

RAISING EXPECTATIONS?

A Review of NSW Local Government Social Plans

**Simone Schwarz
Brendan Hartnett
Graham Sansom
Daniel Grafton**

UTS Local Government Papers: 1/07

June 2007

Published June 2007
ISBN: 978-0-9803925-1-7

© UTS Centre for Local Government

Contents

Chapter 1	Introduction and Summary	Page 5
Chapter 2	Methodology	Page 9
Chapter 3	Desk Analysis of Plans	Page 11
Chapter 4	Council Interviews	Page 15
Chapter 5	Conclusions and Implications	Page 25
Annexure A	Extracts from Guidelines and Manual	Page 30
Annexure B	Phase 1 Review Questions	Page 33
Bibliography		Page 35

Acknowledgements

The UTS Centre for Local Government gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance and access to library resources and reports provided by the NSW Department of Local Government, as well as the cooperation of council officers and elected representatives in giving their time and insights concerning social planning in New South Wales.

Simone Schwarz

Program Manager, UTS Centre for Local Government

UTS Centre for Local Government

The UTS Centre for Local Government is an independent, cross-faculty centre within the University of Technology, Sydney. It began operations in 1991.

The Centre's goal is to support advancement of Australian Local Government through continuing education and training, research and specialty consultancy services.

The Centre conducts research projects and consultancies for a wide range of local, state and federal government organisations. These provide a cost-effective and best practice approach for clients, capitalising on the specialist skills of the Centre's staff and associates. They are also important in ensuring that the Centre maintains a practical involvement with current developments in Australian government, in order to underpin its educational programs.

The Centre also works internationally and is a member of networks promoting exchange of best practice both across the Asia-Pacific and globally amongst Commonwealth countries.

Website: www.clg.uts.edu.au

1

Introduction and Summary

This report presents the findings of a research project undertaken by the UTS Centre for Local Government to examine the recent experience of New South Wales councils in preparing social/community plans.

Preparation of a social plan at least every five years has been a requirement under the NSW Local Government Act, and most councils have now prepared two: one in 1999 and a second in 2004-2006.¹ Details of some of the mandatory requirements and underlining principles involved are included as Annexure A, which draws on the NSW Department of Local Government's *Social/Community Planning and Reporting Guidelines*, December 2002 ('the Guidelines'). Also included are extracts from the companion Manual.

Social plans are intended to explore the needs of the local community and detail 'access and equity' activities that should be incorporated in councils' management plans (corporate plans) as well as the programs of other relevant agencies. Access and equity activities are defined broadly as "... any activities that aim to promote social justice and enhance community wellbeing". (Guidelines, 2002: 7).

The Guidelines highlight the need for social plans to:

- Ensure a broad understanding of community needs
- Monitor changes in needs and the extent to which these are met by existing services
- Devise appropriate strategies for response
- Identify needed services, facilities and processes, specifically those that the council should (partly) fund

- Advocate for other services to be provided
- Provide improved facilities, services and regulatory activities that are appropriately targeted
- Achieve a more coherent service delivery system through cooperation with other agencies
- Address broader quality of life issues.

The Guidelines also indicate that the preparation of social plans should:

- Focus on a 'whole of council' approach with linkages to other council plans, and linkages to the plans of other agencies
- Actively involve community and other agencies/organisations
- Give particular attention to people in vulnerable positions, specifically those from the seven mandatory target groups
- Avoid discriminatory practices and promote participation by groups that suffer discrimination
- Respect cultural diversity and acknowledge differing views
- Promote fair, open and participatory decision-making
- Consider equity implications: who pays and who benefits?
- Recommend actions for council and other agencies.

The research therefore looked generally at councils' views about the requirement for social plans; the ways those plans were prepared in terms of process, content and style; and the implementation process that followed. We aimed to explore differences between councils and to determine whether the preparation of social plans did in fact bring about more activities on the part of local government that aim to promote social justice and enhance community wellbeing.

We were also interested to see whether the need to prepare plans was seen positively by councils – both officers and elected members – and whether opportunities for innovation were taken up as implied in the Guidelines. These included the potential for regional cooperation in preparing plans, as well as for councils to work with other agencies and to make recommendations for action

¹ Plans were due in November 1999 but councils subject to recent amalgamations were given extra time.

informed by these alliances. More broadly, we explored the perceived relevance and value of the Guidelines.

The research is timely as the Department is currently floating proposals for major changes to the whole range of requirements for strategic and corporate planning by NSW councils. The Department has issued an options paper on Integrated Planning and Reporting that canvasses the possibility of replacing the requirement for a separate social plan with a new 'quadruple bottom line' strategic plan.² This raises the question of whether the current purposes and principles of social planning would be adequately served.

Findings

Social planning remains in its infancy. After two rounds of preparing plans, councils are still coming to grips with what is required, what is useful, and what methodologies to adopt. A number of points stand out:

- In most councils, social planning is driven by specialist staff and middle management and seems to be very much a 'community services thing', with only weak linkages to other council departments and broader strategic and corporate planning.
- A substantial proportion of senior managers and elected members still question the value and benefits of social planning, and many have a poor understanding of the mandatory requirements.
- Implementation mechanisms are generally poorly articulated, with often inadequate monitoring and reporting in social plans and limited follow-through into council management plans.
- Councils are often unsure about the audience for social plans and what purpose they might fulfill beyond compliance with a legislative requirement.

² *Planning a Sustainable Future - Integrated Planning and Reporting for NSW Local Councils*, Department of Local Government, December 2006.

From our review of a sample of social plans, and subsequent interviews with staff and elected representatives of some of the councils involved, it was clear that overall a great deal of effort and dedication had gone into preparation of social plans. This was evidenced by the amount of detail in the reports and the recommendations arising. The end result should be that most councils are much better informed about the profile of their communities and the needs to be addressed, especially among the designated target groups.

However, many plans fail to cover all aspects of the mandatory Guidelines, for example, the inclusion of an implementation schedule or a review of the previous social plan. As well, some of the councils' management plans did not include an adequate 'access and equity statement' showing how recommendations from the social plan will be actioned. Monitoring and reporting frameworks for implementation of the social plan were often not clearly identified or articulated, even when they were actually in place.

On the other hand, follow-up interviews found that implementation of social plans was in several cases more effective than was evident from the available documentation. This may be widespread.

Most of the councilors we interviewed stated that they had not read the social plan. In this respect, and perhaps more broadly, social plans appear to have missed the mark of being useful and important strategic documents for councilors. It would appear that elected representatives do not see or utilise social plans as a management tool, and generally do not read the document unless prompted by a particular issue or pressure.

Overall, it became apparent that the opportunity provided by social planning to raise and deal with key issues of concern to communities was not being fully utilised. The reasons for this were not confined to social planning per se, but rather, reflected broader concerns about the limited funds available to councils to manage their growing responsibilities. This is in addition to aspects of the underlying relationship between local and State governments. First, councils may not

identify issues of real concern in the social plan because they do not have the resources to act upon them. Second, council representatives repeatedly said that while developing and implementing a social plan was important, it was of limited value where State agencies paid little or no regard to it when looking at their own service delivery priorities, and often point blank refused to fund priorities identified by the community and endorsed by council. There is a perceived (and probably real) lack of will and mechanisms to align council and State priorities.

In essence, councils believe that the State government largely does not want to know about or fund issues identified by councils in social plans. Therefore councils are concerned about raising unrealistic expectations in the community, and in some cases General Managers look for ways to limit the responsibilities and financial exposure of their council.

As a consequence, crucial opportunities to address serious and complex problems at a community level may be lost, despite social plans being a useful measure to identify them and propose solutions. Moreover, whilst the Department's Guidelines infer the desirability of innovative practice in completing a social plan, in reality this may be stymied by financial constraints and the current nature of intergovernmental relations. Rate-pegging is a key factor in this equation.

Other key findings of the research were as follows:

- Whilst some smaller councils struggled to resource social planning, there was no evident correlation between council size and the quality and effectiveness of the plan.
- Generally, community consultation seemed to have been handled well and has led to a better understanding in the community about councils' roles and operating constraints.
- Although some councils were quite innovative, few went beyond the mandatory requirements and there appeared to be widespread

misunderstanding of what the Guidelines actually said.

- Plans often seemed unnecessarily long and complex and thus inaccessible to the average reader.
- Methodology and terminology were rarely explained clearly, and in many cases it appeared that more effort could have been made to learn from experience with the previous plan.
- There was little consultation between neighbouring councils, or on a regional basis, and the preparation of joint social plans was mostly seen as being too difficult. This was because each council had differing budget and financial priorities and a different understanding of the social planning agenda. A number of councils also felt that a regional approach would not be particularly helpful given the likely lack of State support for regional strategies.
- Those councils with 'champions' for the social plan at elected and senior staff level achieved greater organisational support and funding for implementation.
- There is evident scope for professional development activities for elected councillors about social planning in general, ie the need for and the value of having a social plan.
- Despite the financial and other constraints, there were many examples where there had been good outcomes for individual councils as a result of preparing a plan.
- There was an evident belief that the Department of Local Government could and should do more to secure State agency support for the implementation of social planning outcomes.

Implications

The findings of this research have significant implications for the proposed introduction of quadruple bottom line strategic plans, in part as a replacement for mandatory social plans. In particular, great care will be needed to ensure that:

- The gains in social planning and implementation of an access and equity agenda made over the past decade are not undermined.
- Guidelines for strategic plans clearly and fully articulate the government's intentions with regard to purpose, process, methodology, content and implementation mechanisms.
- New requirements and guidelines are fully absorbed and commonly understood at all levels of councils.
- Substantial improvements are made to strategic planning skills generally across local government, and including within senior management.
- There is effective political support for both the strategic planning process and subsequent implementation – meaning that awareness and training programs must be directed to councillors as much as to staff.
- State agencies recognize the importance and value of council strategic plans and there are effective mechanisms to align State and local priorities wherever possible.

Experience with social planning suggests that introducing a new strategic planning framework will not be easy, and will require a willingness to explore fresh approaches on the part of both local and State governments. It will also require a substantial effort in explaining the new requirements and building greater capacity for strategic planning. This could place very considerable demands on the Department as well

as councils and substantial funding support may be required.

Unless the introduction of the new arrangements is handled well, that is, explained and adequately resourced, there is a real risk that a substantial proportion of councils will fail to produce sufficiently rigorous plans, and/or to translate strategic plans effectively and consistently into budgets and programs. The strategic planning framework could thus become largely meaningless.

As with social plans, expectations must not be raised beyond what is achievable. A requirement for strategic planning can raise expectations in a number of ways:

- People's expectations about what local government and governments in general can do to address their issues and problems.
- Community and State government expectations about the functions of local government.
- Local government's expectations about the support it can expect from State and federal agencies to implement strategies.
- Expectations amongst council staff and departments, senior managers and elected members about their respective roles.

There is much to be learned from a review of social planning in New South Wales over the past decade. Overall it is a positive story and it is important that the progress made becomes a platform for further advances.

2

Methodology

The research was conducted between February and September 2006 in two phases. The first involved a desk review of 25 social/community plans prepared by New South Wales local councils. Each council's current management plan was also reviewed with a particular focus on those sections that reported on proposed access and equity activities derived from the social plan.

The sample of councils was based on the NSW Department of Local Government's (DLG) classification³ with a view to representing the geographic, social and economic variations that influence the function and practice of local governments across New South Wales.

DLG Group	Type of Council	Number in Sample
1	Capital City	0
2-3	Metropolitan Developed: <i>Small-Medium</i>	6
4-5	Regional Town/City	8
6-7	Urban/Metropolitan Fringe	4
8-11	Rural/Remote	7

All councils in the sample had submitted a second social plan in November 2004 in response to the Guidelines published by DLG in 2002, and 16 had undertaken or were currently involved in a DLG 'Promoting Better Practice' review.

Each social plan and management plan was analysed against a set of questions established by the research team, and appended in Annexure B. Aspects covered by these questions were:

³ Information on group numbers are described in *NSW Local Government Councils Comparative Information 2004/2005*, Department of Local Government, January 2006. pp.12-13. Available online: www.dlg.nsw.gov.au/dlg/dlghome/documents/Comparatives/Comparatives%202004-05.pdf Accessed December 2006.

- Context
- Conceptual framework
- Preparation and content
- Implementation
- Accessibility as a public document.

Where relevant, secondary material such as journals and allied publications was reviewed, and statistical data produced by DLG was also utilised in support where applicable.

Many of the questions were qualitative and required the use of informed judgment on the part of the researchers in interpreting the content of each social plan. There is inevitably scope for debate concerning the validity of the conclusions reached, and they should be regarded as indicative rather than definitive.

In the second phase of the project eight councils were selected for closer analysis:

DLG Group	Population ~
3	80,000
3	190,000
4	60,000
4	40,000
6	40,000
7	160,000
7	140,000
10	7000

The purpose of this phase was to verify findings from Phase 1 and also to explore in more detail some of the underlying factors at work. These included, for example:

- The resources available to the council, including the availability and skills of specialist social planning staff
- Attitudes of councillors and senior management towards social planning and community development
- Placement of the social planning function within the organisation
- The council's broader understanding of and approach to strategic and corporate planning
- The socio-economic status and mix of the local government area

- Relationships with community organizations and State or federal agencies
- The changing role of local government and councils' response to those changes.

Methods used in this phase were:

- Semi-structured interviews with council staff and elected representatives
- Review of additional council documents and publications
- Further desk based analysis of material collected previously.

Where possible, each council interview was conducted in two groups: the first included the General Manager and the Mayor and/or a nominated councillor, and the second included senior managers and social planning staff or others nominated by council as appropriate. A set of interview questions was submitted to each council in advance. It must be emphasised that the questions were used only a starting point for the interviews which aimed to explore the particular issues and concerns of each council.

While the sample of interview councils for the second phase of work was small, the research team is satisfied that sufficient material was gathered to produce some worthwhile and more broadly applicable insights.

3

Desk Analysis of Plans

This chapter provides an overview of some key issues arising from the desk analysis of 25 social plans. Management plans from the councils concerned were also reviewed to ascertain if and how recommendations from the social plan were actioned.

The Guidelines specify that each social plan will comprise:

1. A demographic profile of the community
2. A needs assessment – an assessment of social issues identified through a broad community consultation process with residents and other interested stakeholders including an assessment of issues relating to specific needs groups
3. Information about the mandatory target groups⁴
4. An assessment of council's previous social plan
5. Recommended strategies and actions
(Guidelines, 2002:15).

Compliance with this brief meant the finished documents were complex and in some cases lengthy, often with the inclusion of considerable amounts of background material.

Our review looked at the following aspects of each document:

- Context – the size and staffing of the council

⁴ These are: children aged 0-11 years; young people aged 12-24 years; women; older people (Aboriginal people aged 45 years and over and non Aboriginal people aged 55 years and over); people with disabilities (including those with HIV/AIDS); Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including racial, ethnic, and ethno-religious groups (Guidelines, 2002: 15-16).

- The conceptual framework – that is, the approach to social planning that apparently underpinned the document and led to the conclusions reached
- The approach to preparation and selection of content, including reporting on implementation of the previous social plan
- Proposals for implementation, including such issues as the relationship of the social plan to the council's management plan, and systems and indicators to monitor implementation
- The accessibility of the social plan as a public document such as its readability, ease of access on the council's website and by other means.

The questions used to guide the analysis are included as Annexure B. The selection of themes and questions drew on issues raised and guidance offered in the Guidelines and Manual, and sought amongst other things to explore the extent to which that guidance had been followed.

Context

We collected a small amount of background information on each council. Of the sample of 25, six council areas had a population of less than 10,000; most were between 10,000 and 50,000; and four exceeded 100,000.

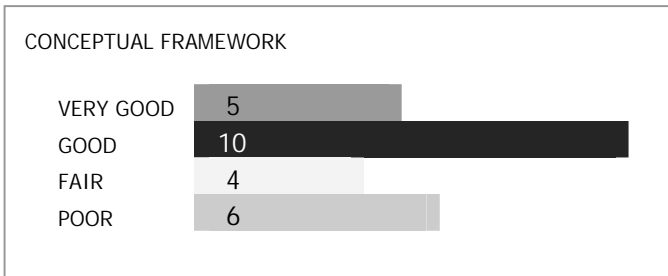
Council officers prepared the majority of social plans. A specialist social planner was employed by ten of the 25 councils (40%), whilst four (including one with a population exceeding 100,000), engaged consultants to prepare the plan.

Conceptual Framework

Questions under this theme were aimed at identifying what informed the 'thinking' behind each social plan. We asked the following: were key terms adequately defined; did the plan include a

thorough needs analysis; did the council take an 'extra step' in its preliminary work, such as experimenting with a different or novel approach; and what was the profile of those consulted in issue identification? For instance, were people from several areas of the council's organisation involved? We were also interested as to what extent government agency representatives participated in preparing the plan, and whether the plan involved cooperation with adjoining councils.

In terms of our criteria and analysis, 15 (60%) of councils appeared to demonstrate a sound conceptual framework for their plan and appear to have taken a broad and/or innovative approach to its preparation.



It was considered that 20 councils had taken an extra step beyond the minimum requirements of the Guidelines:

- Eight (32%) produced a needs analysis for an additional target group – in most cases this was 'men'
- Twelve (48%) presented a range of other variations such as pursuing a different paradigm for organising the plan, commissioning additional work such as position papers or supplementary research, and incorporating useful bibliographies.

Twenty councils (80%) either stated or appeared to have achieved a 'whole of council' approach, although it was not clear in several cases whether this approach had been adequately followed through.

Eight councils (32%) claimed or evidently attempted a 'whole of *government*' approach. It was difficult to determine what had been done or achieved in two of these councils. By 'whole of government approach' we mean as a minimum, seeking the active participation of State and/or federal agencies in a consultative process when developing the plan. Seventeen councils (68%) did not clearly discuss what if any mechanisms had been used to encourage participation from State or federal agencies.

Thirteen councils (52%) had engaged neighbouring councils in some way – either directly or through a Regional Organisation of Councils – in preparing their plan. The extent of consultation and the value gained through pursuing a regional approach was generally difficult to determine.

Notwithstanding identified weaknesses, all 25 plans had a framework that to a greater or lesser extent committed their council to addressing social issues and the facilitation of necessary change for the benefit of local communities and individual residents.

Preparation and Content

This section of the review looked at some key aspects of plan preparation and content. Questions explored:

- Compliance with the Guidelines
- Whether there had been an adequate review of the previous social plan
- Whether a clear and robust methodology was outlined
- Whether an effective needs assessment was undertaken and social justice principles applied
- Evidence of adequate community and agency consultation.

Overall, we considered that one council did very well, with the majority (17) ranking fair to good.

Twenty councils (80%) were judged to have complied with the Guidelines, allowing for some minor departures.

Twenty plans (80%) included an adequate demographic analysis and 17 (68%) put forward a complete and useful needs assessment. Fifteen councils (60%) appeared to have based their plan on sound social justice principles.

In general, however, methodology was not well addressed. Ten councils (40%) described a clear methodology that underpinned the development of their plan and how it had been put together. The absence of this information in the remaining 60% left questions about the validity of the data presented. Frequently the only methodological information was an account of who was consulted.

Also, only 11 councils (44%) had completed what was considered an effective or useful review of their previous social plan. We were looking for appraisals of previous plans that might include not only information on tasks completed but also insights into methodology and ongoing implementation.

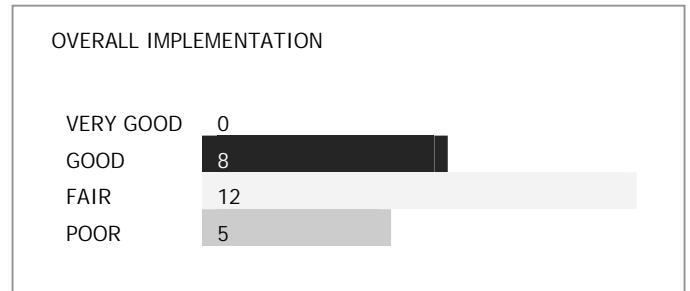
Community consultation appeared to have been handled reasonably well overall. Eighteen plans (72%) displayed evidence of broad consultation, and 13 (52%) were judged to have provided sufficient opportunities for participation by target groups. However, in the great majority of cases it was unclear whether such participation extended to real involvement in decision-making.

Implementation

Here we focused on how councils intended to give effect to their social plan so that identified needs could be addressed. Main areas of interest included: whether recommendations from the plan were clearly followed through into the council's management plan; clarity of proposed implementation mechanisms; and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, including timeframes and use of performance indicators.

Overall, 8 councils (32%) were rated as having adequately outlined how they would implement

their social plan, leaving the remaining 68% considered fair or poor.



Specific results were as follows:

- Thirteen plans (52%) included an implementation schedule, but only 4 councils (16%) clearly translated recommendations from their social plan into the management plan.
- Six councils (24%) failed to include an access and equity statement in their management plan despite this being a mandatory requirement.
- Of the 19 access and equity statements that were produced, over half were broad statements of principle rather than a detailed specification of proposed activities flowing from the social plan.
- Eleven plans (44%) included cross-referencing to other council strategies, and 9 (36%) referred to the activities of council departments other than community services.
- Nineteen plans (76%) did not include performance indicators, and 21 (84%) did not clearly outline monitoring and evaluation mechanisms or a timeframe in which these might be applied.
- Thirteen councils (52%) appeared to have established advisory committees for ongoing community consultation as the plan was implemented.

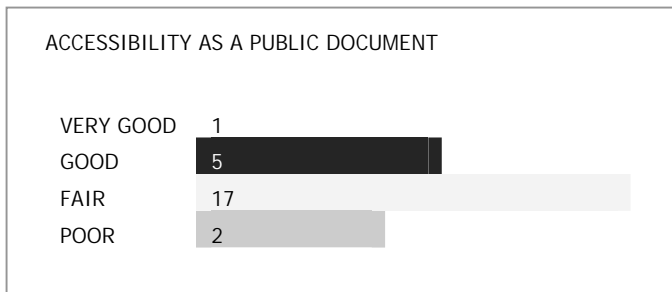
Accessibility as a public document

This part of the desk review aimed to gauge how easily a council's plan could be accessed and understood by a non-specialist reader. The Guidelines state: 'The plan must be presented in a way that is readable and accessible to the community, councillors and council staff.' (Guidelines, 2002:17).

A basic consideration was whether key concepts such as 'social', 'community', 'social planning' and 'access and equity' were adequately defined. In 20 plans (80%) they were either not defined or not explained in a manner that would be meaningful to the local readership.

Twenty-two plans (88%) were easy to read in terms of format, layout and text. Seven (28%) clearly considered the needs of local readers in terms of language, complexity, length and content. Eight social plans (32%) were considered to be fully self-explanatory.

Eleven (44%) were simple to access both in hard copy and via the internet. Problems with other plans included, for example, being difficult to find on the council website and/or hard to download. In several cases the electronic documents were far too large to be downloaded via a dial-up internet connection. It should be considered that around half of all Australian households with internet access still rely on dial-up (ABS, 2006).



4

Council Interviews

This chapter summarises issues explored in interviews with representatives of eight of the councils involved in the research. Themes discussed here reflect the diversity of viewpoints of council representatives and build on the aspects of social planning covered in Chapter Three.

Face-to-face discussions with elected members and officers of the eight councils selected for Phase 2 of the research were both enlightening and encouraging. It was clear when discussing the background to individual social plans that most councils had a positive approach towards social planning as a means of creating better communities, as one Mayor explained:

Our overall object is to provide a vibrant town for a growing population; if that's what's happening, then council is doing something right.

Material from the interviews is organised around five themes:

- the perceived value and benefits of social planning
- the process of preparing plans
- implementation issues and in particular integration of social planning with councils' broader activities
- the role of councillors in plan development and implementation
- attitudes to the Guidelines and DLG.

It was agreed that all comments made in interviews would be reported anonymously. Where there are references to individual council plans, these are provided as examples, noting that many other councils' plans could contain similar material. No criticism is implied or intended.

Value and benefits of social planning

Key issues discussed in this part of the interviews included whether social planning would take place were it not mandatory; the relationship between the requirement for social plans and the role and status of community services sections within councils; and, the extent to which social planning and consequent implementation of plans should be a responsibility of local government.

Mandatory or optional?

General managers and mayors were asked to consider whether their council would have a social plan if it were not a legislative requirement. All those interviewed felt that there would be a similar process undertaken by their council to obtain a snapshot of the area, the profiles of the people who lived in it, and service gaps. One response was that given the option, there would be some form of plan but it would be less comprehensive than the current document:

There's a plan for everything we do [so] some sort of plan would exist, but I doubt in that form. We would have one for children and seniors and indigenous, but gay and lesbian – that's questionable. The plans wouldn't be as wide ranging (Mayor).

Another Mayor commented:

I think the mandating of such plans can help to clarify needs in the community ...it helps explain the need for social action.

On the other hand, councillors generally appeared not to consider the social plan as a management tool, with most not having even read the document:

...the elected members do not read it. I'm sorry to say that, but that's the truth (Mayor).

Nevertheless, councillors were usually aware that a social plan existed, with many suggesting they would read relevant parts of it when the need arose. For this reason perhaps, there was an expectation that significant issues would be covered in the social plan and that councils could

point to the social plan as evidence that they were aware of and 'on top' of those issues. The social plan could also be used to support making hard decisions that may otherwise not be welcomed in the community, particularly around allocation of expenditure.

When council considers expenditure of funds it can go to the social plan for consideration (Mayor).

Social plans were also seen as having helped councils pursue funding opportunities. For example, the information already available in one social plan when collated into a funding submission was successful in attracting a special grant of \$1.9m. Similarly, another council was able to leverage special funding for a new youth centre by providing background statistical data and quoted from a meeting of school children recorded in its social plan as evidence that the centre was a local priority. Such successes help legitimise the social planning process with both councillors and the community.

However, these reflections do not mean that social plans are seen as especially important. One Director suggested that while the social plan clarified the work of community services staff, it was not seen as crucial:

"COUNCIL GETS SOCIAL PLAN WRONG!" as the lead news story at 6pm? I don't think so!

Calling the process 'social planning' also concerned some interviewees, with one councillor considering it as having somewhat Marxist overtones. Another view was that a different term might ensure more reflective consideration of any funding recommendations coming out of the plan.

Status of community services

It was clear that social planning is inextricably linked to the perceived role and status of community services staff. They are the ones usually charged with the development or commissioning of the social plan, and it is they who are most cognisant of the legislative imperative involved.

Being mandated and clear is helpful in applying upwards pressure [to senior staff]: "see, it's mandated – we have to do it!" (Community Services staff).

The mandatory social plan has meant that "the warm and fuzzies are here and we're here to stay boys" (Manager, Community Services).

An evident benefit of social planning was that it clarified for other areas of councils what community services staff and departments actually did in their day-to-day work. One General Manager said there was a desperate need for the social plan: "I couldn't work out what we were doing in community services [before the social plan was developed]". Yet the resources question arises:

Each department needs a plan – a base from which to form strategies [but] the problem is resourcing (General Manager).

Some community services staff also saw the requirement to have a social plan as a way of educating councillors about social issues and the role of community services in council's operations.

Our [community services] department profile has risen and so has our confidence – the social plan has enabled this. It shows that we are not just kind people that do nice things (Community Services Manager).

The social plan is a tangible output of community services work and can give staff the ability to argue for budget allocations, as well as a seat at the table as part of the council management team. This is recognised not only by community services staff but also others within the organisation:

... [the social plan] is important at the senior level [because] having a research document supports your case. It gives you a cross section and appreciation of different disciplines (General Manager).

In one sense, therefore, social planning has re-affirmed the function of community services within councils, but this needs to be qualified. One social planner observed that community service staff need a voice to become more proactive or visible

so they stop being the 'poor cousins' but also need to get out of a 'welfare state of mind'.

Moreover, an enhanced role for community services is not always welcomed. During our interviews the comment was made more than once (and in the presence of social planning staff) that community services could not expect any more funding.

Whose responsibility?

Interviews explored the underlying question of the extent to which social planning and community services should be a local government responsibility. One senior council officer said:

Whose responsibility is it? We [local government] don't have the capacity to deliver [on the social plan].

Inevitably, issues were raised in consultation processes during the preparation of plans about needs that were not a local government responsibility to address. Law and order is a case in point, and one where it seems local councils have been pressured to support community safety programs that might have been left to the police and other State agencies. Allocating ratepayers' money to such programs is in effect taking over part of the State's role. As a result, councils have fewer funds for matters that are more directly their own responsibility.

This is just one example of a number of issues raised where there was an impact on quality of life that needed to be addressed, but the solution lay elsewhere than councils. Social planning was seen by some as a potential generator of more cost-shifting, whereby State governments in particular devolve responsibilities to local councils to their financial disadvantage (Hawker, 2003).

The question then arises as to whether broader issues should be included within the social plan. The emphatic view of one Mayor was that they should not. In that person's view, to do so would mean local government would be tacitly agreeing it

had a wider role and could therefore be expected to find funds to deal with the issues raised.

An alternative view taken by council representatives was that all identified needs should be included in the social plan, and that issues outside councils' responsibility should then be the subject of lobbying other governments. The Guidelines pick up this point: one role identified for councils is that of community advocate:

Councils do not necessarily have to be the implementing body for all recommendations in a social plan. A council can play an important advocacy and leadership role even on issues where *it does not have the statutory authority or the resources to implement a recommendation itself* [Emphasis added] (Guidelines, 2002: 9; Manual, 2002: 10).

Preparing social plans

Key aspects covered here included community consultation, needs assessment, cooperation with neighbouring councils and other government agencies, and the selection of a target audience for the plan.

Overall, it appeared that the process of preparing a social plan, and what should or should not be included in accordance with the Guidelines, was not well understood by many councillors and senior staff. There appeared to be little familiarity with the specifics of the legislation, as evidenced by one General Manager apparently understanding for the first time during the interview that the council had failed to comply with the Guidelines.

On the other hand, social planning staff indicated that they had learned much from preparing their first and second social plans and could look forward with confidence to a third round should that eventuate. Getting the balance right is not easy: one regional council said their first plan was overly ambitious and their second (the current plan) perhaps not ambitious enough. In their words, they had "sold themselves short", with approximately 80 per cent of their goals achieved after less than two years of implementation of a 5-year plan.

Community consultation

Local government often refers to its role as the level of government closest to the people and the one most responsive to dealing with people's needs. On that basis, councils should be good at consulting their communities. This was certainly borne out in the majority of cases considered by the review team.

In accordance with the mandatory requirement, each plan involved a consultation process with residents and other local stakeholders. The consultation mechanisms were many and varied, including:

- Detailed telephone or written surveys with participants chosen at random or in the case of a written survey, all ratepayers
- Councils 'tapping into' regularly scheduled meetings (or specially arranged meetings) of community groups who 'represented' particular sections of the community, such as Lions, senior citizens, youth groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, and others
- Setting up general meetings for all citizens, advertised in the local press and often promoted in the mayoral column in the local paper
- Use of libraries as a focal point to publicise meetings and a place to drop-off submissions
- Individual councillors engaging residents in discussion when the opportunity arose – a variation on 'management by walking around'.

One council with a remote hinterland provided a copy of the draft social plan at the village general store. This appeared to be a successful approach; it got round the problem of unsatisfactory Internet connections and spared residents in very small communities the inconvenience of traveling to the regional centre to view the document.

Overall, views about the consultation process were positive. Everyone seemed to 'win' something: the

council got a better appreciation of social needs; community groups achieved empowerment through their participation (and the ability to use that as a bargaining tool for their own work); and individuals were empowered through taking part in a process that might influence council priorities.

Several councils indicated that the consultations provided a valuable opportunity for attendees to learn more about the functions of local government, particularly the pitfalls of inter-government relations and unclear or overlapping responsibilities for service delivery. It also gave an opportunity to explain priority-setting in an environment of scarce financial resources.

However, the requirement for community consultation also raises concerns. Most councils indicated there was a danger of over-consulting and that care had to be exercised to make sure the community appreciated the need for yet another round of phone or paper surveys, meetings and so on. This was important so that the fund of community goodwill was not damaged. One council officer suggested there was little point in consulting as "nothing changes". Similar feedback from others included:

We didn't do community consultation [for the social plan]; ...our community has been consulted to death and we were doing it badly

If we don't know the needs by now we should all be sacked

We have councillors with local knowledge – don't ignore this organic approach.

And a comment from a Mayor:

We had a solid foundation about what we believed our community wanted.

There was also considerable concern that the process of developing a social plan – and the community consultation it involved – may create community expectations that councils could not fulfill. One council representative summed it up:

... overall, the social plan created different levels of expectation, depending on the audience ... expectations were created by

simply talking about the plan, in the community and in the council.

Other comments related to this theme included:

You end up trying to be everything to everyone – what do you use to say no? [Community Services staff]

You raise expectations – but where are the resources? [General Manager]

We didn't want to build expectations in the community [Director].

These comments mirror the previous discussion about the extent to which social planning and community services should be a council responsibility. They are also closely linked to attitudes and approaches to needs assessment.

Needs assessment

There were differing views on the value of social plans in clarifying community needs. A concern expressed repeatedly was that no matter how many priorities were identified and successfully addressed, by the time of the next plan there were still as many to deal with.

Another statement was that the needs hadn't changed in twenty years so it wasn't necessary to have an elaborate process to work out what they were. The view was, if councillors were doing their job properly and listening to their constituents, they would have a good idea of what had to be addressed. In this case, the value of the social plan was that it validated what people already knew (or suspected):

Most of the staff and councillors know what the needs are; putting it in a plan gives outsiders an idea (Mayor).

In a similar vein, an interviewee from a smaller council stated that the social plan "channeled" what was already known from political processes into "actions that are written down, measurable and part of an implementation process".

Terminology was also an issue here, particularly in the use of the term 'needs' which was seen to have

potentially negative connotations. Talking about needs could be seen as reflecting badly on the council area as a whole because it suggested things which council should possibly have done, but had not.

One respondent encapsulated this concern by remarking that having looked at the myriad needs identified in the plan, and the scant resources available to meet them:

You wouldn't want to live in the area because of the problems involved.

Some council officers therefore preferred an issues-based (or 'strengths-based') approach to social planning which could emphasise more positive attributes of the area. In reviewing plans we found that some councils that opted for an issues-based approach in their needs assessment did not address all mandatory target groups, with one omitting 'women' completely, perhaps because no problems were evident or acknowledged.

Interestingly, however, most of those interviewed saw dealing with the issues raised in their councils' plans in positive terms and as a challenge.

Regional cooperation

The interviews suggested that relatively little weight was placed on cooperation with neighbouring councils or working through Regional Organisations of Councils in the formulation of social plans. In this regard it is worth noting that in the foreword to the 2002 Guidelines the then Minister for Local Government wrote:

The guidelines also encourage councils to co-ordinate their activities with other government agencies and non-government organisations in providing services within their areas and with other councils where regional approaches are appropriate. The community deserves the benefits of reduced costs, greater efficiency and the better targeting of services resulting from improved co-operation between agencies. (Guidelines, 2002: 2)

When questioned, most interviewees felt there could be advantages in discussions to identify

common issues with neighbouring councils, but overall priorities varied too much between councils for there to be a benefit in formal coordination.

Everyone has a different take on the regulations and what they're willing to commit to

[Social plans] ...are highly structured and integrated with the budget – it's difficult to translate that regionally.

One example where there was evidence of discussion to address common needs concerned availability of public transport from rural centres to the regional service centre located in a different local government area. Whilst the rural council saw this as a valuable discussion, the larger council, which would be the transport hub, referred to the issue only in passing. Similarly, sharing library resources between a larger council and its rural counterpart was discussed but not pursued.

A factor inhibiting regional cooperation appeared to be doubts that State government agencies would support the outcomes. In most cases government agency representatives were consulted during the preparation of plans but there was concern at the lack of any formal mechanism for agencies to at least have regard to the priorities identified in the social plan when framing their own.

There is a deficit in funding [of programs and projects identified in the social plan] ... we won't ever get it. Where is the money? Give us the funding to do all this. They are not addressing the issues from a state level (Mayor).

One council that had been extensively involved with its neighbour in developing strategies for dealing with common needs in their 1999 social plan found that joint efforts were wasted when those strategies that required State government funding support fell on deaf ears. The feeling from this council was that it was pointless spending major time and effort on regional approaches in the future if the State took no responsibility as a partner in government. This was seen as paradoxical given the State government's encouragement for councils to be more closely

involved with their region and immediate neighbours.

Who is the audience?

The review team was interested to see what consideration had been given to the plan as a document that should reach a wider audience well beyond council and key stakeholders. After asking interviewees the question: 'Has the social plan given Council a clearer picture of community needs?' a subsidiary discussion point was raised around who the plan might be written for and therefore how it should be written.

Some council officers were surprised at the question and it provoked differing responses. Some said no consideration had been given to the issue of readership when framing the report, whilst others suggested that the plan was intended as an internal working document, adding that while anyone was welcome to look through it, no concessions had been made to making it accessible to a wider audience. One simply said the plan was written for anyone who wished to look at it. Not surprisingly, some councillors referred to their councils' plans as 'doorstops'.

Certainly the written social plan is a technical document and potentially large because of the amount of detail it must contain. On the other hand, it is clear that a detailed document can be of considerable value in articulating issues thoroughly, and presenting them to a broad range of actual and potential interested parties. One council thought that 50 pages was 'about right'.

An important issue to emerge was that community groups were often expected to use the social plan in formulating requests for council funding or support. There seemed to be a clear expectation among staff and councillors that if a community group wished to pursue a specific issue for council funding, then it should do so only where it could point to its inclusion in the social plan as a priority.

This was borne out by one community services staff member who stated that their council's system for grants was "in line with the social plan". If this

approach were to be widely adopted, social plans should be written with a broader public audience in mind. This is so that the information is readily accessible for those in the community wishing to make use of it for their own purposes. (See also Annexure A for material related to this.)

It will be recalled that the desk analysis reported in the previous chapter found that most plans did not rate very well in terms of accessibility or readability.

Implementation

The Guidelines outline what each council needs to do in terms of an implementation process:

Councils must decide annually which of the actions recommended in their social plan will be carried out. These actions will be included in an access and equity activity statement in council's management plan. (Guidelines, 2002: 22).

While the Guidelines do not suggest or prescribe how a council's access and equity activities are to be implemented (Guidelines, 2002:22), they do outline the need for a monitoring and evaluation regime:

Councils must make sure that access and equity activities are implemented as planned and that they are having the desired effect on the community. This means measuring both the outputs and outcomes of the recommended access and equity activities. (Guidelines, 2002: 22).

Nearly all social plans include detailed proposals that could be worked into the council management plan. However, most councils had concerns about getting the balance right between the legitimate need for adequate planning processes and inevitable constraints on implementation.

There was a view that implementation programs had to be in fairly general terms. If priorities changed or fresh opportunities arose, as they inevitably did, then implementation scheduling should change to reflect that.

You can't be too prescriptive; you need to be able to drive programs when opportunities

arise, and the social plan needs to enable you to take them up (Mayor).

Thus one council made a distinction between that part of the social plan that set the broad direction and the other that set the work plan. Another stated that the management plan rather than the social plan set the priorities.

Several interviewees highlighted the need for 'champions' to promote implementation of the social plan, including both elected representatives and senior managers, so that there was sufficient organisational support and funding for the implementation of strategies. This may suggest that the process of social planning is not as entrenched as might be hoped and expected given its mandatory status.

Another general implementation issue raised by several councils related to the different timelines for key planning documents. It was pointed out that the 5-year social planning and reporting cycle was 'out of kilter' with that of the management plan (although this is not necessarily the case given the flexible timelines for management plans offered under the Local Government Act), and with the State of the Environment Report, another major planning tool mandated by legislation. This issue is now being addressed by DLG as part of its Integrated Planning and Reporting project.

Monitoring and evaluation

Every council had at least a basic reporting process for the implementation of social plan recommendations, directed to either a committee or the full council. However, in a number of cases the information presented was fairly sketchy: a favourite phrase was 'implementation in progress', or 'ongoing', often with no detail on costs or completion dates.

Some interviewees referred to detailed reporting mechanisms that were either not mentioned or not clearly outlined in the plans themselves. Moreover, in several cases councils had mechanisms to link staff work programs to successful implementation of agreed aspects of the social plan. This was so

that these achievements could be included and used for assessment in individual performance appraisals. It was also indicated that implementation reports were considered regularly by the senior staff committee so that there were ongoing, cross-department linkages.

At least one council had developed a detailed implementation program that included a set of social indicators to measure the impact of each strategy in meeting identified needs:

... these indicators would enable council to readily identify if it is moving towards/or away from achieving Council's desired social goals and objectives. Collectively, these indicators will enable Council to assess the community's overall social well being and identify challenges/opportunities where strategies need to be reviewed and/or new ones devised to redress any undesirable trends.

This approach provided an accessible way for the community to track how implementation of an individual plan was proceeding.

As a result of the interviews we concluded that up to 12 councils (as opposed to the 8 identified in Chapter 3) had an adequate implementation regime. However, doubts remained about the extent to which social plans were effectively translated into management plans and the quality of access and equity statements.

Integration

Social plans are one of many council plans that councils must or may prepare. It is a challenge to integrate all these plans into a coherent management framework. On this theme, the Guidelines state:

Social planning is most effective when it is integrated into council planning processes. A whole of council approach means identifying which operational units of the council are relevant to a project and establishing mechanisms to ensure that their input is integrated in the planning and implementation of the project. (Guidelines, 2002: 8).

When asked how the social plan was integrated with other plans and strategies, most councils identified the management plan as the connecting document:

All plans come together; the social plan contributes to the management plan – we developed the framework ourselves (General Manager).

However, the difficulty of achieving effective integration was a source of frustration. As one Director said: “we put in a lot of thought about how to make it fit together”.

Integration is a big issue and we are doing research on it. We have a myriad of plans, most with recommendations and action plans [so] it's a knowledge management task to index the information so that it's not too complex (General Manager).

The number of plans currently required of councils and the resources consumed were seen by some as excessive:

The amount of plans we have to develop... they are expensive to keep up to date and we have limited resources. We're spending too much time on planning rather than doing (General Manager).

Nevertheless, there was evident awareness of the importance of adopting a ‘whole of council’ and ‘whole of government’ approach where possible. Many community services staff were certainly aware of this need and were trying to promote integration:

You need people owning the document. They have to be saying “the document belongs to us (whole of council) not just community services” (Community Services staff).

As noted previously, other government agencies were usually invited to be involved in consultations during plan preparation and often took part at that stage. However, one council commented that when it came to supporting recommendations that impacted financially on the state government, the involvement of those agencies quickly evaporated.

Views of elected councillors

In the end, it is the elected council that is responsible to the community for the successful development and implementation of the social plan. However, our interviews suggested that social planning is largely a process driven by community services staff. Significant numbers of councillors and General Managers appear to have little knowledge of what is in the Guidelines, with some unconvinced about the need for a plan at all.

It was noted previously that most councillors felt they did not have to know the detail of what was in the social plan. However these interviewees saw it as important that when the need arose the social plan could be used as evidence that council had identified an issue and was ready to deal with it. There was also a preference for recommendations to be cast in fairly general terms so that they could be adapted as necessary to meet emerging situations.

Councillors also felt that if they were doing their job well, they ought to know the issues without needing to resort to the plan. One mayor stated that he was “working on a feeling” but it was important to have the backing of a plan if the need arose. There should be a match between the plan and councillors’ knowledge of their areas. Many staff agreed with this view; it was considered important that the plan included issues that councillors had raised on behalf of their constituents, particularly where funding was involved.

Not all councillors supported a social planning process. In these situations, it was important for them to be convinced of the benefits of having a plan. Discussion with their peers could be helpful, and for that reason it was important that there be champions of the plan amongst elected members.

It appeared that some councillors also did not support the social plan receiving publicity and being highlighted in council business papers. This was because it painted a negative view of the local area and was generally seen in terms of raising too many issues when there was not

enough money to deal with them. Understandably, councillors wanted the council to be seen in local media in a positive light. Thus the general view was that reporting on problematic issues identified in the social planning process might only be acceptable if at the same time solutions (including financial ones) could be included.

Attitudes to the Department and Guidelines

There was a general perception that DLG’s interest in social plans was primarily to ‘tick’ the appropriate boxes in its assessment template, and that the Department did not look at the issues involved beyond compliance. For some, this was clearly a source of considerable irritation:

We’ve covered the requirements – bugger the Department if they don’t like it (Community Services staff).

Interviewees also found it frustrating that they were required to undertake a lengthy and detailed process leading to a plan that in many respects could not be funded. This was attributed to the constraints on councils (especially rate-pegging) and lack of support from government agencies. Councils hoped that DLG would be able to see a future role for itself in helping them engage government agencies, particularly in regard to funding. As one Director argued:

...if the Department of Local Government is genuine about having a social plan then it behoves them to take notice of it.

It was seen that this would require a substantial change in DLG’s focus and an improvement in State-local relations as well as a change in the state government’s overall approach to local government. Another Director put it in these terms:

There should be more recognition and validation of the planning work done by councils. Other levels of government should respect it.

There was also a view that the Guidelines should say more about implementation reporting and

monitoring, and that DLG should be clearer about what was expected on this aspect. However, the Guidelines do include quite detailed suggestions about monitoring and evaluation, as shown in the extracts presented in Annexure A. This perhaps underlines the limited awareness of the Guidelines reported earlier.

The latest Guidelines replace those from 1998. DLG wrote that they “identified five ways in which the earlier guidelines could be modified to improve clarity, intent, flexibility and responsiveness”:

These five changes were to ...encourage councils to be creative and innovative in their social plans and annual reports, provided they comply with the requirements in the legislation and the guidelines. (Guidelines, 2002: 6).

And elsewhere in the Guidelines:

There is no one prescribed format or method for preparing a social plan. Different councils across NSW have developed and used a range of innovative planning models (Guidelines, 2002: 17)

DLG thus made it clear there was scope for councils to adopt innovative approaches to the content and presentation of social plans provided mandatory requirements were met in some way. Nevertheless, most plans stayed within the confines of reporting against the mandatory target groups, and some frustration was expressed by interviewees that the Guidelines (in their interpretation) required a repetitive format dealing sequentially with each group.

One council suggested that the Guidelines placed people ‘in a box’ and made it difficult to know how to structure a plan when needs spanned a number of groups. For example, if public transport was an issue for three of the seven target groups, then it had to be referred to three times with supporting material, rather than dealing with the issue of public transport overall.

It was cumbersome to use target groups; saying the same things over and over again (Community Services staff).

Again, these expressions of concern suggest an imperfect understanding of the Guidelines and

perhaps a culture of compliance rather than innovation. On the other hand, there were several instances where the Guidelines had been interpreted creatively. It also needs to be remembered that a substantial proportion of councils do not have specialist social planners, and that resource constraints can make it difficult to look beyond the strict requirements of a mandatory process. The spirit of innovation is perhaps easily stymied.

5

Conclusions and Implications

Some of the principal themes highlighted by this research project related to:

- Attitudes generally towards social planning and community services in local government
- Perceptions about the usefulness of preparing a social plan
- The differing perspectives of community services staff, senior management and elected members
- Involvement with other government agencies and the extent of regional cooperation
- Links between the social plan and management plan, and implementation issues generally
- The value of the Department of Local Government Guidelines
- Opportunities taken to step beyond the Guidelines to pursue an innovative approach.

Exploring these themes is timely as the Department is currently putting forward proposals for major changes to the whole range of requirements for strategic and corporate planning by NSW councils. This raises the question of whether the current purposes and principles of social planning will be adequately served under any new arrangements. Moreover, recent experience with social planning sheds light on a range of factors that will influence successful implementation of the proposed changes.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that, overall, councils recognise the value of having a social plan to underpin their activities. Even if there was no legislative requirement, there was a general view that there would be a similar process undertaken by councils to

obtain a snapshot of the area, the profiles of the people who lived in it, and to identify if and where gaps in services might exist. Social planning has clearly focused more attention within councils on community development and service delivery issues, and provided a platform for increased interaction between councils, community organizations and service providers.

However, social planning remains in its infancy. After two rounds of preparing plans, councils are still coming to terms with what is required, what is useful, and what methodologies to adopt. A number of points stand out:

- In most councils, social planning is driven by specialist staff and middle management and seems to be very much a 'community services thing', with only weak linkages to other council departments and broader strategic and corporate planning.
- A substantial proportion of senior managers and elected members still question the value and benefits of social planning, and many have a poor understanding of the mandatory requirements.
- Implementation mechanisms are generally poorly articulated in social plans, with often inadequate monitoring and reporting, and limited follow-through into council management plans.
- Councils are often unsure about the audience for social plans and what purpose they might fulfill beyond compliance with a legislative requirement.

Underlying issues here are the developing role of local government, the inadequacy of resources available to discharge growing responsibilities, and difficulties in the State-local relationship.

Mandatory social planning has extended local government's role further into the realm of community services and development. The preparation of social plans inevitably generates expectations that councils will take action of some sort to address identified

needs and service gaps. Senior managers and elected members are troubled by this: they see a combination of greater demands on councils' resources and the possibility of adverse publicity arising from identification of social problems in the local area. These concerns are perhaps heightened by the requirement for social plans to focus on the needs of a number of 'disadvantaged' or 'vulnerable' target groups, thus suggesting a welfare orientation.

Community services professionals are also aware of these risks, but see the requirement for social planning as an opportunity to cement their place in the local government realm and to exercise more influence over corporate direction. Taken together, these are considered as a means to balancing the power and influence of established groups such as engineers and town planners.

Lack of resources is a pervasive issue. Mandatory social planning has been introduced along with a raft of other requirements for local government to expand its activities, and in the context of the NSW system of rate-pegging. As the recent report of the Independent Inquiry into the Financial Sustainability of NSW Local Government highlighted, the numbers simply do not add up.⁵ The result has been serious under-expenditure on infrastructure maintenance and renewal that must now be addressed. This realisation is creating a new climate in local government that could impact significantly on the future of social planning.

Social planning also draws attention to broader weaknesses in the State-local relationship. Experience with preparing and implementing social plans has led many councils to conclude that State agencies are unwilling to engage effectively in 'whole of government' approaches to address community issues. Although the Guidelines call on councils to pursue collaboration with State agencies and other service providers, councils believe that social plans carry little or no weight when it comes to influencing State priorities, even when agencies have been closely consulted in their preparation.

⁵ *Are Councils Sustainable?* Final Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Financial Sustainability of NSW Local Government, NSW Local Government and Shires Associations, May 2006.

This is not to deny that social planning has been successful in bringing a range of service providers to the table to discuss community needs, and has often provided a valuable platform for funding submissions, but simply to say that expectations of a more concerted, cooperative approach to implementation appear to have been unfulfilled.

Other key findings may be summarized as follows:

- Whilst some smaller councils clearly struggled to resource social planning, there was no evident correlation between size of councils and the quality and effectiveness of the plan produced.
- Not all councils had in-house resources to prepare plans that met the mandatory criteria. Those councils will have to give serious consideration to their ability to employ additional staff or engage consultants to prepare future plans (including the new 'quadruple bottom line' strategies proposed by the Department) – or consider a 'fall-back' position.
- Generally, community consultation seemed to have been handled well, and to have led to a better understanding in the community about councils' roles and operating constraints.
- Few councils went beyond the mandatory requirements (although some were quite innovative), and there appeared to be widespread misunderstanding of what the Guidelines actually said.
- Plans often seemed unnecessarily long and complex, and thus inaccessible to the average reader.
- Methodology and terminology were rarely explained clearly, and in many cases it appeared that more effort could have been made to learn from experience with the previous plan.
- There was little consultation between neighbouring councils, or on a regional basis,

and preparation of joint social plans was mostly seen as being too difficult as each council had different budget and financial priorities as well as a differing understanding of the social planning agenda.

- A number of councils also felt that a regional approach would not be particularly helpful given the likely lack of State support for regional strategies.
- Those councils with 'champions' for the social plan at elected and senior staff level achieved greater organisational support and funding for implementation.
- There is evident scope for professional development activities for elected councillors about social planning in general, ie the need for and the value of having a social plan.
- Despite the financial and other constraints, there were many examples where there had been good outcomes for individual councils as a result of preparing a plan. Interviews found that implementation of social plans was in several cases more effective than was evident from the available documentation.
- There was an evident belief that the Department could and should do more to secure State agency support for implementation of social planning outcomes.

Implications

As noted previously, the DLG has canvassed the possibility of replacing current requirements for management plans, State of Environment reports and a separate social plan with a new 'quadruple bottom line' strategic plan.

The findings of this research project reinforce the need for change. Leaving the process as it is will not deal with issues such as non-compliance with mandatory guidelines, the negative views of some councillors and senior managers about social planning, the lack of cohesion between State and

local plans, and difficulties in the broader State-local relationship, including funding arrangements. Nor will it encourage local government to focus more on effective integrated planning and management, or adopt longer-term strategic planning.

But by the same token, the findings presented here make it clear that introducing a new strategic planning framework will not be easy, and will require a willingness to explore fresh approaches on the part of both local and State governments. It will also require a substantial effort in explaining the new requirements and building greater capacity for strategic planning. This could place very considerable demands on the Department as well as councils, and substantial funding support may be required.

Specifically, action will be needed to ensure that:

- The gains in social planning and implementation of an access and equity agenda made over the past decade are not undermined by making the social plan just one part of a quadruple bottom line strategy.
- Guidelines for strategic plans clearly and fully articulate the government's intentions with regard to purpose, process, methodology, content and implementation mechanisms.
- New requirements and guidelines are fully absorbed and commonly understood at all levels of councils.
- Substantial improvements are made to strategic planning skills generally across local government, and including within senior management.
- There is effective political support for both the strategic planning process and subsequent implementation – meaning that awareness and training programs must be directed to councillors as much as to staff.
- State agencies recognize the importance and value of council strategic plans and there are

effective mechanisms to align State and local priorities wherever possible.

Inevitably, and especially in light of the findings of the recent Independent Inquiry, rate-pegging will again emerge as a vexed issue.

For councillors and General Managers, the evident dilemma of raising community expectations and yet not being able to 'deliver' is one that would apply not only to social plans, but even more so to broad-based strategic plans.

This also highlights the issue of skills in community consultation, which can raise community expectations and produce 'wish lists', plus a general 'dumping' on local government of all the problems of individuals and communities. Staff and councillors need skills in methods of consulting that help communities understand complex issues and prioritise needs in a realistic way (be they environmental, economic, social or for infrastructure), having regard to the constraints on local government. A clear distinction has to be drawn between councils delivering services and facilities themselves, and their role as partners with and advocates to State and federal governments, the private sector and other service deliverers.

Another 'Catch-22' of strategic planning that must be addressed is the tendency to highlight the problems facing an area rather than its qualities and achievements – or in the minds of councillors and senior managers, focusing too much attention on the 'bad news'. Again, this could well be the case with multi-dimensional strategic plans in the same way that it has been an issue for social planning.

Experience with social planning is particularly instructive in the area of implementation. The social planning Guidelines require extensive background research and a thorough assessment of needs that should have led to specific proposals for action built into the management plan via an access and equity statement. Generally, this study found that the research and analysis was handled well, but implementation mechanisms were often

lacking, even to the extent of there being no access and equity statement at all in some cases.

This does not augur well for the proposed new approach to strategic planning. There is a risk that a substantial proportion of councils will fail to produce sufficiently rigorous plans and/or to translate strategic plans effectively and consistently into budgets and programs. The strategic planning framework could thus become largely meaningless.

Success factors for social planning

We conclude by offering a list of 'success factors' for social planning that have emerged from this research. It is suggested that these factors may apply equally to future quadruple bottom line strategies.

- 1. A thorough assessment of the previous social plan** and what was learned from that plan – its successes and shortcomings. This might lead to different methods of research, different implementation mechanisms, fewer (or more) recommendations and a new focus on integrating the social plan with other council documents.
- 2. A clear methodology** for the social plan that is stated in the document and then followed. A methodology is important for both staff preparing the plan, and the reader. This outlines to all parties what methods have been used by the researcher to determine the needs of the community, and how the elements of the plan fit together. It lends credibility to the planning process.
- 3. Robust research and consultation** including demographic analysis of target groups and an effective needs assessment. Once a methodology has been established, the research and consultation must be robust and be able to stand up to scrutiny and be convincing to the reader. A mix of techniques or methods, or triangulation, is considered the best approach as it draws on the strengths of each

method or technique while offsetting the weaknesses.

4. Consultation with neighbouring councils and linkages with other government departments.

Most social issues do not have strict geographic boundaries, and residents of other municipalities will use services in other council areas. Hence consultation with neighbouring councils is important. As the social plan goes beyond the service delivery role of council, it is also essential to look to other service providers in the local government area including other levels of government (even though this may result in frustration if adequate cooperation is not forthcoming). This approach can also help to make it clear that a council is not solely responsible for all the issues and problems identified in the social plan.

5. A 'whole of council' approach that considers social issues and impacts and implementation possibilities across all council divisions, not just community services. Solutions to many social issues lie not within the community services department, but in other parts of council. The social plan must therefore encompass council as a whole.

6. Consideration of the needs of the 'target audience' for the social plan – notably councillors, senior staff, the community and other service providers. The critical question of 'who is the plan for' must be addressed. If the readership is diverse then perhaps there should be multiple versions of the plan. Documents need to be easy to read and access, both in print and internet versions, preferably less than 1MB in size. There is no point in having a fantastic plan if no-one can gain access to it, or if it is written in highly technical language that few understand, or it is overly lengthy.

7. Clear and detailed recommendations that then carry through to appropriate parts of the management plan and other council documents. Without such recommendations, the plan cannot be implemented.

8. Implementation, monitoring and reporting frameworks including costing and timeframe schedules that are detailed in the social plan and then translated into management and operational plans. Many strategic plans fail due to lack of an adequate implementation framework. Monitoring and reporting frameworks including rigorous performance indicators are tools by which we can ensure that the plan is effectively implemented effectively.

9. Innovation: a willingness to try something different that may be better suited to the circumstances and needs of the council and local area, whether in terms of the style and content of the document or implementation mechanisms.

10. Political astuteness. Strategic planning is inherently political as it deals with setting priorities and allocating scarce resources, and affects the image of the council. Staff that are politically astute to generate support and find champions amongst both senior management and councillors will likely achieve more successful outcomes.

Annexure A

Extracts from Guidelines and Manual

Access and Equity

[Guidelines] A2. Social justice and social/community planning

The NSW Government's social justice strategy is based on the four interrelated principles of equity, access, participation and rights. For local government this means a commitment to ensuring:

- there is fairness in the distribution of resources
- rights are recognised and promoted
- people have fairer access to the economic resources and services essential to meet their basic needs and to improve their quality of life
- people have better opportunities for genuine participation and consultation about decisions affecting their lives.

Source: NSW Social Justice Directions Statement: Supporting People and Strengthening Communities, NSW Government, February 2000.

A social/community plan examines the needs of the local community, including groups that may be disadvantaged in some way, and formulates access and equity activities that council and/or other agencies could implement to address identified needs. Access and equity activities are any activities that aim to promote social justice and enhance community well-being. They include:

- a council's social/community welfare, health, cultural and recreation activities
- the access and equity aspects of other council activities such as providing infrastructure and services, planning and regulatory activities, providing information and levying rates.
(Guidelines, 2002: 7)

Reporting Access and Equity Activities

[Guidelines] C2. Access and equity activity statements

The Local Government (General) Regulation 1999 requires all councils to include in their draft management plans a statement containing particulars of the access and equity activities they propose to undertake during the period covered by the draft management plan. These activities include the priority access and equity activities from the council's social/community plan (Clause 30).

Councils must have a section called 'Access and Equity Activity Statement' in their management plan. This section must:

- Refer to the existence of council's social/community plan or related planning documents and inform the community that these have helped council identify its access and equity activities.
- State the date the social/community plan/s were last modified.
- Provide details of how to obtain copies of the social/community plan and any related planning documents.
- Identify the recommended actions in the social/community plan that will be implemented by council in the following year/s.
- Include a brief explanation of why there is no activity identified against a mandatory target group, if this is the case. This explanation may be based on information from your social/community plan.
- Identify against each listed access and equity activity whether the proposed activity was identified in a social/community plan or another plan. You should include the name of the plan and the most relevant page number.
- Provide detailed information about each listed access and equity activity. This information should clearly state the purpose and nature of the activity and give enough details to enable the implementation of the activity to be effectively monitored. You can put these detailed statements in one section of the management plan or spread them throughout the plan. (Guidelines, 2002: 23)

Regional Planning

[Guidelines] B6. Possibility of a regional planning process

Councils are encouraged to consider the benefits of organising a regional social/community planning process with neighbouring councils. This process can help you adopt a more regional overview and forge active partnerships to formulate and implement strategies for your local community resulting in the more efficient use of limited resources. (Guidelines, 2002: 18).

Presentation of information

[Guidelines] B5. Presenting information in social/community plans

There is no one prescribed format or method for preparing a social/community plan. Different councils across NSW have developed and used a range of innovative planning models.

The format you choose should be appropriate and relevant to your local government area and the planning processes used. It should also recognise that members of target groups are not homogeneous and may fall into more than one target group.

If you decide to present information under issues or localities, you must identify relevant target groups for each issue or locality and how the issue affects each target group. To ensure integrated council planning, there must be cross-referencing between the social/community plan and other relevant council plans such as a disability action plan or crime prevention plan.

The plan must be presented in a way that is readable and accessible to the community, councillors and council staff. (Guidelines, 2002: 17).

[Manual] B3. Making the social/community plan accessible

The social/community plan should be user friendly, written in plain English and have an easy to follow format. Consideration should be given to:

- using alternative formats for people with disabilities, such as large print, on an accessible Web Site, on computer disk, on audiotape or in Braille
- providing a summary in community languages
- making the plan available at libraries and other community venues, such as migrant resource centres, seniors centres, neighbourhood centres, youth centres and Aboriginal land councils. (Manual, 2002: 32).

Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

[Guidelines] C1. The Implementation Process

Step 3. Monitoring and Evaluation

Councils must make sure that access and equity activities are implemented as planned and that they are having the desired effect on the community. This means measuring both the outputs and outcomes of the recommended access and equity activities. (Guidelines, 2002: 22).

[Guidelines] C3. Monitoring and Evaluation

If access and equity activities have been included in a council's management plan, the General Manager must report to the council within two months after the end of each quarter about the extent to which the performance targets set for the activities have been achieved during that quarter. It is essential for councils to monitor and evaluate the access and equity activities included in their management plans to ensure that resources are appropriately allocated and the needs of the community are being met. (Guidelines, 2002: 24).

[Manual] C3. Monitoring and evaluation

The monitoring and evaluation of strategies and initiatives is essential to ensure that resources are appropriately allocated and the needs of the community are being met. You should plan for evaluation and monitoring at the same

time as you plan the activity, program or facility. This ensures that relevant data will be available and adequate resources are allocated to collecting and analysing this data. (Manual, 2002: 38).

Integration

[Manual] A4. An integrated approach to social/community planning

Social/community planning is most effective when it is integrated into council management planning and other planning processes. Councils prepare a range of plans with different legislative status. Some are required by legislation. Others are initiatives by councils with no specific legislative basis.

A whole of council approach is also important because some council activities which are not traditionally regarded as 'community' or 'social' can have a significant impact on the well-being of a community. For example, the construction of a road may involve a number of different operational units of the council, some of which may initially seem unrelated to the principal service being provided.

Linking the social/community plan with activities of other government agencies:

You need to identify any links your social/community plan has with related activities of other government agencies. The social/community plan should feed into the relevant plans of other agencies and take into account the information and recommendations in those external plans. This facilitates resource sharing and reduces the duplication of services.

The social/community plan can also serve as a useful reference document when discussing issues with government agencies. (Manual, 2002: 8-9).

Councillors and Staff

[Manual] Step 3 Conduct a Needs Assessment, 'Internal Consultation'

As well as consulting the community and external stakeholders, you should also make sure you involve relevant council staff and councillors in developing the social plan. This helps to raise awareness about needs and issues in the community as well as foster commitment to implementing solutions that are council's responsibility. (Manual, 2002: 22).

[Manual] Setting Priorities

... Both councils and their communities should understand that although documenting current community need is an important first step in developing strategies to meet those needs, it is not realistic to expect that councils, in conjunction with other local community resources, will be able to meet all identified needs in the short or medium term. Priority recommendations will have to be identified and implemented in a staged fashion depending on the level of resources available. It is also important that councils remember that they do not have to be the implementing body for all recommendations in a social/community plan. (Manual, 2002: 22)

Target Groups

[Guidelines] B4. Essential components of a social/community plan

... Social/community plans need to recognise that these [the seven mandatory target groups] are not homogeneous and that people may belong to more than one target group. You should also consider including information in the plan about other specific groups relevant to your community. For example, in their last social/community plans some councils included groups such as low-income earners, gay/lesbian and transgender people, families, men, socially isolated people, people with a mental illness, new residents, volunteers, long term caravan park and mobile village residents and people who are unemployed. (Guidelines, 2002: 16)

[Manual] Step 2 – Develop a demographic profile of the community

The demographic data should be analysed carefully to gain an accurate perception of the characteristics of the target groups and the community generally. Target groups should not be looked at in isolation. (Manual, 2002: 15)

Annexure B

Phase 1 Review Questions

CONTEXT

- Size of council, staff,
- Key social characteristics area, including Department of Local Government State categories (including State Averages)
- Does the council have a specialist social planner, or Does the council have a community development officer?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- Was key terminology independently defined, ie Social, Community, Access and Equity or Social Planning?
- Has council taken an 'extra step' in approaching and/or researching the exercise or expanded upon mandatory requirements, i.e., were target groups broadened? Were other principles/paradigms/models used to organise the preliminary work? Is there anything that indicates an independent approach to the SCP's conceptual framework?
- Was supporting supplementary material related to background work included, ie, bibliography, background paper? What else?
- The general approach: Whole of Council? Whole of Government?
- Were regional cooperation and linkages explored?

PREPARATION AND CONTENT

- Was the effectiveness of the previous plan thoroughly assessed? If so, how was this done?
- Was the methodology used for producing the current SCP clearly outlined?
- Were mandatory target groups and/or optional groups identified and needs assessed
- Is there a demographic profile of the area
- Is there evidence of development using participatory processes
- Does SCP detail consultations conducted in its development
- Did the planning process actively involve: Local residents, Business, Community groups, Other government, Non-government agencies
- Did the planning process identify community needs and develop plan based on social justice principles
- Did the planning process promote fair, open, participatory and inclusive decision-making?

IMPLEMENTATION

- Are recommended actions from SCP clearly followed through within the management plan?
- Does the management plan include an Access and Equity statement?
- Does the SCP cross-reference to other relevant council plans, ie, cultural, public health, crime prevention, disability etc?
- Are proposed implementation mechanisms articulated? Are they relevant, useful and realistic in view of exercise and identified issues and aims?
- Is there integration of the SCP across council functions/divisions?
- Does the SCP contain clearly identified timeframes for actions?

- Does the SCP contain clear mechanisms and timeframes for monitoring and evaluation, including when it will be reviewed?
- Does the SCP use performance indicators?
- Are there consultative or advisory committees (e.g.s377) for ongoing community consultation, or evidence otherwise of regular/appropriate mechanisms for consulting a range of community groups?

VALUE OF PLAN AS PUBLIC DOCUMENT

- Is the plan easy to read
- Is it easy to access on-line? If a single file, is it under 1MB? If not, how many megabytes is the on-line version of the plan? Can entire plan be easily accessed via council website?
- Who does the plan appear to be written for? The Public, The Department of LGov, Peers, Other?
- Is there anything of interest-creative-progressive or innovative in the current SCP?
- Are there significant 'gaps' in document in terms of facts or analysis that make it difficult to determine as a reader the Council's intention or goals with the document, or is the SCP plan self explanatory?

Bibliography

- Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, *Internet Activity, Cat. no. 8153.0*, viewed 20 August 2006
<www.abs.gov.au>
- Department of Local Government, *Planning a Sustainable Future - Integrated Planning and Reporting for NSW Local Councils*, December 2006.
- Department of Local Government, *NSW Local Government Councils Comparative Information 2004/2005*, January 2006.
- Department of Local Government, *Social/Community Planning and Reporting Guidelines*, December 2002.
- Department of Local Government, *Social/Community Planning and Reporting Manual*, December 2002.
- Department of Local Government, *Social/Community Planning and Reporting Guidelines*, May 1998.
- Department of Local Government, *Social/Community Planning and Reporting Manual*, May 1998.
- Department for Women, *In Focus: A gender analysis of NSW Local Government Social Plans*, January 2002.
- Rates and Taxes: A Fair Share for Responsible Local Government*, (Hawker Report), November 2003.
- Local Government Act (General) Regulation, 1999.
- Local Government Act (1993, as amended).
- NSW Social Justice Directions Statement: Supporting People and Strengthening Communities, NSW Government, February 2000.
- NSW Local Government and Shires Associations, *Are Councils Sustainable? Final Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Financial Sustainability of NSW Local Government*, May 2006.



Raising Expectations?
A Review of NSW Local Government Social Plans