



Just Communities: A National Network of Councils Promoting Community Wellbeing through Local Democracy

Just Communities is a joint initiative of the Local Government Community Services Association of Australia (LGCSAA) and the Centre for Local Government, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS-CLG)

It is an action research¹ project to establish and support a national network of councils interested in promoting community² wellbeing by strengthening local democracy.

“Local government tends to be understood in two basic ways: as provider of a range of services within a local area and as a democratic system of local governance. Each of these ways of considering local government focuses on an essential part, but neither gives a complete view. Rather the two have to be combined because each informs the other in important ways.” (Professor Brian Galligan, *Local Government Reform in Victoria*, State Library of Victoria 1998)

“The reform spotlight has fallen so heavily on management in recent years that the democratic dimension of local government has, to a considerable extent, been overshadowed. Some commentators would put the even stronger view that a strident preoccupation with obtaining economic performance has had a detrimental effect on civic values.” (Professor Brian Dollery and Associate Professor Neil Marshall, *Reshaping Australian Local Government*, UNSW Press 2003)

“The local government franchise is hardly ever discussed in Australia. The property element is left over from the nineteenth century before the democratic principle became established. . . . Each person should only vote in her or his place of residence. This is the essence of democracy. Whether we are dealing with representative or participatory democracy, popular control and political equality are the key democratic principles.” (Dr. Rosemary Kiss, *Reshaping Australian Local Government*, UNSW Press 2003)

¹ Action research involves working with organisations that are actively engaged in the field and willing to explore possible changes to their operations. It recognises that changes will flow during the research process.

² In the context of this project, ‘community’ generally refers to the residents, business-people and local organisations within a local government area. It is understood that communities are characterised by a wide range of viewpoints and interests, that local government areas may include localities that differ widely in socio-economic and environmental terms, and that there may be sharp differences of opinion on issues facing local councils.

1. CONTEXT

A changing role

The overwhelming majority of Australians live in areas administered by elected local governments and their wellbeing depends to a significant extent on the provision of adequate and appropriate municipal services.

Since the colonial origins of local government in the 1840s, its role has developed from predominantly focusing on property services and physical infrastructure to providing a diverse range of services for people and communities.³

This widening of the scope of Council services to address social, cultural, economic and environmental issues has been accompanied by expansion and professionalisation of local administrations. Councils have had to address the need for new approaches to local area planning, agency coordination, intergovernment relations, and integration, monitoring and evaluation of services.

These changes have generated significant changes in the culture of local government and have important implications for the nature of local democracy. A key factor has been the introduction of numerous legislative requirements for community consultation before decisions can be taken. Moreover, many Councils have taken it upon themselves to consult and engage with their communities well beyond those legal requirements.

Management reform

The combination of Councils' broader role, enhanced public participation and more holistic approaches to community development could have been expected to reinvigorate discussion on the concept and practice of local democracy and active citizenship, but to a large extent this has failed to eventuate. Instead the dominance in the 1990s of economic reform led to a preoccupation with the efficiency of service delivery, management improvement, boundary restructuring, performance measurement and benchmarking, competitive tendering and other measures focused primarily on streamlined administration and cost-saving. In many places this led to the characterisation of residents not as *citizens* of their local government area, but more narrowly as *ratepayers* or service *clients* and *customers*.

This preoccupation with management has been heightened by the mounting financial problems facing local government. Growth in revenues over the past 30-40 years has generally failed to keep pace with increasing roles and responsibilities, resulting in particular in a failure to invest sufficiently in renewing ageing infrastructure. These pressures are restricting Councils' capacity to explore new areas of activity and focusing attention on the need for performance management and still greater efficiency in service delivery.

³ An in-depth overview and analysis of the historical development of local government's role in human services will provide an important foundation for the *Just Communities* project. It is being researched and documented by Frank Hornby, immediate past president of LGCSAA and former Director of Social Development at Townsville City Council.

Good governance

Alongside organisational efficiency considerable attention has also been given to the workings of elected Councils and the issue of good governance. To date, efforts have been directed primarily towards *corporate governance* – meeting statutory requirements, ethical administration, accountable and transparent decision making, handling complaints, internal audit etc – rather than broader *community governance*: promoting robust democracy, citizen rights, active citizenship and community engagement (see below).

Democratic processes

In some ways, democratic developments in local government have not kept pace with managerial and operational changes in local administration. As noted earlier, the efficiency agenda has tended to dominate, although there has been substantial progress in community consultation and participation (see below).

Electoral systems are one area of concern. In some States voting remains optional and voter turnout may be very low. Also, with the exception of Queensland and the Northern Territory, the local government franchise across Australia still includes voting entitlements linked to property ownership. This can be seen to undermine the representative legitimacy and status of local government, and as a consequence to diminish its claim for recognition as the third sphere of democratic government in Australia.

It is also noteworthy that by international standards Australia has relatively few elected councillors. There have been widespread moves in recent years to amalgamate small (in population) councils, and to cut the number of elected members in larger councils. In metropolitan areas and larger regional centres each councillor may represent 10,000 or more people – and councillors are nearly all part-time and receive little administrative or research support. This impacts significantly on their capacity to engage effectively with constituents.

Strengthening engagement

Since the 1970s, community consultation and public participation have become increasingly important tools for identifying issues of concern and setting and achieving agreed community goals. Most Councils now apply a diverse menu of methods and techniques for working with local residents and other stakeholders to promote community wellbeing. These techniques range from simply providing information to people about what is happening in their local area, through various degrees of consultation and participation in decision-making, to supporting and delegating authority to community organisations to undertake activities on behalf of Councils. This spectrum of activities is described here as ‘community or civic engagement’.

Available evidence suggests that whilst many Councils remain strongly committed to community engagement, others feel that consultation processes have become too consuming of time and resources, have produced only limited benefits, and have tended to challenge the status and prerogatives of elected councillors. There is a sense in some quarters that community participation is ‘out of control’, that the methods of consultation being used are sometimes

inappropriate, and that the information and opinions gathered are not being fed effectively into management systems and decision-making processes.

Whilst there has been extensive research in the field of community consultation, there remains a need for closer examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches taken by different Councils, and in particular how consultation is linked to management systems and decision-making processes. This would inform further progress towards effective community engagement and inclusive local democracy.

Partnerships and empowerment

Faced with increasingly complex issues and constrained by scarce resources, local councils are clearly unable to meet all the demands placed upon them. Many councils have a long history of working with community organisations and other agencies to deliver services and undertake projects, and such partnerships are now widely regarded as an essential element of modern local government.

However, working in partnership with community organizations can be seen as more than just a pragmatic response to the pressures on Councils. Partnerships can also be used to ‘empower’ local communities to exercise more influence and control over their future direction and wellbeing – and at the same time to accept greater responsibility for making decisions and meeting their needs. This is not a matter of reducing the role of local government, but rather of accepting the reality that Councils cannot do everything and translating that into positive moves to build closer links with the community and strengthen local democracy.

This approach is consistent with the concept of *community governance*. This has been defined as “the process by which we collectively (emphasis added) solve our problems and meet our society's needs”. Local government is just one player in governance, working alongside community organisations, business and industry, other government agencies and others, all of which can act independently. However, local government’s powers and responsibilities, and especially its democratic mandate, give it a special role to play in exercising leadership and forging key partnerships to meet identified needs and promote community wellbeing. But Councils can only play this role effectively if they are truly engaged with their communities in a well-functioning local democracy.

The Challenge

Thus a critical challenge for local government in the 21st Century is to address both management imperatives and its democratic governance agenda, as a means to more effectively promoting community wellbeing.

To meet this challenge Councils will need to (among other things):

- explore the parameters of community governance and effective local democracy, including citizenship, partnerships and empowerment
- review the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to community consultation and engagement

- facilitate a well-informed community and effective citizen involvement in the critical political decisions that shape community wellbeing
- examine how political leadership at the local level can strengthen links between Councils and their communities
- ensure that Council decision-making processes are open and transparent and take all relevant factors and viewpoints into account
- address the need for management frameworks and systems that support and facilitate new approaches to community engagement and promotion of community wellbeing
- consider whether property rights and plural voting are consistent with modern democratic governance.

In essence, local government needs to find the right blend of community engagement, governance and decision-making processes, and management frameworks to strengthen local democracy and advance community wellbeing. **Just Communities** seeks to define that blend.



2. PROJECT PROPOSAL

Goal

To identify practical measures by which local government can promote local democracy and community wellbeing through more effective community engagement and supportive governance, decision-making and management processes.

Methodology

The project will involve:

- research into recent Australian and overseas experience, with a focus on exploring examples of successful practice and the linkages between community engagement, governance/decision-making and management in local government
- establishing a national network of 12-15 Councils willing to explore opportunities to strengthen community engagement and improve related systems and processes in governance/decision-making and management
- facilitating an ongoing exchange of information, experience and ideas amongst Network Councils and with other interested parties
- developing a package of 'toolkit' of resources that Councils can use to enhance their efforts in this field
- evaluating the experience of Network Councils over the life of the project and disseminating the findings across local government.

Research Partnership

To support the Network Councils, LGCSAA and UTS-CLG will form a research partnership and Project Team. The team will:

- Undertake background research and assemble the 'toolkit'
- Convene workshops and facilitate an ongoing exchange of information and experience amongst Network councils and with other partners (see below)
- Establish a project website and list-serve for Network Councils
- Monitor progress and document and disseminate examples of successful practice achieved by Network Councils
- Provide further assistance as required to Network Councils, within available resources
- Seek research funds to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of project activities and achievements, and to disseminate findings widely across local government and other stakeholders, including recommendations for good practice models and continuing activities to support and promote local democracy and community wellbeing in Australian local government.

The evaluation will be guided by a reference group with representatives from a range of organisations and interests such as local government associations, professional institutes, community-based organizations and relevant government agencies, as well as Network Councils and funding bodies.

Liaison Officers

Each Network Council will need to appoint a Liaison Officer to maintain contact with the Project Team and with other participating Councils. Similarly, one member of the Project Team will be nominated as the primary point of contact and assistance for each Council.

Implementation stages

The project will be divided into four stages as shown in the accompanying flow chart.

Stage 1 will run from July to December 2006. It will involve Network Councils completing a self-assessment audit of their current practices in community engagement and related governance/decision-making and management processes. The Project Team will provide advice and support, facilitate audit workshops in each Council, and undertake further background research to provide Councils with reference material.

Towards the end of Stage 1 the Project Team will analyse the completed assessments and then convene a roundtable meeting of the Network to discuss the results and exchange information more broadly. If necessary, Councils will be asked to fine-tune their assessments prior to commencement of Stage 2.

Stage 2 is expected to cover the first half of 2007. Network Councils will prepare draft Action Plans (including targets and indicators) to address their key issues and opportunities identified in Stage 1. The Project Team will offer advice and support, and will also assemble an initial 'toolkit' of resources Councils may wish to use in completing and implementing their Action Plans. This could include, among other things:

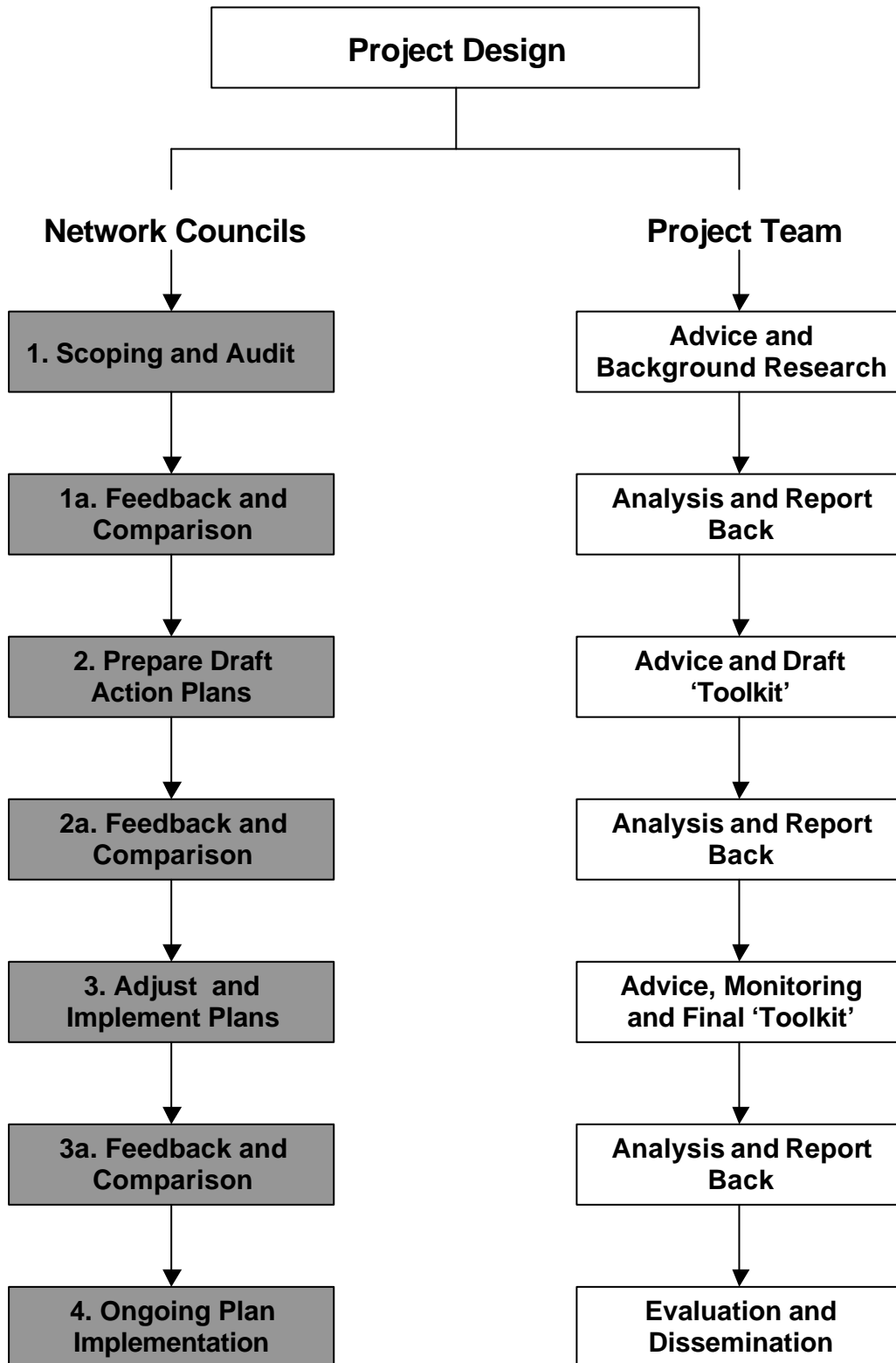
- information on recent practices in community empowerment, open democracy, citizen juries, community decision-making, community budgets, local citizenship, information access, etc
- a model local citizens' rights charter
- a 'community democracy and wellbeing index'.

Network Councils will be free to select and implement these resources and tools as they see fit.

Again, a roundtable meeting will be held towards the end of Stage 2 to discuss progress and experience gained.

Stage 3 is expected to cover the second half of 2007. Network Councils will finalise and begin to implement their Action Plans. The Project team will assist as required, monitor progress with implementation of plans and also finalise the 'toolkit' for ongoing use.

Project Flow Chart



A further roundtable will be convened towards the end of Stage 3 to exchange information and in particular to determine the process for evaluating progress made towards achieving the project goal and the objectives of network Councils. This will involve establishing a common set of objectives and indicators to complement those adopted by individual Councils. Subsequently, Councils will have an opportunity to fine-tune their Action Plans in light of each other's experiences and insights.

Stage 4 is expected to cover the remainder of 2008. It will involve continuing implementation of the Action Plans together with a detailed evaluation of progress based on the agreed objectives and indicators, plus documentation of the broader findings and achievements of the network and project. The results will be disseminated across local government and to other interested parties.

It is envisaged that Network Councils will continue to collaborate beyond the life of the formal project.

Project Partners

Network Councils and the Project Team will also engage with a wide range of other organisations that endorse the goal of pursuing community wellbeing through stronger local democracy. This will include other Councils, local government associations, professional bodies, government agencies, community groups and alliances, private sector organizations and so on.

3. ROLE OF LGCSAA

This ***Just Communities*** and Good Practice Network project will build on the LGCSAA's established contributions to community wellbeing initiatives development through its policy development, publications, national workshop program and highly successful biennial national community development conference.

Through these various avenues LGCSAA over the last decade has demonstrated a firm commitment to expanding the role of local government in fostering a more just Australia.

Publications

In the early 1990s the LGCSAA worked collaboratively with the Australian Local Government Association on a project aimed at rationalising government functions and improving intergovernmental cooperation for the benefit of local communities. The publication, *Better Services for Local Communities*, was followed by articulating the concept of Integrated Local Area Planning (ILAP), the publishing of an ILAP kit and Commonwealth funding for an ILAP implementation program in all States.

In 1999 the Association's publication, *Working Together to Develop Our Communities: Good Practice and Benchmarking in Local Government Community Development and Community Services*, identified the significance of local governance, social capital and participation in the formulation of indicators for community development

This was followed in late 2001 with the launch of *Just, Vibrant and Sustainable Communities: A Framework for Progressing and Measuring Community Wellbeing*. This pocket guide provides a framework for local government to develop community wellbeing and indicators to measure progress. It emphasises the importance of integrated and balanced development, community visioning, community cultural values and local leadership and proposes four building blocks underpinning community wellbeing - democratic governance, active citizenship, social justice and social capital.

National workshop program

The LGCSAA has endorsed a national program of one-day training workshops in each State to assist Councils and their communities to discover how local democracy can promote and reinforce community wellbeing. To help ensure sustainability of wellbeing outcomes the workshops encourage Councils to comprehensively tackle community empowerment through their three key and interlinked roles in governance, organisational management and civic engagement. .

To follow-up the State-wide workshops individual Councils are encouraged to host local workshops with participation from Councillors, officers and community representatives.