



KNOWLEDGE CITY

The Difference an In-House Research Team made to a Council and its Community

Background

As part of an initiative to explore and encourage links between research and policy inside local government, the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) approached the City of Melbourne about documenting the work of its City Research unit for broader knowledge by the sector. The story of this research branch is presented as a discussion paper called *Knowledge City: The Difference an In-House Research Team made to a Council and its Community*.

The aim of the paper is to inform thinking about what role a council can take in research and how it can change the way a council works. The paper is in two parts, each presenting complementary views of the City Research unit. The first is a journalist's perspective based on interviews; the other, a case-study, was written by a City of Melbourne employee. The paper is intended for readers such as local government professionals, elected representatives, academic researchers, and general readership who may not normally engage with research.

Summary

City Research is a branch of Council that works alongside other branches to add specialist expertise to council-wide research undertakings. In the paper's first section, 'Taking the Pulse of the City', journalist Caroline Baum presents a view of what research is and how it has assisted the City of Melbourne to design and adapt to ever changing circumstances. Here Baum stresses that councils have a key role in shaping the policies and facilities that define that quality of life through the services they deliver – many of which are often overlooked by the general public.

By adopting a more holistic approach that extends beyond the council's traditional physical boundaries, the City Research unit has achieved a more comprehensive understanding of factors that affect its 'world's most liveable cities' status. It has also equipped Council with innovative strategies to bolster its competitive reputation and future-proof it against anticipated threats.

Some of the research work undertaken includes, a Census of Land Use and Employment of the municipality, collaboration with other Council branches such as Environment, Health Services, Events, Tourism, Events, Retail on an array of strategies and studies, such as *the Urban Forest and Wellbeing Indicators* strategy and Council's *Laneways* initiatives among others.

Manager of the City Research unit, Austin Ley says 'The objective is evidence-based planning across all sectors so that we can track the effectiveness of our policies and adapt as the city changes.' In the section 'City Research at the City of Melbourne', Ley also makes the case for the development of a local government research *discipline* as a key means of strengthening this effort.

From this enhanced research effort and focus, local government, can:

- understand their local areas and communities, enabling informed debate about issues, policies and decisions, not disputes over the sources of facts;
- find the best, most cost effective way to provide services now and in the future;
- be accountable and monitor progress toward goals;
- grow their local economies; and
- build new – or replace old – infrastructure, particularly with respect to Federal and State priorities and funding.

The case study presents evidence that with councils, as with many organisations in both the public and private sectors, a rigorous research capability is the necessary means to drive strategy and minimise risks by reducing uncertainty.

Ley's views can be supplemented by literature which provides another useful element to the discussion paper for local government readers, particularly a body of work that has explored the nature of people known as 'insider researchers' – also referred to as 'practitioner researchers'.

Reflection

An emerging theme is the improved productivity of the practitioner researcher working within organisational constraints, where the research drives the generation and application of innovative knowledge, particularly in an agenda for change.

Apart from the direct value of knowing the City Research story itself, the benefit of presenting these perspectives is in their contribution to an ongoing discussion about the offerings of research taking place inside local government, and how knowledge is strengthened when it is seen through multiple 'lenses'.

Together the papers address a number of related questions that lend themselves to an ongoing dialogue of relevance beyond Melbourne:

- What can be learned from the story of City Research? In general, what contribution might an in-house research capacity make to the way a local government conducts its business?
- How would this research capacity evolve and what is needed to develop it?
- What is the scope for developing a 'new research tradition' focused on local government?

Future work under this theme could recognise and identify research activities within councils to establish a collective or consolidated approach, and supported by a knowledge base. Another opportunity for practitioner involvement is to continue advocating for the principle of 'unlocking data' that can provide information for multiple purposes. The support of local government also needs to be framed and understood as a benefit to university researchers so they might be encouraged to collaborate with local government on research and to develop a deeper understanding of the research needs of local government.

Further information

John Lavarack, ACELG Research Officer, john.lavarack@acelg.org.au / 02 9514 2595.