

Councils Learning From Each Other

Background and aims

The 'Councils learning from each other' study continues ACELG's focus on education and training in the Australian local government sector, and is part of the broader 'Learning in Local Government' project. Findings from this project had suggested that councils look to each other for solutions to commonly arising problems and challenges, particularly within the context of reforms to the sector. Local governments who seek to understand and learn from the experiences of others in order to frame decisions and programs are engaging in a valid and important method of learning to adapt to changes in a number of policy areas, professions and levels within their organisations.

Recognising that there is a lack of research in the Australian context on inter-council learning, and particularly on the strategies and methods to achieve knowledge transfer, 'Councils learning from each other' was designed to address this gap in an exploratory way, while being solidly located in a growing body of knowledge on this topic that has emerged in recent years internationally. The aims of the study were:

- to understand and describe the phenomenon of councils learning from each other in the Australian context
- to identify the mechanisms which facilitate inter-council learning in order to understand how associations, jurisdictions and educators might make use of this enhanced understanding to inform capacity building programs promoting local government reform
- to put forward the study as a contribution to current national and international research and debates on inter-organisational learning in local government.

Methods and findings

Adopting a case study approach, the research comprised a literature review, including in-depth exploration of using case studies as a research strategy; data gathering and analysis of one-on-one and group interviews with people working in local government; and feedback reports from students undergoing training in local government leadership.

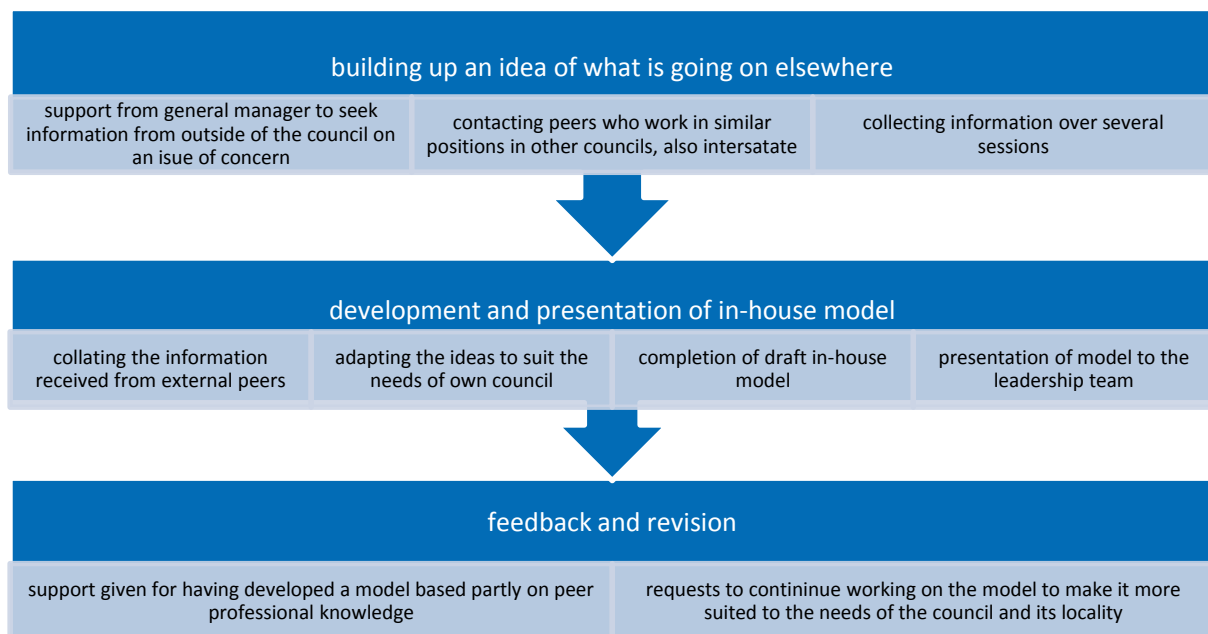
Respondents provided insight into a wide variety of situations, programs and initiatives that encourage them to seek out information and ideas from other councils. Findings suggest that they are motivated by factors such as the search for constant improvements in their own councils, staying on top of developments in the sector, seeking out best practice based on trust in peers, and desiring to do the best for their communities.

Based on these wide-ranging motivations, they are encouraged to seek and take advantage of a similarly wide range of opportunities to learn from their peers in the sector. They readily take advantage of informal means of peer-to-peer learning within activities that are organised on a more formal basis.

A conceptual framework derived from the literature was tentatively drawn upon to illustrate the mechanisms of learning and the facilitators and barriers of these mechanisms. Findings suggest value in positing a ‘trajectory of learning’:

- Intuiting ideas and tacit or implicit knowledge
- Interpreting ideas and/or knowledge within the organisation
- Diffusion of ideas and/or knowledge within the organisation and its variation through replication in context
- Explicit embedding of ideas and/or knowledge in the organisation.

Findings suggest that a process of model building, drawing on information received from professional peers in other councils, can be put forward as follows:



Reported benefits of peer-to-peer learning include efficiency benefits through ‘not having to reinvent the wheel’; personal benefits, including those derived from professional networking and helping to inspire staff who may be stuck on certain ways of doing things; and inspiration and models for problem-solving on specific issues.

Concrete changes in receiving organisations include: changes to systems and procedures, particularly areas of council practice (such as purchasing and procurement) where cost savings could be brought about; participation in forums where professionals from various councils meet on a regular basis and also establish email connections and online chat forums; and the development of ‘sister relationships’ with other councils.

Several respondents highlighted the point that all learning derived from other councils needs to be adapted to context; it also needs to be shown to have been modified in this way. After a period of time, it may be difficult to distinguish between the learning derived from other councils and learning derived from other sources, including the local government’s own dynamics of change and reform.

Implications of the findings for enhancing capacity building

Results from the study suggest that the following could be put forward as recommendations for capacity building in the sector:

- Incorporating the learning from other councils or peer learning as an explicit element of learning and development for staff within individual councils
- Continuing to work on the development of an organisational culture that favours openness, collaboration and reciprocity
- Including other councils in governance networks, including through shared services
- Inter-council mentoring and other forms of joint training
- Acknowledging that much shared learning is based on informal personal networks.

Further research is recommended to better understand the mechanisms of inter-council learning and the means by which this understanding can be employed to promote continuing learning and capacity development in the Australian local government sector.