

IT'S ALL IN THE DELIVERY

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Introduction

The title of my research-based dissertation was 'It's all in the delivery: An exploratory case study focusing on the Appleby* Council Delivery Program 2010-2016'. Aiming to highlight key issues for strategic management in New South Wales (NSW) local government, the research focuses on the development and implementation of the Delivery Program (DP) as one of the strategic management plans mandated by the 2009 and 2016 amendments to the *Local Government Act 1993 (NSW)*. The case study examined the content of the DP, its priorities, and the three main actors involved in the process, namely the Councillors, the staff and the community.

This paper is a summary of some of the main points and guidelines from the dissertation, which may assist Councils in their strategic planning and implementation.

Strategic management

The Integrated Planning and Reporting (IP&R) Framework is a tool for Councils in NSW to implement their long-term organisational strategies. It comprises the Community Strategic Plan, the Delivery Program, and the Operational Plan and associated Resourcing Strategy. Underpinning the process are decision-making guidelines, including the recognition of 'diverse local community needs and interests', 'social justice principles', the 'long term and cumulative effects of actions on future generations', and the principles of 'ecologically sustainable development'. 'Decision-making should be transparent and decision-makers are to be accountable for decisions *and omissions*' (NSW Government 2016; emphasis added).

This suite of documents is a good example of strategic management in action. Strategic management is 'the appropriate and reasonable integration of strategic planning and implementation across an organization (or other entity) in an ongoing way to enhance the fulfilment of its mission, meeting of mandates, continuous learning, and sustained creation of public value' (Bryson, cited in Edwards 2012, p. 9). Extensive and on-going community engagement is required in formulating the long-term strategic plan. Council is custodian of the plan, owned by the community. Many agencies and organisations could have responsibility for implementing the strategies in the plan. The plan is the 'agent of the collective' (Moore 1995, p. 302), reflecting their aspirations.

Councils implementing strategic management have found that it benefits their organisations. Research has found that local government managers consider strategic planning to have 'improved performance, in terms of financial conditions, operations management and delivering services' (Poister and Streib, cited in Edwards 2012, p. 42). Development of successful strategic management documents could take between four and ten years, and several iterations. Vinzant and Vinzant's (1996) model for successful implementation lists several stages to the process:

- Education and development of the Senior Management Team
- Identification of desired outputs and outcomes by Senior Executives (which includes the strategic plan, the mission and vision, and the budgets linked to the strategic plan)
- A pre-implementation assessment of internal and external factors
- Review and modification of desired outputs and outcomes to align the organisational capacity with its aspirations
- Process design tailored to the unique circumstances of a particular organisation
- Capacity building modifications to be able to produce the services and/or products. This may involve structural changes, staff, and information systems and reports, amongst others.

*Council name has been changed

While it is challenging to turn ‘strategies ... into actions’ (Office of Local Government 2016), the DP sits in the implementation phase of the IP&R as a ‘single point of reference and accountability, where key elements of the Community Strategic Plan, Resourcing Strategy and Operational Plan come together’ (Bass 2012, p. 21). Despite being the ‘go to’ document for Councillors – the kernel of Council’s strategic management process containing all Council activities that are doable from the Community Strategic Plan – my study found that Councillors were often not engaged in the strategic management process and were on the whole unaware of the purpose of the DP.

A key message from my research is that there is benefit in linking the process of turning strategies into actions and prioritising projects to discussions around **public value** and **place-shaping**.

Public Value

Over the past few decades, several local government reforms have been undertaken in order to make Councils more accountable and efficient, often by adopting ‘New Public Management’ practices that draw inspiration from the private sector. While this has benefited the operation of local government organisations, there is a fundamental difference between public and private organisations: private business can immediately assess the effectiveness of their goods and services by the profits they make. Public agencies produce goods and services. The value of these to the public may be evaluated and assessed, but it is a slow, expensive process and causation can be difficult to prove. So how does a Council prioritise the delivery of goods and services, and how can it know that the outcomes will provide public value?

For Councils, the public has ‘first claim on being able to say what should be valued and what interests should be satisfied in the operation’ because it ‘pays for an enterprise and gives up some of its freedom for it to succeed’ (Moore 1995, p. 301). Moore goes on to say that the value of some government organisations ‘lies not in the satisfaction of clients they meet at the business end of their operations, but in the satisfaction that citizens and politicians and judicial overseers take in the overall fairness of the organisation’s operations’ (Moore 1995, p. 302).



Rather than the cost (based on rates paid), it is fairness that underpins much of the debate about Councils’ outputs and operations. A perception of fairness in their operations is probably a better assessment of whether Councils have generated public value through their activities. According to Moore (1995, p. 303), the question of what should be collectively produced with public resources is ‘analytically unresolvable’, so ‘responding to politics and accepting its demands is as fundamental to public managers as responding to the market is to private managers.Thus, it is in learning to read, respond to, and help to shape political aspirations that managers can learn to create public value’.

Place-shaping

The seminal report from the United Kingdom Lyons Enquiry (Lyons 2007, p. 3) stated the local government is ‘well placed’ to play the convening role in representing matters of greatest importance to local people and influencing the appropriate service or function. It requires the ‘joining-up of resources and activities [and] a leadership and influencing role’.

The aim of the 2016 amendments to the *Local Government Act* 'to provide guidance to enable Councils to carry out their functions in a way that facilitates local communities that are strong, healthy and prosperous' (NSW Government 2016, p. 3) echoes Lyons' definition of place-shaping as 'the creative use of powers and influences to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens' (cited in Pillora & McKinlay 2011, p. 16). It is more meaningful, both for members of the community and for Councillors, if they have a vision of their ideal 'place', rather than a list of services and broad motherhood statements or aims.

The content of the DP would possibly have more meaning for Councillors and the local community if it were based on building local identity and places. It suggests that there is value in adopting a visionary approach to setting outcomes, to which Council activities and services can be aligned.

The information can be presented in a simple format with options to drill down to more detail. Technology lends itself to this presentation and is used effectively, for example, to present the [NSW Government State Plan](#).



Telling the Story

A theme that has emerged from case study research and from the literature is the need for a distillation and evaluation of options, for greater specificity and refinement (Prior 2010; Sansom 2013; Vehaun & Croskey 2014; Worrall 1998). This suggests a 'less is more' approach.

Lawson (2014) seeks to simplify the 'immense detail required for councils to do comprehensive business planning appropriately by sharing a story about where we are, where we want to be and how we'll get there'. His story is framed in Service Dashboards that turn services into the 'common thread'. These tell the story simply with pathways provided to greater detail in the form of the relevant supporting policies, plans and strategies. They also list priority projects to show that the story is tangible. The story meaningfully relates outputs (DP) to outcomes (Community Strategic Plan) in a way that facilitates an ongoing conversation in local communities. So therefore, it's all in the delivery!

All in the Same Boat

Lack of Councillor engagement in strategic management processes could be an outcome of public administrators exerting 'too much influence over policy direction' (Marshall and Sproats 2000, p. 504). The challenge lies in developing mutual trust and transformational leadership skills to share the view of public value, re-framing planning processes and creating frameworks of governance and mechanisms which facilitate Councillors' fuller engagement in the processes.

One of the respondents in the study suggested that the administration, Councillors and the community should be 'steering the ship' together:

Staff are in the engine room, at least, the community should be informing the direction; and it should be the Councillors that are at the wheel..... At the moment I would suggest that the community's still at the port – doesn't even know that the ship's sailed; the Councillors are trying to get into the engine room to get into the details of DA and bla bla, and actually it's the staff that's up there steering the ship. So actually, how do we turn that around?

New challenges arise with the emergence of community governance, such as blending expert knowledge with emerging knowledge from the community as well as determining the role of politicians within this process. Some Councils are developing a series of principles and analytical frameworks for achieving this synthesis. Of particular interest is the assertion that the experiences and knowledge of the service user lie 'at the heart of effective public service design and delivery' (Osborne, Radnor & Nasi 2013, p. 146). Moore and Khagram (2004, p. 9) state that having a view of public value is not enough: 'others have to share it', and this includes the governing body that legitimizes and supports public value (i.e. the Council), as well as the community.

Both Councillors and the administration are critical in the implementation of strategic management processes (Hambleton 2000; Marshall & Sproats 2000; Svava 2008). Hambleton (2011, p. 14-17) describes civic leadership as 'place-based leadership'. He provides a model demonstrating the three 'realms of civic leadership' and their interaction:



The areas of overlap in the model are 'innovation zones'. If mishandled these could be areas for conflict and power plays. Effective leadership can exploit these innovation zones with education and effective communication. This, in turn, requires emotional sensitivity and an awareness of the importance of various sources of community identity'.

Genuine engagement with the Councillors, as with the community, depends on the 'decision – space': 'the greater the decision space, the greater the potential for meaningful public participation. Decision-space is an

important element that differentiates limited or traditional participation from more innovative and interactive participation' (Walker 2004, p. 119). A Councillor strategy based on the widely-used IAP2 public participation spectrum (Inform – Consult – Involve – Collaborate – Empower) would ensure more clarity in their community engagement initiatives.

To continue the nautical theme, Council can be compared to a large ship trying to turn around (Lawson 2014, p. 2), made more challenging when some crew members are not engaged in the process, and others are resisting the change. Some may be too busy dealing with the everyday processes of keeping the engine going, unaware of the order to reset the compass! The strategic management process is complex and challenging, but it can pay dividends if all parties are working together to reach the destination set by the community.

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