Outcome-focussed planning in Australian local government:

how council plans and cultural development plans measure up

Short running title: Outcome-focussed planning in local government

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Abstract:

Contemporary public policy increasingly emphasizes a focus on outcomes, the difference that occurs in the lives of citizens from policy and activity of government. Other contemporary imperatives for effective planning include: recognition of the values of the community whom plans serve; direction towards goals and objectives; utilisation of evidence; articulation of theories of change that underpin planning; and responsiveness to evaluation. This article reports a desk-based research project to assess how local government planning documents meet these imperatives. Two documents are examined for 67 councils across Australia: the major strategic document, council plan or other-named document;

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and the cultural development plan or other-named document that directs staff and investment aimed at cultural enrichment of the LGA. Findings indicate that the majority of councils' documents appeared only concordant with one or two of these planning imperatives. No plan addressed more than three. Overall, council plans and cultural development plans did not clearly indicate their responsiveness to values of their communities, nor include objectives that formed measurable steps toward goals or formally refer to the use of evidence in decision-making. No plans included theories of change to underpin decision-making. This analysis indicates clear areas of improvement for planning for local governance.

Keywords

Planning, local government, outcomes, outcome-focus, evaluation, council plans, cultural development

Summary at a glance

This article reports an examination of Australian local government plans (council plans and cultural development plans) against principles for effective planning, including attention to community values; outcome-focus; utilisation of evidence and theories of change; and responsiveness to evaluation. Findings indicate little concordance of planning documents with these principles.

Introduction

Contemporary public policy increasingly emphasizes a focus on outcomes, that is, the difference that occurs in the lives of citizens and residents as a result of policy and activity of government. In this approach, reduced emphasis is placed on investment and strategies that contribute to such outcomes, that can be considered as inputs (the former) and outputs (the latter), as valuable in and of themselves. Rather, investment in—indeed, government activity generally—is considered valuable because of its enhancement of public good and the creation of public value (see, for example, Alford and O’Flynn 2009). Two Victorian government departments have recently published outcomes frameworks that guide their work: the Education Department to ‘focus their efforts on key areas that are known to have the greatest impact on school improvement’ (Victorian State Government 2017), and the Health Department to provide ‘a transparent approach to monitoring and reporting progress’, with indicators to track ‘whether...efforts are improving the health and wellbeing of Victorians over time (Victorian State Government 2016).

The same impetus towards outcomes might therefore be expected in local government planning, both at the level of the overall organisation, as well as in plans that direct specific areas of councils’ work. While guidelines for council planning included a focus on outcomes as a priority more than a decade ago (Victorian Corporate Planners Network n.d), outcome-focussed planning has been identified as underdeveloped in some areas of local government’s work. For example, Auditor-General reports in Victoria (Auditor-General Victoria 2012) and NSW (Crawford 2018) highlight the lack of outcomes reporting by councils. In New Zealand, most ex-post evaluations undertaken in local governments were found to focus only on outputs (Laurian et al. 2010).

In our roles as advisors to and researchers of Australian local government's cultural development work over more than a decade, we have observed many areas of planning that do not match these standards. In 2015, cultural development plans (CDPs) produced by Victorian local governments were found not to be strongly outcome-focussed, with more attention paid to investment (input) and activity (outputs), than the impact these had (Dunphy and Yazgin 2015). Many of these plans largely comprised lists of activities (outputs). Other areas of planning that were noted as underdeveloped in that examination included articulation of objectives, utilisation of theory of change to support decisions, and emphasis on evaluation. These plans were also observed as often being long and complex, thus reducing their likely usefulness as working documents.

Other less strategic practices of cultural development planning we have observed include investment in design and production of documents that seems disproportionate to the consideration given to content. These plans are often launched in public celebrations largely attended by providers (artists and arts agencies) rather than beneficiaries (community members).

These experiences catalysed the development of a *Framework for Cultural Development Planning* (Dunphy and Smithies 2017) to support more consistent approaches to cultural development planning. The *Framework* was intended in turn to support local government cultural development departments achieve better outcomes for their communities. It is based on contemporary standards for good planning discussed in more detail below and supported by planning principles articulated in other professional fields such as strategic spatial planning (Albrechts 2004 and 2006) and sustainability planning (Godschalk and Anderson 2012). It comprises six principles of: based on values; directed

towards goals; focused on outcomes; informed by evidence; underpinned by a theory of change; and respondent to evaluation. It is applied in this project as the analysis tool for plans.

The current article extends earlier research that focussed only on cultural development plans in Victoria and takes a national perspective, examining documents from local government across Australia. It also extends analysis to councils' major strategic document, the council plan (CP) or other-named document that sets the overall direction for the organisation. This is used as a point of comparison for the cultural development plan (CDP) or other-named document that directs staff and investment aimed at cultural enrichment of the LGA. The relationship between the two documents is also examined.

The article begins with an overview of the literature around strategic planning, for government and especially local government, focussing on contemporary best practice standards. Planning undertaken for, and by, the cultural development sector of local government is a focus. It then describes the method used in this research for creating a nationally representative sample of councils and locating their relevant planning documents. The process of analysis of plans from the 67 council sample utilising the *Framework* is outlined. Then, findings of that analysis are discussed, along with issues arising for local government planners. The article concludes with recommendations for professionals writing local government plans and their leaders.

Literature review

Principles of good planning

Effective planning requires clear links being made and articulated between stakeholders' values, goals, objectives and activities (Oliveira and Pinho 2010; Duxbury, Hosagrahar and Pascual 2016; Guyadeen and Seasons 2016). Hawkes (2001) identifies that a society's values underpin everything meaningful and that these values need to be reflected in the development of society. Consequently it might be expected that governments plan with consideration of the values of their communities. For organisations to achieve best outcomes for communities they serve, plans then need to be focussed on outcomes, that is, the changes that the organisation is seeking through their activities (Dunphy, 2015; Crossick & Kaszynska 2016). When programs are directed toward outcomes, the likelihood of improvement increases: conversely, when the focus is on activity, there can be an inappropriate tendency to assume that change has occurred because the activity has (Bradley, Munger and Hord 2015).

Outcomes-focused planning is also essential (Godschalk and Anderson 2012) to identify strategies and activities that have the best potential to contribute to desired change. Articulation of intended outcomes will also affect how activity is implemented (Wong, Baker and Kidd 2006). A lack of outcome focus increases the likelihood of activities being undertaken for reasons that are not related to the needs of beneficiaries. These reasons might include business as usual, leaders' preferences, political agendas, skills and interests of staff (Dunphy 2010). Lack of outcome-focus can also result in difficulty in implementing plans (Kovacs 2010).

Theory of change is a concept increasingly employed in effective planning. A theory of change articulates the relationship between desired outcome/s and activities that might be expected to contribute towards them (Anderson 2005). Crucially, a theory of change impels the use of evidence to inform choices of activity and expectations of their likely effectiveness (Funnell and Rogers 2011), given the imperative for strategic use of always-limited public funds (Albrechts 2004). By utilising a theory of change, planners can improve the planning and implementation of an activity and also facilitate the evaluation process (Connell and Kubisch 1998).

The use of evidence in planning is understood to be fundamental. Stevens (2013) argues that a strong fact-based component is needed to assess a current situation and make future projections: in order to identify goals, planners need to have knowledge of the situation at present. Stevens also recommends the use of results from previous evaluations to inform planning. Likewise, the selection of strategies and activities to address objectives need to be undertaken informed by evidence. Without evidence from research or previous practice knowledge to inform such choices, the potential for achieving desired outcomes is not maximised (Rousseau, 2006). Despite its importance, there are indications that evidence is under-utilised in planning (Ven den Hoogan 2013).

Community consultation can also be utilised as a form of evidence gathering. Citizens can be considered experts in their own lives and therefore the best source of data about their experiences. Policy making is more successful when communities have opportunities to present their views and priorities (Godschalk and Anderson 2012), than when politicians make decisions in isolation (Catt and Murphy 2003; Crase, Dollery and Wallis 2005). Use of consultation has the additional benefit of being considered important in terms of legitimacy and transparency of governance (Catt and Murphy 2003) and promotes community building (Brackertz and Meredyth 2009).

Evaluation and reflection are recommended as essential in all parts of the planning cycle (Albrechts 2004; Godschalk and Anderson 2012; Oliveira and Pinho 2009), with strong links between program planning and evaluation seen as vital (Guyadeen and Seasons 2016; Oliveira and Pinho 2011).

Evaluation can inform planners about how previous strategies have impacted on community members and offer insight for future directions (Albrechts 2004; Guyadeen and Seasons 2016). The reviewing of contributory processes along with measurement of progress are considered important in effective practice (Duxbury, Hosagrahar and Pascual 2016).

While monitoring and evaluation are important steps in the planning cycle, they are often overlooked (Laurian et al. 2010). Factors posited for this oversight including an absence of clear statements of goals, objectives or outcomes in plans, lack of ability or desire to evaluate, and organisational culture that does not prioritise evaluation (Laurian et al. 2010). Inclusion of activities that are not related to goals and objectives also hinder efforts to evaluate both activities and plans in which they are articulated (Stevens 2013; Dunphy 2010).

One significant factor identified as causal in this under-utilisation of evaluation is the greater value placed on preparation of plans over other aspects of planning (Guyadeen and Seasons 2016). This bias appears to be ingrained within the practice of planning, with training courses focussing more on plan creation than evaluation (Balas 2012).

The inclusion of clear evaluation strategies in plans is recommended to address these challenges (Gattenhof 2017). After goals and objectives are defined in the planning stages, and appropriate activities are identified, evaluation criteria should also be selected and included in plans (Oliveira and

Pinho 2009). When activities are chosen because of their potential for addressing specific outcomes, appropriate evaluation criteria become self-evident. Therefore, it is imperative for effective evaluation that plans include objectives, activities and outcomes that are linked in a causal pathway (Guyadeen and Seasons 2016).

Local government planning in Australia

In Australia, local government authorities differ significantly in a range of respects, such as geographic area (from 1.5 sq. kms in Peppermint Grove, WA, to 371,696 sq. kms in East Pilbara, WA) and population size (111 in Sandstone Shire, WA, to more than one million in capital city Brisbane). However, they all have similar responsibilities, being obliged by local government acts to provide a range of services to their communities. Their work is increasingly sophisticated, with jurisdictional responsibility expanding from its earliest incarnation of basic ‘roads, rates and rubbish’ service provider to complex enterprises that deal with the multifarious needs and aspirations of local residents and visitors.

Likewise, requirements for planning in local government are becoming more sophisticated and demanded equally of all agencies across the nation. LGAs in all jurisdictions are required to produce a strategic plan for their area, supported by an imperative for evidence-based policy (Blomkamp 2014). Local government legislation shows some consistency nationally in requiring plans to state: objectives; strategies to achieve objectives; and indicators that measure achievements towards objectives. Local Government Acts in Victoria and NSW are clear in requiring authorities to work towards desired outcomes for communities. Despite this imperative, Auditor-General reports in those states found that performance reporting has largely focused on outputs rather than achievements

towards objectives (Auditor-General Victoria 2012; Crawford 2018). The Victorian report further identified that objectives were often not well expressed, and that even when performance indicators were included, they often did not actually measure outcomes.

There is significant variation in requirements re length of plans, with jurisdictions being required to plan across timeframes that range from four to ten years (Grant and Drew 2017). For example, in Victoria, council plans are required to be written every four years (Local Government Act 1989 (VIC), s. 125); in NSW, councils must have four year delivery programs (Local Government Act (NSW), s. 404) and ten year council plans (s. 402), while in Tasmania ten-year plans supported by annual operational plans are required (Local Government Act 1993(TAS) s. 66). The ACT's legislation does not mention length of plans.

Lack of use of evidence, including published research, has been identified as a feature of Australian local government planning (Brown, Davern and Giles-Corti 2017). These authors posit an explanation for this in the confinement of evidence to academic journals that are not read by local government staff. They also note the lack of use of evidence from previous activity considered in local government health plans, suggesting that such evidence may not exist or may not have been documented.

Community consultation is considered important, with all jurisdictions' local government legislation (bar ACT which does not have such legislation) stressing that communities should be included in planning. The Northern Territory (Northern Territory Government 2011) and Queensland (Queensland State Government 2009) Local Government Acts note the requirement for councils to be

responsive to community needs, while Victorian legislation requires councils to develop a public consultation program regarding services they provide (Victorian State Government 1989). Legislation in other states (New South Wales State Government 1993; South Australian State Government 1999; Tasmanian State Government 1993; Western Australian State Government 1995) explicitly direct councils to engage communities in the development of strategic plans (see Grant and Drew 2017, 246-264). As discussed earlier, this process can also be used to determine community members' values, which enables government to respond to them.

However, there are challenges evident in local governments' utilisation of data gathered through consultation. A previous analysis of Victorian cultural development plans indicated little use of data or findings from consultation actually affecting the plan (Dunphy, Metzke and Tavelli 2013).

Cultural development planning

Cultural development is a growing aspect of local government's work (Johanson, Kershaw and Glow 2014). Investment from the local government sphere made up 20% of the total government spend in Australia in 2014 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014) and increased to 27%, a total of \$1.5 billion, in 2015-2016 (Commonwealth of Australia 2017). As publicly funded activity, this aspect of government's work might be expected to be subject to the same imperatives as all others in aiming for best use of public funds supported by judicious planning.

As yet there appear to be no specific legislative requirements for cultural development plans in any jurisdiction. Despite this lack of imperative from legislation, an increasing number of local

government authorities have begun to produce specific plans about their cultural activity over the last twenty years (Dunphy, Metzke and Tavelli 2013; Dunphy and Yazgin 2015; The Chamber of Arts and Culture WA and CANWA 2015).

Challenges identified with those cultural development plans in Victoria include a lack of measurable goals or targets, focus on delivery of activities, and missing or under-developed evaluation strategies (Dunphy and Yazgin 2015). Evaluation of cultural activities is often undertaken only informally, with methods such as workers' reports of events most often used and findings often undocumented (Blomkamp 2014; Gilmore 2014). This under-emphasis on evaluation is considered to be at least partly because of lack of capacity (Gattenhof 2017). These findings accord with reports from the USA (Markusen and Gadwa 2010) and Europe (Van den Hoogan 2013) that outcomes of cultural development plans often not clearly identified.

Having introduced the literature outlining issues in local government planning, particularly in relation to local cultural development, we now introduce the research undertaken for this project. The section to follow articulates how we undertook our analysis of council and cultural development plans.

Method

Sample

We sought to gather data about CPs and CDPs from at least 10% of Australia's 568 councils (the number at the time of the research) to be representative of that government sphere as a whole. A stratified randomised sampling technique was used to select councils from each of the 22 ACGL

classifications of LGAs (Australian Government Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development 2015), attached as Appendix 1. Councils were selected from each category in each state and territory proportionate to the numbers in those jurisdictions in each ACGL category. Where more than one council in a jurisdiction fitted a category, to reduce sampling bias, the selection was made by identifying the median council listed, followed by the agency at the 25% point and 75% point of the range. 67 councils were initially selected, to allow for attrition of up to 20% of the original sample, considering organisations that might not be able to be included because of lack of published plans or other challenges.

Disruptions due to council amalgamations in NSW reduced the availability of planning documents in that state, impacting the selection of councils. Authorities from eight classifications in the original sample in NSW were replaced by others in the same category, and no councils were included for NSW for three further classifications (Urban Development Small, Urban Development Medium and Urban Development Large).

Search technique and inclusion criteria

The search for plans to be analysed was undertaken using only a web-search of each authority's website. When documents were unable to be directly located there, a key word search was conducted via Google. If both these methods did not enable us to find the plan, then no further attempt was made to locate documents from that organisation. First, we sought the main strategic document of the selected entities, entitled council plans (CP) or other. Our focus was particularly on strategic documents that the cultural development plan (CDP) (also known as arts and culture plans/strategies, or cultural plans/strategies), should be expected to respond to. In identifying council plans, we first

looked for documents that were four years in length, because most jurisdictions have legislation for plans of that timespan. Where these were unavailable, plans of other lengths were considered. Only plans that were dated as current at the time of the search were included in the sample.

Analysis

Both Council and Cultural Development Plans were assessed against the principles of best practice planning discussed earlier that underpin the *Framework for Cultural Development Planning*: based on values, directed towards goals, focussed on outcomes, informed by evidence, underpinned by a theory of change and respondent to evaluation (Dunphy and Smithies 2017). A point was awarded for alignment with each principle, enabling a maximum score of six. While terminology we are using is consistent, this was not so for plans, for example, with terms like mission, vision, goal, aims and objectives often used interchangeably, or with differing meanings in different organisations. In our analysis we have considered the function of terms used by councils rather than the actual terms, to ensure that our analysis did not discount council's planning prowess because of terminology that was different from ours.

The following section explains each principle and how plans were scored against them.

Principle 1: Based on values. Values can be defined as 'what residents care about for a desired future' (Dunphy and Smithies 2017) and wish to achieve (Albrechts 2004). This focus might be expected to ensure that the LGA's work will contribute to residents experiencing the life they wish to lead. An example of expressed community values is "Diversity: We value differences that enrich our

community and the positive contributions everyone can make in improving the quality of community life” (Glenorchy City Council 2013 p10).

Principle 2: Directed towards goals. Goals are defined as “the result or achievement toward which effort is directed; in this case, an intention for the desired future of residents of an LGA” (Dunphy and Smithies 2017). Goals should respond to the community’s values (Godschalk and Anderson 2012) and are aspirational: they may never be achieved. For example, the goal of a ‘Healthy and active community’ (Fairfield City Council 2017 p10) could never be redundant, as health and activity might be expected to always be possible to improve. A point was awarded if plans were directed towards goals, with goals being presented as aspirational and not worded as activities. In the case of CDPs, we determined that goals needed to have been drawn from the main council planning document to meet this criterion. A concordant example is provided by the City of Newcastle, with its Council Plan 2013-2018 goal of a ‘caring and inclusive community’ matched by the same goal in the Cultural Strategy 2016-2019 (City of Newcastle, 2013, p. 7).

Principle 3: Focussed on outcomes. Objectives, and the related concept of outcomes, can be defined as ‘a specific intended outcome that a person or system aims to achieve within a timeframe and available resources’ (Dunphy and Smithies 2017) and should be steps towards goals (Godschalk and Rouse 2015). Thus, objectives are conceptualised as intended outcomes, which may or may not be matched by outcomes achieved. An example is provided by City of Darwin, whose Strategic Plan goal of a ‘collaborative, inclusive and connected community’ is matched by outcomes that are sought of

‘community inclusion supported’ (City of Darwin, 2012, p. 26). Plans were analysed for the inclusion of objectives designed to assist in achieving the council’s goal/s. For a plan to be awarded a point here, it needed to include objectives undertaken to meet a council goal that were not activities or worded as activities.

Principle 4: Informed by evidence. Use of evidence to inform planning is vital because it enables understanding of where the LGA is at the current time in relation to any situation or issue, the cause of the situation or issue, and identification of activities or approaches that have previously been effective in addressing the issue. Evidence can be considered in three forms: practice knowledge; published research; and data, either existing data or data collected by the authority. Plans were next analysed in terms of their use of evidence. To meet this criterion, plans were required to have included evidence to illuminate issues and used it to support the selection of an objective and/or activity. Although not part of our sample, the Greater Dandenong Cultural Plan (2016) documents a relatively sophisticated use of evidence. It draws on information from the VicHealth Indicators survey (VicHealth 2016) to identify that arts participation in this LGA is lower than the state average (*where the LGA currently is in relation to the issue*). Council-commissioned research identified that cost was a factor in low participation (*the issue to be addressed*). With this knowledge, the council was able to implement initiatives to improve participation by focussing on reducing financial barriers (*strategies to address the issue*). Additional evidence could have been obtained from initiatives undertaken by other agencies or councils to increase participation for communities for whom cost is a barrier (*what has been effective previously to address this issue*).

Principle 5: Underpinned by a theory of change

Theory of change is a fundamental principle in planning because its use ensures that activities are logical choices underpinned by use of evidence and explanation for why they have been selected to address any issue. Plans were assessed for articulation of a theory of change. To meet the criteria, plans needed to include documentation of a three-step process; stating of the outcome or change that they sought; use of evidence to identify a course of action that was considered most likely to achieve desired change; and decision to undertake an appropriate activity or type of activity based on these.

Principle 6: Respondent to evaluation

Evaluation is vital in understanding the impact of activities and therefore needs to be included in all planning and design processes. Evaluation criteria are ideally identified when considering the change that is sought and therefore need to be included in plans from the beginning. The evaluation of activities undertaken, as well as evaluation of plans themselves, are essential in effective planning cycles. To be deemed to have met this criterion, plans were assessed for three inclusions: measures that related to outcomes or the change that was desired; a strategy for evaluation of activities such as identifying methods to be used and stakeholders to be surveyed; and articulation of a strategy for evaluation of the plan itself. Only plans that satisfied all three conditions were awarded a point here.

Findings

This section reports our findings, firstly about where we found councils with published CD and CDPs, then how concordant those plans were with the six principles.

Council and cultural development plans published

Of the 67 councils selected for analysis, 65 had current published council plans (CPs). The two authorities without CPs also did not have published cultural development plans (CDPs). Both of these were in NSW, and amongst the four councils nationwide in the category of smallest by population size, 'Rural Remote Extra Small'.

Of these 65 authorities with CPs, only 22 (34%) had a current cultural development plan. A further 11 councils (17%) had CDPs that were out of date or in development. This made the percentage of authorities who currently have, have had, or indicated intention to produce a CDP, 51%. We found no evidence of CDPs past, present or future for 32 (49%) councils, as depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Percentage of Australian councils with cultural development plans

Urban authorities were more likely to publish CDPs, with 19 of the 40 urban authorities in the sample (almost 47%) having plans, compared to only three of the 27 (11%) regional authorities. In terms of geographic variations, a greater proportion of councils in Queensland, Victoria and ACT had CDPs. Seven of ten Queensland local authorities (70%), six of 14 Victorian councils (43%) and the single ACT authority had current plans. In the Northern Territory, two authorities from a sample of four (50%), three of 11 New South Wales councils (27%) and only one council in each of six Tasmanian (17%), nine South Australian (11%) and ten Western Australian (10%) councils analysed had a current CDP, as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Council and cultural development plans published by state/territory

Principle 1: Based on values.

Of the 65 CPs examined, 26 (40%) included a statement of community values, as determined by an entry called values or a mention of values in the text. However, only 15 (23%) of the total actually included values phrased as statements supported by qualifying information to indicate what might be desired about this concept for the future of the community. Eight of the 26 plans (31%) mentioning values included stand-alone words or phrases such as ‘community’ that offered no information about what type of community or what change or improvement might be sought for the community.

A further three included what were claimed as value statements but were actually values regarding the operating principles of the council as an organisation, such as transparency and efficiency, and not values about what the people of that place cared about in their lives. The majority of CPs, therefore, did not provide evidence that they were being written to reflect what the community was looking for with respect to its future.

These challenges were even more pronounced in the CDPs. Only six of the 22 plans examined (27%) mentioned values, but only one of these included clearly articulated values of the local community.

The other five comprised: one plan that offered one-word value statements with no qualifying information; one referring to council (operational values) rather than community values; two

discussing the value of undertaking cultural activity broadly; and one using an external document (UN Convention on Human Rights) as the source of values considered, as depicted in Figure 3.

Principle 2: Directed towards goals.

The majority of CPs did include an articulation of a desired future for the community in the form of goals, with 54 plans (83%) meeting this criterion. The figure for CDPs was lower, however, at only 12 (53%). Of the ten CDPs not including goals, three did not include any goals, while seven named goals that did not align with goals from the CP and so were deemed not to have met the inclusion criteria. Four of these CDPs were produced for a time period that did not match that of the main CP, which may account for the disparity.

Principle 3: Focussed on outcomes.

While the majority of CPs did purport to include objectives, only 32 (49%) were deemed to have meet the analysis criteria of having objectives that were measurable steps towards a stated goal. Common problems were objectives that were not related to council goals or were worded as activities rather than achievable change. This suggests that there is some understanding that objectives should relate to goals, but a need is evident for strengthened relationships between objectives and goals, and improved distinction between activities and objectives. Only 6 (27%) CDPs included objectives that appeared to be measurable steps towards council goals.

Principle 4: Informed by evidence

When it came to use of evidence in planning, only two of the 67 CPs met this criterion. The CDPs showed stronger utilisation of evidence, with 13 documents (59%) reporting some form of evidence use. However, only ten (45%) CDPs achieved the full score for use of evidence for three functions: to identify issues; provide relevant information about past activity or achievements; and inform decisions about future activities. Problems identified with use of evidence in CDPs included references used to justify support for the arts broadly, rather than related to specific objectives, and consultation processes that could be considered a form of evidence gathering undertaken but without any apparent use of the data gathered to contribute to the plan or activities listed in it.

Principle 5: Underpinned by a theory of change

With respect to theory of change, none of the 65 CPs and 22 CDPs met this criterion. No plan examined effectively included justification for activities listed or linked stated activities with a desired change. While activities were often listed under an objective, plans did not offer a theory of if, or how, that activity was expected to support the objective.

Principle 6: Respondent to evaluation

Looking at evaluation practices documented in plans, CPs and CDPs showed the same tendency. While a number of CPs did nominate outcome measures, none of them did this consistently enough to meet the criteria. Only two CPs named measures they would use to determine their progress towards objectives. Other named outputs as measures (activities they did rather than outcomes, or the difference the activity made). One council mentioned that measures would be finalised once the plan received approval, but no evidence was found that this had been done in a follow up search of the council's website.

The CDPs followed the same pattern, with none of the plans including any outcome measures. Only one of the documents indicated a strategy for gathering information against its indicators and listed such methods as ABS statistics and a community indicator survey. That plan did not mention conducting evaluation that would require feedback from the public about their experience of the council's activities.

Figure 3: Council and Cultural Development Plans' alignment with the planning principles

Discussion

This study explored how well published council plans and cultural development plans of local government authorities across Australia conform to six best practice planning principles. It also assessed how well integrated councils' cultural development plans appear to be with their main strategic document, the council plan or other named document. Overall, our findings indicate that the majority of councils' documents were only concordant with one or two of the principles, with no authorities achieving a score above three. This has significant implications for effective delivery of activities and achievement of intended results.

Both CPs and CDPs included little evidence of articulation of the values that their communities hold and aspire to, and response to these in plans. As plans' goals should be based on the values the community identifies as important (Hawkes, 2001), LGAs risk not best serving their citizens and

residents if these goals do not address their community's desired future/s. Significantly, authorities may be more likely to experience community satisfaction if plans are reflective of residents' values.

The inclusion of goals was one area in councils' planning that was consistently achieved. That is, CPs and CDPs predominantly included goals that articulated a desired future for their communities. This suggests that authorities are aware that their work should be directed towards achieving community aspirations and have competence in articulating this.

We identified less consistent inclusion of objectives and outcomes. Our analysis identified that the majority of authorities did not convincingly link goals to objectives that form measurable steps toward the achievement of that goal. Without a link between objectives and a stated goal, councils risk undertaking activity that does not address the goal and therefore may not most efficiently achieve it. Under-developed connections between goals and objectives identified in our research may in part be linked to lack of theories of change.

A number of CPs and CDPs listed only a range of activities under a specific goal, which suggests that the activities were designed to meet that goal. This is problematic, as achievement of a broad goal will usually require a number of relevant objectives to be articulated and addressed. This suggests that planners may not be sufficiently thoughtful about the range of outcomes that might be needed for goals to be attained.

No plans studied specifically linked activities listed to a change being sought or reported a theory to underpin their selection of activities which correlates with observations of strategic planning by Godschalk and Rouse (2015). This suggests that careful thinking about why activities were selected might not have been undertaken.

While the importance of evidence including published research in planning is indisputable (Stevens 2013), our analysis identified a range of issues with the use and gathering of evidence in council documents. Although many authorities undertook consultation ostensibly as a form of evidence gathering, a range of underdeveloped practices related to this was found, including results of consultations not being mentioned in plans or data gathered not being made use of. This may be because data that could be useful in illuminating issues of concern to communities was not generated, a possibility supported by our observations of council's consultation practices over many years working with the sector.

Few authorities referred to any form of published research in their planning documents. Of those that did, few were found to have made appropriate use of this information to underpin planning decisions. Plans uniformly lacked inclusion of any information that supported their selection of activities, thus providing no justification of how activities were expected to achieve desired results.

Learning from past activity through reflection is another fundamental of effective planning (Stevens 2013) that neither CD nor CDP plans included evidence of. No mention was made in any plans of whether objectives of previous plans or outcomes of past activities were met to justify their continuation. This indicates that authorities may not be using knowledge about what has been

achieved in the past to guide current or future practice. The implication of these findings is that councils may not be undertaking most effective practice, when opportunities to learn from others' research or their own experience is not maximised.

The lack of focus of reflection on past activity may be linked to lack of emphasis on evaluation. In line with issues identified in the literature (Laurian et al. 2010), our results show that a minority of plans include evaluation measures for activities, and even when measures are included, they are most often output- rather than outcome-based. The reliance on output measures provides a challenge for councils to know the effect of their work on their community and therefore, the extent to which their goals are being achieved. Significantly, councils are missing the opportunity to understand which changes might be catalysed by specific activities. Lack of information re the success (or otherwise) of previous plans and activities has implications for the future cycles of planning. This includes planning processes that are always commencing from the beginning rather than building on corporate knowledge of what has been implemented previously, what effect it has had and what changes have occurred in the community as a result.

The findings of this current project of a national sample of council plans and cultural development plans substantiate previous findings about cultural development planning in Victoria (Dunphy and Yazgin 2015). We identify a series of problems with council and cultural development planning: a disconnection between goals and activities, a disconnection (or no connection) between activities and purpose (or a desired change), which is fundamental to effective practice, and lack of evaluation of outcomes and therefore inability to report on achievements towards council goals.

However, there is a possibility that our process of examining only published documents impacted our findings. It may be that councils have detailed planning documents including all or some of the principles that we recommend, that they choose not to include in documents published for their communities. We would suggest that this is not the most responsible or respectful approach, perhaps because of the assumption that community members couldn't understand this detail or wouldn't wish to know why council is making the decisions it does or whether it is achieving its intentions for the community. We found no evidence of supplementary information being available for community members who wished to know more than what was provided in published documents.

We recommend that future planning documents include greater consideration of basic planning principles as per the planning principles discussed in this article and articulated in more detail in CDN's *Planning Framework* (Dunphy and Smithies 2017). We suggest that great emphasis be placed on content, rather than design of plans, and that celebration, if any, occurs at the end of the planning cycle to mark achievement of outcomes against intentions, rather than the creation of a plan.

To be useful documents, plans need to provide clear guidance regarding objectives, yet it is also important that they be able to responsive to changing circumstance, especially given that they are created for periods as long as ten years. The inclusion of extensive lists of activities together with lack of adequate evaluation measures leaves authorities at risk of committing themselves to continue activities that may not be producing desired results, or that may not be responding adequately to changed circumstances or new opportunities that arise. We recommend that plans focus on desired outcomes and specify only the types of activity that may be undertaken to achieve such outcomes. In so doing, authorities would have the flexibility to discontinue activities that are not being most effective and adjust to implement more suitable activity.

Conclusion

This article documents an examination of council plans and cultural development plans from a representative sample of 67 local government authorities across Australia. We found that 65 of 67 LGAs have a strategic document that directs their overall work, as might be expected because of legislation that impels it. Only 22 (34%) LGAs of our sample were found to have a current published plan that underpins their cultural development work. This might be expected given a lack of legislative requirement for such plans and the relative recency of cultural activity as part of standard local government work.

Our analysis of both of these types of plans against a set of planning principles that are based on current standards for effective planning indicate significant aspects of planning practice that could be improved. This includes adherence in plans to all six principles: based on values, directed towards goals, focussed on outcomes, informed by evidence, underpinned by a theory of change and respondent to evaluation. A greater focus on these principles in planning and execution of local government work would be expected to make better use of scarce public resources and improve outcomes for communities, thereby improving both the value to the community of their local authorities' activities and improved quality of life for all those living, working and studying in local government areas.

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Appendix 1

Appendix 1: Classification of Australian local governments

1	UCC	Urban Capital City
2	UDS	Urban Development Small
3	UDM	Urban Development Medium
4	UDL	Urban Development Large
5	UDV	Urban Development Very Large
6	URS	Urban Regional Small
7	URM	Urban Regional Medium
8	URL	Urban Regional Large
9	URV	Urban Regional Very Large

10	UFS	Urban Fringe Small
11	UFM	Urban Fringe Medium
12	UFL	Urban Fringe Large
13	UFV	Urban Fringe Very Large
14	RSG	Rural Significant Growth
15	RAS	Rural Agricultural Small
16	RAM	Rural Agricultural Medium
17	RAL	Rural Agricultural Large
18	RAV	Rural Agricultural Very Large
19	RTX	Rural Remote Extra Small
20	RTS	Rural Remote Small
21	RTM	Rural Remote Medium
22	RTL	Rural Remote Large

Figure 1: Percentage of Australian councils with cultural development plans

Figure 2. Council and cultural development plans published by state/territory

Figure 3: Council Plans and Cultural Development Plans' alignment with planning principles

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