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Community Facilities, Community Building and Local Government – An Australian Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose: The financing, planning and management of community facilities has emerged as a major public policy issue in Australia in recent years as assets acquired in the post-World War 2 years of growth and decentralisation age, service needs widen and local governments experience fiscal stress. During this period, awareness of the limits of state provision and market individualism has brought renewed focus on community, and policy outputs, particularly at local government level, are increasingly framed around community strengthening. This article examines the connections between community and community facilities, and the implications for local government facility management.

Methodology/Approach: In addition to cited published literature, the article draws on archival and case study research and interviews with local government managers and local residents conducted by the author.

Research Limitations: The research focus is Victoria, Australia.

Practical Implications: The article identifies key strategic issues for facility planners and managers involved in regeneration projects.

Keywords: asset management, community, facility management, governance, local government, public policy, regeneration

Type: Research Paper

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Introduction

The past decade or so has seen growing concern in Australia over the deterioration of community facilities. While the impact of long-term disinvestment in public infrastructure is apparent at all levels of government in Australia (Troy 1999, Allen Consulting Group 2003, Cardew 2003), higher level governments have deflected some attention by criticising local authorities for the inefficient management of their assets (AMQ international et al 1998, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration 2003). Local authorities own or manage around 80% of community facilities in Australia, defined here as recreational, cultural, educational, health and civic facilities available to the public. Many local authorities are experiencing the compounding effects of declining local government revenues (particularly from property rates), debt aversion, widening service provision, increasing per-capita infrastructure costs, and ageing asset portfolios. The sustainability gap, or the gap between municipal funds currently allocated to infrastructure management and the funds required to maintain service levels, has become a powerful phrase in public administration lexicon. State-level governments, which in Australia have statutory responsibility for local authorities, have mandated asset management regimes to restore local authorities to financial sustainability, and council property managers have developed a more strategic and aggressive posture towards asset rationalisation.

The developing concern over local authority physical asset portfolios coincides with renewed policy interest at all levels of government in community. Broadly defined, community has two characteristics: belonging and reciprocity. Delanty (2003) identifies three modes of community as spatial, cultural or identity-based and (with the increasing influence of communication technologies and globalisation) communicative. A staple of sociology and urban studies, community has been mobilised in public policy to counter dissatisfaction with the individualism of market-based policy settings and the limits of state provision. Critics of what Delanty (p.90) refers to as “governmental communitarianism” argue that community now invariably takes the place of citizenship, stressing the duties of citizens rather than their entitlements. Another perspective views community as a re-scaling of governance, calling attention to local-level concerns and enabling innovative approaches to solving local or regional problems (Geddes 2005).

Following a period of sweeping local government reform aimed at achieving structural efficiency and economies of scale through amalgamation, community has been recently re-associated with local government. The Victorian state government, an Australian leader in its response to local infrastructure policy, adopted community as an overarching administrative logic for local government, through the establishment in 2002 of the Department for Victorian Communities. In 2004 the president of the Australian Local Government Association identified community cohesion as a prime responsibility for local authorities, and policy rhetoric around community strengthening, social capital and partnerships has filtered into strategic and operational settings of local authorities.
This article examines the impact of the community turn in public policy on the current context in which community facilities are planned and managed, with particular reference to the Australian state of Victoria. The implications of policy demands for ‘more community’ in a period of ‘crisis’ (Troy 1999) for local government infrastructure are unclear. But neither are these demands new. In contrast to the growing literature on technical and financial aspects of local government infrastructure (Ingenium-IPWEA 2002, Jolicouer and Barrett 2004), there is limited awareness of the relationship between community facilities and community strengthening (Brown 1995, Reddell 2003). This article argues for the strategic importance of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of this relationship, particularly in a period of facility rationalisation and renewal.

Rather than rehearse the extensive theoretical debates surrounding community (see Delanty 2003 for a useful summary), this article maps changing conceptions of community that have underpinned the provision of local facilities. Earlier rationales now compete with arguments for change, adding complexity to the characteristic task of local government – balancing local preferences and wider structural efficiency – and placing new demands on local managers. This article draws on case-study research on community facilities and a series of structured interviews and informal discussions with local government managers and local residents to identify three key issues for community facility management: ownership, change management and governance.

**Who Owns Community Facilities?**

The association of community and facility has substantive and normative aspects that locate community facility management as a distinctive public sector activity. The substantive relates to qualities of universality and equity, or the publicness of the facility. The normative aspect, which underpins much community-focussed policy, ascribes an instrumental role to facilities, whether in the nineteenth century language of public instruction and civic improvement, or the current rhetoric of community building. Blurred sectoral roles and boundaries raise important questions about the definition of community facilities. Local government reform initiatives, such as the outsourcing of service delivery, increasing reliance on user charges, and the use of private finance initiatives to construct new facilities confound earlier, seemingly sharper divisions between public and private. Current definitions of community facilities (for example Brackertz and Kenley 2002) focus on service-oriented objectives and principles of universality and equity that underpin public provision, rather than on ownership status.

The topography of community facilities in Victoria suggests the interplay of public and private has a long history. Religious, philanthropic, trade union, sporting and civic organisations played a significant role in the provision of social infrastructure such as community halls, libraries and recreational assets, and in the management of local environmental features. Many of these facilities were built on public land, reserved by colonial and (from Australian federation in 1901) state governments for religious, educational and recreational purposes. These nascent public-private partnerships sought to provide basic services, establish a civil sector which accommodated communal differences (notably religious sectarianism), and supplement public finance. While the
proportion of this infrastructure that remains in service varies, its identification with communities of interest, such as faith-based groups, has been overlain with views that it has heritage value for place-based communities. In the words of one resident interviewee, this infrastructure now forms part of the local community texture. In recent years changing land uses and rising financial values, the inability of community groups to maintain facilities, and new state-level asset management policies geared to economic efficiency have brought friction over competing local and state-level values, and sometimes awkward policy resolution.

The post-World War II period in Australia, as elsewhere in the Western world, saw rapid population growth and settlement in new suburbs. Decentralised housing provision commonly outstripped the establishment of social infrastructure. Governments at all levels in Australia sought to remedy planning imbalances, supplement public funding, and encourage community identity in new tract housing areas by encouraging local sporting and community associations to construct pavilions and clubhouses. Residents of new post-war neighbourhoods built halls and kindergartens through voluntary labour contributions and innovative community finance schemes. Local authorities often matched the monetary contributions of associations, the details of facility ‘ownership’ left vague. On one account around two-thirds of the current stock of community facilities in Australia was built after World War 2 (AMQ International et al 1998, p.69). Age and deferred maintenance have resulted in a clumping of cyclical maintenance or renewal tasks at the present time. A round of local authority amalgamations in Victoria during the 1990s increased pressure for asset disposal. Who has authority to decide the future of community facilities, when their status is poorly documented? Questions of ownership and authority are complex and problematic, but are key ethical and strategic issues in asset rationalisation programs.

An adjustment to the concept of community sketched above can be seen in the growth of ethno-specific facilities such as sporting and social clubs, a trend that found national policy endorsement with the inception of multiculturalism in Australia in the early 1970s. Delanty (2003. p.3) argues this period saw a wider redefinition of community as a culturally-based construct, concerned with meaning and identity, rather than a form of social interaction based on locality. As the first generation of post-war migrants ages and the socialisation patterns and identity formation of their descendants changes, dilemmas over the future of their community facilities (or are they ‘ours’, as part of a wider Australian heritage?) become more commonplace.

At the end of the twentieth century, Delanty suggests, theories of community based on culture and identity came under pressure from critics wishing to re-emphasise shared experience and location. In Australia and elsewhere this renewed concern with community defined by sameness rather than difference is framed by global politics of terror and a retreat from multicultural policy, as well as the increasingly uneven social and locational impacts of neo-liberalism (Smyth, Reddel and Jones 2004). Renewed interest in community as a public policy objective and the rise of spatial or area-based policy initiatives has called attention to the role community facilities and public spaces play in community strengthening [1]. While neighbourhood renewal programs, generally
developed at state government level in Australia, have operated on interventionist notions of community as sites of disadvantage, an alternative ‘capacity building’ initiative in Victoria takes its bearings from an asset-based approach that has been articulated recently in international planning literature (Arefi 2004). Still novel in Australia, this approach suggests a move beyond the conventional division of physical and social assets in local-level administration. However, limited research on the social outcomes of facilities, and their connection with formal service provision, constrains evidence-based policy development.

Recovery of a locationally-based concept of community can, though, mobilise old forms of exclusion and conflict over access to public and local goods. A stark example was the widely-reported conflict in Sydney in late 2005, based on attempts of largely young white Australian male residents of the relatively monocultural Sutherland shire to regulate access to and use of “their” beaches, an action aimed particularly at young men of Arabic background from Western Sydney. In a country with a relaxed attitude to patriotism at a national level, the strident identification with the “shire” (interestingly, a term describing non-metropolitan local authorities) was unsettling. While Delanty and others point to the increasingly mobile and discursive formulation of community (that is, belonging through communicative activities rather than location or culture), lived social experience largely takes place in physical spaces. Mediating difference is a major task for managers of community facilities and public spaces.

Change and Change Management

The co-location of community facilities and services is arguably the most far-reaching policy trend in current facility planning and management in Australia. In proclaiming that the era of the single use facility is over, local authorities advance persuasive arguments for shared occupancy. These arguments include increased ability to leverage capital works funding through sale of redundant assets, operational and cost efficiencies, peer support of staff, and (more speculatively) the ‘linking’ social capital created through shared-use facilities. However, relatively limited attention to holistic management models and new service capacities arising from co-location suggests that economic efficiency is a dominant policy objective.

Service co-location brings policy, design and operating challenges. Existing facilities may fall short of building or safety standards, but planning for new multi-purpose facilities is presented with regulatory dilemmas, such as a conflict in Victoria between statutory provisions for disability access and child protection. A recent New South Wales parliamentary report into the co-location of public buildings urged greater focus on the adaptive re-use of facilities, arguing that existing planning and asset management practices and regulatory frameworks frustrated attempts to maximise the use of public assets in this way (New South Wales Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Public Works 2004, p.xii). Concern to avoid the future redundancy of single-use facilities, as well as a desire to encourage wide community use, brings an emphasis on flexible-use spaces and life-cycle change in architectural briefs. However, as one local manager commented, the desire to open up programming possibilities may be perceived
as an ambit claim for space when budgets are tight. Conversely, user group ‘needs’ may extend beyond generic service provision to place-making desires, through display of club insignia or honour boards. These desires may conflict with the wishes of councils to break with earlier, more proprietorial attitudes to facilities.

Many local authorities in Victoria are seeking to rationalise facilities in response to the pressures of urban consolidation, the increasing span of recreation and cultural activities, the service needs that accompany an ageing, culturally diverse population, and the loss of service capacities of ageing assets. The momentum of multi-use facilities seems assured, supported by testimony of their financial and service effectiveness (Besnard 2002, New South Wales Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Public Works 2004). However, there is little attempt to assess whether the loss to neighbourhoods of the re-scaling and re-location associated with this type of renewal exercise outweighs the benefits. Issues of change and loss lie at the heart of regeneration or co-location projects, and partly explain the political controversy surrounding many proposals. However, the importance of change management processes to the success of such projects has received little attention.

An example of the productive outcome of sound change management is the successful redevelopment of a community hall and kindergarten in outer suburban Melbourne. The facility was built in the late 1940s by residents of the then new suburb, many with young children. After fifty years or so of service as a meeting place, function room and kindergarten, the facility began to fail compliance standards, particularly in the children’s services area. The local council was anxious to upgrade the structure but equally sensitive to the history of the site and the real and symbolic equity of the now ageing ‘pioneers’. Council staff, too, were concerned that the former and current users of the kindergarten had limited contact with each other, indicative of changing social and demographic structures of the suburb. When the structure was built, the kindergarten played a secondary role to the social environment of the hall. In the intervening years, the professionalisation of pre-school education and a more exacting regulatory climate effectively reversed this order, and planning for the new facility focused on the kindergarten function. The pioneer residents were involved in the community planning process, which sought to accommodate the earlier tradition of a neighbourhood community centre with new requirements for pre-school education, and which brought together the former and current facility users. An agreement between the ‘owners’ of the original building and the council set out the formal terms under which control was transferred to the council. A plaque at the new facility recognised the history of the site and the community contribution. The process, with its mixture of symbolic and substantive actions, was overseen by a council manager whose local knowledge was both a key input and evidence of the council’s commitment. The process has become a model for further regeneration projects by that council.

An alternative example, where a renewal proposal conflicted with local community preferences, suggests that earlier policy actions at other levels of government may have a significant influence on community reception of municipal-level plans. Residents may be aware of the services or public goods provided by each level of government, but may be
unwilling to divide the public sphere so neatly when assessing the impact of proposed change. Policy effects are ‘joined-up’ in this sense. Community consultation in a rural shire in south-west Victoria, revealed the preference of residents in the shire’s small towns for keeping open their local outdoor pools, despite a limited season and sub-optimal condition of the facilities, rather than opt for a consultant’s recommended ‘upgrading’ to a year-round facility located in one of the towns. As well as an absence of public transport between towns, the local pools were considered to be important social places, particularly for young people, in localities with few other public facilities, localities exposed to the erosion of state-level public services in recent years. Consequently, the local council revised its budget allocation towards amenity and compliance-based improvements at each site, rather than fund a centralised development project.

**From Government to Governance**

The case studies outlined above, with their inclusion of local residents in the authorising process, indicate a widening of decision-making co-ordinates at local level, where top-down government is supplemented by horizontal forms of governance. Changing outlooks on local governance raise significant policy and operational questions for community facility managers.

The concept of governance is broad and in many ways ill-defined. Considine and Lewis (2005, p.206) argue that governance includes citizen participation, partnerships with government, private or third sector organisations, and local innovation. A number of local authorities in Victoria prefer the more limited term *engagement* to characterise their changing relationship with residents. Within this rubric, a tripartite distinction between information, consultation and participation (or close variants) suggests an emphasis on the resources required by councils and citizens at each level, and a new concern to manage citizen expectations.

Participation has been a long-standing feature of community facility management. Commonly, this has been formally structured through management committees appointed by local and state governments, particularly to oversee complex and contested sites such as parks and recreation reserves. Such mechanisms, of course, risk domination by the articulate, organised or well-connected. However they reinforced the position of community facilities within the public sphere and mediated conflict over the use of public places, through formal agreement and informal trust-building processes of committee participation. Committee structures also served an important if under-recognised educative function, in giving members experience in consultation, advocacy, debate and meeting procedures. However new interest in governance has brought little innovation in this area for community facility management, in Victoria and Australia generally. Although the provision of facility management services is widely contracted out to private companies and the Y.M.C.A. (the dominant provider of leisure management services in Victoria), there appears to be only one community-based association providing such services in Australia [2].
Interviews conducted by the author suggest the complex policy environment in which community facilities operate - an unstable mix of regulation and devolution - has made the task of attracting volunteers to perform governance roles increasingly difficult. For example, the boards of management for pre-schools and neighbourhood houses (a type of community centre) in Victoria are employers of facility staff, rather than the local authority that is customarily the owner of the physical facility and a major funds provider. The liability of volunteers serving on the management committees of community facilities in Australian jurisdictions is now similar to that of private company directors. At a time when governments are urging volunteer participation, there is at least a perception that committee tasks are becoming more onerous and risky. Other factors weigh against this perception. The demographic profile of localities influences the extent and orientation of volunteering. The level and quality of organisational support is also a significant variable. However, as Jones (2002) observes, a commitment to community governance may require facility managers to develop new skills, in areas such as networking, relationship management and community consultation.

Enthusiasm for citizen consultation in decision-making at local level, beyond formal democratic processes, has waxed and waned (Munro-Clark 1991). The devolution of strategic planning functions in Victoria from state to local level in the 1970s saw the gradual development of neighbourhood-based and service-based planning (Logan 1986). The profile of community-based cultural planning, which has conventionally placed greater emphasis on participatory processes, has grown over the past fifteen years, and is now mandated by the New South Wales government for local authorities in that state. Alternatively, the focus on economic efficiency and market logic that dominated public administration in Victoria in the 1990s saw forced municipal amalgamations, suspension of local democratic processes, and the retreat of community consultation and integrated planning.

In 1999, introduction by a new minority Labor (or social democratic) government in Victoria of a “best value” regime at local authority level signalled the adoption of a more consultative approach to local authority service provision. As in the UK, the hasty mobilisation of this concept found many local authorities ill-prepared for implementation, and its association with concepts of service reinforced what Caulfield (2003) describes as a clientalist relationship of residents with their local authority. The implementation of “best value” in Victoria reinforced a normative assumption that has underpinned asset and facility management paradigms in Australia that local residents should be consulted on service standards. Asset and property areas of local government have generally not engaged in more broadly-based community consultation, perceived as the domain of social policy or of land-use planning. Additionally, the dominance of networked infrastructure such as roads and utilities in public asset portfolios has suggested a technical and operational focus of this field that is beyond the grasp of local residents.

However, a range of factors has sparked interest in adopting new consultative and decision-making frameworks for asset and facility management, encouraging greater dialogue between physical services and social policy areas within local administrations, and private organisations and community groups beyond. The first factor is strategic: the
need to better manage the political fallout from facility closure or redevelopment has become pressing, as opponents become better organised and their campaigns more sophisticated [3]. Second, a number of Australian state jurisdictions direct local authorities to assess economic, environmental and social impacts of decisions, prompting a search for ways to identify and measure the social outcomes and community value of facilities. Third, decision-makers are more receptive to evidence of the broad health benefits of leisure, recreation and social participation as local budget outlays for interventionist community and health services grow. Fourth, the reliance of some local authorities on the services of third sector or voluntary agencies has raised the question of whether councils should play a strategic role in the maintenance of these facilities. Fifth, local authorities are playing (or, some might claim, forced to play by the disinterest of higher level governments) a greater role in addressing locational disadvantage, through service provision and augmentation of physical environments.

While Birch’s (2002) extensive survey of consultation trends at local authority level in the UK has no Australian equivalent, a search of Victorian council websites provides ample evidence of the popularity of discursive and deliberative forms of consultation – web-based, neighbourhood meeting, citizen panels and so on. A large international literature explores the limits of deliberative or participatory processes, measured against liberal democratic requirements (Meadowcroft 2001). Zwart (2003) questions the capacity of such processes to transform individual preferences to wider expressions of public interest. The question of how to conceptualise public interests associated with facility closure, redevelopment or retention is a key one for local-level managers.

A Question of Value?

Public sector management is characterised by a requirement to strategically evaluate complex, often competing objectives (Moore 1995). In making difficult decisions over the future of community facilities, local authorities are now better able to assess the financial and physical performance of their assets. However, there are few examples in Australia where the community, cultural or social values of facilities (these terms are used variously and sometimes indiscriminately by Australian local authorities) have been clearly defined in policy and operational statements, beyond reference to a majority or strongly held community preference. On the face of it, this may give social or community-based goals limited traction against more quantifiable service and financial goals in evaluative processes. The pressure to identify and measure qualitative outcomes has been felt across a range of public sector activities (most notably arts and culture) that were once assessed and funded in terms of their public interest or public good (Scott 2002). In the Australian local government sector, an initiative of several metropolitan Sydney councils to develop facility performance measures succeeded in the area of financial and environmental performance, but foundered when it came to social value (Besnard 2002). Facility managers, understandably, tend to fall back on facility usage and satisfaction ratings as indicators of community value.

Victorian local authorities have substantially improved their knowledge of physical assets in recent years, pushed by the state government and municipal associations, and aided by
advances in technical knowledge and data management. However, there has been no systematic attempt to map cultural or social assets, beyond inventories of historic places. There are a range of reasons for this disparity, including the conventional focus of local government on physical services, the locus of power and resources in local administrations, functionally-aligned organisational structures, and the absence of policy leadership at higher government level. The conceptual and methodological difficulties that lie behind the mapping of social assets are significant. However, such a project may assist in augmenting the uneven information base that currently informs local authority assessment of the value of physical infrastructure, and its contribution to community strengthening.

However, the current policy focus on community is only one input to a wider assessment of the public value of facilities, that ultimately is decided in the political arena. The current financial difficulties faced by many Victorian local authorities will not be remedied by a rhetorical engagement with community. Rather, policy commitment to the public sphere may lead to a more satisfactory resolution. The use of community in public policy has been accompanied by lingering unease about self-reliance and service withdrawal. Transparent and vigorous discussion of the financial position of local authorities and its impact on local facilities, can be readily comprehended by local residents, as the experience of one inner-urban municipality in Melbourne shows. In this instance, the agreement of local residents to a substantial (17%) property rate increase to fund local infrastructure, following release of a cogent discussion paper (Glen Eira City Council 2002), took place against local-level political instability and a wider political environment favouring tax cuts and reductions in public outlays. Trust in administrative leadership (perhaps encouraged by the poor performance of the elected representatives) and open communication (through local newspapers and ‘town hall’ meetings) were significant factors in achieving this outcome. The appeal of the discussion paper to the various interests and perspectives of local residents – as property owners, customers, citizens, community members – suggests the cross-cutting nature of the infrastructure renewal problem and the limits of privileging community building as a rationale for community facilities.

1 The title of a landmark national conference held in Melbourne in 2005 summarised the policy sentiment: *Better Facilities, Stronger Communities.*
2 www.manninghamrecreation.com.au
3 See for example http://www.savesunshinepool.com/
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