

ACELG-ABS Local Government Data Roundtable

University of Technology Sydney
Tuesday 7th August 2012

OUTCOMES REPORT

1 INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the outcomes of the Local Government Data Roundtable convened jointly by the Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government (ACELG) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) held at the University of Technology Sydney on Tuesday 7th August 2012.

The roundtable arose from discussions involving ACELG, ABS and other local government bodies regarding Local Government data needs and issues in the context of the Census and other ABS data. A number of projects which ACELG has auspiced, including the development of community indicators for local government, development and implementation of a national minimum data set and the development of a national Local Government workforce strategy, have all highlighted gaps in the range of data relating to Local Government which is currently collected and released by the ABS.

Given the number of councils and jurisdictions with responsibility for Local Government in Australia, the ABS has also expressed an interest in developing a more structured approach by the sector in making requests for data its needs. In this regard the timing of the roundtable was particularly appropriate given the recent release of data from the 2011 Census and the commencement of planning for the 2016 Census.

The roundtable was well-attended, with over 30 participants from Local Government associations, state and federal agencies and individual councils as well as the ABS and ACELG. The primary aims of the roundtable were to:

- develop an understanding of local government data uses, data needs and data gaps;
- develop mechanisms for coordinating national priorities for ABS local government data needs; and
- discuss options for working with the ABS on future local government data development.

The roundtable was divided into three sessions. The first explored Local Government related data from the 2011 Census and plans for the 2016 Census, as well as the relationship between ABS Census and other data and the development of Local Government community indicator frameworks. The second session provided an overview of non-census ABS data sources and the use of some of this data in the development of the national Local Government workforce strategy. While opportunities were provided for discussion in each of these sessions, the third session was devoted to a more detailed exploration of the roundtable aims.

This report provides summaries in point form of the outcomes of each session. It should be noted that the points noted here summarise the comments made by the attendees and do not necessarily

reflect the views of the ABS, ACELG or any of the other bodies represented at the forum. The presentations mentioned are attached as PDF documents with the exception of the discussion on Local Government community indicator frameworks, which did not involve a slide presentation. Other material tabled at the roundtable is also attached.

Finally it should be noted that the request for attendees to have an opportunity to indicate whether they are interested in further involvement in this area is addressed in the email accompanying this report.

2 PRESENTATION SESSIONS: ISSUES AND OUTCOMES

2.1 Session 1: Local Government Data and the Census

2.1.1 Session 1 Presentations

- *2011 Census Local Government-related data and 2016 Census plans* – Gareth Edwards, ABS.
- *Local Government community indicator frameworks and ABS data* – Allegra Zakis, Penrith City Council Community Indicators Project.

2.1.2 Session 1 Roundtable Discussion

Comment in the first session revolved mainly around the question of whether it is possible to have a national response to approaching the ABS regarding community indicators. Key points included:

- It is possible to develop a national response but the sector needs to determine drivers at the community level. The recent work in developing national sustainability indicators could provide an example.
- The ABS works with the states in developing the core set of national data and indicators it collects.
- The state and territory jurisdictions collect their own data as well, for example transport, but in different ways.
- Data is shared between jurisdictions but there are different perspectives: different sectors have different "lenses".
- If there is data collection at the local level, how can that be made useful at a State/Federal level and what can these levels give back?
- There is some concern that the national minimum data set questions could be used for political purposes.
- The interval between censuses (five years) poses problems for the timeliness of the data and the difference between this cycle and that of most local and state government electoral terms (three or four years) also creates difficulties. It would be prohibitively expensive to change the census cycle, so different strategies are needed to address data needs between censuses.

2.2 Session 2: Local Government and other ABS data sources

2.2.1 Session 2 Presentations

- ABS Presentation: other ABS data sources – Lisa Conolly, ABS.
- Presentation: Local government national workforce strategy and ABS data – Mervyn Carter, ACELG.

2.2.2 *Session 2 Roundtable Discussion*

Discussion in this session related broadly to two questions – why collect workforce data and who should collect it. Key points discussed included:

- *Why collect workforce data?*
 - Once the sector has appropriate data then it can look at programs to address workforce issues in a similar way to the assistance programs relating to skills shortages in the mining and car industries. However at the moment the Local Government sector can't quantify its skills shortages on a national basis.
 - It is important to look not just at the Local Government gender workforce balance but also at the changing skills requirements and composition of the overall workforce. The makeup and education levels of the workforce should influence training needs. Financial data should also assist in providing information on the workforce.
 - Some councils produce workforce reports, but often current council collections are not consistent even within jurisdictions.
 - It is a challenge to maintain data collections over time, but if this is not done they run the risk of becoming a one-off snapshot.
- *Who collects workforce data?*
 - Local Government obviously has a key role, however there is a question of whether Local Government has the capacity to collect data at this level.
 - The national minimum data set project will collect some of this data. There will be a release of information from the data set this year with one more follow-up. After that, further development will depend on whether the sector finds it useful. The data set also uses some data from the ABS
 - Industry skills councils also collect some data which is useful for workforce development.
 - The roles of ALGA and COAG were discussed. There has been a change in the Ministerial council structure. The roundtable was advised of an upcoming forum comprising senior officials from state local government departments or divisions. There is a need to re-establish local government priorities, especially with recent changes in state governments.
 - Also, Departments of Local Governments across the jurisdictions have differing priorities and responsibilities as well as collecting data. However there is the potential for the return of data collection issues to the national agenda.
 - There are issues around the capacity of State governments to collect data on a comprehensive basis and a hesitation by some state ministers to make data collection compulsory.
 - The authority to collect data is largely the goodwill of the state agencies involved. Hopefully once the national minimum data set project is up and running, state agencies will find it useful and will continue to maintain the data collection.
 - There will be some issues relating to cross-border areas in terms of some of the data collected at a jurisdictional level. Local Government also sometimes falls between the cracks in other data collection processes.
 - The national workforce strategy has made good use of existing ABS data sources. However it has to be noted that these data collections were not originally designed to provide a comprehensive Local Government data set.

- ABS can do work to develop data sets provided this work is funded and auspiced through national policy approaches – for example, if another Federal agency required and funded it.
- ACELG is not a peak body and does not have the resources or authority to collect data. However, other program areas and bodies such as the LGMA have a developing role.

3 SESSION 3 OPPORTUNITIES AND MECHANISMS ROUNDTABLE: ISSUES AND OUTCOMES

Session 3 was the main roundtable session which discussed three key questions:

1. *What outcomes can be achieved by developing national priorities for local government data?*
2. *What mechanisms could be used to develop these priorities?*
3. *What processes exist for communicating these priorities to state and federal governments and ABS?*

Discussion around these issues is summarised below.

3.1 What outcomes can be achieved by developing national priorities for local government data?

- *Census-related data*

There is a need to identify key outcomes of developing a national approach in terms of the benefits to Local Government. Key outcomes identified by the roundtable included:

- Developing better strategic planning processes for councils;
 - Strengthening relationship between local, state and national planning processes;
 - Being able to make stronger bids for Government funding;
 - Providing a basis for comparison of different approaches across jurisdictions, council size, etc to determine examples of best practice. These can include international as well as regional comparisons;
 - Helping to foster identity as part of a strong national Local Government sector and to build better cooperation and representation to other bodies;
 - Helping to identify common issues across boundaries – for example, a regional council may have more in common with a similar council in a different state than with an urban council in the same state;
 - Developing a collective approach across councils to community surveys, which will provide economies of scale, and assist in the standardisation of questions;
 - Supporting Local Government's role in engaging and empowering local communities to develop solutions. National data would help in this process and support Local Government's capacity to show leadership.
- *Workforce data*

There was a wide-ranging discussion around priorities, outcomes and issues relating to workforce data. Key points included:

- More work needs to be done on the ground to facilitate better use of workforce data. For example, in NSW there is a requirement for each council to develop a workforce management plan and for this plan to support council's delivery program. However there is evidence most workforce plans don't do much to address this latter responsibility.
- Even if more data is collected there will still be a gap in knowledge between the data and how it is used. But consistent data will help council decision-making and encourage improvements in workforce planning.
- Workforce data needs to be integrated with community resources and council's financial resources in developing workforce plans. However this is very difficult in practice and few councils can do this properly. This issue also applies to the use of asset data.
- Councils need to develop their own skills sets in order to take workforce information and apply it – councils need mechanisms not only to collect skills data on a national basis but also the skill sets to use this data locally.
- There are however a range of existing resources. For example, national skills councils have an important role in gathering data relating to skills development.
- It is important to relate Local Government skills issues to those of the wider environment; for example, if a council is experiencing a shortage in a specific skills area, is this also occurring in the wider community?
- It is also important to note that the Local Government workforce encompasses a range of skills found in other industries, but also has some positions requiring skills specific to the sector, for example, building inspectors.
- Better knowledge of skills shortages also provides opportunities for local solutions as well as regional ones involving groups of councils.
- The ABS is developing a land account system as part of wider environmental accounting process.
- The National Minimum Data Sets project has recognised the need to understand the value of the data it is collecting and is providing information on the value of each item and how it might be used.
- It is important to develop a sense of purpose in and the value of collecting data and to focus on making this data usable to councils.

3.2 What mechanisms could be used to develop these priorities?

- *General Comments*
 - The sector needs to identify key outcomes, objectives and opportunities, emphasising the positive benefits and avoiding the potential for negative political responses.
 - A national approach to local government data collection will need buy-in by all levels of government. This should include lead councils that are already doing good workforce planning and which have established good relationships with local TAFEs and RTOs.
 - Some of the ABS data that has been used to provide local government statistics was not designed for this specific purpose.
 - The ABS is willing to look at the possibility of developing a Local Government industry data set in the longer term.

- *National Minimum Data Sets Project*
 - It was emphasised that the national minimum data project is underway and will provide a data set for people to look at and base further discussions on. The NSW Division of Local Government is organising for data users in local government to receive a presentation on the data set and it would be useful if similar data user groups could be established in other jurisdictions.
 - It was suggested that the data sets project involve councils and people who work in the sector itself as well as peak groups.
 - There is a need for ongoing consultation between the ABS and ACELG on ABS to identify key areas of data that can feed into the national minimum data set project. This has already started.
- *Other mechanisms*
 - Other indicators are also being developed, for example, the capital city lord mayors have lobbied the Federal Government to develop state of Australian cities reporting. The role of the private sector is also important, for example, the Property Council of Australia's survey of people in Australian cities: *My City: The People's Verdict 2011*.
 - However the ABS probably has a higher degree of credibility regarding the data it provides because of its independence and expertise. NGOs and peak bodies also have a role in providing data.
 - It is important that core indicators are developed from engagement with the community. We need to establish what communities want and then establish how to measure these indicators.

3.3 What processes exist for communicating these priorities to state and federal governments and ABS?

- There is support for the development of a Local Government Industry data set. The COAG Local Government forum should play a key role in this, involving discussion with state/territory jurisdictions.
- Infrastructure asset data is also important but there are big gaps in the current information available. Different systems are used in each jurisdiction so it is difficult to get a sense of the national value of this data. It is also difficult to measure unfunded renewals or infrastructure gaps across the country due to this lack of consistency.
- For example, we need to know how much is spent on local roads by all levels of government. This is Local Government's major asset but it is impossible to get an accurate break down from current data.

3.4 Concluding comments

- It was noted that other industries have statistics reference groups. A number of roundtable attendees expressed interest in participation in an ABS Local Government data reference group or similar body, if one were established.
- ALGA and the state associations should play a key role, with ALGA providing the link to the Federal Government through COAG.

- Further roundtables would be useful but should look at using the national minimum data set project roll-out as a basis for discussion.
- There is an overall willingness to continue discussions and establish a consistent response regarding Local Government data needs, possibly through a Local Government statistics users reference group with representatives from ALGA, state/territory Local Government associations and State Government representatives. State associations should also consult with their member councils specifically in relation to data issues.
- The presentations and contact details of roundtable attendees should be circulated with the roundtable report. This could provide a basis for seeking responses from people interested in being involved, for example in the suggested ABS Local Government statistics users reference group or similar body, and in which specific area they would like to participate. This issue is addressed further in the email accompanying this report.

Prepared by Alex Gooding on behalf of ACELG and ABS (17/8/12).