positions across the state included the word 'planner' or 'planning' in their titles.

Many positions were dedicated to venue management. These roles included cultural centre or community arts centre manager/co-ordinator (12), gallery manager (12) and performing arts centre/theatre manager (8). These were supported by a range of operational positions including curators/exhibition staff (27), technicians (11), and education officers (5).

The 13 LGAs that had no dedicated cultural development staff were all the smallest shires.

## Who has cultural plans?

46 (out of 79 Victorian councils) had specific published cultural plans, and a further 10 had a plan in development. Almost half of these councils have had cultural plans prior to the current versions (23). These are commonly called 'arts and culture' 'plans' or 'strategies', although they primarily refer to the arts. City of Melbourne was the only council that did not include the word 'culture' in the title of its *Arts Strategy*.

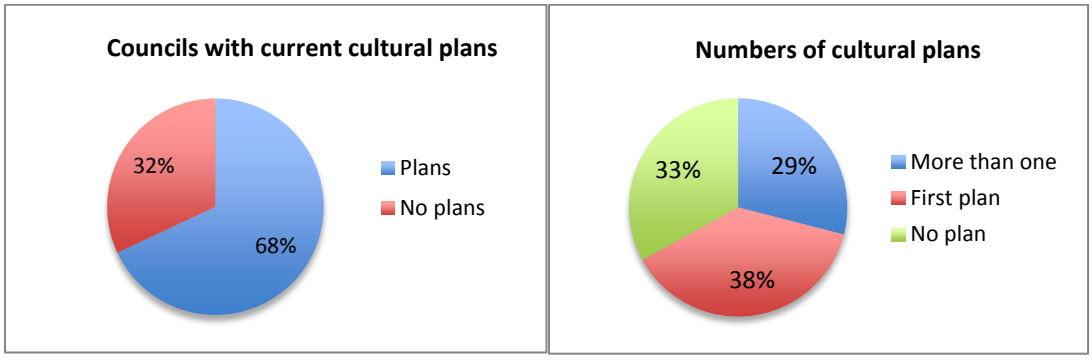


**Figure 3.** Distribution of cultural plans in Victorian LGAs

A common pattern to the planning process was observed. The first plans councils made tended to be fairly basic and aimed at establishing council's engagement in this area. Second plans often included investment in infrastructure for cultural development. Third plans, in those councils that had revised their plans for the third time, focused on utilisation of facilities according to perceived community needs, but were also mediated by directives from council. In LGAs with more limited resources, plans included a priority on skill development for artists in the community and other potential arts participants rather than on infrastructure.

Most cultural plans were developed internally (35/53), some by a combination of staff and consultants (12/53) and a few (6/53) solely by external consultants.

Only three metropolitan councils did not have a published stand-alone cultural plan, although they all had published information about arts activities of their council. The majority of councils without specific plans were small-medium regional towns or shires. All but one of these mentioned some provision of arts and cultural services incorporated in other plans or strategies. These included six whose strategies were documented in regional strategic plans, such as the G21 Alliance in the Greater Geelong region, and the *Wimmera-Southern Mallee Region Strategic Plan*. Amongst LGAs that did not have a specific plan, cultural development policies were included in other strategic plans including tourism (7), council plans (4), health/wellbeing (4), economic development (2), and leisure and youth (1). Several of the councils that did not have a plan commented that it was not lack of interest, but lack of resources preventing a plan being developed.

## Community reference groups for cultural development

Community reference groups for cultural development activities were common, with 56 of the 79 LGAs having some kind of advisory body. Forty councils with cultural plans had a community reference group, as did 16 councils that did not have a cultural plan. These groups were mostly general arts advisory committees (33), but groups were also focused on venues (8), heritage (7), local cultural development networking (6), multi-council activity (4), public art (4) and visual art collection (1). Two councils had specific committees to advise the development of the arts strategic plan.

## Policies or principles that inform the development of cultural plans

To investigate policies and principles that inform cultural plans, published versions of these documents were examined. From this, it could be seen that the majority of cultural

development strategies identify broader council plans as a guiding principle (28 of the 46 published documents). Hawkes' *Fourth Pillar of Sustainability* and Arts Victoria's *Creative Capacity* policy were mentioned by five councils. Ideas from UNESCO had some influence, with three councils mentioning UNESCO's *Declaration of Human Rights*, one council referring to UNESCO's 'City of Literature' initiative, and one using UNESCO's definition of culture. Other references or policies mentioned by one council each were: UCLG's *Agenda 21 for Culture*, the Federal Government's *New Directions for the Arts*, Arts Victoria's *Strengthening Local Communities* evaluation report, the State Government's *Melbourne 2030* report, the Victorian *Local Government Act*, and Landry's *Creative City*. One council mentioned its own tourism plan as an influence. One council mentioned the Municipal Association of Victoria and one the Centre for International Economics as an organisation that informed their practice without providing any detail about specific policies or documents . In nine plans, no guiding principle was mentioned.

One frequent comment from council staff was that in developing new plans, they sought to create documents that were more strategic and better integrated with other council plans.

### Use of data, evidence and indicators.

While there was much reporting of community consultation as part of planning cycles, the use of data to inform planning processes was not strongly evident, either to define issues to be addressed or consider their impact. Nor was there much cited use of evidence in decisions about actions to address specific goals. Most plans (44 out of 46) listed actions that had a relationship to stated goals. However, only 21 of the 46 plans listed any measurable indicators and targets.

## Discussion

This comprehensive data gathering exercise about the cultural development sector in local government is the first to our knowledge in Victoria, and perhaps the first in Australia. With an investment of 20% of total government spending on culture, and employment of more than 550 staff in this sector across the state, local government's contribution is significant. This investment has grown more quickly than investment from State and Federal government. Such research therefore seems timely.

The first finding, gathered through desk-research and phone surveys, indicated that while departments referred to culture in their titles and plans, their work was almost exclusively

concerned with the arts. This included heritage, but not the many other functions of councils that also have a relationship to culture, including diversity services and planning, education, indigenous issues and youth. These are almost exclusively organised in separate, although related, divisions.

Most councils had specialised cultural development staff situated within a stand-alone department, or in a department that identified arts or cultural development in its title. The number of staff was quite different, ranging from a team as big as 20, to 13 councils that had no staff. Where departments had a function in addition to the arts, the most frequent alliance was with community development, followed by libraries. This pattern was also observed in councils, including all small regional shires that did not have specialised staff. In these LGAs, cultural development activities were most frequently supported by, or initiated within community service departments.

In terms of staffing, cultural development officer was the most common job designation, with 62 positions across the state across the majority of councils. Many councils also had senior positions dedicated to cultural development, including managers in almost 50% of councils and co-ordinators in more than 50%. More than 50% of councils also had festival/events positions. Councils also had significant investment in venue staffing, with many positions dedicated to management and operations of venues, including cultural or community arts centres, galleries and performing arts centres.

Most councils had an ‘arts and culture’ plan or strategy in development (56/79), and many councils were developing a second and, in some cases, even a third iteration of this plan. These all referred to arts activities, rather than culture in a broader sense, although they also indicated attention to a range of broader cultural issues including diversity, creative expression, human rights, heritage, education and spirituality.

Alignment with the overall council plan was evident in the majority of cultural plans (60%). However, this figure also indicates that 40% of cultural development plans did not have a significantly dynamic relationship with the overall direction of council to warrant it being mentioned in the plan. Few plans were informed by any other overall policy or principle. Influences quoted as guiding the development of cultural plans were disparate, with Hawkes’ *Fourth Pillar of Sustainability* and Arts Victoria’s *Creative Capacity* the most commonly mentioned documents, but only by five councils each. Given that *Creative Capacity* is a policy document developed by State government for its own operations, it might seem less than ideal as a guiding document for local government. *Agenda 21 for Culture*, the policy document for local government cultural development created by the

international peak body for local government UCLG, was mentioned by only one council. This indicates significant scope for application of principles and policies relevant to cultural development in local government planning processes.

Not surprisingly, the smaller regional shires were the most challenged in terms of cultural development capacity. Lack of resources and specialised staff were major factors, compounded by lack of formal planning. However, not all smaller shires lacked plans. The reverse was also true, in that not all councils that invested significant resources in cultural development, such as dedicated staff and venues, had a plan. Several councils made significant investment in venues and related operations without any over-arching plan or staff with responsibility for broader cultural development activity outside the venues. These were mostly large regional towns, but also several metropolitan councils.

While current broader policy directives advocate the use of data in planning, evidence in decision-making, and evaluation of activities, these practices were not strongly evident in councils' published documents. Very few cultural development plans made any mention of data to inform their decision-making position or the use of evidence in development of strategies and actions. Measurement of outcomes was an area that indicated a lack of focus, with less than half of current plans listing indicators or measurable goals or targets. Lack of measurement strategies and targets mean that achievement of outcomes is much more difficult to determine. Theories of change were also missing in many plans, in that there was often no obvious logical relationship between goals, and activities intended to address those goals. These deficiencies were not confined to smaller councils, with as many larger metropolitan councils and regional towns lacking similar theories. These findings indicate significant potential for improved practice around goal setting and accountability.

What is evident, confirming Ley's (2012) recommendation for research relevant to local government, is the need for more data that can inform planning and decision-making, and increased application of this in practice. The lack of reference to relevant policy documents perhaps indicates both a dearth of relevant resources as well as a lack of awareness of those that exist. This points to the need for higher profile of relevant references such as UCLG's policy for cultural development. The prevalence of focus on councils' *outputs*, rather than *outcomes* for communities confirms Blomkamp's (2012) observations of such practice even in progressive, well-resourced councils. This indicates a need for shifting of mindsets and heeding of maxims like that from Community Indicators' Victoria, discussed earlier, of the importance of focusing on outcomes for communities rather than the activities undertaken to achieve them.

In the course of gathering this data, some needs became strongly evident. Overwhelmingly, council cultural development staff indicated a strong desire to have assistance with the development of their cultural plans. This was particularly evident for smaller regional shires, though not exclusive to them. Opportunities for knowledge sharing between councils was a frequent request, with colleague support and advice preferred to benchmarking or other comparative approaches that could be perceived as competitive.

### Areas for future investigation

This article has addressed the investment of councils in cultural development activity, in resourcing, staffing, planning and community engagement. Many more issues not discussed in depth could offer further insight to councils. These include: whether theory of change principles are used in the planning processes; whether evaluation, including outcome measures are used; what these measures were; and what the relationship is of this to planning. More detailed examination of this data could provide correlations, for example, between the existence of a plan or community reference group and allocation of resources. A further process is recommended involving interviews with senior local government staff to determine their perceptions of the effectiveness of their current planning processes and the consequent challenges and opportunities.

This article has primarily focused, as local governments do, on delivery and support of cultural development activity. It has not addressed the major thrust of Hawkes' *Fourth Pillar of Sustainability* (2001) that the cultural dimension be integrated within all areas of council activity and reporting, along with social, economic and environmental concerns. As Hawkes' monograph has been influential internationally, for example, as the major platform of UCLG's Commission for Culture, this would be a worthwhile topic for future research. Two further areas of inquiry recommended by Markusen and Gadwa (2010) have yet to be examined: gauging the impact of cultural plans, and examining process and its influence on product.

## Conclusion

This article has presented a picture of the current state of professional activity in the cultural development sector of local government in Victoria. In so doing, it offers the potential for accepted professional standards, improved collaboration and stronger shared practice and resources between councils. The survey undertaken for this project confirmed a

significant investment of resources in cultural development in local government across Victoria, in staffing, venues, programming and support for local initiatives. However, the potential for improved practice in many areas of cultural development planning was evident. These include data-based planning, evidence-based decision-making, and use of outcome measures and targets. These issues need to be addressed if cultural development activity is to be most effective in supporting councils to achieve their goals of enhancing the quality of life for people in their communities.

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# Appendix

## Research topics investigated through web search of published art or culture plans

- Does council have an arts/cultural plan?
- What is the name of the cultural plan?
- Was this document developed in-house, by consultants, or a combination of the two?
- Is this the first plan, or were there previous versions?
- Is there a local cultural advisory group?
- Where are cultural services located within council?
- What other documents are noted as being relevant to cultural planning?
- Is there a noted relationship between the cultural plan and the broader council plan?
- What are the principles or policies that are named as guiding the development of the cultural plan?
- What areas and services are covered by the cultural plan?
- Does there appear to be a clear relationship between the cultural plan's goals and strategies for action?
- Is there any apparent use of data in establishing and evaluating the plan?
- Is there any apparent use of evidence from research or data in setting actions?
- Does the plan have measurable indicators and targets?
- What is the budget for cultural services?

## Questions asked in phone survey of cultural development staff

- What is the job title (including department name) of all council staff in full-time or permanent part-time cultural development roles?
- At what stage is the arts or cultural plan: are there any developments beyond what is published on the website?

# The pitfalls and promises of an academic approach to solving real world problems in local government

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**Abstract.** Traditionally many local government entities have been entrenched in a system of no change. Change has been regarded as a threat to available resources, existing projects, and to top-down risk adverse management's control of priorities. Local governments are not usually regarded as research hubs. However, the highly localised and complex nature of many environmental management issues, in particular, often means research is essential to ensure effective and efficient management. Dealing with issues of a high magnitude of complexity is thought to be beyond the scope of Councils and better left to state and federal agencies. In recent years this perception is proving increasingly false. Despite the lack of recognition, difficult internal management priorities, and a community unaware of the benefits, several local councils have managed to create a substantial research profile designed to address important knowledge gaps.

Ku-ring-gai Council has benefited greatly from the development of a research agenda. Management has recognised the value of fostering innovation, the dangers of clinging onto the old mantra 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', and the positive effects a culture of problem solving can have for staff and the overall wellbeing of the community. Although research into pressing environmental management issues including water, bushfire and climate change has not been without substantial challenges, the benefits of this approach are clear – ensuring that already limited resources are being spent where they will have the greatest effect. Through continued research, monitoring and review, this provides a basis on which to make sound managerial decisions.

## Introduction

Local government has always been expected to function as a 'jack of all trades', and it may once have been argued that it was a 'master of none'. In years past local government functioned to meet the much simpler needs of their local constituents (Dale 2008). The domain of local government was confined to the function of 'roads, rates and rubbish'

service delivery. This paper will argue that today this premise does not, and should not hold true. Local government is the most exposed level of government to public scrutiny and the closest level of government to the community. As a result it has transitioned from a traditional form of 'government' of yesteryear to an administration system more defined by community engagement and the characteristics of 'governance' (Pillora & McKinlay 2011).

## The transition to governance

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (cited in Pillora & McKinlay 2011), good *governance* has defining characteristics including being participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective, efficient, equitable and law abiding. *Government* on the other hand is characterised by decision making in narrowly focused on prescriptive administrative and legislative frameworks (Hambleton cited in Pillora & McKinlay 2011).

The transition from the traditional model of government to one that integrates the practice of governance into government has emerged in an ad hoc fashion within Australian local government over the past few decades. Dale's research into the role of contemporary local government in Victoria finds consensus regarding the role of local government (Dale 2011). Respondents in Dale's research regarded local government's role to be services, democratic representation, infrastructure, community building, advocacy, governance and planning for the community. This description, if taken as an order of priority, demonstrates that service oriented roles of local government still take precedence– nevertheless elements of governance are also present. Governance, while integral to the truly local democratic process, appears to take a lesser profile. This suggests that the transition between government and governance is fluid and may always be so.

State of the environment (SoE) reporting in New South Wales over the past decade demonstrates the difficulty in bridging the nexus between government and governance. Kelly (2011) discusses the increasing complexity and demands for public performance reporting in local government in the 20 years between 1991 and 2011. SoE reports were semi-prescriptive documents founded on a bottom-up approach. While local government in NSW was legally obligated to produce these reports, Kelly (2011) found the documents served no internal function for most councils, with senior managers ignorant of their content. Kelly notes that SoEs have had to be re-designed to be more applicable and flexible.

Council management plans in NSW have made the transition from only a prescriptive annual report to include a community strategic plan (CSP), which is described as a plan for the community rather than just council. According to Kelly (2011), the CSP seeks to integrate civic leadership with social, environmental and economic issues, or in other words a quadruple bottom line approach. Such an approach sees state and local governments and communities coming together in a straightforward process that feeds directly through to councils' operational plans for implementation. Whether this revitalised SoE process is effective in creating grounded outcomes remains a question. It does however provide an example of the transition local government is making in toward improved governance and better informed, more transparent and accountable decision making.

While external and internal reporting systems may function more transparently, the degree of complexity in decision making at the local level has increased in a more governance oriented system. This complexity has given rise to the need for better information to support the decision making process.

## The impact of development on local values

In Australia the growth of cities has been significant. The urbanised footprint has expanded into productive farm land and nature conservation areas in almost every state and territory.

According to Crichton (2010) the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) figures show Australia as one of the most urbanised and coastal-dwelling populations worldwide. In Australia, over 80 per cent of people live within 100 kilometres of the coast. Sydney's population is rapidly expanding and is predicted to reach six million within the next twenty years (Crichton 2010). In the Ku-ring-gai area, a local government area northwest of the Sydney CBD, growth occurs mainly from infill development and implementation of the Local Environmental Plan (LEP). In the years between 2000 and 2005 Ku-ring-gai's population was in a slow decline, however from 2007 to 2012 the population in Ku-ring-gai has increased by an average of 1.74% per annum (*Demographic profile* 2011). This trend appears set to continue with the planned intensification of the urban footprint in the municipality (DoP 2007).

Problems arise when growth impacts the values that local communities have inherited from past communities. These values are often in the form of natural assets, cultural and heritage items, and productivity and employment. These values are perceived by local communities to be intrinsic to the quality of life in the local area. The challenge for local government is the need to maintain these values while simultaneously instructed by

higher levels of government to allow what could be argued as barely fettered development to occur. This tension requires careful analysis to avoid the often seen result of win/lose – generally the local values lose and the development imperative wins.

## Integrating different knowledge

Making the shift between government and governance models of decision making in an environment where tensions on decision makers are multiplying demands a transparent and reasoned process. Such a process is underpinned by good quality research capable of incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods. Within the quasi governance/government world, many different voices compete to be heard. From professional lobbyists to subject experts, local residents, and other layers of government and non-government associations, all these voices seek to influence decisions.

Experienced researchers understand the need to moderate the squeaky wheel with robust inquiry methods and transparent analytical techniques that lead to clearly validated outcomes. Basing decisions on accepted methods that incorporate all voices wishing to influence a decision has social, political and legal acceptance. Outcomes need to be completed through integration into council practice and community action. Collaborative learning frameworks which support knowledge integration processes rather than knowledge products have gained favour in recent times (Raymond et al. 2010). Raymond et al. (2010) claim such processes need to exhibit a cyclic nature, and be reflexive and systematic. The challenge for today's researchers say Raymond et al. (2010) is to create user-inspired and user-useful strategies. Nowhere is this more necessary than in local government.

Integrating various knowledge types into a decision making framework should assist in creating solutions that are grounded, applicable and user-oriented. Creating solutions inside the workplace rather than consultants doing the job as external observers strengthens the likelihood of creating user-oriented results. There is no single correct technique for combining scientific and local knowledge. The complexity of many of the issues confronting local government such as budget prioritisation for natural area management, stormwater controls, natural systems conservation, emergency management and climate change, for example, may need different approaches. Every approach should be underpinned by solid methods, inclusiveness and open lines of inquiry. Above all, the impact of the solution needs to be well thought through as the solution can lead to both intended and unintended consequences. Innovation is not without its risks; the rewards can be great but failures are not to be underestimated.

## Innovation

Local government is not generally regarded as an innovation hub, though this perception has recently been changing in councils' favour. It is now better understood in many councils that to make the transition into governance, there is a need to create a culture that fosters innovative responses to problems. Creativity requires a wide variety of inputs and the systemic analysis to select which alternatives should be retained to address the problem at hand (Martin n.d.) The problem needs to be viewed in the context of all stakeholders. A functioning internal research culture within an organisation fosters motivation, whereas relying on external motivators for problem solving capacity has a disengaging effect. Researchers are, by definition, innovators. Researchers are, by necessity, self-motivated and thrive on the desire to solve tangible problems.

## Examples of successful research outcomes in Ku-ring-gai Council

Pelz and Munson (cited in Dale n.d., p. 4) cite four stages in innovation:

- Diagnosis – problem has a solution identified
- Design – development of the detail of the solution
- Implementation – solution embedded
- Stabilisation – innovation proves successful, it requires adjustment or it is abandoned.

These four stages more or less describe a quality research method. The following two case studies undertaken within Ku-ring-gai Council in recent years demonstrate how these four stages have been used as a research framework in action. These case studies are the product of an active research culture currently building the problem solving capacity inside Ku-ring-gai Council. The first case study deals with the problem of disaster preparedness in a changing climate, and the second deals with improved water management in the Council area.

### Case Study 1: Climate change adaptation to address bushfire risk and disaster management

The risks emerging from changing weather patterns include more frequent and intense extreme weather events such as bushfire, storms, droughts and heat waves (Ku-ring-gai Council 2011). Ku-ring-gai Council has experienced many extreme weather events in the past. In 2007 Council began an ongoing research process to investigate and address the risks facing the community from climate change. In 2008, research and

workshops with experts and the local community confirmed that bushfires were considered to be the single most serious threat to the area (Ku-ring-gai Council 2011).

Ku-ring-gai Council is responsible for the management of 1,100 hectares of bushland that largely intersects with densely populated residential areas. Much of this bushland is contiguous with larger natural areas to the north, south-west and east, making it one of the most bushfire-prone areas in Greater Sydney and Australia-wide (Chen 2005).

Ku-ring-gai has a history of destructive fires impacting the urban/bushland interface, with large scale and intense wildfires impacting the area on average once every 10 years (HKBFMC 2010). The physical setting, development and demographic profile contribute to the area's vulnerability to bushfire. This risk is exacerbated by increasing populations and development on the bushland interface escalating the bushfire risk to human life as people increasingly place themselves in more vulnerable locations (Cottrell et al. 2008; Erikson & Prior 2011).

Land owners and managers – including Council – have statutory obligations to prevent the occurrence of, and to minimise the danger from the spread of bushfires (*Rural Fires Act 1997*). These obligations, however, need to be enacted without totally compromising the basis for which the land is managed, which is primarily to ensure the long-term conservation of the natural values while also responsibly caring for our community.

There needs to be a commitment from all land managers to undertake adequate fuel management and ensure that fire protection measures are addressed in urban planning and development through a means that also respects ecological values. However, defining what is deemed 'adequate' is complicated by the knowledge that weather patterns will alter as a response to $CO_2$ concentrations in the atmosphere. The changes will likely result in a longer fire season, increased frequency of extreme or catastrophic fire-risk days, increased fire intensity, reduced opportunity to undertake prescribed burning, and a decreased effectiveness of hazard reduced areas to provide protection under extreme conditions (Lucas et al. 2007; Hennessy et al. 2005; McCarthy & Tolhurst 2001 cited in Fernandes & Bortelho 2003).

Traditional measures applied to reduce the risk of bushfire have proved inadequate in the face of large scale, catastrophic fires (VBRC 2009). With this knowledge, Council invested in research with the aim to better prepare and protect its community and natural environment to the risks from bushfires and other natural hazards which are likely to impact the Ku-ring-gai area.

Regional climate change modelling produced by the CSIRO (2007) and the Bureau of Meteorology (2013) was analysed by Macquarie University in partnership with Bond

University and Ku-ring-gai Council. This research contributed to the development of a downscaled model for the Ku-ring-gai local government area (Taplin et al. 2010). This climate change modelling suggests that the Ku-ring-gai area may be particularly vulnerable to increased fire and storm activity as well as increased exposure to drought and extreme heat. The modelling was used to inform the development of a climate change adaptation strategy. As part of this process vulnerability and resilience factors were evaluated and the residual risks identified. An analytical model was then developed to re-evaluate the traditional cost-benefit method to develop prioritised adaptation options. The model provides decision makers with highly robust community referenced information that clearly sets out the expected performance of each adaptation measure, as well as the monetary and non-monetary costs associated with implementation.

*i. Climate Wise Communities program*

The adaptation strategy was completed in 2010. The key adaptations emerging from the merit analysis demonstrated sustainability and risk reduction to more than one hazard type.

The Climate Wise Communities (CWC) program developed in 2012 sought to deliver these high priority adaptations. The CWC program was the synthesis of several of the leading adaptations emerging from the adaptation analysis. Initially, three pilot workshops were conducted which focused on bushfires. These workshops tested a new participatory engagement method developed by RMIT University (Akama et al. 2012) to enable community members to identify bushfire hazards, self-assess their vulnerability, and examine the adequacy of their bushfire plans. This method guides self-assessment across the personal, property and neighbourhood dimensions. It promotes the reality of shared responsibility as central to reducing vulnerability and explores the local context through people's experience of past bushfire events. This method highlights the resilience benefits from participating in an interdependent network. It also allows the most vulnerable residents to be included in the wider neighbourhood response framework without being labelled as 'vulnerable'.

Participation was enhanced by targeting existing community networks such as schools and Bushcare groups, and through the neighbourhood's 'social facilitator' because such people often bind others to their neighbourhoods. The participatory nature of the workshops provided excellent opportunities for residents to develop and strengthen local connections, share past experiences, explore locally relevant questions, and clarify areas of concern. This interactive format proved valuable in developing shared responsibility compared with more traditional methods of presentation (Ku-ring-gai Council 2012a).

The challenge for Ku-ring-gai Council now is to expand the RMIT method into a multi-hazard approach including bushfire, storms, floods and extreme heat.

While this external program was proceeding, Council also reviewed its own emergency management procedures. Emergency management can be divided into preparation, response and recovery phases. Council participates in a regional emergency management committee that focuses strongly on the response phase. Emerging trends in improved emergency management also places emphasis on preparation and recovery, and it is in these phases that local government has a key role to play. As part of Council's continuing research agenda, staff have reviewed emergency management arrangements in other areas and listened carefully to the experience of those who have recently had to deal with large scale natural disasters in their areas.

The stories emerging suggest that councils have largely been caught short when disasters occur, whether it be bushfires, cyclones, floods or earthquakes. Moreover, communities routinely turn to councils for answers as they are the tier of government closest to those directly affected by natural disasters. Ku-ring-gai has developed an improved understanding of the potential role that a Council can play in the preparation and recovery phases of disaster management, and the benefits of utilising existing community networks to develop preparation and recovery strategies.

Climate change risk assessment and adaptation planning have the characteristics of a 'wicked' problem, that is they can be difficult to define (spatially and chronologically), they often have interdependencies and are multi-causal, the risks are variable in type and magnitude according to the context, they are socially complex, responsibility sits with more than one organisation, and the solutions rely on changing behaviours (APSC 2007).

Research including Council's own climate change adaptation work points out that there are many common elements to disasters and addressing disasters through a multi-hazard lens is more efficient in terms of time and money (Field et al. 2012; APSC 2007; Ku-ring-gai Council 2011). For example, bushfire weather not only carries with it a heightened risk of wildfire, it also carries other primary risks including illness from extreme heat. Secondary risks including water and power disruptions, disrupted access to goods and services, burdens on the provision of temporary accommodation, and loss of income. These complexities are currently being translated from Council's adaptation policy and strategy into the local region's emergency response procedures.

Council's Strategy and Operations departments are working together to review new state based Emergency Management Plans to develop improved volunteering opportunities for the preparation and recovery phases of disasters, resource acquisition and allocation strategies, and logistics for medium to longer term recovery support for those affected in the community.

*ii. Landuse planning options to reduce bushfire risk*

The climate change research also assisted in providing an evidence base behind introducing measures into Council's principal LEP that address an increasing risk of bushfires. An extensive background study was developed in 2011 which examines the context within which the risks occur, including local influences on bushfire behaviour, likely changes under climate change, vulnerability, resilience, and response capability and capacity (Ku-ring-gai Council 2012b). The background study outlined 25 recommendations that have expanded on the measures described in New South Wales' key bushfire landuse planning document, *Planning for Bushfire Protection* (2006). The study recognises that existing approaches to bushfire management, while they should continue, are alone not enough to protect lives and properties. Indeed, the physical environment, developments, and changing demographics all act to heighten the risk. For example, most of Ku-ring-gai's developments close to the bushland interface were constructed prior to the introduction of construction standards and mandatory bushfire protection measures, and are also primarily located on ridge tops with inadequate road networks to enable safe evacuation (Cova 2005 cited in Ku-ring-gai Council 2012b). Ku-ring-gai also has a high proportion of aged care facilities, schools and hospitals located within these high evacuation risk areas.

Key recommendations include:

- Restricting intensification of land use in high evacuation risk areas through introducing minimum lot sizes
- Applying environmental zoning where environmental hazards require careful consideration, planning, siting and design.
- Applying a minimum lot depth to sites that contain land within 55 metres of bushfire prone land that is identified as extreme risk (HKBFMC 2010).

## Case study 2 – water management

Ku-ring-gai Council has diverse riparian ecosystems including some of the most intact systems with the best water quality in the Northern Sydney area (NSROC 2010-11). Cost effective and meaningful waterway management is a key issue for Ku-ring-gai Council's natural areas and sustainability team. Due to its urban bushland setting, Ku-ring-gai's natural streams are threatened by development creating increased runoff. This in turn alters the physical, biological and chemical properties of the water, contributes to accelerated erosion, increases sediment deposits, exacerbates local flooding, creates a proliferation of weeds, and results in a loss of habitat and biodiversity (Ku-ring-gai

Council 2004). To address water management in this urban setting, Council is actively involved in a variety of water research projects with a number of different universities.

In the largest of these projects Council is an industry partner in the Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) for Water Sensitive Cities. This is a project of national and international research significance for the future urban water industry both in Australia and overseas. Ku-ring-gai Council decided to join the CRC as it provided an opportunity to influence, in a small way, the future of water sensitive urban design from a local government perspective. However, as a small partner in a large project, it can be difficult to get your voice heard, and by joining a consortium of other councils from the Sydney region the councils' collective influence had increased.

The benefits to Council of participating in this research have included the possibility to undertake sampling of stormwater treatment systems that would have otherwise fallen outside Council's financial capacity. As a partner in the CRC, Ku-ring-gai is able to partner with Universities in Melbourne and Brisbane to share the cost of sourcing and installing the sampling equipment. The samples collected have been processed at a fraction of the normal cost of a commercial laboratory. In addition, studies conducted as part of the CRC research are looking for less commonly investigated pollutants and contaminants for which testing is not normally offered by commercial laboratories. This includes an investigation into alternative meaningful indicators to be used for regular monitoring programs. This gives Ku-ring-gai's staff additional understanding of water management issues that is not normally available outside of specialised research institutions.

Participation in the CRC for Water Sensitive Cities has provided Ku-ring-gai with information that has helped guide design standards and, in turn, provided greater environmental benefits to Council's stormwater treatment program. The involvement in this large project has also provided good opportunities for networking and sharing ideas with other Councils and a number of research institutions across Australia.

Council also frequently partners with local universities on smaller, locally significant projects. Maintaining active research partnerships with local universities provides Ku-ring-gai with access to experts in relevant fields, as well as students that can undertake smaller research projects for Council as part of their curriculum. Each year, final year and honours students are available to apply the skills developed through their studies to address an environmental management research question that is specific to Ku-ring-gai. These projects have a number of benefits for the Council as well as the students. Often, relying state, national or international research and management guidelines does not address locally unique issues. Having local university researchers and students investigate issues, for example in providing estimates of the amount of potable water that

contributes to base flow, can help establish more accurate local environmental health guidelines and approaches to management.

Not only does partnering with research institutions help address locally unique management issues, it can also be used to legitimate policy. For example, Council partnered with researchers and honours students from the University of Western Sydney in investigating how concrete drainage infrastructure impacts on water quality. The results influenced Council's policy on using concrete in sensitive environments and has provided a more holistic understanding of what is required to ensure improved environmental performance. This research has also been used in a NSW Land and Environment Court conciliation conference as justification to minimise the amount of concreted hard surfaces constructed near sensitive aquatic ecosystems when other more environmentally sensitive options exist. In addition, other research undertaken by Council staff on water management, riparian zones and waterway health has also been used to provide background evidence and establish the council officers' expertise when required to act as an expert witness.

## Lessons learned from case studies

In the past, staff were not encouraged to look much beyond legal and policy compliance. Shining a light into dark corners was thought to simply be the cause of angst and had the potential to create unwelcome imposts on departmental budgets.

According to the Commonwealth Auditor-General in 2009 the public sector needs to embrace innovation, and therefore research, if it is to deal with future challenges and take full advantage of emergent opportunities.

The Commonwealth Auditor-General (2009, p. 14) states that the public sector can be innovative if:

It is committed to achieving a supportive culture where innovation is encouraged and lessons disseminated

- Innovation is embedded in corporate strategy and adequately resourced
- Staff have the requisite skills, training and development opportunities
- Departments and agencies encourage internally-generated innovation and actively engage with citizens, clients and stakeholders to garner external ideas and innovations
- There is a deep understanding of core business, government policy and aspirations, the broader external environment and internal and external sources of data and information

- There are mechanisms in place to assess and respond to new and emerging issues
- Departments and agencies build organisational capabilities and agility
- Innovation is appropriately recognised and rewarded.

Table 1 utilises the key lessons cited by the Commonwealth Auditor-General to evaluate institutional learning fostered by the case studies cited in this paper.

**Tab. 1.** The engagement of key institutional learning criteria in the abovementioned case studies on water management and climate change.

| Learning criteria | Climate change case study | Water case study |
|---|---|---|
| Research was disseminated | Dissemination via peer reviewed journals, conference presentations and workshops, both domestically and internationally, including by research students undertaking postgraduate and undergraduate projects on different aspects of Council led research. | Dissemination via peer reviewed journals, conference presentations and participation in expert workshops. |
| Innovation was resourced | Council allocated staff time and funds to collaborate with Macquarie University and others. Other council staff indirectly related to the project were allocated time to assist with expert input e.g. economists and bushfire officer. | Staff and funds committed to facilitate participation in CRC research and collaborate with experts on possible outcomes. |
| Skills were internally available | Research skills, project management skills and engagement skills sourced internally. Collaborative research with the tertiary sector built the collective skill profile. | High level engineering and scientific skills available internally. This allowed project managers to contribute to the work of the CRC and helped to guide research students investigating smaller, local issues. |
| External knowledge sought and applied | Expert, local, strategic and political knowledge utilised. External knowledge supported by local knowledge allowed for adaptations to be highly relevant and contextualised. | External knowledge available through the CRC and within the Sydney Council Consortium expanded the range of options and solutions that could be applied to solve problems. Partnering with universities and facilitating projects for research students helped to identify key solutions to many local issues. |
| Staff able to respond to emerging issues | Staff given the flexibility to respond to not just emerging issues, but more importantly emerging solutions. | Staff able to utilise the expanded range of options because of the autonomy in decision making given to them. |
| Organisational capacity is developing | Staff are building a strong profile in the area of adaptation planning. Skills are moving beyond one department into other areas of Council, e.g. disaster resilience planning involving a local emergency management officer (known as LEMOs). Assisting other Councils to implement a similar strategy is assisting staff to develop a deeper understanding of adaptation issues. | Continued involvement in the CRC and local research projects is increasing capacity for sustainable water management through broadening involvement of council staff and integration of research outcomes into council policies, plans and strategies, including local planning instruments. |
| Innovation is recognised and rewarded | Council has in place a system of recognition for innovation that includes work on policy and strategy innovation. | Council has in place a system of recognition for innovation that includes work on policy and strategy innovation. |

Although it doesn't qualify as a revolution, local government culture has shifted. Today, staff search out the knowledge gaps, foster the transition from reactive to proactive budget allocation, and build knowledge based on transparent and accountable methods sourced from peer reviewed literature and research. The rigor of such investigations gives decision makers confidence and encourages them to allow the results to inform future directions. Research has opened up many new opportunities for local government, it helps motivate staff to explore solutions to recalcitrant problems, and has expanded and enhanced the quality and quantity of the knowledge base informing decision making. Overall, this contributes to more sustainable and transparent actions that contribute to the overall quality of our environments, communities and lifestyles.

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# *One size fits all?* An appraisal as to how NSW councils have reacted and adapted to new legislation

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**Abstract.** This paper is part of a research project examining the long-term impact of local government reform in NSW. In particular, it examines those reforms that emphasise policy creation and strategy formulation as opposed to 'day-to-day' management and operations. It takes as its starting point the *1993 Local Government Act*, which was a watershed in implementing 'new' approaches in New South Wales Local Government. The paper succeeds a previous paper – '*Panacea or snake oil? An examination of local government reform processes in New South Wales*' (Willis & Paddon 2011) – and details the first of three case studies providing analysis. The first case study is a comprehensive review of council plans and reports of how Canada Bay Council ('the Council') responded to legislated requirements during the period 1994–2012.

The paper briefly explains the NSW State Government's objectives vis-à-vis the *NSW Local Government Act 1993*[1], and its subsequent amendments. It also describes how those objectives have been interpreted, implemented and established as a series of guidelines or expectations by the State Government's Division of Local Government ('the Division'). The paper also details a timeline of administrative reforms as determined by the Division. In turn, a timeline of Canada Bay Council's approach to the reforms was formulated and contrasted against the Division's expectations. The analysis revealed that immediately following the introduction of the '93 Act, Council was still locked into a 'departmental' mind-set, and was focussed on 'day-to-day' management and operations. However, as it entered the period 2000–10 the mindset transitioned to one of long-term strategic planning, and post-2010 its full focus was on strategic formulation and policy creation coupled with community engagement. From the research and analysis undertaken to date, it is surmised that for any introduction of new local government legislation, as much as 12 years should be allowed to facilitate a transition of the existing culture. Moreover, unique council contexts should factor into calculations of cultural change as it can be broadly concluded that 'one size will not fit all'.

[1] All in-text references to the legislation were current at May 2013.

## Introduction

The reform program over the last two decades has been significant – but imposed in a 'top-down' approach (legislation). There has been little research as to how the reforms have impacted on local government or how local government has reacted to them. This paper aims to provide insight into how councils have coped with the reform process.

It is anticipated that the completed research will provide an understanding of the effects of introduced reforms, thus building a basis so that the future introduction of reforms may be more harmoniously undertaken.

## Background

The author is undertaking a research program into local government with the view of acquiring a Ph.D. The research in particular seeks to elicit a response to the following research questions:

Primary research questions are as follows:

1. To what degree has it been evidenced that NSW councils are now thinking and acting with a greater emphasis on policy creation and strategy formulation (as opposed to 'day-to-day' management and operations) than was the situation prior to the reform process culminating in the NSW Local Government Act 1993?
2. To what degree has it been evidenced that there is now a clearer distinction of the roles and responsibilities between councillors and staff than there was prior to the reform process culminating in the Local Government Act 1993?
3. With regard to responses drawn from Questions (1) and (2) above, what is the evidence that changes that have occurred (if any) were the result of the NSW Local Government Act 1993?

As a component of that research, three NSW councils have been selected as case studies – viz. Canada Bay Council, Penrith Council and Wollondilly Council.

In the endeavour to gain an appreciation as to how those councils have reacted to the impacts of the reforms, detailed analysis is being undertaken of their annual reports, management plans, strategic plans, and other salient documentation. When complete, the analysis will be followed up with interviews.

This paper is derived primarily from an initial analysis of public documents from Canada Bay Council. Whilst much of the paper is concerned with the Council in particular and NSW to a lesser extent, what is revealed has ramifications beyond the State border.

## The Local Government Act 1993

The NSW State Government established objectives for local councils to be, amongst other things, more accountable, more transparent, and to think in the long-term. Accordingly the following provisions were included in the 1993 Act.

S402 – during each year, a council must prepare a draft management plan with respect to:
a. The council's activities for at least the next three years; and
b. The council's revenue policy for the next year.

The 1993 Act then specified the content of the draft management plans, the operative comments being 'must include'. These requirements are given below (s.403).

- A statement of the principal activities that the council proposes to conduct
- A statement of the objectives and performance targets for each of its principal activities
- A statement of the manner in which the council proposes to assess its performance in respect of its principal activities
- Statements with respect to such other matters as may be described by the Regulations.

The 1993 Act (s.428) also required that 'within 5 months after the end of the year, a council must prepare a report as to its achievements with respect to the objectives and performance targets set out in its management plan for that year'.

### 2009 amendment to the Local Government Act 1993

S.402 was amended in late 2009 to require 'community strategic plans'. In this context, it was required that 'each local government area must have a community strategic plan that has been developed and endorsed by the council'. A community strategic plan is a plan that identifies the main priorities and aspirations for the future of the local government area covering a period of at least 10 years from when the plan was endorsed. Whilst overall there are seven issues identified in the legislation (s.402) to be taken into account, the following two are particularly pertinent:

- A community strategic plan is to establish strategic objectives together with strategies for achieving those objectives.
- The council must ensure that the community strategic plan:
    a) Addresses civic leadership, social, environmental and economic issues in and integrated manner; and
    b) Is based on social justice principles of equity, access, participation, rights; and

c) Is adequately informed by relevant information relating to civic leadership, social, environmental, economic issues; and
d) Is developed having due regard to the State Government's State Plan and other relevant State and Regional plans of the State Government.

In addition, and in support of the community strategic plan, the following are required:

- 'A council must have a long term strategy (called its 'resourcing strategy') for the provision of the resources required to implement the strategies established by the community strategic plan that the council is responsible for.' (*Local Government Act 1993*, s.403.)
- A council must have a program ('its delivery program') detailing the principal activities to be undertaken by the council to implement the strategies established by the community strategic plan within the resources available under the resourcing strategy (ibid, s.404) and that this is for a four-year period commencing 01 July following an election.
- 'A council must have a plan (its 'operational plan') that is adopted before the beginning of each year, and details the activities to be engaged in by the council during the year as part of the delivery program covering that year.' (ibid, s.405.).
- 'A council must ensure that the requirements of the guidelines [for Integrated Planning and Reporting] are complied with.' (ibid, s.406.)

## Pre-1993 Culture

Prior to 1993 there was no requirement for formal planning, and under the provision of the *Local Government Act 1919* no member of staff officially occupied a position as chief executive officer – indeed, this office was occupied by the Mayor (or President) who could only be elected by council members. In many councils prior to 1993, a culture prevailed that allowed individual departments to plan their activities with little regard for the overall public good or the plans of others. This is supported by Peacocke (1991) who asserts that the previous Local Government Act (1919), because of its detailed and archaic provisions, locked organisational structures into rigid hierarchies.

## NSW State Government objectives underlying the 1993 Act – ('Watershed No.1')

In considering the overhaul of the *Local Government Act 1919*, the State Government sought a piece of legislation that would:

- Be comprehensible (i.e. written in ‘plain ‘English’)
- Provide a basis for the next 20–30 years
- Aim to maintain excellence in the best councils
- Ensure that those below par improve their performance
- Provide for greater local involvement
- Broadly express powers of councils
- Consolidate regulatory systems
- Provide a clear policy role for councillors
- Require performance contracts for senior staff
- Ensure accountability focussed on the community
- Ensure accountability focussed on the State
- Be useable by all.

In particular the thrust was that it would:

- Be a ‘modern Act’
- Eliminate certificated and departmental responsibilities (i.e. eradication of the ‘departmental’ culture detailed above)
- Reduce the numbers of differing approvals
- Be more outcomes focussed (NSW DLG 1992).

Further, from detailed perusal of relevant documents at the time, it can be assessed that the intention was for a culture in which the ‘higher-level objectives would be:

- Accountability
- (Management) efficiency
- Transparency
- Community leadership
- Improved strategic planning
- Enhanced annual reporting
- A clear distinction between the respective roles of councillors (policy) and staff (day-to-day operations) (NSW DLG 1992).

Thus, councils were required (by legislation) to change their focus/culture from inward-looking departmental activity to an outward looking, long-term planning (community focussed) program. This change in culture, however, could not occur overnight. This paper examines how Canada Bay Council (formerly Concord and Drummoyne Councils) reacted to the legislation. In particular, the paper establishes a

time-line for the change in Council culture, and compares this with an ideal time-line established by the State Government's Department of Local Government.

### Additional objectives of the 2009 amendments – ('Watershed No. 2')

As early as 2000, councils were being urged to think more strategically and the NSW Department of Local Government (the Department) produced guidelines for this purpose (NSW DLG 2000). In this document, the Department provides advice on how to develop both the strategic component of the management plan, plus the operational component. It also provided draft guidelines as to a 'whole-of-council' approach to strategic planning whilst at the same time endeavouring to clarify the respective roles of councillors and staff (put simply, councillors – policy; staff – day-to-day operations).

In December 2006, the Department released a discussion paper; *Fitting the Pieces Together: Integrated Planning and Reporting by NSW Local Councils.* This document tied integrated planning and reporting to the NSW local government reform program. Its stated aims were to 'ensure healthy and sustainable local councils, that are accountable and responsive to their local communities' (NSW DLG 2006a, p. 2). It stated further that there are 'shortcomings in the existing planning and reporting arrangements' (ibid). With particular regard to integrated planning and reporting, it was stated that the aims were:

- Improved integration of various statutory planning and reporting processes
- Strengthening councils' strategic focus
- Streamlining reporting processes
- Ensuring that the Act and subsequent guidelines support a strategic and integrated approach (ibid).

In presenting the *Local Government Amendment (Planning and Reporting) Bill, 2009* the Minister for Local Government, Barbara Perry MLA stated that 'Local government has come a long way in terms of strategic planning, but there is still room for improvement'. She further stated that 'the object was to improve long-term strategic planning and resource management by local councils'. She concluded that 'this is all about councils being accountable to their community for delivering positive outcomes' (Perry 2009).

## Local government commentators (interviewees) related comments

The foregoing indicates the more recent State Government approach to local government reform. Basically this approach requires councils to think in a long-term strategic manner, following engagement with their communities whilst concurrently

planning and reporting on its more immediate needs. To achieve this end, it was required that councils be more accountable, more transparent, more efficient, more effective, provide community leadership and, importantly, be outcomes/programs focussed as opposed to departmentally focussed (Perry 2009). As an initial part of the author's research program, and in order to synthesise and validate the main objectives behind the reforms the 1993 Act, the thoughts and observations of 11 disparate local government specialists were obtained. These specialists were both practitioners and academics, all of whom had been actively involved in the reform program. From these interviews the key elements of the reforms were identified as relating to accountability, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, community leadership, and generating a focus on outcomes.

*Accountability*

Basically, the interviewees viewed 'accountability' as a responsibility to the community. In this regard, the interviewees were generally in agreement. They were of the opinion that (limited) planning and reporting requirements had increased the apparent accountability to the community. The interviewees differed, however, with regards to the degree of accountability legislated, and avoided making generalisations as to how the situation has changed since 1993One interviewee noted that accountability to the community was effective only in so far as it was genuinely community-based.

The interviewees submitted a note of caution regarding increased accountability. They feared that too much accountability may have a negative impact as councils may be susceptible to excessive scrutiny and public criticism.

*Efficiency*

The respondents were of the opinion that the major drawback to improved efficiency was the lack of clearly legislated, defined roles between councillors and staff. They were generally of the opinion that, whilst the '1993 Act had made progress on this topic, it still fell far short of expectations. They also indicated that this imprecision had lead to power struggles between senior staff and the elected representatives. They offered the opinion that a clearly defined chief executive officer with appropriate powers would overcome this situation.

*Effectiveness*

The interviewees noted that a philosophy underpinning the 1993 Act was the lack of prescription. They noted that one of the intentions of the legislation was to give local government the 'freedom to act'. Despite this intention, however, the interviewees also felt that the reform process had actually increased bureaucratisation and over-regulation.

As a result, they considered that local government's compliance with legislation remains over-prescriptive and over-bureaucratised.

*Transparency*

Generally, the interviewees made little distinction between 'accountability' and 'transparency', with feedback on the subject of accountability also relating to ''transparency.

They did, however, refer to a number of related issues. Firstly, they felt that the introduction of a council's charter into the 1993 Act was beneficial, and represented a major step forward. A second major (at the time) innovation was the writing of the 1993 Act in plain English, with accompanying sketches and tables. Much was made of this by the State Government at the time but it did not impress the interviewees. What did impress the interviewees, however, was the new openness of council meetings and council actions generally. They felt that this was a distinct improvement.

*Community leadership*

Surprisingly, issues such as community leadership were considered relatively minor. Given that that one aspect of the planning requirement was community engagement, there was anticipation that the 1993 Act would improve standards of community leadership and engagement. The interviewees asserted that this did not occur. The interviewees also noted that, whilst provision of community engagement has been an on-going trend, this remains an activity with which councils remain unfamiliar.

*Outcomes / programs focussed*

As with community leadership, an outcomes/programs focus was a topic that did not significantly interest the interviewees. However, they felt that the 1993 Act gave councils the ability to create organisations to suit their needs and they expressed a desire for a flatter organisational structure comprised of inter-disciplinary teams focussed on outcomes. As such they felt that local government should be transformed from a 'serving property' orientation to a 'serving people' orientation.

They viewed the requirement for management plans as beneficial as they forced councils to think ahead. However, they viewed the introduction of integrated planning and reporting as an even better initiative, as it forced councils to take a longer view.

## Overview

As a consensus, the interviewees were of the opinion that introduction of the 1993 Act had proved beneficial, albeit falling short of the ideal. Indeed, the comment was made

that at the time of preparation of the 1993 Act, there was great hope for a result, but some requirements ultimately proved elusive.

Some of the areas that the interviewees subsequently would like to see addressed include:

- Removal of major stakeholder power struggles
- Clear distinction of roles between council members and staff
- Longer-term strategic and sustainable planning
- Improved asset management
- Benchmarking.

In fact it could be argued that the following papers and documents have to a large extent addressed these issues:

- Guidelines: *Management planning for NSW local government* (Department of Local Government 2000)
- Discussion Papers: *Planning a sustainable future* (Department of Local Government 2006b); *Promoting Better Practice* (Department of Local Government 2005)
- Legislation: *Local Government Act 1993, Amendment, 2009*.

## Concord Council / Canada Bay Council: policy analysis and review

The primary research for the author's doctoral program which is covered in this paper involves reviewing the responses to the State Government initiated reform process in three case study councils via an extensive analysis of their planning and reporting documents. This will be supplemented with interviews with elected representatives and senior appointed officers in each council. The three case study councils are Canada Ba City Council, Penrith City Council, and Wollondilly Shire Council. They were selected to give coverage of inner/outer city, and urban/rural councils. The remainder of this paper covers what is now Canada Bay Council in the inner west of the Sydney metropolitan area. Canada Bay Council was established in 2000 as an amalgamation between what was previously Concord and Drummoyne Councils. So the analysis starts with Concord Council from 1994.

From the foregoing and scrutiny of Department of Local Government documents culminating in the 2009 legislative amendment, a time-frame of reform can be anticipated as follows:

| | Main objectives in State Gov. reforms | Concord / Canada Bay Council actions |
|---|---|---|
| 1994-99 | Primarily a culture change, requiring, in particular, a degree of forward planning (management plans), and a more transparent and accountable annual report readily available for public perusal. | 1994: Retention of previous 'departmental' culture<br>1995-99: Transition from 'departmental' outputs to a series of council programs (outcomes). |
| 2000-06 | The concept of long-term planning was introduced, together with aspects of strategic planning. Roles of staff/councillors being clarified and resolved. | Bedding down the requirements for the provision of management plans and annual reports, and an awareness of the objectives for strategic planning. |
| 2007-09 | The principle of 'Promoting Better Practice' was introduced, and councils were required to take a self-reflective analysis of their activities. Councils were to consider resource planning and engage the community in major discussions. | Transition towards community engagement and community-based strategic planning. |
| 2010-11 | Councils were required to think long-term and engage with their communities. Councils were also to display community leadership and undertake resource planning. | Determining community engagement and community-involved strategic planning. |

## Concord Council 1994-99

*Management plans*

Earlier the requirements for management plans were enunciated. This was an initial step by State Government to make councils plan ahead (albeit for only three years), and to plan holistically. At the time (General Counsel 1987) there was a concern that this may prove insufficient. The concern was realised, and between 2000 and 2009 the State Government pressed for the introduction of Integrated Planning and Reporting objectives (viz. long-term strategic planning, community engagement and holistic planning).

The first Concord Council (the Council) Management Plan analysed was 1994-97, and in the introduction to that Plan it was reported that 'it was the first Management Plan produced' by Council. It was further reported that Council's 'activities' were divided up by departments and sections within those departments. There was little reference to the concept of strategic planning, and effectively no mention of inter-relating with the community.

By 1995, however, the Management Plan was focussed on 'Principal Activities' and the departmental roles had been dispensed with. One principal activity was that of 'Customer Service and Organisational Management', reflecting a more customer-focussed and managerially efficient organisation. It was noted that the emphasis on

service delivery had diminished, to be somewhat replaced by an emphasis on communities.

The 1996 Management Plan increased from 51 to 70 pages, and provided more details of activities. There continued to be awareness of the community, and community leadership was prominent. There was also a thrust for a more strategic approach to planning, and there was a growing awareness of the Council's role as steward of the local environment.

The 1997 Management Plan saw a greater emphasis on Council as a steward of the local environment, and also in displaying a greater interest and focus on the community.

The 1998 Management Plan had increased in size from 70 to 120 pages, primarily to include (operational) budgeting, but also to include some long-term financial planning. Community focus continued to feature prominently, and a strategic approach was evident for the first time.

In brief, the Council had been entrenched in a 'departmental culture' in 1994, but had progressed to an activity-based culture founded on interaction with the community by 1998. However, whilst progress had been made towards a customer-driven forward plan, the old 'departmental' culture was still very much in evidence.

*Annual reports*

Annual reporting of itself was not an innovation, however the 1993 Act requires reports not only of a fiscal nature, but to include a general management focus including, but not limited to: commentary on the year's operational activities; management plans; the environment; and asset management.

Although the Concord Council 1994 Annual Report was not the first that the Council had produced, it was the first since the introduction of the '93 Act, and the specific requirements of that Act. As with the Management Plan, the pre-existing culture still held sway, and comments and activities were mentioned in a non-specific manner. There were some limited examples of community focus, but overall, the departmental culture underpinned the document. The document highlighted (departmental) achievements and success, but not where progress may have fallen short.

The following year, the 1995Annual Report had increased in size from 20 to 30 pages. The 'departmental roles' had been dispensed with in favour of generic customer-focussed principal activities.

The additional 10 pages were for the reporting of customer-focussed activities including 'Customer Service' and 'Community Facilities and Services'. The Council displayed 'increased transparency' and 'accountability', and the reporting included not only achievements, but activities that fell short. However, the 'departmental' culture

prevailed, leading the Mayor to comment in his introduction to the report that ‘some divisive departmental attitudes are still apparent’.

The 1996 Annual Report for the first time saw a definite effort to provide community leadership and a degree of strategic planning. However, the ingrained departmental culture was still evident, causing the Mayor to again comment accordingly.

The 1997 Annual Report expanded to include the activities of ‘CanBay’, a resource-sharing initiative between Concord and Drummoyne Councils. The report highlighted achievements of this entity, somewhat at the expense of its other activities. It focussed on service provision, and the move toward a customer focus appeared to have stalled.

The following year the Annual Report was reduced by three pages, primarily due to less detail being allocated to the principal activities. Whilst accountability and transparency still predominated, there was still a focus on the provision of services, and the activities of CanBay.

In brief, as with management planning, the Council had progressed from a ‘departmental’ culture to one in which it was starting to focus on the community through a series of programs. Unfortunately, the advent of CanBay derailed the progress on reporting somewhat.

*Overview*

Analysis of the annual reports tended to mirror those of management planning. In 1994 the Council was still locked into a departmental culture with each department trying to highlight its independent achievements (sometimes at the expense of other departments) and thus the management plan and annual report were merely undertaken because they were a legislated requirement.

By 1998, the Council had altered its focus from introspection to outward-looking. Customer focus was increasing (although there was no community leadership or community engagement), and there was some evidence of strategic thinking.

The establishment of CanBay was to some degree unpropitious as it created an over-emphasis on the activities related to service provision (for provision’s sake). This probably constrained the Council’s community focus and strategic thinking.

## Canada Bay Council 2000-10

*Background information*

Concord Council amalgamated with Drummoyne Council in December 2000 to form Canada Bay Council (the Council). The remainder of the analysis is therefore from the records of Canada Bay Council.

In conducting research for Concord/Canada Bay Councils it was not the intent originally to study any documents other than management plans and annual reports. However, as the research progressed, it became apparent that a study of the documents leading to the creation of a newly-amalgamated council would be salient. Unfortunately, this aspect of the research at this time remains outstanding.

*Management plans*

The first Management Plan of the new Council (Canada Bay) was basically an update and merger of the respective individual management plans of Concord and Drummoyne Councils (a foreword to the 2004 Management Plan stated this). However, it was evidenced that this new Council was forward-looking and community focussed. The lingering 'departmental' culture had been dispensed with and the Council had made more than a figurative break with its past. In particular, the roles of councillors and staff had been clarified, with councillors concentrating on policy and/or reviewing council's performance, and with staff concentrating on day-to-day management.

By 2004, the Management Plan had taken a new approach and was expanded from 59 to 93 pages, principally due to the inclusion of detailed strategic planning of the principal activities, which had been significantly revised. The Council showed a marked shift to community-related items, in particular in responding to community needs by way of the provision of services. However, whilst increasingly community-focussed, based on the analyses conducted of the Council's actions and transactions it would appear that the Council had yet to fully engage its community.

In light of continued reform, the Council introduced its 2007 Management Plan in two parts. Part A is a document based on a 10 year projection, and is structured around 10 'Corporate Objectives'. As could be expected, strategic planning plays a significant role, but so does a community orientation, and in particular Council displays significant community leadership.

Part B is a 'standard' management plan. Again, from analysis of the Council's actions and transactions, community engagement is a feature of the plan, as is accountability.

In brief, this plan indicates the endeavour of the Council to comply with the Department's requirements in that it engages the community in a long-term social plan, separates the respective roles of councillors and staff, and makes its proposed actions fully available for scrutiny.

*Annual reports*

Canada Bay Council had been created thus precipitating a new approach to annual reports. The 2004 Annual Report had increased from 35 to 118 pages. The major

increase was due to the detailed reporting of principal activities, which had increased from 14 to 93 pages. The principal activities in this instance were proposed outcomes and holistic activities spanning all council divisions.

Within the annual report, there were increased examples of transparency and accountability as well as an increased community focus. In brief, the Council was showing the community what it is doing, what it has done, and how it has gone about it.

The 2007 Annual Report reported on five principal activities subdivided into 27 programs. The emphasis within the report is increased transparency, and to a lesser extent accountability. In its reporting the Council draws attention to improving management activities. Further, the Council has bedded down the respective roles of councillors and staff. Through the 2007 Annual Report, the Council endeavoured to comply with the Department's objectives. It opened itself up for scrutiny, displayed a high degree of transparency, and was prepared to commit to its activities.

The 2010 Annual Report was divided into two Sections: 'Snapshot' and 'Legislative Report'. The snapshot was directed primarily at the community and provided a summary of the Council's activities for the year. The legislative report was intended to provide the detailed information required by legislation. As can be expected, compliance with legislative requirements features highly in this iteration of the annual report, as does 'enhanced annual reporting' due to inclusion of the items detailed above.

In compliance with departmental objectives, the Council is increasingly transparent and accountable. In addition, through its annual reporting it was able to highlight issues relating to improved strategic planning, customer focus, and improved management efficiency.

*Strategic Plan – Futuresplan20*

Legislation requiring, amongst other things, integrated planning and reporting was introduced in late 2009. In accordance with the new legislation, Council produced a strategic document detailing planning until the year 2020. It was an upgraded version of the document originally produced in 2008. It was heavily reliant on community input, with two pages devoted to explaining how the community was engaged, seven pages devoted to what the community said, and 18 pages devoted to detailing how the community expectations could be realised. In brief, the Council began showing increased concern for its community, environment and future, and signalled that it is prepared to act on community responses. The previous requirement and format for a management plan had been replaced by the reporting framework of a strategic plan (ten-year plan); a delivery plan (three-year plan), and an operational plan (one-year plan). Thus, *FuturesPlan20* combines both the delivery plan and the operational plan. In the strategic

plan, community focus features highly, particularly community leadership and community strategic options.

*Canada Bay review report*

In 2007, the Council prepared its submission under the terms of the Department's *Promoting Better Practice* program. On receipt of this submission the Department carried out a review and prepared a Report accordingly (NSW Division of Local Government, Department of Premier and Cabinet 2010). The review had no legal status per se – it replaced somewhat the previous examples of the departmental 'Inspectors Report'. The expectation, however, was that councils should take cognisance of any requirements, and take immediate efforts to comply. Departmental advice was that, in an extreme case of non-compliance, the matter could be placed in the hands of the Minister for Local Government for an appropriate determination (e.g. dismissal of the council).

The Departmental Review Report comprised some 47 pages, of which 33 were commentaries of the Council's activities. The analysis was *not* to dwell on the Council's shortcomings, but rather to consider on a broad canvas what the Council is doing and why, and in particular how its activities conform to Departmental objectives.

The over-riding concern was with efficiency, concerning which the Council was seen in a favourable light. The Department also noted that the Council was fully compliant with legislative requirements, and favourably observed that Council had improved its decision-making facilities. It also noted that the Council had become a more strategic thinking, customer-focussed organisation. Despite the favourable commentary, however, the Department viewed the Council's transition as being driven primarily by legislative requirements, rather than by a broader appreciation of the merits of strategic planning and community engagement.

*New Democracy*

In compliance with *Promoting Better Practice* principles, and later the integrated planning and reporting legislation, the Council formally adopted a comprehensive community engagement policy on 16 February 2010 (City of Canada Bay 2010). This was followed by invitations to the community to engage with Council, particularly with regards to its FuturesPlan20 activities.

In early 2011, the Council further improved its community engagement program and undertook an initiative derived from NewDemocracy principles which essentially argued that governmental policy decisions should be determined as a result of significant community engagement. Through an initiative of the Council, 1,577 randomly-generated addresses were selected and the prospective participants invited to register their interest

for participation in a panel. From those who registered an interest (approximately 10%), a panel of 32 was selected by a stratified random draw based on census statistics.

The panel's 'brief' was to consider a broad range of the Council's overall activities and report back. The panel was thus provided with wide-ranging powers, and had access to most of the Council's stored information. The panel held five sessions and was due to report to the Council in October 2012. The Council was of the opinion that it would come out of the process smarter and better informed. However, the Council viewed the exercise in isolation (i.e. as a 'one-off'), although its conclusions would be reviewed regularly. At the time of writing the Council's determination as to the panel's recommendations is yet to be released.

## Observations and conclusions

Preparatory to the introduction of *Local Government Act 1993*, the State Government was highlighting the need for councils to be transparent and accountable in particular. These objectives lead to the implementation of legislative requirements for the preparation of annual reports and management plans. These two document types have formed the basis of the analysis within this paper.

Even as the '93 Act was being promulgated, there were moves to expand councils' actions such that councils would think strategically and in the long-term with a whole-of-council approach (ALGA 1993). Pressure both from within the Department of Local Government and from member associations led to a discussion paper for integrated planning and reporting (NSW DLG 2006), plus guidelines for promoting better practice (NSW DLG 2005). Finally, in December 2009, a significant amendment was moved (Perry 2009) which called for integrated planning and reporting which itself had the following objectives:

- Community engagement
- Long-term community-focussed strategic planning (min. 10 years)
- Whole-of-council reporting
- Clarification of the respective roles of councillors and staff.

Prior to 1993 each council department head pursued their own agendas – even if they were not necessarily in the best interest of the Council as a whole.

Perusal of data received from Canada Bay Council yielded the following time-line of council development as dictated by Departmental objectives:

- 1994: Retention of previous 'departmental' culture

- 1995-99: Transition from ‘departmental’ outputs to a series of council programs (outcomes)
- 2000-06: Bedding down the requirements for the provision of management plans and annual reports, and an awareness of the objectives of strategic planning
- 2007-09: Transition towards community engagement and community-based strategic planning
- 2010-11: Determining community engagement and community-involved strategic planning.

An appraisal was carried out as to Concord/Canada Bay Councils’ actual actions over time and compared them with the Department’s time-line above. The following actions were determined:

- 1994: Retention of a previous ‘departmental culture’
- 1995-99: Early transition towards a council program culture, but this stalled to some extent with the advent of the CanBay resource- sharing initiative
- 2000-06: Working towards community-focussed activities, plus the introduction of planning by performance
- 2007-09: Creation of a community-engaged long-term strategic plan (FuturesPlan20)
- 2010-11: Compliance with the full requirements of integrated planning and reporting. It went beyond those requirements with the initiative of NewDemocracy Principles as applied to the Council’s services and activities.

In brief, Canada Bay Council generally aligned with Departmental expectations between 1994 and 2012, and in some respects exceeded them. In particular it was evidenced that as time progressed the Council was moving to a more strategic outlook and had itself clarified the respective roles of councillors and staff although the creation of its ‘arm’s-length’ resource-sharing entity, CanBay, temporarily set back the Council’s reform program. Initially there appeared to be a culture of compliance purely to accord with legislative requirements, however, as the analysis proceeded, there appeared to be a growing culture of strategic planning, although sometimes at the expense of service provision. The introduction of integrated planning and reporting legislation may overcome this dichotomy through its requirements of published operational plans. Comments from council staff and members should also prove fruitful, interesting and revealing in this regard.

From past research undertaken by the author, it has been argued that a realistic time-line for compliance with new reforms and legislation is 12 years for major legislation,

and five years for significant amending reforms. This time frame appears warranted in order to change a council's ingrained culture. However, in the case studied, it would appear this time-frame appears over-optimistic. Whilst the Council made significant efforts to embrace the reforms, changing its culture was not an exercise to be undertaken in the short-term.

## Acknowledgements

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# Community wellbeing indicators: measures for local government

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**Abstract.** This paper presents key findings from a research project undertaken for the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG). The research project builds on national work undertaken in developing community wellbeing indicators and contributes to enhancing the capacity of councils to plan for, measure and report on the wellbeing of their communities. Whilst the concept has been the focus of research for many years, it has been revitalised by a renewed interest in how community wellbeing might be measured. A key objective of the project was to develop a tool which allows councils to: measure community wellbeing using a number of standard indicators; track changes over time in community wellbeing; benchmark performance against results from comparative surveys in councils across Queensland and elsewhere; and identify policy measures that can improve community outcomes. This paper profiles the process used to develop the survey template, and the results obtained from the state-wide survey using the questionnaire. The utilisation of scores obtained from the survey to develop a valid set of indicators capable of measuring overall community wellbeing is also discussed. The use of a standard questionnaire, as developed by this project, is seen as providing an opportunity to develop benchmarks by council category, and to track performance in enhancing community wellbeing. The paper argues that the use of this survey template enables replication of the research method allowing a valid assessment of community wellbeing. Such performance measures are critical to enhancing governance and general service delivery.

## Background

This paper presents key findings from a research project undertaken for LGAQ and ACELG. The research project built on national work undertaken in developing community wellbeing indicators and contributes to the enhanced capacity of councils to plan for, measure and report on the wellbeing of their communities (Morton & Edwards 2013).

The aim of the project was to support councils in developing ways to:

- better understand and measure local community wellbeing
- build a consistent statistics base
- improve community planning
- strengthen citizen involvement.

This research aimed at establishing a valid, but limited set of survey questions, able to be easily replicated, that would provide an indication of relative community wellbeing. The concept was to provide councils, especially smaller ones, with a tool which allows them to:

- measure community wellbeing using a number of standard indicators
- track changes over time in community wellbeing
- benchmark performance against results from comparative surveys in councils across the State (and elsewhere in Australia)
- identify policy measures that can improve community outcomes.

The project did not seek to identify every possible measure of community wellbeing. Instead, the project aimed at developing a practical community survey tool that can be used to assess and monitor community wellbeing within the framework of local community objectives and the context of local government roles and responsibilities.

## Framework

The project focused on five themes developed by Community Indicators Queensland (CIQ)[1]:

1. Healthy, safe and inclusive communities
2. Culturally rich and vibrant communities
3. Dynamic resilient local economies
4. Sustainable built and natural environments
5. Democratic and engaged communities.

The LGAQ/ACELG wellbeing indicators project rolled out simultaneously with the Community Resilience project conducted jointly by the Queensland Council of Social Service and Griffith University using the same five domain CIQ framework informed by Community Indicators Victoria. The resilience measures project further confirmed the need for establishing baseline community wellbeing measures at the local government level.

[1] See <http://www.communityindicatorsqld.org.au/>.

The National Accounts of Wellbeing project [2] reports two headline figures for personal and social well-being. **Personal wellbeing** measures people's experiences of their positive and negative emotions, satisfaction, vitality, resilience, self-esteem, and sense of positive functioning in the world. **Social wellbeing** measures people's experiences of supportive relationships and sense of trust and belonging with others.

The National Accounts of Wellbeing model relies on subjective ratings which capture personal wellbeing and social wellbeing assessments, noting that "… presenting separate data on 40 or so different questions would make it hard to see the patterns for the numbers and has the lack of reliability associated with using a single measure to capture any particular aspect of well-being".

A key issue for this project was the development of a valid set of questions. Another integral element was how to minimise the number of questions required while still being able to provide an indication of relative community wellbeing. Particularly, the research tool was intended to be relevant for the majority of local governments which typically do not have the research resources of larger councils.

This ACELG/LGAQ project resulted in some 34 indicators with scores on a five point scale. The indicators covered the five domains noted above, allowing them to provide an aggregated measure of relative community wellbeing. Full details of the survey instrument developed by the research are included in the project report published by ACELG (Morton & Edwards 2013).

## Research method

The Project involved:

- a literature review of community indicator research undertaken internationally and elsewhere in Australia (CIQ 2011; CIV 2013; Cummins et al. 2011; Malcom 2012; Michaelson et al. 2009)
- development and testing of an initial pilot survey with representatives of five local governments
- review and feedback on the draft questionnaire from a further six councils across Queensland
- a State-wide survey in March 2013 to develop the benchmark scores for each question with a sample of 500, subdivided into South East Queensland, Regional Cities and the Rural Balance.

[2] See <http://www.nationalaccountsofwellbeing.org/>.

The results obtained from the March 2013 benchmarking survey using the final questionnaire indicated that there is very little difference for the ratings given by each geographic sector, or those ratings given in the initial pilot. For most questions there was also little significant difference in the responses by gender or by age group.

At the aggregate level, the total score in the 2013 survey was **3.43 (68.6%)**. Table 1 shows the scores aggregated by theme for the initial pilot and for the benchmarking survey. Table 2 shows the score out of 5 obtained for each of the 34 indicator questions. Data from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey in April 2011 (Cummins et al. 2011) provides an indication of how well this survey corresponds with other surveys aimed at measuring wellbeing.

In this Australian Unity survey, two indexes generally cover the themes used for this study. For personal wellbeing, the score was 75.9% while for National Wellbeing the score was 62.7%. Combining these two indexes gives a score of **69.3%**, very similar to the aggregate score above from the 2013 ACELG/LGAQ project survey of **68.6%**.

**Tab. 1.** Theme Scores 2013 Survey and 2011 Pilot

| Theme | Score 2013 | Pilot 2011 |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Healthy, safe and inclusive communities | 3.69 | 3.8 |
| 2. Culturally rich and vibrant communities | 3.74 | 3.8 |
| 3. Dynamic resilient local economies | 2.98 | 3.2 |
| 4. Sustainable built and natural environments | 3.46 | 3.6 |
| 5. Democratic and engaged communities | 3.10 | 3.0 |

## Conclusions and recommendations

The intent of this project was to provide a survey template and benchmarks that could be used by councils, in Queensland and elsewhere.

The use of these standard questions and the rating scale provided is important in gaining a comparative measure of community wellbeing. While other questions can be added to suit unique local government contexts, the use of the core set of questions is recommended.

Key outcomes sought from the project were to:

- encourage councils to use the survey template provided as a key tool to source data for their long term community planning
- provide the ability to benchmark performance against results from comparative surveys in other councils
- assist councils to identify policy measures that can improve community outcomes.

**Tab. 2.** 2013 Community Wellbeing Survey Scores

| Item | 2011 Pilot Survey | 2013 Survey | SEQ 2013 | Provincial Cities 2013 | Rural 2013 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Public transport adequacy | 3.9 | **2.75** | 3.00 | 2.66 | 2.23 |
| 2. Health service adequacy | 3.2 | **3.48** | 3.58 | 3.44 | 3.28 |
| 3. Education service adequacy | 3.9 | **3.71** | 3.79 | 3.61 | 3.65 |
| 4. Sport, recreation | 3.8 | **3.74** | 3.73 | 3.73 | 3.78 |
| 5. Arts and culture | 3.4 | **3.35** | 3.34 | 3.26 | 3.53 |
| 6. Social interaction in public spaces | Not piloted | **3.58** | 3.48 | 3.78 | 3.51 |
| 7. Park/reserves upkeep | 3.6 | **3.77** | 3.97 | 3.47 | 3.71 |
| 8. Park/reserves accessibility | 3.6 | **3.84** | 4.00 | 3.58 | 3.84 |
| 9. Park/reserves facilities | Not piloted | **3.58** | 3.68 | 3.47 | 3.48 |
| 10. Bikeways | 3.2 | **2.96** | 3.06 | 2.81 | 2.94 |
| 11. Walking paths | 3.3 | **3.16** | 3.34 | 2.92 | 3.09 |
| 12. Protection of natural environment | 3.5 | **3.49** | 3.58 | 3.38 | 3.46 |
| 13. Socially inclusive environment | Not piloted | **3.40** | 3.45 | 3.39 | 3.30 |
| 14. Liveable built environment | Not piloted | **3.50** | 3.56 | 3.34 | 3.54 |
| 15. Suitability for young children | 3.8 | **3.52** | 3.49 | 3.49 | 3.63 |
| 16. Suitability for teenagers | 3.4 | **2.97** | 2.90 | 3.13 | 2.90 |
| 17. Suitability for seniors | 3.7 | **3.58** | 3.58 | 3.61 | 3.52 |
| 18. Level of support from friends | 4.1 | **4.30** | 4.21 | 4.44 | 4.30 |
| 19. Level of support from family | 4.1 | **4.32** | 4.32 | 4.37 | 4.23 |
| 20. Level of support from neighbours | 3.9 | **3.93** | 3.91 | 3.89 | 4.05 |
| 21. Access for disabled | 3.4 | **3.37** | 3.31 | 3.44 | 3.39 |
| 22. Welcoming of people from different cultures | Not piloted | **3.57** | 3.42 | 3.74 | 3.65 |
| 23. Volunteer/organisation involvement | Not piloted | **2.26** | 2.40 | 1.93 | 2.41 |
| 24. Safety when alone | 4.0 | **3.72** | 3.83 | 3.48 | 3.82 |
| 25. Life satisfaction | 4.2 | **4.30** | 4.27 | 4.42 | 4.18 |
| 26. Work not demanding or stressful | 3.2 | **3.01** | 3.13 | 2.79 | 3.07 |
| 27. Work not interfering with family life | 3.3 | **3.16** | 3.24 | 2.79 | 3.49 |
| 28. Job security | 3.8 | **3.08** | 3.18 | 2.63 | 3.51 |
| 29. Impact of cost of living | 2.6 | **2.37** | 2.38 | 2.25 | 2.51 |
| 30. Impact of housing cost | Not piloted | **3.29** | 3.48 | 2.77 | 3.60 |
| 31. Opportunities for engagement | 3.0 | **3.02** | 3.02 | 3.07 | 2.96 |
| 32. Range and quality of council services | Not piloted | **3.18** | 3.25 | 3.05 | 3.18 |
| 33. Ability to access internet | Not piloted | **3.96** | 3.98 | 4.01 | 3.82 |
| 34. Ability to access private or public transport | Not piloted | **3.55** | 3.66 | 3.16 | 3.85 |
| **Average of above** | **3.6** | **3.43** | **3.48** | **3.32** | **3.43** |

To achieve these outcomes requires ongoing initiatives. LGAQ has indicated that it will:

- place the results of this project, including the questionnaire and benchmarks, on-line
- promote the use of the questionnaire by Queensland councils
- use this survey tool to supplement its Queensland-wide biennial Community Attitudes Survey.

ACELG intends to:

- distribute the report widely through its national local government networks
- support LGAQ in promoting the use of the survey in other jurisdictions.

Where a council uses the specific questions and survey framework, it would be valuable if individual council results were collated and also made available through the LGAQ website. This would provide more specific benchmarks for different types of councils. This needs some organisation to collate data and disseminate the results.

Consideration could also be given to developing a web-based questionnaire. While such surveys do not have the rigour of a random sample, they do provide an opportunity to collect and analyse a large volume of data.

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## Attachment A. Summary of standard questions

*(5 point scale with 5 = very good to 1 = very poor)*

1. How would you rate the adequacy of the following services in your local community in terms of your needs and wellbeing?
    a. Public transport
    b. Health services
    c. Education
2. How adequate are the opportunities in your local community for you to effectively engage in:
    a. Sport and recreation
    b. Art & and cultural activities
3. How would you rate the opportunity for social interaction within your local community's public spaces?
4. How do you rate the parks, reserves and open spaces in your local community for:
    a. Upkeep
    b. Accessibility
    c. Facilities
5. How do you rate the availability in your local community of:
    a. Bikeways
    b. Walking paths
6. How satisfied are you with efforts being made in your local community:
    a. To protect and conserve the natural environment
    b. To provide a socially inclusive environment
    c. To provide a liveable built environment
7. How would you rate the suitability of your local community for:
    a. Young children
    b. Teenagers
    c. Seniors
8. How would you rate the level of support available to you from:
    a. Friends
    b. Family
    c. Neighbours
9. How would you rate access to buildings and services in your local community for people with a physical disability?
10. How strongly do you agree or disagree that your local community is welcoming of people from different cultures?

11. How would you rate your level of involvement in your local community as a volunteer or member of a community organisation?
12. How safe do you feel when you are outside and alone in a public place in your local community?
13. Thinking about your life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?
14. What is your current work status? If ‘working’ then: do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
    a. My work is not too demanding nor stressful
    b. My work and family life do not interfere with each other
    c. I have good job security
15. How would you rate the impact on your household from the increasing costs of living?
16. How would you rate the impact on your household’s finances of your current rental or mortgage payments?
17. How satisfactory is the way your local council provides opportunities for your voice to be heard on issues that are important to you?
18. How would you rate the overall performance of your local council in delivering an appropriate range and quality of services relevant to your households needs?
19. How satisfactory is your ability to access the internet whenever you need to?
20. How satisfactory is your ability to access private or public transport to meet your daily mobility requirements?

# Carbon offsetting by Queensland councils: motives and benefits

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**Abstract.** Carbon offsetting provides one avenue for local councils to mitigate their greenhouse gas emissions. This includes voluntary offsetting of council events or activities and purchasing carbon credits to offset emissions from transport, or landfill sites exceeding 25,000t$CO_2$-e. Offsets are 'An investment in a project that reduces greenhouse gas emissions or sequesters carbon from the atmosphere' to compensate for emissions from other activities (LGAQ 2009, p. 58). Under the *Carbon Credits (Carbon Farming Initiative) Act 2011*, local councils can also earn carbon credits through managing landfill emissions, or environmental plantings. This paper evaluates carbon offsetting actions and motives by Queensland councils from a 2012 *quantitative* and *qualitative* survey sent to all 73 councils. Some 32 councils completed the survey with a response rate of 51% (excluding Aboriginal shires). Seventeen Queensland councils stated that offsetting was neither necessary nor a priority due to their small size, or were unsure about offset guidelines. However, five city councils and two coastal regional councils were partially offsetting emissions mainly from vehicle fuel and electricity, or community events. Councils with a climate change strategy aiming to be carbon neutral (i.e. Cairns, Gold Coast, Redland, Sunshine Coast) were most likely to offset. The preferred offset action by councils was tree planting on council land, or in partnership with conservation groups or offset companies (Ecofund Queensland, Greening Australia, & Greenfleet). Four councils wanted to sell/earn carbon credits, or support local landholders. The key motives for carbon offsetting included: council concern about climate impacts, supporting conservation, being climate friendly, and financially supporting offset projects. Councils preferred carbon offset methods such as tree planting or renewable energy with tangible environmental and financial benefits.

## Introduction

Climate change and carbon mitigation are key issues for local government (ACELG 2011; Kebe, Bellassen & Leseur 2011; Pillora 2011; Svara et al. 2011; Storey et al. 2012, pp. 23-4; Storey & Eckstein 2013; Clean Energy Future 2013; Hoff & Strobel 2013;

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Iraldo & Gasbarro 2013; Zeppel 2013; Zeppel forthcoming). Reports include advice and case studies on greenhouse gas mitigation actions for local councils, including offsetting (QLGA 2009; Storey et al. 2012, pp. 23-4). Australia is a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol, with a national target of 5% emissions reduction on 2000 levels by 2020. Local councils are now required to report their carbon emissions over 25,000t$CO_2$-e a year from a single facility (i.e. landfill) under the *Clean Energy Act 2011*. Some 40 Australian councils are now liable entities for the carbon tax from landfill emissions or gas supply (CER 2013a). The carbon price of AUD$23t$CO_2$-e from 1 July 2012 ($24.15t$CO_2$-e from 1 July 2013) also impacts on council operations through the increased cost of electricity and materials (ALGA 2011; IPART 2011; LGAQ 2012). Councils are thus adopting eco-efficiency measures, and offsetting emissions, to reduce operating costs and carbon liability.

This paper evaluates carbon offsetting actions implemented by 32 Queensland local councils. As part of the broader national response to global warming, local government in Queensland faces the challenge of implementing policy, organisational and technical initiatives to mitigate its carbon emissions (LGAQ 2009; Steffen et al. 2012). This includes reporting of greenhouse gas emissions over a threshold of 25,000t$CO_2$-e to the Clean Energy Regulator under the *Clean Energy Act 2011*. To date, 12 Queensland councils have been listed as liable entities by the Clean Energy Regulator: 10 larger councils from landfills (i.e. Brisbane, Gold Coast, Logan, Townsville, Gladstone, Mackay, Moreton Bay, Rockhampton, Sunshine Coast and Toowoomba) while two regional councils are liable as natural gas suppliers (i.e. Maranoa and Western Downs). In that context, this paper reviews carbon offsetting responses by Queensland local councils at the city, regional, and shire levels (Zeppel & James-Overheu 2012a; Zeppel 2012a). It considers the varied size, capacity and motives of Queensland councils to adopt carbon offsetting. It also extends a pilot survey of Greater Adelaide councils (Zeppel 2012b) to a State-wide survey of Queensland councils.

## Queensland local government

There are 73 local government areas (LGAs) in Queensland, including seven city councils, 30 regional councils, 24 shire councils, and 12 Aboriginal shire councils. These councils range in size from five of the 10 largest LGAs for Australia in the high urban growth region of South East Queensland (SEQ; i.e. Brisbane, Gold Coast, Moreton Bay, Sunshine Coast, and Logan); mid-size regional centres in coastal and inland areas; and small rural or Aboriginal shires with less than 1,000 residents. These LGAs operate under the *Queensland Local Government Act 2009*. The *City of Brisbane Act 2010* covers Brisbane City Council as a corporation managing the largest LGA (by population)

in Australia. There is no state-wide climate change strategy for Queensland LGAs and no renewable energy, GreenPower or other carbon mitigation targets for local government have been set by the State government. The Local Government Association of Queensland has published a *Climate Change Mitigation* guide (LGAQ 2009), including advice on carbon offsetting to reduce emissions. A regional carbon plan by five LGAs in Far North Queensland set a target of 50% reduction in carbon emissions on 2007/08 levels by 2020 from council operations, and a regional offset planting policy for revegetation (FNQROC 2011). The Council of Mayors SEQ previously supported regional carbon sinks with tree planting on council land in Ipswich, Redland and Moreton Bay in 2009 for 11 SEQ councils to offset emissions (LGAQ 2009). The climate change plans of four coastal councils in Queensland have set a goal of being carbon neutral by 2020 in their operations by purchasing offsets (i.e. Brisbane [2026], Cairns, Gold Coast, and Sunshine Coast) (BCC 2008).

## Carbon offsetting

Carbon offsetting provides one avenue for local councils to mitigate their greenhouse gas emissions. Council vehicle fleets are offset through Greenfleet and regional tree planting initiatives (Newman 2010). City councils purchase carbon credits to offset emissions from transport or landfill (BCC 2008). Carbon offsets are defined as 'An investment in a project that reduces greenhouse gas emissions or sequesters carbon from the atmosphere,' to compensate for emissions from other activities (LGAQ 2009, p. 58). Carbon offsets are sold in both voluntary (National Carbon Offset Standard) and compliance (Australian Carbon Credit Unit) markets. A local government carbon offset checklist recommended councils seek offset products that were accredited, independently verified, and provided other environmental benefits (Balance Carbon 2010; LGASA 2010). Carbon credits from renewable energy, forestry, and methane reduction projects are sold by accredited offset companies such as Ecofund Queensland (2013), Greenfleet (2013), Greening Australia (2013) and other carbon brokers (Low Carbon Australia 2013). Under the *Carbon Credits (Carbon Farming Initiative) Act 2011*, local councils can engage in Carbon Farming Initiative (CFI) projects through managing landfill emissions, by native reforestation, or savannah burning (DCCEE 2012; CER 2013b). Key offsetting issues were CFI guidelines, project approvals, and ancillary benefits (Moore 2011).

In western Sydney, the Regenesis project established 33 carbon forests compliant with the Kyoto Protocol, with 21 forests on council land and 10 on private land (Storey et al. 2012, pp. 23-4). Land owners generate income through trading Regenesis carbon offset certificates in the NSW Greenhouse Gas Reduction Scheme, National Carbon

Offset Standard, or CFI (BCC & LPSC 2011). However, the NSW State government has banned NSW local councils from buying carbon credits as a financial product, with a legal quandary over meeting carbon liability (AAP 2012; Benson 2012). In Victoria, the South East Councils Climate Change Alliance established the Bunyip Carbon Sink project with regional planting of native trees to offset the emissions of five councils. Member councils purchased carbon from biodiversity plantings to offset their vehicle fleets. The Northeast and Central Greenhouse Alliances in Victoria also developed tree plantings for carbon sequestration and assessed their future carbon trading potential (SECCA 2012a, SECCA 2012b). In South Australia, 10 councils assessed land areas and vegetation with potential to earn CFI carbon credits (LGASA 2012). This paper evaluates carbon offsetting actions adopted by Queensland local councils.

## Methodology

The climate change mitigation survey for Queensland councils was based on carbon mitigation actions recommended in the Cities for Climate Protection (CCP) program, and a desktop review of climate change plans and carbon actions listed on Queensland council websites (Zeppel 2011b). The survey also adopted some questions from ICLEI's review of Australian (and New Zealand) councils in the CCP program (Hoff 2010), and previous climate change surveys of New South Wales local councils (DECCW 2010; LGSA 2010). These Australian surveys of local councils included a range of carbon mitigation actions relevant to Queensland councils, while local government associations have assessed carbon price impacts on selected councils (LGAQ 2012; MAV 2012). Similar surveys in the USA have evaluated carbon mitigation actions by municipalities (Svara et al. 2011), and planners (Tang et al. 2009). Sustainability officers at two large Queensland councils with climate change programs provided feedback on questions in the draft survey. A pilot climate change survey was also conducted of 14 Greater Adelaide councils in 2011 to assess their carbon mitigation and offsetting actions (Zeppel 2011b; Zeppel 2012b; Zeppel & James-Overheu 2012b).

The Queensland council survey included 36 main questions organised in five sections: A: Your Local Council; B: Climate Change; C: Climate Change Mitigation; D: Carbon Offsetting; and E: Preparing for the Carbon Price. The survey included climate change responses, a checklist of 64 carbon mitigation actions, ranking of council motives for carbon actions, and open-ended questions on reasons for climate change actions by councils. This survey was circulated to all 73 Queensland councils, by email, post and follow-up telephone calls, during January to May 2012. A total of five (of 7) city councils (CC), 18 (of 30) regional councils (RC), eight (of 24) shire councils (SC), and

one (of 12) Aboriginal shire councils (ASC) completed the survey. The response rates for each type or category of council in this survey were: CC (71%), RC (60%), SC (33%) and ASC (8%). Hence survey responses from city and regional councils are representative, while shire councils are under-represented in the results. Excluding the Aboriginal shire councils, the response rate for this carbon survey among all other Queensland councils (31 of 61) was 51%. In the results, councils are referred to by type (i.e. city, regional, or shire), and geographic location (i.e. coastal or inland). The survey was mainly completed by council staff with roles related to environmental, sustainability, and climate change areas (78%). At smaller councils, the survey was completed by the CEO or environmental health officers; and by building or engineering staff. Other council staff or councillors may have different responses to climate change and carbon issues. Comments by council respondents in the survey are included to highlight key issues in carbon management. This paper reports on survey responses to section D on carbon offsetting actions by Queensland local councils. This includes council involvement in offsetting, types of offset providers/projects supported, and council motives and benefits from offsetting.

## Results

Two thirds of surveyed Queensland councils (20) assessed that climate change was an important issue for local government (5 CC, 13 of 18 RC, and 2 SC). Climate change was considered important because of the potential impacts on council infrastructure, service delivery, risk minimisation, community safety, biodiversity, and economic development. Fourteen councils (5 CC, 8 RC, and 1 SC) were previously engaged in the CCP program. Out of a total of 433 carbon reduction actions adopted by 30 Queensland councils, less than 3% of council climate initiatives related to carbon offsetting actions (11). The main opportunities identified by Queensland councils to reduce their carbon emissions were through waste management and recycling (16), managing methane from landfills (15), planting trees on council land (14), green building design (12) and renewable energy (11). Planting trees on council land for carbon offsetting was preferred by four CC, eight RC and two SC. Just three councils in SEQ (1 CC, and 2 RC) listed carbon offset markets or buying carbon credits as an opportunity to reduce emissions from council activities (e.g. landfill), with Sunshine Coast Council building a ‘portfolio of offsets.’

## Council participation in carbon offset program

Seven Queensland councils were partly offsetting their carbon emissions, including five CC, the Sunshine Coast Council, and a coastal council. Townsville offset its 'community event Eco Fiesta.' Three regional councils and one shire council in western Queensland planned to start offsetting in the next 12 months. However, 18 councils indicated carbon offsetting was not necessary (11), or not a priority (7) (Table 1). Most shire councils and three inland regional councils did not consider that carbon offsetting was necessary due to their small size, smaller populations, and being below the carbon threshold. Six other regional councils and the largest shire council focused on reducing their carbon emissions rather than offsetting. Not one Queensland council offsets emissions totally, although four large coastal councils plan to be carbon neutral by 2020, i.e. Brisbane (2026), Cairns, Gold Coast, and Sunshine Coast. Brisbane City Council, with a likely carbon tax bill of $65 million over four years, 'has offset its public transport and vehicle fleets' (Hepworth, 2012: 5), and has bought 100% GreenPower since 2010 as Australia's largest purchaser of renewable energy. The 2012/13 budget for Brisbane Council included $3.5 million for landfill carbon permits (Moore 2012).

**Tab. 1.** Carbon offsetting by Queensland councils

| Carbon offsetting | Ab. Shire Council | Shire Council | Regional Council | City Council | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No – not necessary | 1 | 6 | 4 | 0 | 11 |
| No – not a priority | 0 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 7 |
| Yes – partially offset | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| No – next 12 months | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 4 |

## Council position or policy on carbon offsetting

A few city and regional councils commented on their council's position or policy on carbon offsetting. This included offsetting as part of a carbon neutral policy (Gold Coast); an unofficial position to reduce emissions first, then to utilise mandated offsets (Logan); and some initial investment in offsets (Redland). The carbon neutral plan for the Sunshine Coast Regional Council requires offsetting of residual emissions by 2020. Cairns Regional Council also has offsetting requirements as 'Council has carbon neutrality in its carbon reduction goal for 2020.' Other coastal councils offset events, or wanted to learn more about carbon credits and offset guidelines, but it was a low priority for one inland council. South Burnett Regional Council was 'willing to investigate options that can be incorporated and enhanced within existing Council operations and the possibility of working with landholders and industry to provide carbon offsets or credits.'

It has evaluated carbon offset options (i.e. environmental plantings, native forest protection, landfill methane gas) and analysed the biosequestration potential of native forest growth in the South Burnett region (SCS 2012, pp. 47-56).

## Council investment in carbon offset projects

Between 2004 and 2010, the five city councils all started investing in carbon offset projects. Two coastal regional councils began buying offsets from 2010 or 2011, while two others planned to fund offsets from 2014. One shire council in Western Queensland indicated it invested in offset projects from 2010-11 'through research'. Another 22 Queensland councils did not indicate when they would start investing in carbon offsetting as it was not considered a priority or it needed an official council position or policy on offsetting. The initial stimulus for offsetting was the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (LGAQ 2009), with the eventual *Clean Energy Act 2011* setting a carbon price and liable entities for emissions.

## Type of carbon offset project implemented or planned by council

Mainly larger city and regional councils have implemented or planned carbon offsetting. Ten Queensland councils (5 CC, 3 RC, and 2 SC) in the survey supported carbon offsetting by planting trees on council land, and/or in partnership with organisations involved in regional tree planting (Figure 1). Just four respondents had paid for carbon credits through an Australian offset provider. These included the Gold Coast and Townsville city councils, Sunshine Coast, and Gladstone councils. Only the Sunshine Coast Regional Council had paid for carbon credits through an international offset provider. Three other larger regional councils and the Aboriginal shire had not discussed or decided on the type of carbon offset project. Only Redland and Townsville city councils had purchased renewable energy to offset council emissions. Another 16 Queensland councils (10 RC, and 6 SC) did not respond to this question on the preferred type of offset project.

## Types of council emissions offset

The abatement strategy is to avoid, reduce, switch, sequester, and then offset (FNQROC 2011). The councils offsetting their emissions are mainly applying it to vehicle fuel and electricity for the council office and facilities (Table 2). Townsville City Council offsets fuel in hire vehicles used by staff. Two larger coastal councils were also offsetting their events: 'community event-Eco Fiesta' (Townsville), and one general 'Event based (air transport, electricity, fuel (car/truck)' offsetting policy. Logan City Council offset its printed materials, while at Redland City Council offsetting was

'general i.e. total emissions offset.' There was ad hoc offsetting of airline travel by staff at Sunshine Coast Council. Mackay Regional Council had not decided on the type of emissions offsetting. Most regional and shire councils (20) did not respond on the types of emissions offset; they were all below the threshold of 25,000t$CO_2$-e that required reporting emissions.

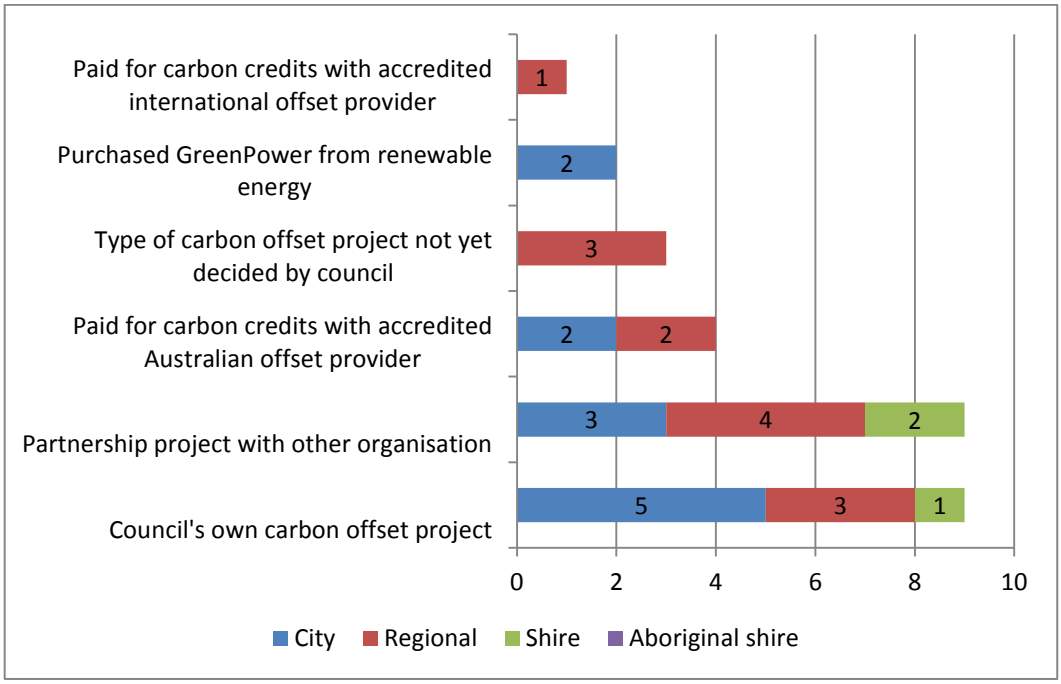


**Fig. 1.** Carbon offset project implemented by Queensland councils

**Tab. 2.** Types of emissions offset by Queensland councils

| Emissions offset | Shire Council | Regional Council | City Council | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Vehicle or plant fuel | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| Council office electricity | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| Council facilities electricity | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Other (i.e. events) | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Airline travel (council staff) | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Council printed materials | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Not yet decided | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Fuel usage (hire vehicles) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |

## Carbon offset method financially supported by council

The main carbon offset methods supported by Queensland councils included energy efficiency, renewable energy and waste diversion, followed by landfill gas (Table 3).

Two coastal regional councils supported offsetting through tree planting. Overall, 10 Queensland councils (5 CC, 3 RC, and 2 SC) previously nominated tree planting as their preferred carbon offset project – by planting trees on council land, and/or in partnership with organisations involved in regional tree planting (Figure 1). Two northern councils supported soil carbon as an offset method (Townsville and one Shire). Some Queensland councils did not separate emissions reduction from extra offsetting actions.

**Tab. 3.** Carbon offset methods supported by Queensland councils

| Offset method | Shire Council | Regional Council | City Council | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Energy efficiency | 1 | 3 | 2 | 6 |
| Renewable energy | 1 | 3 | 2 | 6 |
| Waste diversion | 0 | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| Landfill gas | 0 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Tree planting | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Soil carbon | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |

## Council preference for carbon offset method

City council preferences for carbon offset methods were driven by cost, best return for investment, supporting local famers (soil carbon), and constraints on land, or limited scope for some offset methods (tree planting). Regional councils also preferred offset methods that generated credits, aligned with council business, involved tree planting by community organisations, and provided tangible results in a short payback period. Mackay Regional Council reported they wanted ‘to learn more about the options available to local government for tree planting and soil carbon, there is just too much uncertainty at present.’ Sunshine Coast Regional Council preferred offset methods with the ‘potential to generate own credits, costs’ (i.e. landfill gas, tree planting, waste diversion). One shire council sought ‘longer term financial opportunities’ from carbon offset methods. Redland City Council noted they had ‘limited scope for landfill gas and energy efficiency remains, [and] we have limited land for tree planting so that leaves...two’ [renewable energy, waste diversion].

## Carbon offset provider supported by council

Ten Queensland councils with offset programs supported Ecofund Queensland (4), Greening Australia (2), vehicle offsets with Greenfleet (2), Climate Friendly (1), and Conservation Volunteers Australia (1) – these focused on tree planting. Other offset

providers preferred by councils were ‘local accredited carbon offset companies’ (Townsville City Council), or ‘mixed service providers for our portfolio of offsets’ (Sunshine Coast Council). Larger councils preferred carbon offsetting by tree planting through recognised providers such as Ecofund Queensland and Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA), based on their ‘local capacity and knowledge’ to implement offsets, or given that they had been ‘previously used for other projects’ (CVA). Gold Coast City Council noted ‘This [Ecofund] was set up by the State Government for Queensland departments and LGAs.’ Another 10 councils were either not sure or had not yet decided which carbon offset provider to support (2 CC, 5 RC, 2 SC, and 1 ASC). Redland City Council noted that ‘Some councils own large lots or have sizable rural areas, offering carbon sink opportunities’. Some respondents were aware that they could earn carbon credits from offset projects, or income by leasing land to tree planting offset providers. Only a few larger councils listed carbon offsetting as a mitigation action in a climate change plan.

## Council motives for implementing a carbon offset program

Survey responses indicated that the main motives for Queensland councils to implement carbon offsetting (Table 4) were: (1) council concern about climate change impacts, (2) supporting biodiversity/conservation; (3) promoting council as climate friendly; and (4) financially supporting tree planting or renewable energy. Secondary motives for councils to implement offsetting were earning carbon credits, meeting emission reduction targets (Redland City), and reaching carbon neutrality (Sunshine Coast Council). For larger coastal councils (i.e. Cairns, Redland, Sunshine Coast), carbon reduction targets and/or the goal of carbon neutrality are key drivers for carbon offsetting. However, 18 Queensland councils did not consider carbon offsetting a priority or a necessity.

**Tab. 4.** Motives to implement carbon offsetting

| Motive to Implement Carbon Offsetting | Number | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| Major reasons to implement offsetting (> 5 responses) | | |
| Concern about environmental impacts of climate change | 10 | 2.2 |
| The ‘right thing to do’ for the environment (i.e. conservation) | 8 | 2.3 |
| Promote Council as a climate friendly business enterprise | 8 | 2.8 |
| Financially support tree planting or renewable energy projects | 8 | 2.8 |
| Minor reasons to implement offsetting (< 5 responses) | | |
| Generate income or earn carbon credits from carbon farming initiative | 4 | 1.2 |
| Other: ‘meet emission reduction targets’ ‘reach carbon neutrality’ | 2 | 1.5 |

## Main benefits to council of investing in a carbon offset project

Five councils wanted to earn carbon credits through landfill emission avoidance projects (Table 5). This included one city council and four larger regional councils. A few councils wanted to sell carbon credits, partner with local businesses for offset projects on council land, or support landholders to establish offset projects on private land (four each). Half of the surveyed Queensland councils (17) were unsure about carbon offsetting guidelines for councils in the *Carbon Credits (Carbon Farming Initiative) Act 2011*. Seven councils (4 RC, and 3 CC) did not respond, highlighting the uncertainty about carbon offsetting.

**Tab. 5.** Perceived benefits of investing in carbon offsetting

| Carbon offset benefits | Shire Council | Regional Council | City Council | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unsure about guidelines | 6 | 9 | 2 | 17 |
| Earn landfill carbon credits | 0 | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Sell carbon credits | 1 | 3 | 0 | 4 |
| Support landholders | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Partner with local businesses | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |

## Recommendations for policy and practice

This Queensland study found five city councils and two coastal regional councils were offsetting emissions from vehicle fuel and electricity, or community events. Councils with a climate change strategy or aiming to be carbon neutral (i.e. Cairns, Gold Coast, Redland, Sunshine Coast) were most likely to offset. The preferred offset action by councils was tree planting on council land or in partnership with conservation groups. Only a few councils bought carbon credits. Councils mainly preferred tree planting as a carbon offset method due to ancillary environmental and community benefits. Potential council benefits from offsetting related to earning or selling carbon credits, partnering with local businesses, or supporting private landholders. Many types of council remained unsure about carbon offset guidelines. Other barriers included the lack of a council policy on offsetting, limited land for tree planting, offsetting not aligned with council business, and the need to provide tangible environmental or financial benefits to councils. Key recommendations include councils developing a policy on offsetting for specific activities (e.g. vehicle fleet, electricity, events), and partnerships with conservation groups or landholders for tree planting projects with biodiversity benefits (DERM 2011). Offsetting could also be required for council approval of events, or in

contracts for the supply of goods and services. Council planning schemes could direct offsets from regional tree planting to priority areas for revegetation (Newman 2010). Local councils also need training in carbon farming projects and approvals (Moore 2011).

Local councils are voluntarily offsetting emissions through regional tree planting projects. These carbon sequestration sites involve partnerships between urban and rural councils (South East Victoria, SEQ), and between councils and private landholders (Regenesis, NSW). Councils need to collaborate with regional natural resource management groups on carbon planting projects (DSEWPC 2013). The high domestic carbon price ($\$24/tCO_2$-e versus $\$6/tCO_2$-e in the European Union) has also led to declining investment in tree planting as an Australian offset method. A limiting factor for environmental plantings of native species is the 100-year permanency rule. Registered CFI offset projects by local councils include landfill gas capture and combustion (Brisbane City, Qld; Byron Shire, NSW) and diversion of legacy waste (Southern Metropolitan Regional Council, WA). Councils mainly focus on eco-efficiency and GreenPower, with offsetting as a last option. Few councils purchase carbon credits but liable entities will need to offset landfill emissions. Councils remain cautious about offsetting due to the uncertainty over the *Clean Energy Act* and carbon price after the federal election in September 2013.

## Conclusions

Voluntary offsetting of council vehicles, events or electricity reduces carbon emissions. To date, council opportunities for voluntary offsetting include regional tree planting projects. These provide ancillary environmental benefits for biodiversity, conservation and amenity. Partnerships between councils and conservation groups support these offset tree plantings. Barriers to offsetting by local government include the lack of a council policy on offsetting, uncertainty about CFI guidelines, offset rules, land availability, and limited offset options. In Queensland, seven councils offset emissions from events, vehicles and electricity, while key motives for offsetting were climate concerns and supporting conservation. Over half of councils remain unsure about offset guidelines, or it was not seen as a priority or a necessity. The cost and uncertainty around Federal carbon offset legislation limits council involvement. Councils with a climate change strategy/carbon neutral goal were most likely to offset, while preferred carbon offsets are tree planting or renewable energy with tangible co-benefits.

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# Is anybody listening? The impact of second home ownership on local governments in Australia and elsewhere

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**Abstract.** This paper reflects on aspects of changing national and international housing markets, especially the impacts of the growth of second (and multiple) home ownership on particular places. It is argued that research and commentary on second home ownership has not yet adequately understood or analysed the combined effects of a range of processes of change, including retirement migration, seasonal movements between multiple homes, and the role of overseas-based purchasers of second (and multiple) homes. The impacts vary enormously between places, but in almost every case they generate a range of demands, problems, issues and opportunities for local governments. Examples range from the demand for service provision in inner London to problems of dealing with the legacy of failed second homes developments within the housing market crashes in Ireland and the Spanish Costas.

## Introduction

This paper develops the author's interest on second homes though a comparison between the situation in Australia and examples from the UK and Ireland. The author has worked on this topic over the last 15 years in the UK, Ireland and Australia and has also examined material from many other countries (Paris 2011). The term 'second homes' here refers to dwellings are typically called 'holiday homes' in Australia; *not* households' 'primary residences' *nor* properties that are rented to tenants. This definition includes dwellings that are used as a base during the working week as a pied-å-terre, but excludes dwellings used occasionally by their owners but which primarily are rented to holiday makers. Many owners of second homes own more than one such dwelling purely for use by themselves, their families or friends; in these cases I refer to the ownership of 'multiple homes' or 'multiple residences' (Paris 2012).

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The need for careful definitions reflects the distinctive nature of second homes as the term refers to how dwellings are used, rather than particular types of dwelling. Dwellings are often used in different ways over time and may be used in different ways at different seasons of the year. The tax treatment of second home ownership varies between countries. They are subject to capital gains tax in most countries, though any tax advantages or disadvantages relating to occasional rental of holiday homes to other users vary considerably.

Attitudes towards second homes also vary between countries. They often are blamed for destroying rural communities in the UK, resulting in 'ghost villages' largely unoccupied during the week, and for causing house price inflation in low income areas. The situation is very different in many other European countries where second home ownership has been established more widely across societies and for longer than in the UK; for example levels of second home ownership are very high in Nordic countries. Second home ownership also had become well established in the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia by the 1970s.

The growth of second home ownership has many implications for local government, especially in localities within which demand is most concentrated, especially because it often occurs in combination with other processes of change, including the growth of long-distance and seasonal commuting, high levels of mobility among affluent second home owners, declining employment in primary industries and growth of new forms of work, retirement migration and, in some cases, growing transnational purchase of second (and multiple) residences. The impacts vary enormously between places, but in almost every case they generate a range of demands, problems, issues and opportunities for local governments. Many of these impacts remain significantly under-researched and their impacts are under-appreciated. For example, many Australian local governments experience difficulties related to service provision during periods of peak seasonal use as their rate support from state governments is based only on their 'permanent' populations as recorded in the census (Mackenzie et al. 2008).

## Second home ownership in the UK and Ireland

The growth of second home ownership in the UK and Ireland has been *more recent* and *faster* than Australia. The main drivers of growing second home ownership in both countries were the same: rapidly growing affluence and mobility combined with a strong preference for property ownership. Second home ownership was a major element in the lifetime investment and consumption strategies of affluent households, including tax minimisation strategies and building superannuation portfolios (Paris 2013a).

Despite these commonalities, there have been numerous differences between the UK and Ireland in terms of second home ownership since the early 1990s. The context and character of growth of second home ownership differed considerably between the UK and Ireland during the boom years to 2007. The quality of official data on second homes also varied enormously. There is good survey-based official data on English second home ownership since the early 1990s. Developments in other parts of the UK are less well documented, though census data and some local government property-related data provide useful indicators of change. There is no specific official Irish data on second homes and census-based data is very limited, so it is hard to estimate the number of second homes with any degree of precision. Differences between the UK and Ireland regarding second home ownership, moreover, have become much greater since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) (Paris 2013a).

The UK has one of the most restrictive planning regimes in the world, whereas Ireland has an extremely laissez faire planning regime. The British planning system has largely stopped new rural housing development, so the growth of second home ownership within the UK has largely involved gentrification and diversification of forms of development to fit within the tight regulatory planning regime. In Ireland, by way of contrast, the growth of second home ownership largely involved the construction of new dwellings in coastal and countryside areas, with very little rural gentrification.

The English data show that second home ownership doubled between the early 1990s and 2007, with the highest concentrations of second homes within the UK in or near: designated National Parks, especially the Lake District; Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs); high amenity rural areas such as the Cotswolds; and attractive coastal areas, especially Devon, Cornwall and Norfolk. But the fastest growth took place *outside* Britain, initially mainly in France and Spain but increasingly across a much wider geographical canvas. English second home ownership continued to grow strongly after the GFC, albeit at a slightly lower rate than in the period 2000-2007. English second home ownership continued to expand more overseas than within the UK, though high demand in popular coastal and other high amenity areas spilled across into previously lower-demand areas.

One distinctive feature of second home ownership in England has been strong growth of second homes in urban areas, especially in London; mainly pieds-à-terre for affluent households with other homes outside the cities. In addition, there has been strong growth of overseas-based ownership of homes in the UK, especially in prime inner London areas such as Belgravia, Kensington and Chelsea, most notably in ‘Billionaires Row’ (Kensington Palace Gardens). House prices in these prime areas of London have

continued to grow strongly over the last few years, in marked contrast to much of the UK where they have been static or fallen slightly compared to 2007 prices (Paris 2013b).

Second homes had been a substantial element of the Irish housing boom from the mid-1990s to 2007, especially in coastal areas, in many cases encouraged by generous tax breaks for owners and developers (Norris et al. 2010). Since 2007, however, there has been no discernible growth of second home ownership in Ireland and dwellings constructed for the second homes market have been a large element of the bursting of the Irish housing bubble. Thousands of homes lie empty and deteriorating in 'ghost estates' across the country, especially along the Atlantic seaboard and areas with relatively high rates of second homer ownership (Kitchen et al. 2010). Unlike London, Dublin house prices have fallen at least as much as prices across the rest of the country, overall by more than 40% since 2007.

The situation in Ireland has parallels in other areas where second homes development figured prominently in unsustainable housing development booms, most notably in parts of Spain where massive over-development was followed by collapsing house prices and abandonment of unfinished housing developments (Paris 2011). The main difference between Ireland and Spain in this regard was the much higher proportion of overseas-based second home owners in the Spanish Costas, many of whom also had major problems with changing exchange rates.

## Second home ownership in Australia: shacks, holiday homes and mansions

There is a substantial Australian literature on second homes, mainly within leisure studies or planning, and recently often within debates about sea change. As in New Zealand, mass second home ownership came *earlier* than in the UK or Ireland, but growth was much less rapid over the period from around 1990 to 2007. Many early second homes were vernacular self-built shacks, in some cases on land subsequently eaten up by suburban expansion, in others on Crown land, typically unserviced coastal allotments. Increasingly, however, second homes have been developed commercially, involving some gentrification of former lower quality dwellings, and developer-led mixed use resorts or marinas. New upmarket second homes selling for over $1 million are described as 'shacks' for marketing purposes.

There is no good official data on the number or characteristics of Australian second homes. They are not identified in census or housing surveys, so numbers have to be inferred on the basis of census data on empty dwellings complemented by local government data on the numbers and other addresses of non-resident ratepayers. One

recurring problem is that census data on empty dwellings and councils' data on non-resident ratepayers cannot differentiate between dwellings that are primarily used as holiday homes by their owners as opposed to dwellings that are primarily available for short-term lettings by holiday makers or weekenders. Other sources of evidence include visitor and tourism surveys as well as local qualitative or anecdotal data. It is likely that many Australians own holiday homes overseas, though this is probably much less common than in the UK. It is equally likely that there is less non-domestic ownership of second homes within Australia, though the author suspects that this may be growing quite rapidly. One cannot use census data to separate out second homes from other elements of 'sea/tree change' areas occupied for varying periods of time by mobile populations. Allowing for a considerable range of possible error, the author's best estimate of the current number of holiday homes in Australia is at least 500,000.

## Australian holiday home places

There is certainly sufficient available evidence to enable the identification of places in Australia within which there are high numbers of holiday homes. Permanent residents in areas such as local government officials and elected representatives are well aware of seasonal variations in population numbers and service use. The most obvious examples are popular coastal areas within easy access of all capital cities, as well as highland areas popular for winter sports (the Snowy Mountains) or for trout fishing (Central Highlands of Tasmania). In all cases, though, second homes are mixed in with holiday rental properties as well as other dimensions of sea/tree change processes.

Few studies have looked specifically at local governments and second homes. Frost (2003; 2004) reviewed census and other data on vacant properties in Melbourne's 'second homes belt'. Over 50% of dwellings were vacant on census night 1996 in 14 coastal towns, mainly 75-125 km from Melbourne's CBD. He reported little evidence of conflicts between second home owners and 'locals'. Indeed, he suggested that some second home owners 'see themselves as established (or 'local') in comparison with newcomers or other tourists'.

More recently, Paris (2011) reviewed 2006 census data for the same area and identified both continuity *and* change in this second homes belt since 1996. There had been strong growth in the number of dwellings overall (26%) and the resident population (27%) in the 10 largest towns. The number of dwellings recorded as unoccupied grew in number (23%) but fell as a *proportion* of all dwellings, implying that there had been net movement into these towns on a permanent basis. This may well include former second home owners moving in on a permanent basis as well as new in-migrants between 1996 and 2006. There were some significant differences between the top 10 second home

towns during the inter-censal period. The resident population grew most in Cowes (38%) – more than twice as much as the lowest growth town of Anglesea (15%). Venus Bay stood out with above average growth in its resident population, total dwellings *and* unoccupied dwellings. Thus the census data reveal *diversity* rather than a single motion of change.

The author does not know of *any* studies in Australia either of urban (as in metropolitan) second homes or of overseas-based second home ownership in Australia by owners based overseas. It is extremely likely, however, that both are widespread albeit unrecorded within official housing data sets. The combination of the known diversity of second home ownership within Australia, and high probability that much second home ownership is unrecorded or misunderstood, is crying out for further investigation and analysis.

There are many issues and questions to be explored, regarding local government in particular. How can problems of fiscal imbalance be resolved with LGAs in second homes hot spots that are only being funded by state governments on the basis of their 'resident' population? How best can under-funded LGAs deal with highly seasonal demand for service provision? What are the environmental impacts of large scale commercial second homes developments? Will ageing second home owners retire to their second homes, use them more, or dispose of them? Are there growing conflicts between affluent second home owners and other residents in hot-spot areas, as in parts of England? How many dwellings recorded by the census or records of non-resident ratepayers are holiday *homes* as opposed to holiday *rentals*? Are there risks of over-production, as in Ireland and Spain? What is the extent of second home ownership within metropolitan areas? Is there growing overseas demand for second homes in Australia, for example from China or Singapore? If so, and it seems highly likely, then what are the implications of this?

## Conclusions

Many issues relating to second homes in Australia remain largely unexplored and under-reported. Some are of particular relevance to local governments, especially councils in hot-spot areas: they expected to provide services to cope with peak seasonal demand but their funding by state governments does not recognise the significance of highly varying non-resident populations. There are many other unresolved and unasked questions that the author believes are worthy of much further research.

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ACELG
Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE 3RD NATIONAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCHERS' FORUM

## University of Adelaide, South Australia
## Thursday 6th and Friday 7th June, 2013

An Australian Government Initiative

# Preface

The Local Government Researchers' Forum held in Adelaide in June 2013 was the third in a series of national research forums convened by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG). As with previous forums it was designed to provide a platform for university researchers, policy makers and practitioners to present and discuss new research and perspectives on issues facing local government.

With the support of the University of Technology, Sydney ePress, ACELG is pleased to be able to publish a selection of the peer-reviewed papers presented at the forum. These proceedings contain papers which reflect the key themes of the forum, including workforce development, local demographics, climate change, regional local government, planning and community wellbeing, local government reform and local innovation.

ACELG recognises that there is a great need to build the knowledge base of local government, and for practitioners to be actively involved in that process. A feature of the 2013 forum was the increased involvement of local government practitioners from around the country. It is very pleasing that a number of their contributions are included in this publication (close to half of the papers), reflecting the diversity of disciplines that contribute to local government.

We thank the Local Government Association of South Australia for partnering with ACELG in hosting the event, and members of the ACELG Research Advisory Committee for their generous contribution in helping shape the program, in reviewing and selecting abstracts, and in facilitating forum sessions.

Finally, we thank all the contributors and the reviewers for their commitment to ensuring the high quality of the papers included in these proceedings. It takes considerable time and effort by all involved to compile such a volume, however we recognise the benefit of making these papers accessible to a wide readership and the contribution they will make toward the growing body of local government research.

Stefanie Pillora
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# Exploring interventions in urban form which can enable better population health

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**Abstract.** Knox City Council is one of 12 sites in Victoria where the 'Healthy Together Communities' Initiative is being delivered. Focusing primarily on reducing rates of obesity, physical inactivity, smoking and alcohol misuse, this initiative aims to use a systems approach to support healthy behaviours. This has prompted further investigation by Knox City Council into how its built environment may be influencing the health of its residents. The purpose of this study was to examine the urban form of two suburbs within the municipality, Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville, to identify how it can influence the rates of physical activity and therefore also potentially the rates of overweight and obesity. This comparative case study investigation used an exploratory, observational approach to understand how differences in urban form (i.e. land use mix, transportation networks, access to green space) may influence PA. It found that Wantirna–Wantirna South did not differ remarkably from Rowville in terms of social and other demographic characteristics. However, there were numerous small but cumulative differences across suburbs which may be influencing the rate of incidental physical activity. These included size of dwellings, land-use zoning, density of playgrounds, and modes of transport (i.e. active or motorised). Differences in the built form existed between the two suburbs which may, in part, explain the increased risk of obesity in Rowville. Future strategic and urban planning decisions for the suburb of Rowville and City of Knox should consider the potential impact upon the health of the population.

## Introduction

In 2011 Knox City Council was one of 12 sites in Victoria to receive 'national partnership agreement' funding under Healthy Together Communities, a community-based preventative health initiative. At Knox City Council this has lead to the Healthy Together Knox initiative.

Healthy Together Knox aims to improve people's health where they live, learn, work and play. It focuses on addressing the underlying causes of poor health in workplaces, children's settings, and communities by encouraging healthy eating and physical activity, as well as reducing smoking and harmful alcohol use. The intervention uses a systems approach to implement a range of activities including development of health promoting policies and plans, delivery of local prevention services and programs, and through social marketing strategies (Department of Health 2013).

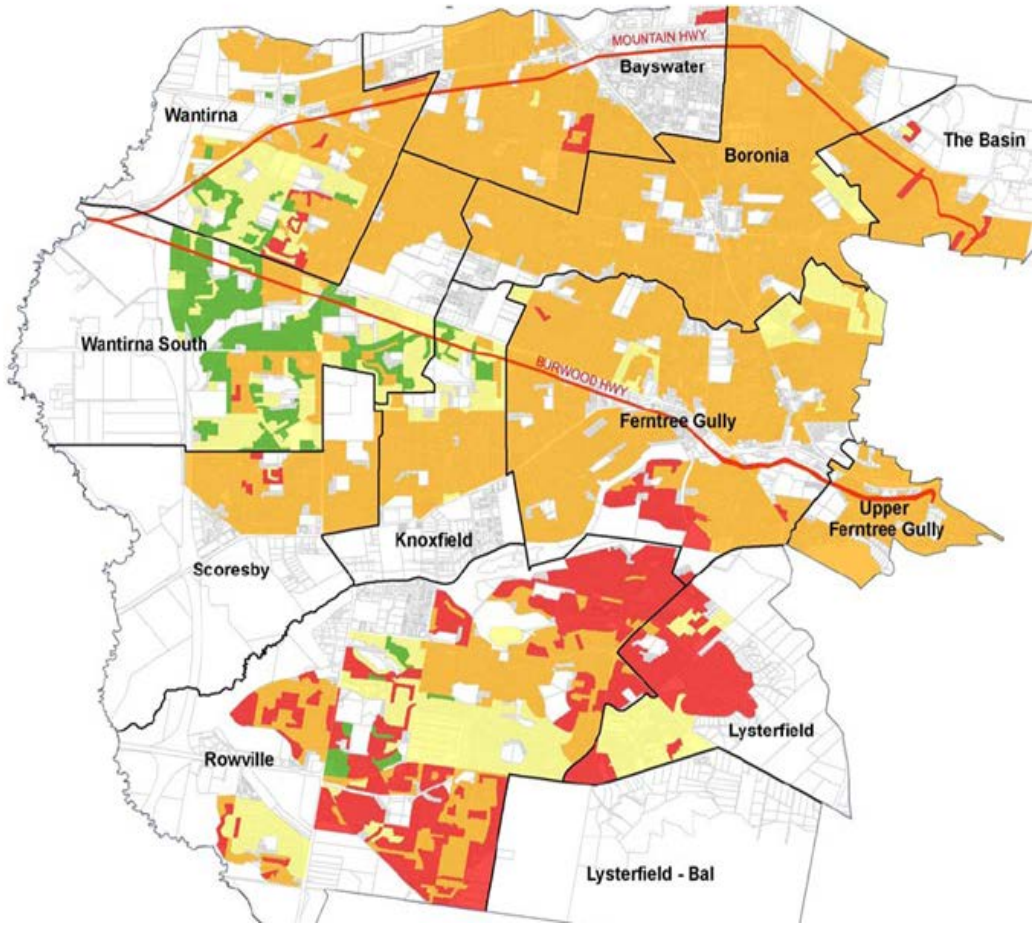
This paper explores differences in the physical activity environment in the Knox city suburbs of Wantirna–Wantirna South (where the population has a relatively low risk of obesity) and Rowville (where the risk of obesity is high) in eastern Melbourne. The purpose of this research is to understand the differences in the built environment between these two suburbs (such as open space, density of playgrounds and access to public transport), and how these differences might be contributing to the variation in the risk of obesity observed between the two suburbs. In the short term, the findings from this paper will contribute to the development of a local area plan for Rowville.

This paper begins by providing a summary of the Healthy Together Initiative and the complex nature of the issues and ambitions of the partnership. It then offers a brief review of the existing literature relevant to land use planning and design, and its effects on physical activity and obesity. The paper then undertakes a comparative case study investigation utilising an exploratory, observational approach in attempting to understand how different elements of the physical activity environment may be influencing the relatively high risk of obesity facing Rowville residents compared to Wantirna–Wantirna South. The findings from the case studies are then considered within the context of the existing literature.

## Background and literature review

### Knox Preventative Health Partnership

The Victorian ‘Healthy Together’ initiative is a community-based health promotion program. Knox is one of 14 Councils in Victoria to partner with the State Government to implement this local health promotion model over four years. Both the Knox and Victorian State initiatives’ primary aims include reducing unhealthy weight in children and adults, increasing fruit and vegetable intake, increasing physical activity, and reducing smoking rates and alcohol use. Knox City Council was selected largely due to the highly varied geographical distribution of health outcomes, particularly in relation to




| | Percentage of overweight/ obese | Description |
|---|---|---|
| | Less than 40% | Less than state average (what we are aiming for) |
| | 40% to 49% | About average (State average 49.1%) |
| | 50 to 53% | Above average |
| | More than 53% | Higher above average |

**Fig. 1.** Relative risk distribution map for overweight and obesity in the Knox municipality.
*Source: Modelled from Victorian Population Health Survey 2008 and Department of Health, Mosaic© unpublished data. Information in Figure 1 is based on the modelled relative risk distribution (rather than actually sampling large numbers of residents directly).*

overweight and obesity (see figure 1). In addition, there is a significant need to improve the dietary and weight outcomes of Knox as highlighted by the below statistics:

- Forty-nine percent of Knox adults are at an unhealthy weight (where BMI is greater than 25)
- There is a low fruit and vegetable intake in Knox (49 per cent of employed people and 43 per cent of young people don't consume enough fruit and vegetables)
- There are generally low levels of physical activity, with only 65 per cent of residents reaching sufficient levels (only 15 per cent of young people exercise every day).

This particular study sought to focus on one of these issues, investigating the physical activity environment and its association with overweight and obesity – although it must be acknowledged that obesity is caused by complex interaction of factors, with insufficient physical activity, overconsumption of energy, and genetics all playing roles (Waters et al. 2011; Wyatt et al. 2006).

As with the rest of the Australian population, obesity is a significant cause of morbidity for the residents of Knox (ABS 2006). Australia is one of the world's most obese nations with over half of adults and a quarter of children and adolescents being classed as overweight or obese (NPHT 2009). The condition has now overtaken smoking as the leading cause of premature death and illness in Australia (The Age 2010).

Figure 1 (above) shows the relative risk for obesity in Knox. What is striking about this map is the large concentration of green (relatively low risk) in the north west of the municipality around the suburbs of Wantirna and Wantirna South, and large areas of red (relatively high risk) in the southern parts of the municipality largely centred around Rowville. This disparity is the focus of the comparative case study investigation.

Across the Knox local government area (both Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville), residents' participation in structured physical activity is comparable to state averages, however levels of incidental physical activity is lower, perhaps indicating that environments are not conducive to this form of activity (Data modelled from Victorian Population Health Survey 2008 and Mosaic©, Department of Health).

## Literature review

Knox City Council recognises the role that both social and environmental determinants play in the development of obesity. This is demonstrated in figure 2, which highlights how extremely complex and multifactorial the aetiology of obesity is. Although there are a multitude of factors that influence body weight, there is a growing

body of evidence supporting the link between physical inactivity and increased BMI, leading to overweight and obesity (Waters et al. 2011; Wyatt et al. 2006; Sparling et al. 2000). Modern environments have tended to lead to less exercise, due mostly to reduced occupational activity, more car use, less walking, and more passive modes of entertainment (Moodie et al. 2006).

Importantly, what figure 2 does is group the major influences of obesity, highlighting that the 'physical activity environment' includes aspects of the built form, such as:

- perceived danger in the environment (safety and perceptions of safety)
- access to opportunities for physical exercise (outdoor and indoor), including opportunities for team based activity (formal and informal)
- dominance of motorised transport and opportunities for un-motorised transport (how people move and opportunities for incidental activity)
- walkability of living environment (quality or amenity of the environment).

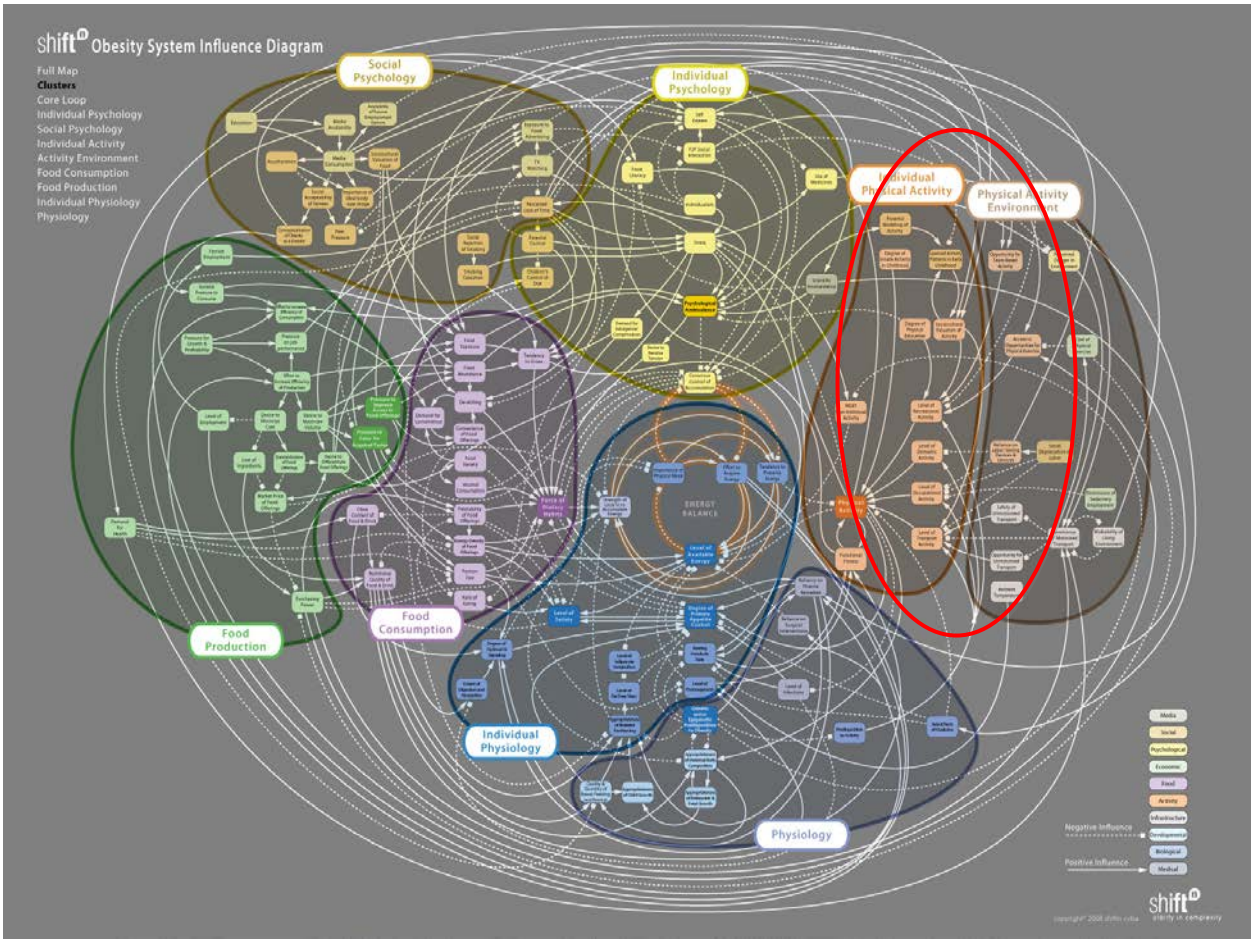



**Fig. 2.** Obesity system influence diagram.
*Source: Vandenbroeck, Goossens & Clemens 2007.*

The built environment refers to aspects of our surroundings that are created or modified by people rather than occurring naturally (VicHealth 2010). It includes homes, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, parks, recreation areas and transport systems (including public transport, footpaths and roads). The built environment can either facilitate or discourage physical activity. According to VicHealth (2010, p. 5) consideration should be given to aspects of the built environment that have a significant impact on levels of physical activity, including: the neighbourhood and road environment; the amenity of the neighbourhood; and proximity to a variety of destinations.

It is acknowledged that 'environments that people build and inhabit provide potential opportunities and barriers to engaging in physically active lifestyles' (Duncan et al. 2005, p. 1). Increasing evidence from both the planning and public health disciplines highlight how planning for urban form can enhance incidental physical activity. Numerous studies now support the role of built form and design, urban material use, transportation linkages, and maintenance of recreational and green space in enhancing physical activity (Frank et al. 2006; Frumkin et al. 2004; Jabereen 2006). There is now supportive evidence to suggest that pedestrian travel increases when route directness and pedestrian facilities are improved (Cao, Handy & Mokhtarian 2006). Ensuring that pathways are linked, have safe street crossings with adequate lighting, and are of good placement and construction can substantially increase the number of individuals walking and reduce vehicle use in a community (Capon & Blakely 2007; Greenwald & Boarnet 2001). Proximity is also important, as adults are more likely to walk if they have a variety of destinations within 400 metres. Research has also found that the closer sports centres and parks are to young people, the more likely they are to use them (Sunarja, Wood & Giles-Corti 2008; Garrard 2009; Kelty, Giles-Corti & Zubrick 2008). Furthermore, reviews of the transportation research and urban planning literature indicate that ease of pedestrian access to nearby destinations is related to active transportation choices, particularly walking (Owen et al. 2007, p. 379).

The physical attributes of residential neighbourhoods, particularly the connectedness of streets and the proximity of destinations, can influence walking behaviours (Owen et al. 2007, p. 378). Numerous studies show that people who live in more walkable communities (i.e. communities offering relatively greater proximity to numerous destinations, as well as high levels of connectivity between those destinations) are more physically active and less overweight than people in less walkable communities (Norman et al. 2006, p. 118).

Street design has also been recognised as a factor in improving walking and cycling levels within urban areas (Frank et al. 2006). For example, residents of Perth who had

trees or no major traffic on their street were 50 per cent more likely to achieve healthy levels of walking than those living on streets with no trees or major traffic (Giles-Corti & Donovan 2003). Similarly, those with access to 'attractive' parks (measured by tree shade, walking paths, water and bird life) were 50 per cent more likely to achieve high levels of walking than those with access to 'unattractive' parks (Giles-Corti et al. 2005). A recent review of the health benefits of green space reported an association between perceived safety and physical activity levels (Lee & Maheswaran 2010, p. 218). For example, the state of disrepair of green space negatively affects its use by making it feel less safe. Most of the studies in this review supported the positive effect that green space has on health, though ultimately the complexity of the relationship meant that establishing causation between green space and health was difficult to achieve (Lee & Maheswaran 2010).

The role of public green spaces in facilitating higher levels of human health is becoming more well-known (Lee & Maheswaren 2010), and some studies argue that incorporating planning principles that recognise and prioritise the natural environment is crucial to ensuring positive health outcomes for residents (Maller et al. 2008). In particular, environmental factors such as the quality and accessibility of green space affects its use for physical activity. Residents choose to use green spaces not only for their features, but also the condition of those facilities and attributes (Lee & Maheswaran 2010). Therefore it is important to look beyond the total supply of green space.

Urban environments – in terms of the location of community spaces, shops and service destinations – can also encourage physical activity to promote health outcomes (Capon & Blakely 2007). Planning that situates such facilities along mass transit routes has been demonstrated to improve physical activity levels (Frank et al. 2006) as well as ensure economic viability for businesses (Capon & Blakely 2007). Systematic reviews have concluded that built-environment attributes (especially land-use patterns) are consistently related to physical activity in general, and to active transportation in particular (Owen et al. 2007, p. 378).

Housing density and mix also has the capacity to impact on travel and walking behaviour and can therefore influence health (Owen et al. 2007; Frank et al. 2006). Density, used in combination with land use mix, is increasingly acknowledged as an important way to promote incidental physical activity and to support public transportation usage (Kent et al. 2011). Furthermore, there is growing evidence for mixed density residential designs supporting reductions in vehicle use, enhancing a greater sense of community, and supporting overall health equity (Jabareen 2006; Wilkinson & Pickett 2009).

Given the growing evidence outlined above, several key organisations have advocated for changes to the built environment to encourage physical activity. The National Heart Foundation (National Heart Foundation [Victoria Division] 2004) states that planning for healthy places to live, work and visit can be encouraged by providing the following:

- Well planned networks of walking and cycling routes
- Streets with direct, safe and convenient access
- Local destinations within walking destinations from homes
- Accessible open spaces for recreation and leisure
- Conveniently located public transport stops
- Local neighbourhoods fostering community spirit.

The Heart Foundation highlights the role of urban planning in supporting health, stating:

> When 'health' is integrated into planning the choice for people to be active becomes more convenient, easy, safe and enjoyable. Providing convenient, easy-to-access built environments that encourage people to be 'out and about' on a daily basis will contribute to a more active and vibrant society (Heart Foundation of Australia [Victorian Division] 2004, p. 7).

While many planners recognise that urban planning influences health, they do not normally perceive that it is their role to focus on or study the relationship. At the same time, public health professionals are beginning to take a real interest in spatial planning. Advocacy and specific population programmes are not enough to change behaviour (i.e. to persuade people to exercise more) when the form of towns and cities are working against them (Barton 2010, p. 96). One of the more challenging aspects of this work for planners and public health specialists is the need to cross professional boundaries and norms (Higgins 2010, p. 108).

## Research aims

The aim of this research was to establish the differences in physical activity environments between two suburbs in the Knox City municipality (Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville), and to consider how these may be contributing to the observed variance in the risk of obesity between the two areas. The review of the literature summarised above also informed which characteristics of the built environment would be analysed in this study. These potential modulating factors for physical activity include:

- safety and perceptions of safety

- opportunities for un-motorised transport
- distance to public transport
- access to open space, playgrounds and shared space
- access to leisure facilities
- land use mix.

This paper provides an important input to the development of a local area plan for Rowville. While the Plan was initially conceived as a review of the land use and development controls within the current structure the Rowville Plan represents an opportunity to develop a much more holistic strategy for the next 20 years for the largest suburb in Knox. The current focus of the Rowville Plan is around understanding the drivers of change; a means of understanding not only the current needs, but also the future needs of this community.

## Methods

This study sought to explore the demographic differences between Rowville and Wantirna–Wantirna South and to assess the impact of the built environment upon physical activity. The findings will be used to identify possible interventions in the built environment to reduce the relative risk of obesity and enable better population health in Rowville through the development of the Rowville Plan.

A comparative case study was possible between the 3152 (Wantirna and Wantirna South) and 3178 (Rowville) postcode due to the similar size and population of these two areas.

**Tab. 1.** Area and population comparison between Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville.

| Area | Size (ha) | Population |
|---|---|---|
| Wantirna and Wantirna South | 2,238 | 31,237 |
| Rowville | 2,169 | 34,77 |

A case study approach has been used as it allowed a comprehensive exploration of each defined case using various data accumulation methods.

Following on from the literature review, this study firstly explored demographic characteristics for each suburb before assessing the social determinants that may underlay the observed variance in the risk of obesity between the two areas. The study then sought to explore differences in a number of physical environmental factors which

the literature suggests may influence physical activity, before assessing their role in affecting obesity levels within each of the suburbs.

## Case Studies

*Case one: Rowville*

At the 2011 Census, Rowville had a population of 34,777. Rowville is named after the Row family, whose property Stamford Park was established in 1882. Rowville is one of the largest suburbs in the south-east of Melbourne. Rowville Post Office opened in December 1905. Rowville has developed rapidly over the 1980s and 1990s. Stud Park Shopping Centre, opened in 1989, is the largest in the suburb. It houses the Rowville branch of the Eastern Regional Library, and is adjacent to the Rowville Community Centre.

*Case two: Wantirna South*

At the 2011 Census, Wantirna South had a population of 31,237. The Knox Private Hospital and Westfield Knox shopping centre are located in Wantirna. Wantirna South was mainly orchards until around 80 years ago. Demand for housing grew in the 1920s and Wantirna South and surrounding communities became a new place for housing development. One of the first buildings was the Wantirna South Post Office, which opened in December 1936. The Westfield Knox shopping centre (first built in the 1970s), includes Knox O-Zone, a popular night spot containing a licensed premises, restaurants, clubs and cinema. Swinburne University of Technology also has a campus located in Wantirna South.

### Findings

*Demographics*

Differences in the general and social characteristics between the two suburbs were firstly explored.

Table 2 outlines some of the key demographic characteristics that may also influence health and levels of physical activity. The figures demonstrate that Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville do not differ significantly for many of these characteristics. For example, levels of disadvantage, as measured through both the SEIFA index and unemployment figures were very similar despite differences in levels of university or tertiary educational attainment (20.1 per cent for Wantirna–Wantirna South compared to

13.4 per cent in Rowville). The two areas also do not differ remarkably in terms of gender profile, percentage of families with children or the average number of people per household.

**Tab. 2.** Key social and general demographic characteristics of Wantirna–Wantirna South, Rowville suburbs and Knox Local Government Area.
*Source: ABS 2012; ABS 2006; ABS 2011.*

| Population characteristic | Wantirna and Wantirna South | Rowville | Knox Average |
|---|---|---|---|
| Median age | 42 | 36 | 38 |
| Female population (%) | 51.2 | 50.5 | 50.8 |
| Country of birth: | | | |
| Australia (%) | 59 | 66.5 | 69 |
| England (%) | 3.9 | 3.4 | 4.4 |
| Sri Lanka (%) | 3.1 | 2.7 | 1.8 |
| India (%) | 3.6 | 2.3 | 2.0 |
| Malaysia (%) | 4.4 | 2.3 | 1.8 |
| Unemployment (%) | 4.8 | 4.3 | 4.6 |
| Education to tertiary or university level (%) | 20.1 | 13.4 | 13.7 |
| SEIFA index ranking[1] | 1,067 | 1,085 | - |
| Families two children (%) | 55.9 | 61.0 | 51.4 |
| Median household weekly income ($) | 1,455 | 1,706 | 1,401 |
| Occupied private dwelling outright ownership (%) | 42.0 | 30.9 | 34.3 |
| Median monthly mortgage repayment ($) | 1,733 | 1,820 | 1,733 |
| Mortgage stress (%)[2] | 8.7 | 13.6 | 11.2 |
| Rent stress (%)[3] | 4.1 | 4.2 | 5.8 |
| Motor vehicles per household | 2.0 | 2.1 | 2.0 |
| People per household | 2.9 | 3.1 | 2.8 |

There were small differences in terms of the median age and age distribution as shown in figure 3, with a 42 year median for Wantirna–Wantirna South compared to a median age of 36 years in Rowville. In addition, Rowville had a higher percentage of people under the age of 17 years whilst Wantirna had a higher proportion of people aged over 50 years. Rowville also had a higher percentage of its population born in Australia.

Despite having higher median incomes, Rowville has lower levels of outright home ownership and higher levels of mortgage stress than Wantirna–Wantirna South. This was

[1] The lower the score the greater the disadvantage.
[2] Mortgage stress defined as households where mortgage payments are 30% or greater of household income.
[3] Rent stress defined as households where rent payments are 30% or greater of household income.

not surprising due to a higher number of comparatively young families living in the area. Rent stress was comparable for the two localities.

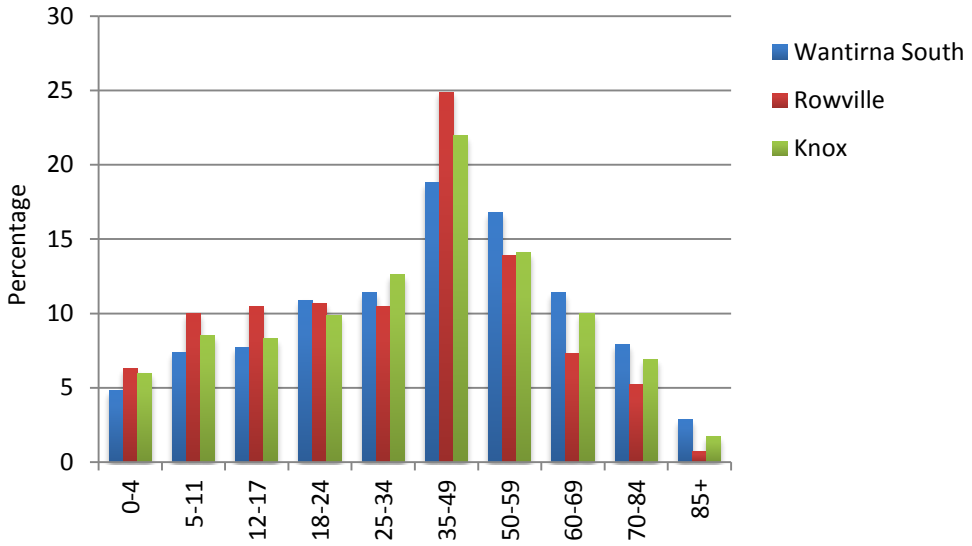



**Fig. 3.** Population profile
*Source: ABS census data 2011.*

*Land use mix*

Figure 4 shows the proportion of the major land use zones within the two areas. While approximately 50 per cent of the land within both suburbs is zoned for residential use, the breakdown of the remaining 50 per cent is quite different. Within Rowville approximately 17 per cent of the land is within a special use zone. In Rowville, land in this zone is generally developed as golf courses (of which there are three in Rowville). The high proportion of the road zone within Wantirna South is as a result of Eastlink (a major north-south toll road) running through the suburb. The high proportion of land within the public park and recreation zone in Wantirna South is in part due to the Dandenong Valley Parkland (managed by Parks Victoria), which runs on the west side of east link along the Dandenong Creek Corridor, and the Blind Creek Corridor which connects to this park land.

Rowville contains a large employment area – the 'Scoresby Rowville Employment Precinct' (SREP). When fully developed this area is expected to produce 15,000 to 20,000 jobs. However, there is a slightly larger proportion of business land within Wantirna South than in Rowville. Much of this land is home to the Knox City Shopping Centre currently managed by Westfield, one of the largest shopping centres in the outer eastern suburbs.

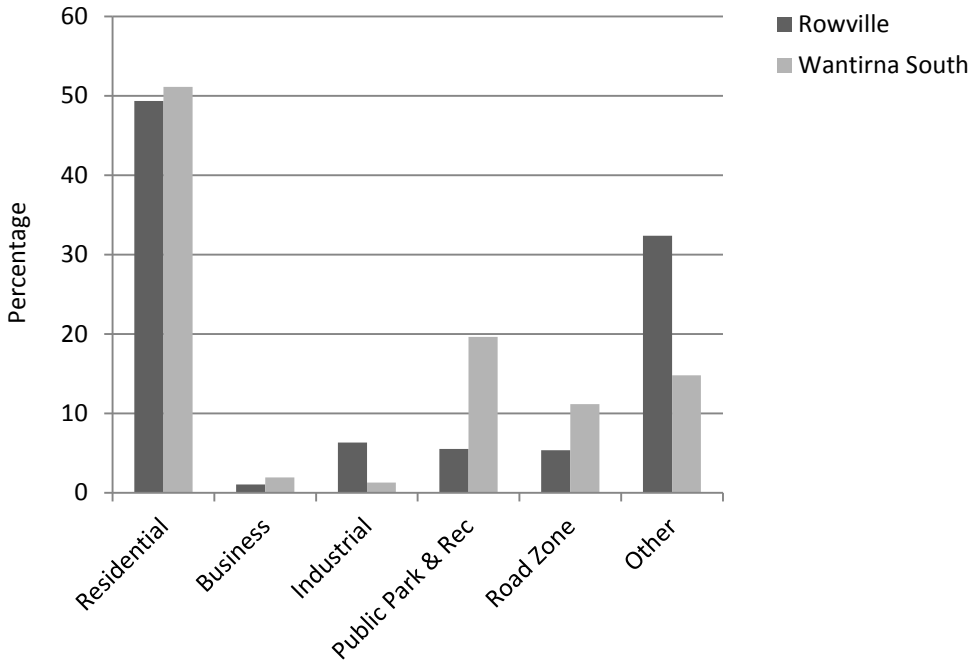



**Fig. 4.** Land use zoning
*Source: Knox Planning Scheme.*

*Housing density and size*

In 2011 the population density in the City of Knox was 13.0 per hectare. This figure was far higher compared to Greater Melbourne, which had a population density of 4.0 persons per hectare (however this is perhaps not surprising as Greater Melbourne includes large areas of non-residential land).

**Tab. 1.** Population density in Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville

| Average Population Density per Ha | |
|---|---|
| Wantirna and Wantirna South (average of Wantirna and Wantirna South) | 14.6 |
| Rowville (average of Rowville, South, central and north) | 16.7 |
| City of Knox | 13.0 |

*Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011.*

The majority of housing in Rowville is counted as large detached family homes. Comparison of the number of bedrooms identifies that over 95 per cent of all dwellings in Rowville have three or more bedrooms. This is higher than the proportion in Wantirna-Wantirna South (87 per cent), and the Knox average of 87 per cent. The proportion of smaller dwellings (one and two bedrooms) in Wantirna-Wantirna South is much higher (11 per cent) than Rowville (five per cent), and closer to the Knox average (12 per cent).

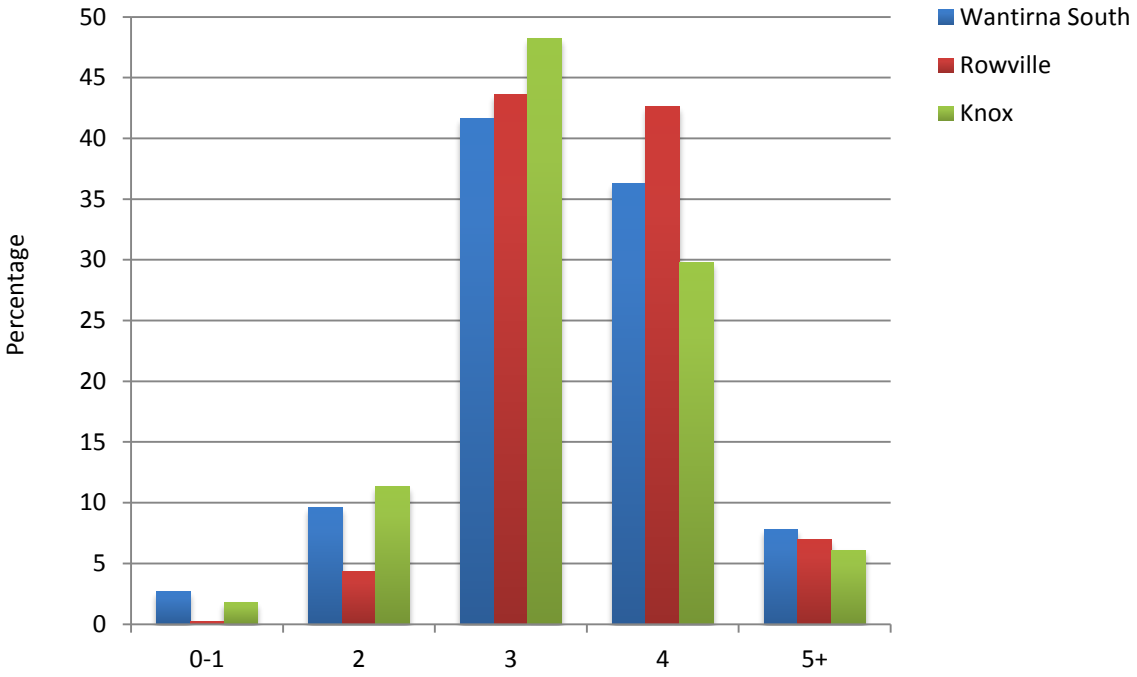



**Fig. 1.** Size of dwellings (number of bedrooms)
*Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011.*

Interestingly, the age of the majority of the residential building stock is fairly similar. Both suburbs were developed through the 1980s into the 1990s – although some parts of Wantirna South were developed a little earlier during the 1970s (see figure 6).

*Comparison of typical suburban streets*

While the majority of land across both areas was developed through the 1970s and 1980s, a number of differences can be drawn from an observation of two typical streets. Within Wantirna and Wantirna South there are a large number of 'pocket parks' which, although quite small (many no larger than an average house lot), connect many courts and cul-de-sacs with other streets, providing direct pedestrian access (see figure 7). This is also reflected in the relatively high amount of (Council owned) passive open space in Wantirna and Wantirna South (119.4 ha) when compared to Rowville (78.4 ha) (see also table 9), and the number of playgrounds per $km^2$ (2.2 across Wantirna and Wantirna South and 1.1 in Rowville; see table 10).

Within Rowville, particularly in those areas developed through the 1990s, many of the houses are large relative to the size of the block. While the subdivision trend of courts and cul-de-sacs continued, there are significantly fewer pocket parks providing pedestrian and cycle access to adjoining streets. Many properties also have relatively small backyards (see figure 8).

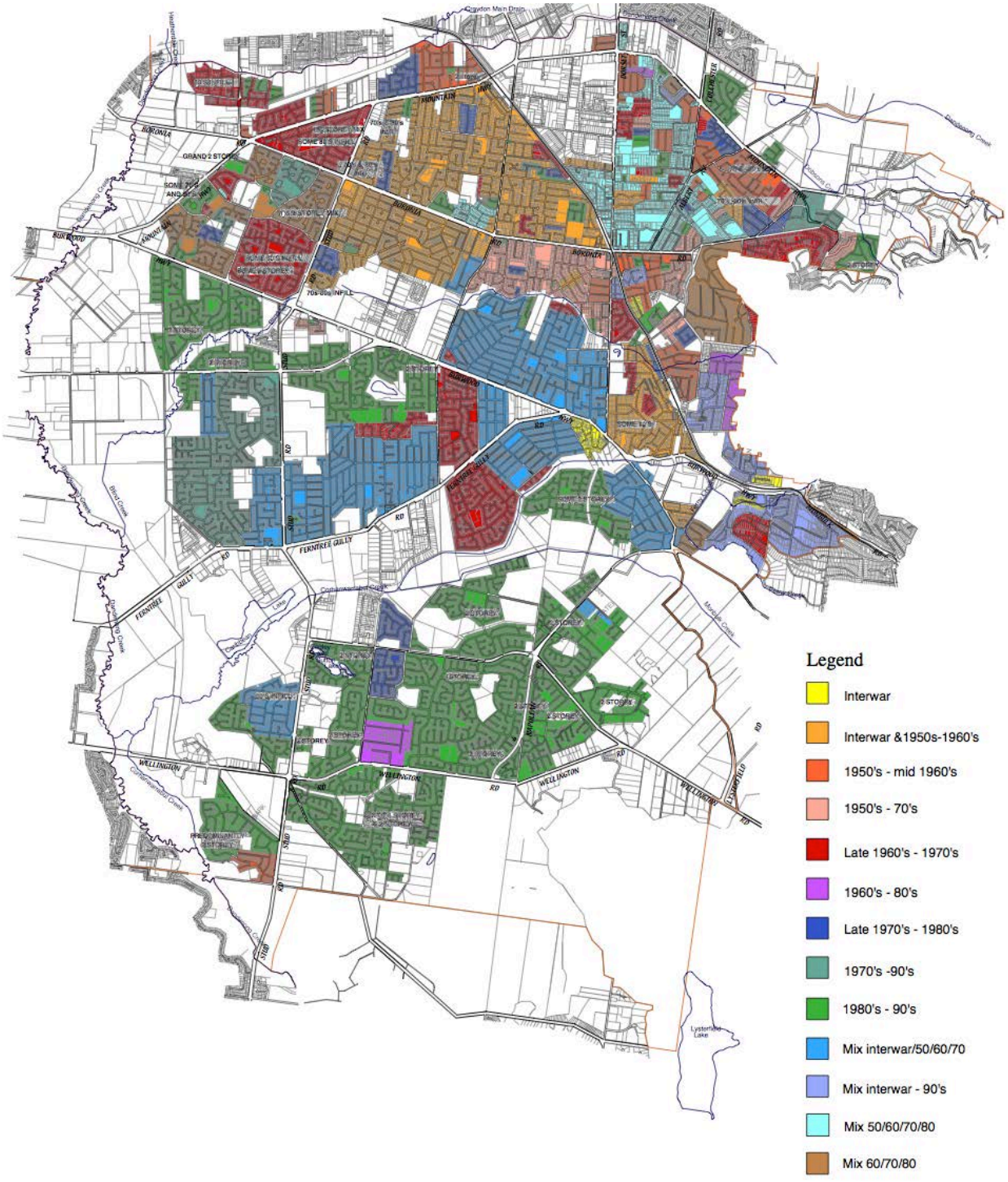



**Fig. 2.** Age of development
*Source: Knox City Council unpublished.*

**Fig. 3.** Typical street pattern in Wantirna South.

**Fig. 4.** Typical street pattern in Rowville.

*Safety and perceptions of safety*

Residents' perceptions of safety were also compared. The overall results of the perceptions of safety survey (conducted by Knox City Council online in 2012) did not

reveal significant differences between the two areas. While the data suggest that Rowville residents are likely to feel safer than residents in Wantirna and Wantirna South, the presence of the Knox O-Zone (a popular night spot incorporating a large number of licensed venues, restaurants, clubs and a cinema) in Wantirna South is likely to have skewed the results such that residents' perceptions overall were not accurately reflected.

Table 4 provides the breakdown of the percentage of residents reporting feeling 'safe' or 'very safe' in the following situations:

**Tab. 2.** Perception of safety

| | Rowville (%) | Wantirna and Wantirna South (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Home alone (day) | 95 | 91.3 |
| Home alone (night) | 92.3 | 86.7 |
| Walking alone locally (day) | 97.5 | 97.8 |
| Walking alone locally (night) | 51.3 | 43.5 |

*Source: Knox City Council perceptions of safety survey (unpublished).*

In terms of what residents of these two areas would change in their neighbourhood to increase safety, table 5 shows that residents of Wantirna would like to see lighting improvements to improve safety at twice the rate of Rowville residents. Residents of Rowville would like to see changes to behaviour of community members and neighbours as a way of improving safety at twice the rate of Wantirna residents.

**Tab. 3.** Residents' preferred changes in the community/neighbourhood to increase safety.

| Change in neighbourhood | Rowville (%) | Wantirna and Wantirna South (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Lighting | 20.5 | 10.7 |
| Environment (e.g. trees and litter) | 7.7 | 7.1 |
| Changes to road / street | 10.2 | 14.3 |
| Security improvements (e.g. gates, CCTV) | 2.6 | 3.6 |
| Police, security personnel | 28.2 | 25 |
| Initiatives for young people | 12.8 | 10.7 |
| Alcohol | 5.1 | 3.6 |
| Neighbours / behaviour in community | 10.2 | 21.4 |
| Justice system response | 2.6 | 3.6 |

*Access to public transport and opportunities for non-motorised transport*

Analysis of 'travel to work' data is important as travelling to work on public transport, on foot, or by cycling all provide opportunities for incidental physical activity. Analysis of ABS travel to work data reveal that a higher proportion of people in Wantirna–Wantirna South catch the train to work than in Rowville, while more people in Rowville drive their car to work than in Wantirna South.

A lower proportion of Rowville residents walk to work than in Wantirna–Wantirna South. In fact, the proportion of Wantirna-Wantirna South residents that walk to work is marginally higher than the Knox average. Some of the reasons that may explain the travel to work data for these two suburbs are considered below.

**Tab. 4.** Travel to work data.

| Mode of travel to work | Wantirna and Wantirna South (%) | Rowville (%) | Knox (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Train | 7.7 | 5.1 | 6.3 |
| Bus | 1 | 0.8 | 1.3 |
| Car driver | 69.3 | 73 | 70.3 |
| Car passenger | 4.8 | 5 | 4.6 |
| Motorbike | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0.4 |
| Bike | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.4 |
| Walk only | 1.4 | 0.5 | 1.1 |

Table 7 shows the number of registered vehicles. This reveals that approximately three quarters of households in Rowville have at least two registered vehicles. This is higher than Wantirna South (approximately 66 per cent) and the Knox average (approximately 65 per cent). Conversely, there are fewer than two per cent of households in Rowville without a registered vehicle (1.9 per cent) compared with 5.2 percent in Wantirna–Wantirna South and the Knox average of 4.2 per cent.

**Tab. 5.** Number of registered motor vehicles per household.

| Proportion of households | Rowville (%) | Wantirna and Wantirna South (%) | Knox (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| None | 1.9 | 5.2 | 4.2 |
| 1 motor vehicle | 21.7 | 26.9 | 28.5 |
| 2 motor vehicles | 48.3 | 41.2 | 42.8 |
| 3 or more vehicles | 26.2 | 24.7 | 22.2 |
| No. of motor vehicles not stated | 1.9 | 2.1 | 2.3 |

The travel to work data and the number of registered vehicles per household may be explained in part by the greater ease in which Wantirna residents can access major public transport networks. Only 40 per cent of residentially zoned land within Rowville is within 400m of a bus stop. This compares with 45.8 per cent of land in Wantirna and Wantirna South. Analysis of all land within 400m of a bus stop also reveals greater coverage in Wantirna–Wantirna South (67 per cent compared to 70.8 per cent).

While both Suburbs are serviced by the Principal Public Transport Network (PPTN)[4], there is a far greater length of coverage in Wantirna–Wantirna South (17.6 km compared to 9.4 km). There is also greater coverage of the PPTN – primarily running along Stud Road (north–south) and Burwood Highway (east–west) within Wantirna-Wantirna South.

**Tab. 6.** Access to bus stops and the PPTN.

| | Rowville (%) | Wantirna and Wantirna South (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Proportion of all residentially zoned land within 400m of a bus stop | 40.1 | 45.8 |
| Proportion of all land within 400m of a bus stop | 67.0 | 70.8 |
| Length of the PPTN (km) | 9.4 | 17.6 |

Figure 9 and figure 10 (below) show the coverage of land within 400m of a bus stop for both areas. Whilst this measured distance is direct ('as the crow flies'), it does highlight that there is a far greater network of bus stops across Wantirna and Wantirna South compared to Rowville. Access to the bus network is important due to the PPTN in both areas being comprised entirely of bus routes – there is no heavy or light rail in either suburb.

In both figures the PPTN is show in blue. In figure 10, which shows coverage in Rowville, the major gaps within residential areas are circled in red. Most of the other gaps across both areas are within non-residential areas, particularly to the west of Eastlink which includes land within the Dandenong Valley Parkland.

[4] The PPTN comprises a network of road and rail-based links connecting principal, major, and specialised activity centres within the urban growth boundary (Ramsey 2010). Additional local feeder bus services also exist within Knox, however these operate at less frequency than the PPTN.

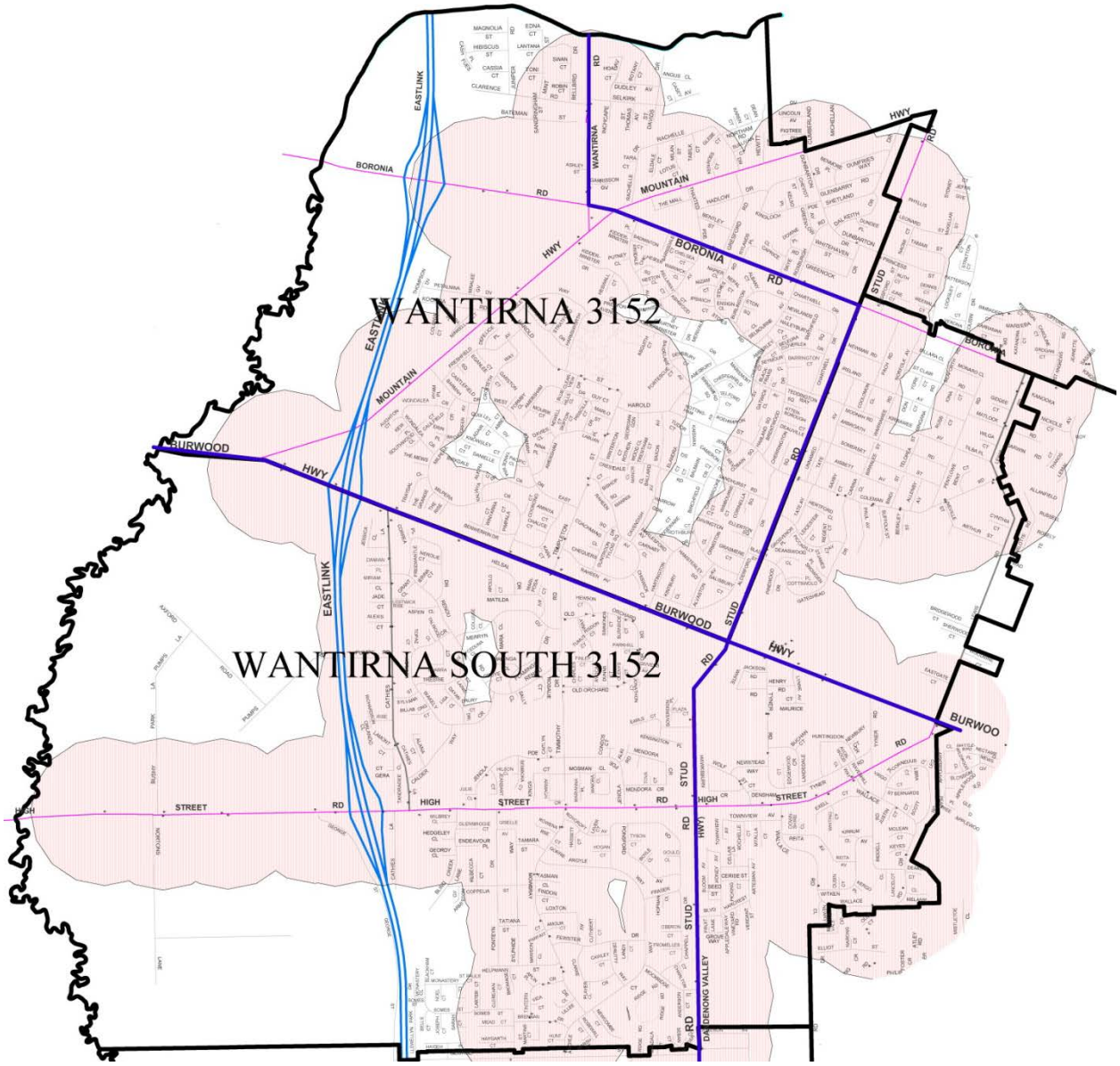



**Fig. 5.** Wantirna and Wantirna South land within 400m of a bus stop (shaded in red). The PPTN is shown in dark blue.

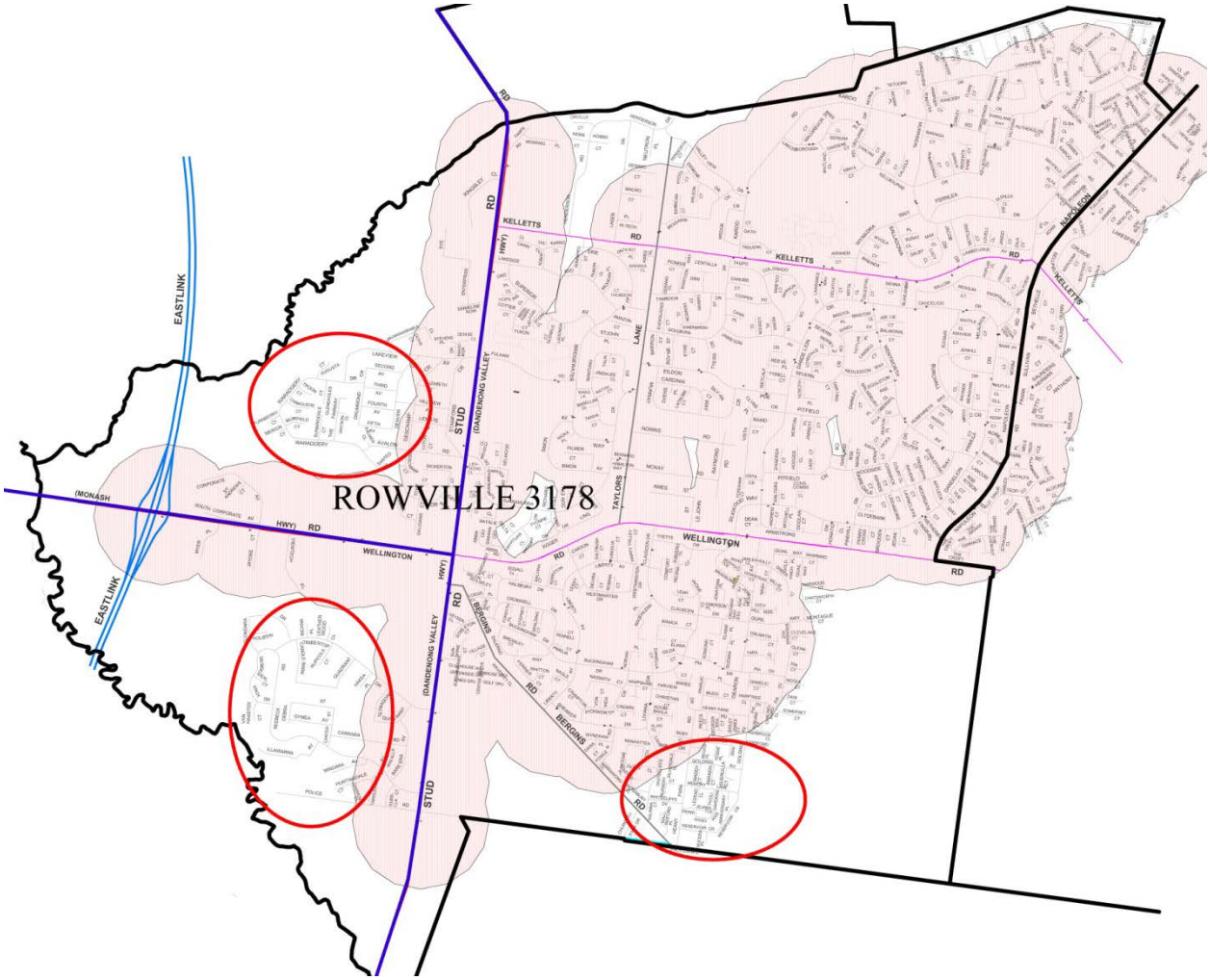



**Fig. 6.** Rowville land within 400m of a bus stop (shaded in red). The PPTN is shown in dark blue. Major gaps within residential areas are circled in red.

*Open space, playgrounds and shared paths*

The Principal Bicycle Network (PBN) is a network of proposed and existing cycle routes that help people cycle for transport, and provide access to major destinations in the metropolitan area. The PBN is comprised of local roads and off-road paths. Within Wantirna and Wantirna South there is a greater length of the principal bicycle network than in Rowville (27.3 km in Wantirna–Wantirna South and 18.2 km in Rowville).

*Open space*

Table 9 provides a broad estimate of the amount of open space maintained by Council. There is 62 ha of open space within Knox that is within land owned or controlled government agencies such as Melbourne Water and VicRoads.

While the total amount of open space is similar across these two areas, there are differences in the amount of usable open space. Much of the open space within Rowville is located within the future Stamford Park and is currently undeveloped and not accessible to the community (approx. 35 ha). Stamford Park is located in the far north west of Rowville, along the Corhanwarrabul Creek. Council has endorsed a master plan for this site that includes the restoration and recreation of wetlands (in partnership with Melbourne Water) and the creation of significant areas of passive open space.

**Tab. 7.** Open space maintained by Knox City Council.

| | Rowville (ha) | Wantirna and Wantirna South (ha) | Knox (ha) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Active open space (sports fields and all playing surfaces, e.g. netball, tennis, athletics etc.) | 16.0 | 25.2 | 112.7 |
| Passive open space (excluding car parks in reserves) | 78.4 | 119.4 | 430.5 |
| Conservation open space (bushland areas managed by Council's biodiversity team) | 18.8 | 49.5 | 131.5 |
| Undeveloped open space | 54.9 | 23.5 | 102.8 |
| Total | 168.1 | 217.6 | 777.5 |

One important form of open space is playgrounds. Figure 11 shows the location of all playgrounds in Knox within a 400m buffer. As highlighted by the red and green ellipses there is a considerably greater coverage of playgrounds in Wantirna–Wantirna South (highlighted in green) when compared to Rowville (shown in red). Table 10 clearly shows that, in terms of number of playgrounds per square kilometer, Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville sit above and below the Knox average, respectively. Indeed, of the 207 playgrounds across Knox, 50 are in Wantirna–Wantirna South.

**Tab. 8.** Number of playgrounds.

| | No of Playgrounds* | No. Playgrounds per $km^2$ |
|---|---|---|
| Wantirna and Wantirna South | 50 | 2.2 |
| Rowville | 24 | 1.1 |
| Knox | 207 | 1.8 |

* These figures do not include playgrounds within childcare and preschool facilities.

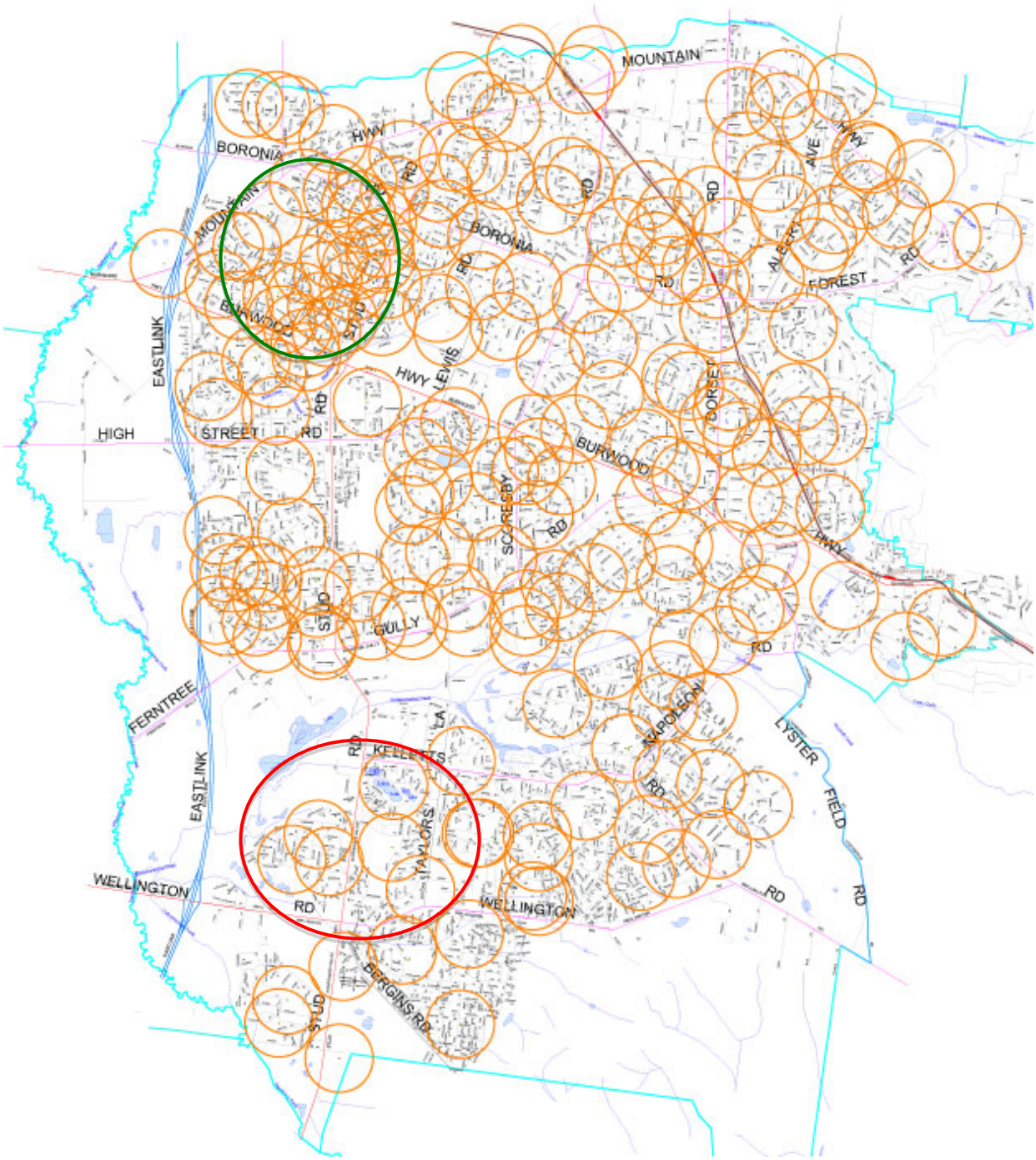



**Fig. 7.** Access to playgrounds in Knox. Playground areas are enclosed within an orange circle of 400m buffer. High density playground areas in Wantirna–Wantirna South and low density playground areas in Rowville are circled in green and red, respectively.

*Access to leisure*

Table 11 provides an overview of Council's active space facilities within the two areas. These figures do not include any private facilities (such as the Paul Sadler Swim School in Rowville and the 27ha Knox Regional Sports Park in Wantirna South). More detailed information on the location and access to leisure services across Knox will be available through the development of a new 'Leisure and Recreation Plan' (scheduled for 2013). Table 11 shows a higher number of tennis courts and cricket pitches and nets in Wantirna and Wantirna South, along with a greater area of ovals/pitches. In Rowville there are more Netball courts and outdoor basketball courts compared to Wantirna and Wantirna South.

**Tab. 9.** Council active space facilities.

| | Wantirna and Wantirna South | Rowville |
|---|---|---|
| Tennis courts | 45 | 21 |
| Ovals / pitches | 197,446 $m^2$ | 142,253 $m^2$ |
| Cricket pitches | 12 | 8 |
| Cricket nets | 6 | 3 |
| Rebound walls | 0 | 1 |
| Netball courts | 2 | 6 |
| Outdoor basketball courts | 1 | 2 |

## Discussion

The preceding analysis reveals key discrepancies between the suburbs of Rowville and Wantirna–Wantirna South, which are otherwise largely comparable areas.

There was a marked pattern of Wantirna and Wantirna South having many of the physical environment attributes that are likely to contribute to the observed reduced risk of obesity and improved health. These included:

- more open space (specifically more active open space) and more playgrounds, with a greater coverage
- a greater coverage of residential land within 400m of a bus stop
- a greater length of the PPTN and the Principal Bicycle Network.

Conversely, within Rowville:

- more residents travelled to work using private motorised transport
- there was a higher proportion of households with three or more cars.

These findings are consistent with evidence which demonstrates that residents who live in environments which have a high reliance on motorised transport, have reduced access to active transport options, and have less access to open space are more likely to have a higher risk of obesity (Frank et al. 2006; Frumkin et al. 2004). Furthermore, these findings support the espoused broader link between urban form, physical activity and obesity (McCormack & Shiell 2011).

Whilst most of the findings were consistent with the existing research, there were fewer differences between the referent suburbs for perceived levels of safety, which has previously been demonstrated to impact on physical activity levels. It is important to note, however, that the data on reported perceptions on safety may be skewed due to the inclusion of a concentration of restaurants and bars within Wantirna. This is important for further research in Knox to get a better understanding of perceptions of safety within the community and other barriers to incidental and structured physical activity related to safety and perceptions of safety.

Unfortunately, there were extremely limited data available to support the analysis of access to leisure and recreation faculties beyond those owned by Council. Therefore it was not possible to draw meaningful conclusions around different levels of access between the two areas.

## What we have learnt from the process

Integrated planning is critical to the implementation of any possible policy interventions, not only in Rowville, but across the whole municipality. One of the most important findings from this paper was the need to ensure that the impact upon health is considered in all strategic and urban planning work.

## Rowville Plan

This paper suggests that there are a number of differences in the physical activity environment between Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville. The important questions to ask in developing the Rowville Plan revolve around what policy interventions could reduce overweight and obesity. Drawing on the literature and an understanding of these differences – many of which highlighted that Rowville's physical activity environment could be improved to reduce the risk of obesity – this paper will form an important input to the development of the Rowville Plan. This section identifies possible interventions in the built environment to reduce the relative risk of obesity and enable better population health in Rowville.

The development of the Rowville Plan is supported by the Rowville Community Reference Group. This group comprises residents, business owners and representatives from various local groups and clubs. One of the outcomes sought through the development of the Rowville Plan is local ownership of the plan, particularly given that the project is a review of a current structural plan that was the subject of much community angst around the land use and development outcomes sought. Because the Rowville Plan represents an opportunity to develop a much more holistic plan for the next 20 years it will be important to embed discussions about healthy environments into discussions with reference group members and the broader community. This could have two benefits: firstly, it can ensure that population health is captured as an important planning issue; and secondly, it can increase understanding of the rationale behind aspects of the final plan that may seek to improve population health.

One obvious aspect of the Rowville environment that could be improved is access to public transport and non-motorised forms of transport. This will require a combination of approaches, and in some cases require further investigation.

In terms of improving access to public transport (largely a state government responsibility), this will require continued advocacy from both Council and the Eastern Transport Coalition (ETC) for both general and specific improvements. The ETC consists of Melbourne's seven eastern Metropolitan Councils and represents approximately one million residents. The ETC advocates for sustainable and integrated transport services to reduce the level of car dependency to secure the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of Melbourne's outer-east. The ETC aims to work in partnership with federal and state governments.

There are two specific improvements which could make a substantial difference to access to public transport in Rowville: Rowville Rail and an improved bus interchange at the Stud Park Shopping Centre. The state government has recently funded a $2 million feasibility study of a 12 kilometre rail line between Huntingdale Station and Rowville (scheduled for completion by mid-2013). A rail line to Rowville was one of the rail network developments proposed in the 1969 Melbourne Transportation Plan (SKM 2012). Importantly, a Rowville rail line would service Monash University (which has over 23,000 students and adjoins a large scientific precinct). The state government study will provide greater understanding of service levels and travel times, patronage projections, constructability, environmental and social impacts, and costs. The ETC and Knox City Council are currently calling on the state government to release the final report for stage 1 of the Rowville Rail feasibility study which is almost six months overdue.

Currently the north-south SmartBus route does not connect to the bus interchange at Stud Park Shopping Centre. The Rowville Plan (which is focused around this shopping centre) can and should allow for the provision of an improved interchange as part of any redevelopment of the shopping centre. The interchange should be designed in a way in which it could be incorporated into a future railway station layout.

As outlined above, in table 9 much of the open space within Rowville is located within the future Stamford Park and is currently undeveloped and not accessible by the community (approx. 35ha). The redevelopment of Stamford Park will provide additional active, passive and conservation open space in Rowville. The Stamford Park Master Plan (Knox City Council 2013) includes a network of shared paths, including an additional crossing of Corhanwarrabul Creek. This will provide improved access to the adjacent Dandenong Valley Parklands. Development of Stamford Park will have a number of benefits beyond improvements to the physical activity environment.

In addition, although not specifically analysed in this paper, the literature suggests that improvements to pedestrian amenity could play a role in making walking more attractive. Therefore, in terms of recommendations for further research, it would be useful to better understand the motivations and barriers to walking and cycling in Rowville, specifically those barriers relating to safety and perceptions of safety, and the amenity of the general environment.

Study's strengths and limitations

This paper has engaged in research of an interdisciplinary nature, 'crossing professional boundaries' that Higgins (2010, p. 108) refers to. The process of writing this paper has provided a number of opportunities for conversations across Council about the differences in the physical environment between Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville, and how this may be influencing levels of physical activity. This research will form an input to the development of the Rowville Plan.

For this paper, analysis of factors influencing obesity was limited to the physical activity environment. Whilst differences in physical activity environments are not the only differences between these suburbs, they are part of a complex interrelated web of determinants that, when addressed in a complementary and holistic way through policy and planning, can make a substantial positive impact on the health and wellbeing of residents.

Some of the specific limitations of this research included a lack of comparative data around safety and perceptions of safety, and access to leisure and recreation. The authors note that more detailed information on the location and access to leisure services across Knox will be available through the development of a new Leisure and Recreation Plan (scheduled for 2013). Additionally, there were a number of elements identified in the

literature that were not considered in this paper, such as the quality of open space, route directness, connection of pathways, and number of trees.

One of the main challenges of this paper was a limited ability within Council to complete detailed and more meaningful spatial analysis. For this reason, much of the analysis is observational; therefore a causal relationship between the built environment and risk of obesity cannot be categorically demonstrated.

## Conclusion

Using a comparative case study investigation to understand how differences in urban form may influence physical activity, this paper revealed numerous small, but cumulative differences between Wantirna–Wantirna South and Rowville. While these two suburbs do not differ remarkably in terms of social and other demographic characteristics, there were differences in terms of the mix of land uses, size of dwellings, provision of open space (and specifically playgrounds), and access to public transport and non-motorised forms of transport.

The findings showed that Wantirna and Wantirna South have many of the physical environmental attributes that contribute to a reduced risk of obesity and a healthier suburb, such as:

- more open space (and specifically more playgrounds)
- better access to public transport, including the Principal Bicycle Network.

While conversely, Rowville (with a relatively higher risk of obesity) has:

- more residents travelling to work using private motorised transport
- a higher proportion of households with three or more cars.

These findings are broadly consistent with the literature reviewed herein and support the espoused broader link between urban form, physical activity and obesity.

The differences in the built form between the two suburbs may, in part, explain the increased risk of obesity in Rowville. Future strategic and urban planning decisions for the suburb of Rowville (and the entire municipality) should consider the potential impact upon the health of the population. Within Rowville there is an opportunity to consider this in 2013 through the development of the Rowville Plan. One obvious aspect of the Rowville environment that could be improved is access to public transport and non-motorised forms transport. This will require a combination of approaches, and in some cases require further investigation. Development of the new Rowville plan will provide

an opportunity for additional active, passive and conservation open space in addition to increased provision of, and access to shared paths. Findings from this study have the potential to inform future policy and planning both within Rowville and, more broadly, to better population health.

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# Local government research into a 'hidden' issue

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**Abstract.** There are increasing concerns emerging through research, demographic and service information about the marginal position of older women who lack resources and support for secure housing. Questions arise about the impact this has on their health and wellbeing as they age. In response, the City of Boroondara, with the support of Monash University, undertook local research during 2011-12 to explore the experiences and issues that place single, older women (55 years and over) at risk of homelessness or that lead to homelessness. As the City of Boroondara is an affluent municipality, many social problems are 'hidden'. Recruiting women to participate in the research was difficult. There were also issues in accessing supporting data from local organisations and Victorian and Australian Government departments. This paper will discuss the challenges in undertaking research into a 'hidden' issue at the local government level. The paper will also describe the key findings and how these will be used to inform the development of local policies relating to positive ageing, health and wellbeing, and housing. It will also discuss the implications for services providers.

## Introduction

The City of Boroondara is located in the inner eastern suburbs of Melbourne, between five and 10 kilometres east of the Melbourne CBD. The municipality is, generally speaking, considered an affluent area. In 2011, the median weekly household income was $1,893 compared to $1,333 in Greater Melbourne (ABS 2013a), and the median house price was $1,250,000 compared to $492,500 in Greater Melbourne (Swinburne University of

Technology 2013). The municipality was also second highest ranked of all Victorian local government areas on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage in 2011 (ABS 2013b).

Within the municipality, many problems facing local marginalised groups can be effectively 'hidden' from the community and funding bodies through the obfuscation of socio-economic indicators of disadvantage within general measures of affluence. In 2010, the City of Boroondara began local research into a hidden social issue: homelessness among older women. The project came about through anecdotal reports of an increase in the number of older women seeking housing assistance in the municipality. The reports indicated that older women were facing homelessness for a range of reasons, including the death of a spouse, reductions in pension income, and elder financial abuse (City of Boroondara 2010, p. 6).

The research was undertaken as the City of Boroondara has an ageing population, which may result in greater numbers of elderly women falling into homelessness, and local agencies were not well equipped to deal with growing housing demand for these individuals. There were also no clear solutions for preventing this new group from falling into homelessness for the first time.

The research aimed to provide Council, local service providers and the community with evidence based information about the circumstances of older women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This information could then be used by Council and service providers to inform policy, planning and service delivery in relation to this group, now and into the future.

This paper provides an overview of the background, methodology and findings of the third stage of the research project: 'health and housing: older women on the margins'. It also discusses the challenges and benefits of undertaking research into hidden issues at the local government level. The recommendations arising from the research and for undertaking research into a hidden issue are also identified.

## Background

In Australia, there are increasing concerns emerging through research, demographic and service information regarding homelessness among older women. There are also limited policy responses and research into this issue at present. The following section provides a brief overview of the three stages of the research undertaken by the City of Boroondara into

this issue. It also provides a brief overview of the policy context in which this research was developed and of recent Australian research.

## City of Boroondara

The City of Boroondara began research on homelessness among older women in 2010. The research was undertaken in response to anecdotal reports of an increase in the number of older women seeking housing assistance in the municipality. The research comprised three stages as described in Figure 1.

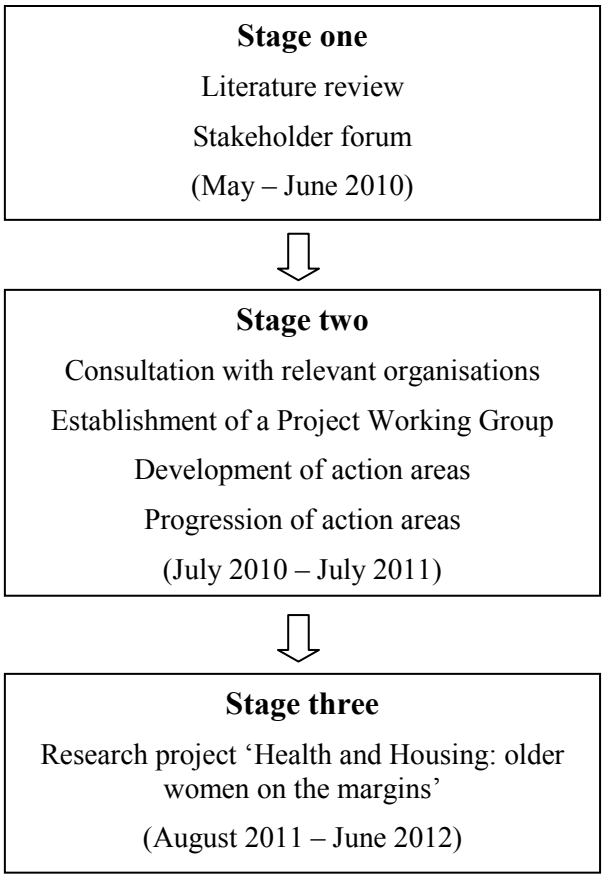


**Figure 1:** The three stages of the City of Boroondara research project on homelessness among older women.

*Stage one*

Stage one of the research was undertaken in partnership with the Salvation Army EastCare, which provides housing information, support and referral services to residents of

the City of Boroondara. It involved a literature review of local, national and international work on the causes of, and trends in homelessness as experienced by older women. It also included a forum in June 2010 to inform key stakeholders about the findings of the preliminary research, and to consult on the experience of other organisations with the issue.

*Stage two*

Stage two of the research involved further consultation and development. A Project Working Group was established in November 2010 following consultation with key organisations that participated in the forum and those identified through subsequent planning. Representatives included support services, housing assistance providers, community health services and peak bodies. The purpose of the Project Working Group during stage two was to:

- consider the information and actions gathered from the literature review, the stakeholder forum and subsequent consultations
- identify and develop action areas and partnerships to progress work
- identify potential sources of funding for future work.

The Project Working Group identified the following five key areas for future work: data collection, advocacy, community education, information resources and research. A data collection tool was developed during this stage and used by local services and Council in mid-2011. The purpose of the tool was to assist in identifying the number of women aged 45 years and over who were homeless or at risk of homelessness in the City of Boroondara.

*Stage three*

Stage three of the research project, 'health and housing: older women on the margins', built on the work from stage two and progressed areas for research that would inform local community and service responses. The focus of the research was on single, older women, rather than older adults in general, as this group were considered particularly vulnerable to homelessness due to a range of drivers including low or no income, lack of superannuation, lack of equity in housing, lack of education and qualifications, and lower-paid work (City of Boroondara 2010, p. 3). There are also limited housing options to meet the short and longer-term needs of older women, as accommodation such as boarding houses are considered unsafe and rising housing and rental costs connected to the gentrification of the municipality makes housing unaffordable.

## Policy context

The Australian and Victorian Governments and the City of Boroondara all have policies on homelessness as follows:

- The Australian Government's white paper on homelessness, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, identifies national responses to the needs of particular groups within the homeless population (Australian Government 2008).
- The Victorian Government's *Homelessness Action Plan 2011-15* supports innovative approaches to homelessness, investigating preventative and early intervention models, and allocating resources when and where they are most needed (Victorian Government 2011).
- The City of Boroondara's Social Housing Policy 2008-11focuses on retaining and increasing the supply of social housing to meet the needs of low income and disadvantaged residents, as well as those who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness (City of Boroondara 2008).

Both the Australian and Victorian Government's policies identify older people, but not older women, as a target group for future work. The City of Boroondara's policy similarly does not identify older women as an *at risk* group.

## Recent research

As noted earlier, a comprehensive review of local, national and international literature focusing on the causes of, and trends in homelessness in relation to older women was undertaken during stage one of the project in 2010. The literature review found that there are substantial gaps in knowledge around the issues confronting older homeless women. It also found that there was a clear need for more qualitative research on the causes and responses to older women's homelessness, particularly as the number of older women is growing and the demand for affordable accommodation is likely to increase (City of Boroondara 2010, p. 5).

Since the stage one literature review, a number of Australian research projects relevant to this subject have been undertaken by community based organisations and peak bodies. This research was undertaken primarily in response to growing concerns about meeting the demands for housing by women, older adults or older women. The three most relevant projects are:

***It could be you: female, single, older and homeless*** aimed to 'investigate the life trajectory of women who become or remain homeless past the age of 45 years, in order to interrogate the definition of homelessness that determine government homeless policy' (McFerran 2010, p.17). The research, which included interviews with 31 women in New South Wales who had experienced homelessness and were 45 years and older, found that being female, older and single is to be at housing risk. The report made a number of recommendations, suggesting that a gendered analysis of housing, homelessness and ageing policy was needed, and that more affordable and appropriate single person housing for single older women was needed (McFerran 2010, p. 4).

***Ageing in what place? The experiences of housing crisis and homelessness for older Victorians*** (Westmore & Mallett 2011) aimed to examine older individuals' pathways into housing crisis and homelessness in Victoria. The report made a number of recommendations including the need to simplify the service system, fund financial counselling and support for older people in housing stress, develop national and state housing policies for older people, and educate older people, service providers and the public about services available to assist older people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

***Home truths: impacts of housing security on women across the life course*** (Anglicare Sydney 2011) examined quantitative data from Anglicare Sydney's emergency relief client database and qualitative data via in-depth interviews and focus groups. The research found that half of the women who were renting privately or publicly aged over 50 years between July 2007 and March 2011 were experiencing significant rental stress. The research also found that older women who were living alone were more likely to live in insecure housing and to live in households with lower incomes. In addition, single older women were also more likely than older women in other family types to be dependent on the Newstart Allowance for their income (Anglicare Sydney 2011, pp. 32, 35).

## Aims

The objectives of the research project were to:

- generate knowledge about the current and future levels of homelessness and risk of homelessness for older women in the Boroondara community
- identify the factors that contribute to older women becoming homeless or at risk of homelessness

- identify issues relating to housing stress specific to older women from diverse communities, e.g. women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds
- identify issues relating to housing stress specific to older women with mental health problems or illnesses
- identify the pathways and tipping points to becoming homeless, or at risk of homelessness for older women
- identify how the service system and the community can respond to homelessness and the risk of homelessness among older women.

## Methodology and findings

The Social Planning Unit at the City of Boroondara, and in particular the Social Planning Officer and the Coordinator Social Planning, were responsible for conducting the research. This included developing the project methodology, undertaking the data collection methods, analysing the information, and writing up the project outcomes. The City of Boroondara also initiated a working relationship and research partnership with the Healthy Ageing Research Unit (HARU) of the University of Monash for the project. A Masters of Community Psychology student also assisted in conducting the interviews and information analysis.

A range of data collection methods were used. This ensured that relevant demographic and service data, and the views of the community, service providers and older women were considered. It also assisted in raising awareness within the community about the project and the issue in general, as the data collection methods were widely promoted through Council's website, monthly magazine, libraries, customer service centres, newsletters and other relevant networks. The data collection methods employed and the findings for each method are described below.

### Project Working Group

A Project Working Group considered the implications of the research findings for service providers, peak bodies and older community members. In particular, the role of the Project Working Group was to:

- reflect on the information emerging through the research

- contribute to a local model for responding to older women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- contribute to the development of forward directions based on information arising from the research project
- progress the action areas developed in stage two of the research.

The Project Working Group also had input into the development of the research methodology and played a key role in the promotion and recruitment of older women to the interviews.

The key areas for future work, described below, were developed in conjunction with the Project Working Group.

## Profile of older women and housing issues

A demographic profile of older women and related housing issues was developed to inform knowledge about the current and future levels of homelessness and risk of homelessness for older women in the municipality. The demographic profile included information about the types of housing in which older women live, how much they pay for their housing, and population forecasts. The housing profile included housing affordability measures, house and unit prices, information about the number of social housing dwellings, and public housing waiting list times. Other relevant Australian research on housing projections for older adults was also incorporated.

The key findings of the profile of older women and housing issues were as follows:

- There is predicted to be a large increase in the number of women aged over 55 years in the municipality between 2011 and 2021, with the number forecast to increase by 3,223 from 24,309 to 27,532 (Forecast.id 2011).
- One of the main risk factors contributing to homelessness among older women is living alone. In the City of Boroondara, women aged over 55 years are more likely than men to live in sole person and single-parent households, and the likelihood of living in a sole person household increases with age up to around 90 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011).
- The National Housing Supply Council *2010 State of Supply Report* projected that the ageing population (65 years and older) would grow from 19 per cent to 28 per cent of all Australian households between 2008 and 2028 (National Housing Supply Council 2010, p. xvi). While owner-occupier will remain the preferred tenure type, demand

for private and public rental by older people nationally was predicted to increase from 146,200 to 321,400 for private rental, and from 86,500 to 189,800 for public rental over the same 20 year period. Forecasting by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute also found that by 2051 a significant drop in the number of older Australians that own their home outright is expected, from 78 per cent in 2006 to 55 per cent by 2051 (Bridge et al. 2011, p. 27).

- Affordable housing options for older residents in the City of Boroondara (whether they are looking to rent or to buy) are limited, with only 14 advertised rental properties affordable for people on Centrelink payments in June 2011. For this same quarter, there were no affordable one-bedroom properties available, effectively preventing sole person households from accessing affordable dwellings suited to their needs (Department of Human Services 2011a, p. 26).
- There is a lack of social housing in the City of Boroondara. In June 2010, there were 827 public housing dwellings and 78 community housing dwellings in the City (Department of Human Services 2011b).
- Waiting times for public housing can be long. In December 2011, there were 2,259 people on the public housing waiting list and an additional 396 people on the public housing transfer list in the Box Hill region (Department of Human Services 2011c).

## Service data requests

To build knowledge about the current level of homelessness or risk of homelessness among older women, requests for service data were made to local, Victorian and Australian organisations providing services in the municipality. The data requested related to the number of single, older women who were accessing housing services or that had been identified by the services as being homeless or at risk of homelessness.

## Community survey

In December 2011 a self-completion survey was mailed to 135 faith groups, Probus clubs and senior citizen clubs in the municipality. The survey was also promoted through Council's website and in the local paper, and distributed via email to relevant networks. The aim of the survey was to elicit community knowledge and experiences of older women and homelessness in the municipality. The survey included 13 questions and collected both qualitative and quantitative data. The survey also provided a way of raising awareness in the community about the issue. Forty-nine responses to the survey were received.

The community survey found that over half (55.3 per cent) of the respondents thought homelessness was an issue for older women, while 6.4 per cent did not think it was, and 38.3 per cent were not sure. Only 10 of the respondents reported having contact either personally or through their community group, network or service with women in Boroondara that were homeless. When asked about their awareness of services available to assist older women, respondents showed a high level of awareness of health and medical services (71.4 per cent), social and support activities (65.7 per cent), and in-home support (65.7 per cent). However, only 37.1 per cent were aware of housing services.

These findings highlight the need to raise awareness about the issue within the community and about services available such as Housing for the Aged Action Group, the Salvation Army EastCare, and the Department of Human Services – including Centrelink.

## Qualitative interviews

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken between December 2011 and February 2012 with 13 women that were recently homeless or at risk of homelessness. Participation in the interviews was promoted through local service providers, libraries, on Council's website, and in the local paper. Members of the Project Working Group also approached women accessing their services about participating in the research.

Women were eligible to participate in the interviews if they were single, were 55 years and older, lived or had recently lived in the City of Boroondara, and had experienced homelessness or had been at risk of homelessness in the last 12 months. Women were defined as being homeless in this research if they fell within one of the following three categories of homelessness as defined by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2006, p. vii):

- Primary homelessness: people without conventional accommodation, e.g. living in streets, deserted buildings, improvised dwellings and parks.
- Secondary homelessness: people staying in boarding houses, people utilising emergency accommodation services such as the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, and people with no secure accommodation staying temporarily with friends or relatives in private dwellings.
- Tertiary homelessness: people living in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis, operationally defined as 13 weeks or longer. These people are considered homeless because their accommodation situation is below the minimum community standard for a small self-contained flat.

Women were categorised as at risk of homelessness if they were currently housed, but their housing was insecure and they potentially faced homelessness due to limited alternative housing options available to them. This included women in private rental accommodation who were concerned their rental costs would increase, that their income could decrease, or that the property would be sold.

The purpose of the interviews was to understand the circumstances and issues that place single, older women at risk of homelessness or that lead to homelessness. An interview agenda guided the interviews and included key questions about the participants' experiences of homelessness or being at risk of homelessness, the factors they regarded as leading to their homelessness or risk thereof, and their experiences of services and support systems.

Interview participants also completed a demographic information sheet, with details about their age, income, source of income, rental or mortgage repayments, their current accommodation arrangements, how long they had lived in the municipality, country of birth, and level of education.

The interviews provided an in-depth understanding of the circumstances and issues that place single, older women at risk of homelessness or that lead to homelessness. The key findings of the interviews are summarised below:

- There was not a single tipping point that lead to homelessness. The women described complex life experiences over extended periods that contributed to a decline in their circumstances. In many ways the women could be described as typical, with the issues that contributed to their housing situations likely encountered by many women.
- Common challenges facing homeless or at risk women included mental health issues, complex and co-occurring health conditions, abuse, disrupted career paths, family relationship breakdowns, and the demands of caring.
- A key theme that emerged through the interviews was that of not seeking help due to the shame and stigma the women experienced, and also as a result of their negative self-perception and experiences in seeking help.
- Deteriorating health in general was common among the women as a result of their housing issues, and this impacted on their ability to work. Dislocation from family, friends and other networks also had a negative impact on their health and wellbeing and highlighted the importance of ageing in place.
- The lack of affordable and appropriate housing to enable women to remain in their communities as they age was identified as an issue.

- The importance of recognising the diversity that exists among older women as a group was evident. For women of CALD backgrounds, this included limitations of the service system in understanding the importance of community and family connections and its connection to housing, and also for access to culturally relevant services.
- The women's connections to the service system varied, with seven of the interviewees classified as being at risk of homelessness managing the attendant housing issues by themselves. No characteristic differences between women who were managing on their own and women connected to the service system were identified. However, it appeared that the women who were managing issues themselves often sought out alternative and sometimes compromised living arrangements (e.g. share house, live-in carer, family members and cheap private rentals).
- When the interviewees faced an acute housing crisis, the women either self-referred to support services, or were referred by friends, support service providers such as Home and Community Care (HACC) or Camcare, or by Centrelink. The services to which the women were connected included housing providers, support services, Centrelink, legal aid, aged respite, allied health, support groups for health issues, general practitioners (GPs), libraries, and other support services.
- In some cases it was found that once the women had received housing assistance, there was a lack of follow up by the service providers to link to the women back into the community through services such as HACC, social support groups or allied health professionals.

## Real estate agents and funeral directors survey

Real estate agents and funeral directors were identified as key businesses that may have contact with older women at vulnerable times of their lives when they may become homeless or at risk of homelessness. For example, when their partner dies they may not be able to make mortgage or rental repayments, or they may be given a notice to vacate and not know where to seek assistance with finding a new property.

In January 2012, a survey was mailed to 92 real estate agents and funeral directors with business addresses in the City of Boroondara. The aim of the survey was to gather information about whether people working in these businesses had experiences with older women who were at risk of homelessness. The survey included 10 questions and collected

both qualitative and quantitative data. As with the community survey, this survey also aimed to raise awareness about the issue among these businesses. Five responses to the survey were received from real estate agents.

The low response rate may have been due to the timing of the survey, which was mailed out when real estate agents in particular may have been on leave. It may also indicate that real estate agents and funeral directors do not think homelessness among older women is an issue, and/or that they do not see that their services can play a role in responding to the issue. As no responses were received from funeral directors, it might indicate that they would not become aware of a client's risk of homelessness when providing services.

The survey of real estate agents found that:

- The respondents either thought homelessness was not an issue or were not sure if it was an issue.
- Only one respondent had contact with an older woman who was at risk of homelessness.
- Three of the respondents were aware of housing information, support and referral services.
- Four of the respondents noted that a directory of local services and advice lines would assist them to respond to older women who are at risk of homelessness.
- Two thought that information sheets that describe the issues and options would be useful.

As with the community survey, these findings highlight the need to raise awareness about the issue and provide information on where to seek help to businesses that are likely to come in contact with older women with housing issues.

## Community workshop

Respondents to the community survey were invited to a workshop in mid-February 2012 to explore strategies which may assist older women to maintain secure housing and enhance social connections, and to flag strategies for the community and service providers to better respond to the issue of homelessness in older women. Five community groups participated in the workshop.

The community workshop participants identified the following actions that they thought could prevent homelessness among older women:

- better information about services through community services such as neighbourhood houses or GPs
- health providers being more alert to social issues
- accessible health services for people on low incomes
- reduced waiting times for public health services
- promoting the message that 'it's ok to ask for help'
- more support systems and social groups
- education about services and social issues.

Preventative actions relating specifically to service system changes identified by the participants were:

- more housing options that are safe, accessible, secure and appropriate
- information sessions for health professionals about housing risks
- holistic case management
- coordinated services.

The findings of the community workshop emphasised the need for community education about the issues, where to seek help, and that it's ok to ask for help. The need for more affordable housing and the important role that health professionals can play in addressing the issue was also highlighted.

### Limitation

The main limitation of the present study was the small sample size. While the interviews were able to generate some rich and diverse data, it is not possible to generalise the findings to all women over the age of 55 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

## Discussion

The findings of this research demonstrate the value of undertaking research into social issues at the local government level. This section discusses the challenges and benefits of undertaking this type of research, and also discusses the recommendations arising from this research.

## The challenges in researching a hidden issue

This research identified a number of challenges in researching a hidden issue at the local government level. These included difficulties in recruiting participants, accessing supporting data, and having the specialist knowledge and officer time to complete the research. These challenges are briefly discussed below.

- The process of identifying older women to participate in the interviews was challenging because, as has been asserted throughout this paper, the issue is largely hidden. This meant that, due to lack of awareness about the issue, women may not have been aware that they would be considered homeless or at risk of homelessness for the purposes of the research. The relative social isolation of the target group may have also reduced their awareness of, and access to the research process.
- The shame and stigma of admitting to experiencing a hidden social problem in an affluent municipality may also have stopped women from participating in the research.
- While services were aware of women who would have been eligible to participate in the research, it was not always appropriate to approach them as they were in the midst of a crisis.
- Accessing data from service providers to support the qualitative findings of the research project was challenging, with only a small amount of data ultimately collected. This was due to a range of factors including limitations with data collection systems related to age, gender and geographical groupings. Third party data were also limited by the reports that the service providers' systems could produce, and by the information that could be freely provided to other organisations. In addition, women may have been engaging services for other issues, such as financial counselling or health issues, and the housing issue may not have been identified and therefore recorded.
- Officers in local government may not have the specialist knowledge required to undertake research into a hidden social issue. For this research, the City of Boroondara initiated a working relationship and research partnership with the University of Monash, Healthy Ageing Research Unit (HARU). This partnership provided the specialist knowledge, support and experience of HARU as part of the research team in the project design, development of the data collection methods, and analysis of the findings. HARU's knowledge was crucial for this research given the

hidden nature of the issue and the sensitivity of interviewing older women who were homeless or at risk of homelessness.

- Researching a hidden social issue can be time consuming. As the Social Planning Unit at the City of Boroondara was leading the project, significant officer time was allocated towards the project. In addition, a Masters of Community Psychology student participated in the research. Members of the Project Working Group also spent a considerable amount of time assisting with the recruitment of older women for the interviews and reflecting on the findings of the research.

## The benefits of undertaking research into a hidden issue

There are benefits of undertaking research in a local government area into a hidden issue. One benefit is the ability to access expertise and local demographic and qualitative data to support anecdotal reports into the issue. In the case of homelessness, research at the local government area it also affords opportunities to assess concomitant local issues around health and other service provisions affecting this social issue. This information can then be used by councils and service providers to inform policy, planning and service delivery at the local level.

For the City of Boroondara, raising awareness within the community about the issue was another benefit of undertaking research into a hidden issue. As this research found, community awareness of the issue of homelessness in older women was low. By widely promoting the project and data collection methods, awareness about the issue was raised and the issue was no longer as hidden as it was before the project commenced. This may assist people who are affected by the issue to seek help. It may also encourage community members to identify people who need assistance.

## Recommendations arising from the research project

The research project identified four key areas for future work. These are to:

- Inform residents, businesses, local services and all levels of government on issues that impact on older women and contribute to homelessness and the risk of homelessness
- Build the capacity of local services to identify and address issues that impact on older women and contribute to homelessness and the risk of homelessness

- Promote services and resources that offer support to older women and their families on issues that impact on, and contribute to homelessness and the risk of homelessness
- Advocate on issues that impact on older women and contribute to homelessness and the risk of homelessness.

The key areas identified link to existing Council policies and strategies such as *Creating an Age Friendly Boroondara 2009-14* (City of Boroondara 2009a), the *Social Housing Policy 2008-11* (City of Boroondara 2008) and the *Boroondara Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2009-13* (City of Boroondara 2009b). As these documents or associated action plans are currently being redeveloped, the findings of this project will be incorporated into the review and redevelopment process.

The key areas identified also build on existing actions connected to positive ageing, community capacity building, and various other issues being addressed by services and in a range of forums. Existing networks and forums convened by Council, such as the Boroondara Aged Service Providers Association, were seen as opportunities to discuss the issues related to homelessness among older women. Such networks and forums would also provide opportunities to engage services and organisations not currently aware of issues around homelessness in older women. An annual meeting, rather than an ongoing Project Working Group, will be used to discuss the issues and identify emerging issues, and to continue connecting these to local and wider issues and directions.

## Conclusions

Through this research it was found that there are challenges in undertaking research into 'hidden' issues at the local government level, including difficulties in recruiting participants and accessing supporting data. Other difficulties identified included accessing officers with the specialist knowledge and the time to complete the research.

The key recommendations arising from the research for local governments undertaking local research into hidden social issues are as follows:

- establish a Project Working Group of key stakeholders to inform the development of the research proposal, and assist in the data collection and analysis of the findings
- assign a dedicated project team that has the skills and expertise to undertake the research

- enter into a partnership with a university or other expert bodies that are able to provide specialist knowledge on data collection methods and analysisemploy a range of data collection methods to ensure that the views of the community, as well as individuals directly affected by the issue, are captured
- develop a data collection tool to assist service providers to collect quantitative data about the issue
- widely publicise the project within the community to raise awareness of the issue and to assist with recruiting project participants.

Although researching a hidden issue can be challenging, the City of Boroondara found the process to be invaluable as it provided a greater understanding of the issue and how it can be addressed at the local level. It also assisted in raising awareness of the issue so that it is no longer as hidden as it was before the research commenced. As the municipality has an ageing population and the demand for affordable housing by older women is likely to grow, the Social Planning Unit at the City of Boroondara will continue to explore ways to incorporate the findings of the research into relevant Council policies and documents. It will also explore ways to raise awareness of the issue in the community to assist and prevent older women from entering homelessness.

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