



Photo: *Light Night Out*, Maryborough, Central Goldfields Shire, 2014.
Photographer Gunther Wilhelm.

Analysis of Victorian Local Government Cultural Development Plans

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ABSTRACT

Cultural development planning is a relatively new practice for professionals in local government in Australia. Yet councils are increasingly investing in cultural development activity to assist in achievement of their goals to improve the overall quality of life of citizens in their communities. This report presents the findings of an assessment of 24 cultural development plans published by councils across Victoria, based on their alignment with principles in CDN's *Framework for Cultural Development Planning*. Findings indicated that the plans largely did not use principles concordant with the *Framework*, with clear *objectives* and *theory of change* principles present least often. Other trends observed included activities being stated as objectives, instances of plans being too complex, too long, and too ambitious given available resources. No discernable difference in quality was evident between plans written by consultants and council staff. The article concludes with recommendations for improved planning, which include evidence-based practice, clear articulation of Council *goals* and *objectives* for cultural development activity, and evaluation strategies to assess plans and activities.

Keywords: cultural development planning, local government, Victoria

Report produced by Kim Dunphy and Leda Yazgin.

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Cultural Development Network
Building 96, Level 2, 17-23 Lygon Street ,
PO Box 48, Carlton South, Victoria 3053 AUSTRALIA
www.culturaldevelopment.net.au

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INTRODUCTION

In line with increasing policy development trends towards evidence-based practice and results-based accountability, CDN is encouraging councils to improve their cultural development planning practices to make them more strategic and logical. This will allow for stronger articulation of how cultural activities, particularly the arts, can have outcomes across all policy domains: cultural, as well as social, civic, ecological and economic. Planning that is more strategic, including making good use of evidence, could be expected to result in better use of resources and better outcomes for communities.

An earlier analysis of published cultural plans of Victorian councils indicated that cultural planning practices varied greatly between councils, with no indication of any common approach across the state. Little documentation of the use of data or evidence in planning, or formalized evaluation or measurement strategies was found (Dunphy, Metzke & Tavelli, 2013).

In response to these findings, CDN began to create a framework for cultural development planning for councils to support planning that is consistent, systematic and evidence-based. This was also informed by principles for strategic planning from other fields, consultations with councils across Victoria undertaken throughout 2014 and ongoing discussion with the Arts and Culture Committee of the Municipal Association of Victoria. The six principles that underpin the *Framework for Cultural Development Planning* are:

PRINCIPLE	DEFINITION
Based on values	What the community cares about, documented in the Council Plan
Directed towards goals	A goal represents a desired future. It is not necessarily attainable, but is aspirational. Goals should be the reference point from the Council Plan that cultural development <i>objectives</i> are directed towards.
Informed by evidence	Research, data and practice knowledge that helps us know more about issues we are facing. This includes baseline data about the community and its needs, and what others have done to address them (outcome studies).
Underpinned by a theory of change	The reason why we do what we do: based on what we are trying to achieve, and what we know about it, our reason for doing what we do. A clear articulation of the relationship between knowledge (research or practice knowledge), and the activities chosen in order to achieve a particular <i>objective</i> .
Focussed on outcomes	These are milestones towards our goals. They are first stated as <i>objectives</i> , (what difference we are trying to make) which, as they are realised, become <i>outcomes</i> (what difference we have made). These should conform to SMART principles: ie. be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely. They are not activities, but what are trying to achieve through our activities.
Respondent to evaluation	Evaluation is used consistently, from the first stages of planning (what would our desired outcomes look like?), right through to the end (what difference have we made, and how would we know?). An evaluation plan includes establishment of <i>measures</i> : benchmarks chosen to assess whether objectives have been achieved. Evaluation should inform future decision-making.

This framework is currently being trialled in several Victorian councils.

Responding to observations that plans were often lists of planned activities rather than strategic documents that identified desired futures, another survey was undertaken a year after the initial research. In this second study, councils were asked whether their plans specified desired 'outcomes', (ie. changes that come about due to an activity). 55 councils of the 62 that had cultural development plans (88%) reported that their plans did specify outcomes.

A further assessment of Victorian local government cultural plans was undertaken in 2015 to determine how existing plans align with these principles. This paper discusses this assessment, starting with the method, the data collection process, findings and finishing with recommendations for improved planning.

METHOD

Process

Published cultural plans of Victorian councils were assessed in a desk-based research process. This assessment was made from the perspective of an elected council representative and local citizens, given that key decision-makers in local government cultural activities, and therefore plans, are those leaders, and plans are also written to advise citizens as to how their rates are being spent. Time spent reading plans in order to assess them was no longer than 20 minutes, on the assumption that a lay reader (Councillor or member of the public) would be unlikely to allocate any longer than this to the task. While the core of the assessment was the alignment of these plans to the planning principles, other trends were also noted. These include how easy it was to locate and to read plans, which was considered important for reasons of transparency and accountability. The number of 'objectives' in each plan was counted to determine what was general practice, and then perhaps determine how many was a good number of objectives. The authorship of plans (internally written or by consultants) was noted to determine whether there was a clear difference in quality between either of those options.

Sample

Of the 79 councils in Victoria, 49 had published cultural development plans, 25 did not, and a further four had plans either unpublished or in progress. A random sample of published plans was selected for analysis, with 24 plans examined before a point of saturation was reached, ie. no new information was being seen in additional analyses, and the information gathered was enough for meaningful discussion. The results provided in this document are an aggregate of findings, offering no identification of any individual council.

Criteria for assessment

Plans were assessed for how closely they matched the six principles of the *Framework for Cultural Development Planning*, as outlined above. While *Based on Values* is the first principle of the Framework, there was not a separate focus on this principle in the analysis, as *Values* are expected to be implicit in the council's goals, and plans therefore devised to address them. In assessing whether a plan was *Directed towards Goals*, we looked for explicit reference to an appropriate *goal* from the Council Plan.

This analysis was complicated by the lack of shared language between councils for expression of similar concepts. For example, what we define as an *objective* was also identified as a 'priority', 'strategic direction', 'aim', 'strategic aim' or 'key principle'. However, we considered this in our analysis and did not exclude plans in which a synonym was used to express a similar concept.

We measured application of the planning principles with a criterion of certainty. That is, if it was immediately clear that a principle was applied, or not applied, the rating was ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, otherwise, the rating given was ‘Unclear’.

FINDINGS

Alignment with the planning principles

This analysis of Victorian councils’ cultural development plans indicated that they were largely not consistent with the planning principles, with no plans aligning with all six principles. Two plans aligned with three principles, seven plans with two, and nine with one. Six plans did not align with any of the principles.

The principle most often included was a *goal*, with 15 of the plans specifying at least one *goal* of their activity that was connected to or drawn from the Council Plan. Seven plans included some kind of outcome *measures*, and four, some strategies for *evaluation*. Two plans demonstrated some use of *evidence* in their planning process. The majority of plans did not include any indication of how progress would be measured. The aspects of plans least consistent with the Framework were *objectives* and *theory of change*, with none of the councils clearly demonstrating use of these in their processes. What many plans listed as *objectives* were actually *activities* or *outputs* (what they would do). This finding contradicted responses to CDN’s 2014 survey, when 88% of councils that had cultural development plans reported that their plans did specify outcomes. This indicates that planners may not have a clear understanding of the distinction between *objectives/outcomes* and *activities*. The absence of documented theories of change in plans indicated that ideas underpinning actions were either largely tacit or not fully developed.

Other observations

Several other trends were observed in this assessment process, all of which indicated scope for potential improvement of councils’ cultural development plans.

Principle	Number of plans including this principle		
	Y	N	Unclear
Goals	62%	20%	18%
Objectives	0	4%	96%
Evidence	8%	46%	46%
Theory of change	0	42%	58%
Measures	29%	67%	4%
Evaluation	16%	62%	22%

Location: Many of the published plans were not listed in the ‘plans’, ‘strategies’ or ‘documents’ sections on Councils’ websites, but rather appeared only in the Arts and Culture sections. This was judged to be less than ideal, as it implied that these plans are not considered strategic documents for Councils in the way that other plans are. The plans were also difficult to find

by Google search as they were not consistently named.

Complexity and length of plans: Many plans seemed overly long and complex, reducing their readability for councillors and citizens. Large amounts of information, such as annual budgets with long pages of figures, or extensive lists of community cultural assets were often included. Such information could perhaps be better placed as an appendix or not included at all, especially if it was available in other council documents. Some plans included many planning steps, to the point of confusion for the reader. For example, in some cases, objectives were broken into ‘focus areas’, which were in turn broken down into further categories, without any indication of why this was done. In many cases, objectives, (what people were trying to achieve through an activity) were confused with activities (what action would be taken), with activities being listed as the endpoint without explanation of the rationale for that activity.

The number of 'objectives' in plans ranged from 4 to 51, with the average 13. Our assessment of this was that documented ambitions often seemed disproportionate to councils' staffing and financial resources. We recommend that councils with smaller teams and budgets, in particular, should take care to establish an achievable number of objectives and activities. This would also make achievement of outcomes more likely and enable effective evaluation.

Authorship of the plans: Of the 24 assessed plans, six were written by consultants. This analysis process discovered that plans written by consultants were no more concordant with the *Framework* than those written by council staff. This suggests that councils are not necessarily advantaged in having consultants write their plans, particularly given the cost, and the potential for resources to be better allocated.

Consultation process: A number of plans reported on surveys to gauge what activities the community wished to see, or what community attitudes towards the arts and culture looked like. Given that community consultations are undertaken by councils in the process of creating their Council Plans, we recommend that councils do not assume the need for consultation process. Should further consultation be considered important, we recommend that it occurs as an activity within the plan- in order to determine its usefulness in realising objectives - rather than being undertaken before the plan is drafted, when there has not been a case made for the need for consultation.

CONCLUSION

This project assessed 24 cultural development plans written by Victorian councils against a framework of well-accepted planning principles articulated by CDN in a *Framework for Cultural Development Planning*. Findings indicate that plans were largely not consistent with the planning principles, with none of them concordant with all principles and six plans not concordant with any. Many plans included activities written as objectives, indicating a need for more information about why activities are being undertaken (theory of change) rather than just lists of activities. Plans written by consultants were no more likely to be concordant with these principles than those written by council staff, indicating less value for money than might be expected by the hiring of experts. Many plans seemed to be too long, complex and ambitious for the available resources, making them less useful as strategic documents than might be desirable. Recommendations for improved planning includes evidence-based practice, clear articulation of Council *goals* and *objectives* for cultural development activity, use of theories of change about activity choices and integrated evaluation strategies for assessing plans and activities.

References

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