

LESSONS LEARNED FROM BUILDING CAPACITY FOR WORKFORCE PLANNING IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

The State Government has initiated reform of Western Australia's local government sector to create fewer but stronger councils that will better service WA communities into the future. As part of this reform an Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework and Guidelines are being introduced. Workforce Planning is an important part of this new approach to planning as it is a continuous process of shaping the workforce to ensure that it is capable of delivering organisational objectives now and in the future.

This paper presents the experiences and lessons learned from the collaboration between the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) and the Department of Local Government in WA (DLG) to develop and deliver a training module on workforce planning for local government. The project has developed a comprehensive two day training workshop based on the workforce planning toolkit developed by the DLG in conjunction with the Human Resources and Change Management Working Group, part of the reform framework. This training workshop has been delivered in nine locations including several in metropolitan Perth as well as in regional areas. Reflecting the importance of local input, the training workshops have been conducted in conjunction with a local co-facilitator and Local Government Managers Australia WA Division. The paper documents the collaborative approach taken, outlines the experience and lessons learned in developing the training approach and resources and concludes with a discussion of the challenges and opportunities for local governments in undertaking the workforce planning journey.

Key Words: Workforce Planning, Local Government, Training and Capacity Building, Integrated Planning

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Introduction

In Western Australia (WA) the state government has initiated a program of local government reform to create fewer but stronger councils that will better service WA communities into the future. As part of this reform an Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework and Guidelines are being introduced. Workforce Planning is defined as a continuous process of shaping the workforce to ensure that it is capable of delivering organisational objectives now and in the future, and is a key informing strategy of the Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework.

This paper presents the experiences and lessons learned from the collaboration between the Australian Centre of Excellence

for Local Government (ACELG) and the Department of Local Government in WA (DLG) to develop and deliver a training module on workforce planning for local government. The project developed a comprehensive two day training workshop based on the workforce planning toolkit developed by the DLG's Human Resources and Change Management Working Group as part of the reform framework. This training workshop was then delivered in ten locations including several in metropolitan Perth as well as in regional areas. Reflecting the importance of local input, the workshops were conducted in conjunction with a local co-facilitator and with the Local Government Managers Australia WA Division.

The paper documents the principles underpinning the DLG introduction of workforce planning in the WA local government sector, describes the collaborative approach taken, outlines the experience and lessons learned in developing the training approach and resources and concludes with a discussion of the challenges and opportunities for local governments in undertaking the workforce planning journey.

Project partners

This project brought together three main stakeholders, the Department for Local Government in WA, the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACLEG) and the UTS: Centre for Local Government (UTS:CLG). This section provides a brief description of each partner.

The Department of Local Government (DLG) is the state agency responsible for promoting and fostering strong, sustainable local government in Western Australia (WA). The Department provides leadership and advice to local governments throughout WA. It also has a key role in promoting and supporting good governance in the sector, through its administration of the *Local Government Act 1995* (WA).

The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) was established in mid-2009 with federal government support to improve the performance of local government and encourage the adoption of innovative practices and solutions. ACELG is a consortium of universities and professional bodies. It is led by the University of Technology Sydney and includes the Centre for Local Government, the University of Canberra, the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, Local Government Managers Australia and the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia.

The UTS: Centre for Local Government (UTS: CLG) offers a wide range of professional development programs for local government personnel and associated professionals, including graduate diplomas and certificates in various aspects of local government. It carries out research into local government and governance and provides

specialist consultancy services for councils, state and federal agencies. The UTS: CLG promotes a cooperative approach to local government education, research and development, and maintains close ties with a large number of local government associations, professional institutes and academic bodies in Australia, the Asia-Pacific and globally.

Background

In February 2009 the state government initiated a process of reform for Western Australia's local government sector to create fewer but stronger councils to better service WA communities. Sector reform is being driven by the need to:

- integrate and coordinate planning to maximise regional opportunities;
- increase capacity to attract external funding;
- work with industry to leverage large projects;
- attract and retain professional and specialist staff; and
- achieve the capacity to meet the economic, demographic, social and environmental needs of local communities in the future.

This project aimed to contribute to these goals, i.e. developing the capacity of local governments to deliver optimal services to meet community needs throughout Perth and regional Western Australia.

As part of this reform process, an Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework and Guidelines were introduced in Western Australia (DLG 2010). Because workforce planning enables councils to shape the workforce to ensure that it is capable of delivering organisational objectives now and in the future, it is a core component of this framework. The Human Resources and Change Management Working Group, under the DLG's Local Government Reform Implementation Committee, was charged with supporting councils to plan and develop their workforce. Underpinning principles for the approach to be taken to workforce planning were developed. These included adoption of a change management approach; provision

of practical tools to assist local governments directly with workforce planning; engagement of elected members and officers across the organisation; and emphasis on the importance of the leadership role of Mayors and Presidents, Chief Executive Officers and managers.

An Implementation Plan reflected these principles, commencing with a Ministerial information circular across the sector; then an information forum for elected members, CEOs and senior managers; the training workshops at locations across the State; the establishment of an Approved Consultant Panel; and a grants program for eligible country local governments. The Group developed a number of tools to assist councils. These include a website together with a toolkit with checklists and best practice examples (DLG 2012). The willing contribution of material from local governments in other jurisdictions and public sector organisations has been greatly appreciated and proven to be a valuable resource.¹

At the same time, the UTS Centre for Local Government, under the auspices of ACELG, developed a body of research on workforce planning and development within local government across Australia. This initiative surveyed a range of approaches to workforce planning and identified the main elements of a workforce planning process (Tan 2012). A wide range of stakeholders were interviewed in order to identify barriers and challenges to developing and implementing workforce plans. Finally, state and territory approaches to strengthen local government's capacity for workforce planning were documented. The findings were published as ACELG Learning in *Local Government Issues Paper Four: Workforce Planning and Development Capacity Building Opportunities*, Tan 2012.²

As a result of the concurrence of these two strands of work, a collaboration was proposed. During 2012, ACELG, through the

UTS Centre for Local Government, worked with the WA Department of Local Government to develop and deliver a training module on workforce planning and development for local government. The training materials produced and the experience of collaboration with the Department in the development and delivery of this product fed into ACELG's work to support a national approach to strengthening local government's ability to carry out workforce planning.

Capacity Building for Workforce Planning

Having set out the context, this paper now turns to a more detailed description of this process, of lessons learned and outcomes.

Project overview

Given the complementary and overlapping objectives, skills and experience in workforce planning among the DLG WA, ACELG and UTS: CLG, a Memorandum of Understanding was agreed to develop a training module to build local governments' ability to carry out workforce planning. In collaboration with the DLG WA, the UTS Centre for Local Government developed a 2-day training workshop on workforce planning and development. The pedagogical approach enabled participants to critically explore their own experiences and knowledge. These were then combined with new concepts and practices to inform their approach to workforce planning in their own councils. Learning objectives for participants completing this program were to:

- Understand the Western Australian context, including the new integrated planning framework and its associated provisions for workforce planning;
- Understand the national context, including the provisions of the National Workforce Development Strategy and the development of the Australian Local Government Workforce and Employment census and for workforce planning;
- Investigate, discuss and compare current workforce data and development practices in their own councils with those of other workshop participants;

¹ The DLG website and resources on workforce planning are available at <http://integratedplanning.dlg.wa.gov.au/WorkforcePlanning.aspx>

² The document can be downloaded at www.acelg.org.au/upload/Work%20Force%20Development_Jun2012.pdf

- Learn to use the ACELG Data Portal as a source of workforce data for their own and other councils;
- Learn from experiences in other states and local governments through the provision of contemporary resources, guidelines and case studies;
- Use the WA workforce planning toolkit to step through the key elements of workforce planning;
- Meet and learn about workforce planning consultants who will be available to support their future efforts for workforce planning and development;
- Understand the benefits of working with peers in other councils, as well as identifying future opportunities for mutual support and exchange of information; and
- Evaluate the training module and think about next steps for their work.

The outputs from this project included a facilitator's guide to implementing the training which provides: a program including timings of sessions, course themes and invited speakers; learning approaches and activities (e.g. presentations, group exercises and discussion topics, the examination of case studies and relevant resources); key learning objectives for each session; a list of resources required to carry out the training (e.g. projector, flipchart paper and pens, room size and set up etc.); and an evaluation template to be used at the end of each training session to capture participants' experience in order to inform the development and adaptation of the training module.

In addition to the facilitator's guide the project has also produced the presentation slides and a participant workbook which contain the training program, key references, action sheets and reading lists.

Senior Management Forum, August 2012

In anticipation of the launch of the training sessions, a senior management forum was held in August 2012 organised by the DLG WA. This forum brought together CEOs, senior staff and elected representatives from councils across WA to discuss the benefits of workforce planning. A lack of high level

commitment for strategic planning and in particular for workforce planning can be a real barrier to realising the benefits of this approach. This forum addressed this challenge by bringing together senior executives and elected representatives to introduce them to the benefits of workforce planning in order to strengthen support for staff responsible for developing these plans.

Training workshops

The UTS Centre for Local Government provided a facilitator to lead the training and to share experience and lessons learned from NSW in implementing workforce planning at local government level. In order to ensure that councils in WA had access to expertise and resources within the state, the DLG WA identified and provided a suitable co-facilitator for the training workshops. This co-facilitator had extensive WA experience in carrying out workforce planning at local government level and continues to offer support to councils in the development and implementation of their own workforce development plans. Altogether a series of ten, 2-day training workshops were held throughout WA from Sept 2012 to March 2013 including metropolitan and regional areas.

Training Content

In February 2009, the Minister for Local Government in Western Australia announced wide-ranging local government reform strategies aimed at achieving better planning, management, and delivery of services to communities, specifically in relation to economic sustainability. Each council in Western Australia was asked to undergo a voluntary amalgamation process, reduce councillor numbers, and form regional groupings to achieve efficiencies. Other requests involved adopting a longer-term strategic planning framework, including asset and financial management and workforce planning, and the review and amendment of current local government legislation to facilitate sustainability.

In addition to structural change, the reform process in Western Australia improves the way local governments plan for the future. Through this initiative, local governments have been provided with frameworks,

guidelines and funding to help them develop strategic plans and implement asset management systems. The essential elements of the Western Australian framework as set out in the *Local Government (Administration) Regulations 1996* are:

- A ten year strategic community plan;
- A four year corporate business plan;
- A ten year financial management plan;
- A ten year asset management plan;
- A four year workforce plan; and
- An annual operating plan and budget.

Figure 1: Western Australia's Integrated Planning Framework



Source: Integrated Planning and Reporting Advisory Standard DLG WA no date p.2

The Western Australian approach is not to specify the contents of the plans in the Act or Regulations, but rather to define some 'Advisory Standards' which describe a basic, intermediate and advanced approach to meeting legislative requirements. These standards will be used by the state department to measure compliance within the sector.

The Advisory Standard describes a basic, intermediate and advanced approach to each of the plans within the framework. Basic standards for the key plans are as follows:

Strategic Community Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A council has, by 30 June 2013 or earlier, adopted a Strategic Community Plan that meets all of the regulatory requirements. - The local government has a community engagement policy/strategy. - Community engagement
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	involves at least 500 or 10% of residents, whichever is fewer, and is conducted by at least 2 documented mechanisms.
Corporate Business Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A council has, by 30 June 2013 or earlier, adopted a Corporate Business Plan that meets all of the listed regulatory requirements. - The current year of the Corporate Business Plan establishes the current Annual Budget. - The local government also has in place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - workforce plan that meets the basic standard; - asset management key performance indicators that meet the basic standard; and - a long term financial plan.

The requirements for workforce plans as set out in the DLG's Integrated Planning and Reporting Advisory Standard are that:

- council has a current workforce plan;
- the workforce plan identifies the current workforce profile and organisational structure;
- the workforce plan identifies gaps between the current profile and the organisational requirements;
- the workforce plan identifies organisational activities to foster and develop the workforce
- the workforce plan is budgeted for in the corporate business plan and long term financial plan (DLG WA no date, p.8).

To enable local governments to meet the basic standard for workforce planning the DLG WA developed a key resource *Workforce Planning the Essentials: A toolkit for Western Australian Local Governments* which sets out workforce planning requirements and provides guidance on how this can be met.

The training developed for this project follows the structure of this toolkit. The remainder of this section sets out the content of the training.

The structure is broken down into four steps.

1. Analysis of internal and external environment and workforce.

2. Strategic Community Plan workforce implications.
3. Corporate business planning strategies to meeting future workforce needs.
4. Monitoring and evaluation of outcomes.

The first step, analysis of internal and external environment and workforce, asks the question “Where are we now?” In answering this question local governments gather data on their own organisation (e.g. organisational structure existing data systems, skills and knowledge of staff, workforce costs, funding, budget, finances, risks etc.).

The second part of this step involves an analysis of the external environment. Answering questions such as:

- How is the population changing in our local government area and what are the implications for the services we provide?
- How will climate change affect our area and what are the implications for the maintenance of our infrastructure?
- How are new technologies affecting the way we work, the way we engage with communities?

In gathering the data on their own organisation, their workforce and the external environment, local governments are able to describe their workforce and the context within which it sits. This is a crucial first step in carrying out workforce planning.

The second step involves an analysis of the Strategic Community Plan. The toolkit and training take participants through a process to identify the workforce implications of the objectives outlined in their Strategic Community Plan. This plan is developed through community consultation enabling residents to identify and articulate their priorities for the area. Perhaps residents see economic growth as an important objective for their community, or it might be better parks and green spaces. This part of the training identifies these objectives and matches them to the current profile of the local government workforce as described in step one to identify any gaps.

The third step “Strategies to Meet Future Workforce Requirements” looks at how to

address these gaps. The comparison of the current workforce against community aspirations for the area highlights areas for further work either to strengthen the provision of current services or to put the organisation in a position to meet future demands. This can include the development of policies and processes to support the integration of workforce considerations across the organisation (including stronger linkages with financial and asset management processes). This step also often involves a close examination of existing staff attraction, recruitment, engagement and retention policies and programs. How can these be improved or adjusted to ensure the organisation will meet its future needs?

The final step, monitoring and evaluation, considers ways of measuring progress towards achieving workforce objectives with the ultimate goals of realising the goals set out in the Strategic Community Plan.

It is these four steps that make up the workforce planning framework for local government in WA.

Figure 2: Workforce Planning Model



Source: DLG WA 2012, p. 7

Having set out the content of the training module, the next section turns to the lessons learned from delivering the training and working with local governments to implement workforce planning in their organisations.

Key Challenges/Lessons Learned

Experience from this program indicates that local governments are open to new ways of working and see the benefits of workforce planning. However, in order to enable them to realise the benefits of workforce planning

there are several elements which need to be in place.

Firstly a sustained and long term approach is required. This project delivered the development and implementation of a two day preliminary training workshop on workforce planning. It was limited in scope. A two day training workshop can only introduce participants to the content of the toolkit and workforce planning principles and assist them to begin their workforce planning. More work needs to be done to follow the progress of local government in designing and implementing workforce plans. What are the difficulties they face in implementation? How can we support them to meet these challenges? Local governments in regional and metropolitan areas will face very different challenges when it comes to workforce planning. More work needs to be done to understand these differences in order to develop tools and approaches to address them.

Secondly, the advisory standard approach to integrated planning and reporting in WA is an interesting model. It enables local governments to situate themselves along a continuum from basic to advanced for all the elements of the framework. This makes sure that organisations have a clear pathway and indicators to measure progress towards and advanced approach to integrated planning.

Thirdly, meeting the challenge of integration is key to the success of workforce planning. Comparatively little research, training or capacity building has been done in the local government context on achieving integration. What are the approaches that work well? What are indicators of good integration and how can this be measured?

Finally, context is also important. The Department invested time and resources to make sure that local governments were aware of the benefits if integrated planning and reporting. They also built understanding amongst senior executive and elected representatives of the need for integrated planning. This helped to create a receptive context for the training workshops. It was also made clear that the training would result in practical actions being brought back to the

organisations so that there would be a concrete outcome to the time invested.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the development and implementation of a capacity building project to build the ability of local governments in Western Australia to carry out workforce planning.

Local governments across Australia and particularly in WA are operating within a context of reform in order to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. As part of this reform process the DLG in WA has established an Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework which requires local governments to take a longer term strategic approach to strategic planning with their communities. One of the elements of this framework is a workforce plan.

As a result the Department sought collaboration with the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government and the UTS Centre for Local Government in the development of training materials on workforce planning. Altogether ten 2-day training workshops were delivered with 100 local governments and 220 CEOs, senior managers and officers from across the organisation from metropolitan as well as regional areas attending.

This is just a first step in a longer journey to enable local governments to realise the benefits of workforce planning. A key element will be their ability to properly integrate their planning processes and ensure that their resourcing strategies (financial, asset and workforce) have strong links to their corporate business plan and strategic community plans.

References

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