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Citizen Participation in Local Government Corporate Planning in Queensland

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Abstract: As part of recent reform policies in Australian local government, municipal councils have been required to develop various corporate planning instruments in order to improve their 'accountability' to the local community. Global trends in local governance and citizen participation provide a rationale for community engagement to be an integral part of councils' corporate planning processes as a form of participatory democracy. This paper examines the practical application of these concepts through a 'community visioning' process conducted by a small urban council in South East Queensland within the context of the Size, Shape and Sustainability program initiated by the Queensland state government.

Keywords: Community engagement; corporate planning; local governance; reform.

Note:

The views expressed in this paper represent the authors' views and not the views of the Redcliffe City Council.

Introduction

Over recent years local governments have increasingly embraced community engagement activities as an integral component of their operations. In local councils across contemporary Australia, local communities are being consulted in relation to a wide variety of issues affecting their local areas. Consultation occurs in a myriad of ways: People complete a survey, attend a public meeting, work alongside councillors in advisory groups and project steering committees, or simply contact their local councillors with local concerns. This interaction between elected representatives and the community, and their involvement in the business of councils, forms the subject of this paper. Using a case study of a 'community visioning exercise' conducted by the Redcliffe City Council, the relationship between participatory and representative governance in local government will be explored in the context of the Queensland local government reform project entitled *Size, Shape and Sustainability*. For the purposes of this article 'community engagement' refers to consultation activities that include residents of a defined local government area and other stakeholders, such as local community groups, sporting associations, businesses, and representatives from other levels of government with an interest in the area.

The paper itself is divided into six main parts. Section 2 describes the main processes and key outcomes of a 'community visioning' project known as the *Redcliffe Community Plan*. Section 3 develops several conceptual ideas to explore different ways of understanding the *Redcliffe Community Plan*. Section 4 identifies links between the *Redcliffe Community Plan* and local government reform in Queensland with particular reference to the current *Size, Shape and Sustainability* project. Section 5 critically evaluates the value of the *Redcliffe Community Plan* project in light of this analysis. The paper ends with some concluding remarks in Section 6.

Institutional Background: The Redcliffe Community Plan

The Redcliffe Community Plan was conducted by the Redcliffe City Council in partnership with local residents and other stakeholders over an 18-month period and represents the largest community engagement initiative ever attempted within the city. The purpose of the project was 'to establish a 20-year plan for Redcliffe City … [to] describe a preferred future for the city and [develop] strategies to achieve the preferred future' (Redcliffe City Council 2005a, 4). The aim of the project was 'to engage the community in a planning process to ensure a sustainable future for Redcliffe City' (Redcliffe City Council 2005a, 4). Once the community developed their vision for the city through this project, the Redcliffe Community Plan was presented to the local Council for its consideration. This section of the paper provides a summary of relevant contextual information about the Redcliffe community, the Redcliffe City Council and its framework for community consultation, as well as information on the project methodology and outcomes.

Redcliffe City and the Redcliffe City Council

Redcliffe City is a relatively small urban local government area (LGA) situated on a peninsula to the north of Brisbane in South East Queensland. It is a coastal city covering 37 square kilometers, making it one of the most densely populated LGAs in Queensland, with the total number of residents of approximately 50,000 people. The Redcliffe City Council is elected every 4 years and consists of a mayor and seven councillors. The Redcliffe Community Plan project was administered by Council officers responsible for community development, social planning and social policy activities in the Department of Community and Cultural Services under the direct supervision of the council's Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The intended key role of this project in Council's corporate planning processes (as described below) meant that the involvement of the CEO was critical to ensuring the successful integration of project outcomes into Council operations (see, for instance, Marshall 2003). Project management of the Redcliffe Community Plan was the responsibility of the Council's Department of Community and Cultural

Services since this unit had been responsible for the development of Council's community engagement policy and a number of consultation projects in the past. It was also acknowledged that such a large-scale community engagement exercise would require staff with expertise in this area 'to effectively manage participatory processes so that each participant [could] contribute in a meaningful way' (Cuthill 2004, 440). Various other departments of the Council, such as the Public Relations unit, also provided invaluable assistance in supporting the community engagement activities of the project.

Community Consultation Framework

The community engagement aspects of the Redcliffe Community Plan project were developed in accordance with the Council's community consultation framework. The purpose of this framework 'is to provide an efficient, effective and consistent approach to the community consultation activities conducted by all sections of the Redcliffe City Council' (Redcliffe City Council 2004a, 3). In this policy document, the Council has adopted the following definition for community consultation developed by the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ): 'An open, accountable process through which individuals exchange views and influence policy or decision making' (LGAQ 2003, 5). To assist Council officers in their decision making concerning when to consult, and what type of community engagement activities to employ, the framework identified four levels of community consultation adapted from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) participation spectrum. Table 1 provides information about each of these levels.

Table 1: Redcliffe City Council Levels of Community Consultation

Level of Community Consultation	Description
Inform	Information is provided to the local community about Council policies, programs and decisions. Interested people may then request further information from the Council or additional consultation.
Seek	Council establishes processes to ascertain community views and opinions in relation to a particular project, community issue or Council service.
Involve	The community has the opportunity to 'have direct and meaningful input into Council processes where appropriate'.
Partner	Council establishes partnerships with local residents and community groups in order to 'work collaboratively … on joint initiatives where appropriate'.

Source: Redcliffe City Council 2004a.

The Redcliffe Community Plan in broad terms was an opportunity to involve the community in Council's planning for the future of the city. However, given the size, scope and methodology of this project, it was acknowledged that various types of community engagement activities would be needed at different levels during the project. To manage this complexity effectively and to ensure Council's community consultation framework was adhered to, a consultation plan for this project was developed. Dollery and Dallinger (2006, 18) contend that the key function of a consultation plan is to link 'the aim of the community engagement activities and the techniques actually used [and it] … must strategically identify who in the community should be consulted and how this engagement is best achieved'. In relation to this project, the main community engagement techniques employed included a city-wide community

survey and community meetings targeting the general Redcliffe community as well as a series of focus groups for stakeholders who were identified prior to the commencement of the project in a stakeholder database. Detailed information about the planning and execution of these community engagement activities and the stakeholder database formed part of the consultation plan. Following these efforts, the Council was satisfied with the participation rates for each of these community engagement activities. The Council received 5,971 completed surveys from a total of 25,270 distributed and 111 local residents attended a total of 5 community meetings. In addition, a total of 130 stakeholders attended 25 focus groups (Redcliffe City Council 2005a).

Project Methodology

The initial step in developing the project methodology was to define the scope of the Redcliffe Community Plan project. Given its intended role as the basis for the Council's corporate plan, it was decided that the project scope should encompass all aspects of community life. To this end six 'areas of interest' were developed: Arts and culture; environment; city infrastructure; sport and recreation; economy and tourism; and community wellbeing (Redcliffe City Council 2005b). The determination of these six areas of interest in the preliminary stages of the project provided much needed clarity as to what topics would be included in the final Redcliffe Community Plan document.

In broad terms, the Redcliffe Community Plan project was based on the 'Oregon Model' for 'community visioning'. This model has four key questions: Where are we now? (i.e. profiling the community); Where are we going? (i.e. analysing the trends); Where do we want to be? (i.e. creating the vision); How do we get there? (i.e. developing an action plan) (Oregon Visions Project 2001, 8-9). The project methodology was structured around each of these questions and various tasks, including community engagement activities, were developed so that these questions could be answered in a way that represented the views and opinions of the Redcliffe community. Table 2

shows what type of project activities were used in response to each of these questions as well as the key outcomes from these processes.

Table 2: Project Activities and Outcomes Using the Oregon Model: Redcliffe Community Plan

Key Questions	Activities	Outcomes
Where are we now?	• Demographic and socioeconomic research of Redcliffe City using ABS Census data. • City-wide community survey. • Stakeholder focus groups.	• Community profile. • Status report on the six areas of interest. • List of community values and priorities.
Where are we going?	• Population forecasts for Redcliffe City from the Queensland Government Planning Information and Forecasting Unit. • City-wide community survey. • Stakeholder focus groups.	• List of key trends impacting on the six areas of interest. • Development of scenarios describing the likely impact of these trends.
Where do we want to be?	• Stakeholder focus groups. • Community meetings.	• Development of a vision for Redcliffe City. • Description of preferred futures in the six areas of interest.
How do we get there?	• Stakeholder focus groups. • Community meetings.	• Statement of strategies and key actions to achieve these preferred futures.

Source: Redcliffe City Council 2004b.

An important aspect of the project methodology was the development of a project steering committee. The purpose of this committee was 'to provide strategic advice to the Council in the development of the community plan and to oversee each stage of the project' (Redcliffe City Council 2004c, 5). The project steering committee was expected to review all of the material collected and analysed from the project activities, and develop the Redcliffe Community Plan consistent with the views and opinions of the local community. The Mayor and two other councillors, council officers and community members representing each of the areas of interest formed part of this group; this falls in line with Marshall's (2003, 143) proposition that the main functions of a councillor include 'representing the interests of residents, leadership and strategic policy formulation'. Accordingly, the involvement of the elected representatives in the project steering committee was critical to the success of the project since they and their colleagues ultimately determined how the outcomes of the project would be used by the Council. The community members were known to the Council for their expertise in one or more of the areas of interest and had demonstrated a 'commitment' to the Redcliffe area. The chairperson of the project steering committee was one of the community representatives nominated by the Council. This was deliberately undertaken to generate a sense that this was a 'community-owned' rather that 'council-owned' project. As anticipated, the group members represented a diverse range of views and it was through the development of group processes - akin to a form of deliberative democracy - that consensus was achieved on the contents of the final document. A consensus model was used for the majority of decisions making processes of this group and all group members were 'considered equal [and] … equally free to intervene as well as question the topics of debate' (Melo and Baiocchi 2006, 590).

It is important to note that whilst a form of deliberative democracy may have been apparent in the development of the Redcliffe Community Plan, the decision about how this document would be used was reserved for the councillors as part of the representative system of local government. The final document was presented to the elected representatives at a Council meeting

by the chairperson of the project steering committee. At a subsequent meeting, the Council voted to adopt the Redcliffe Community Plan as Council's corporate plan for 2006-2010.

Conceptual Considerations

To evaluate the value of the Redcliffe Community Plan project to the Council and Redcliffe community, consideration must first be given to the various different ways in which the project can be conceptualised. It is through these different perspectives that the merits of the approach can be examined in detail.

Global Trends in Local Government

The *Redcliffe Community Plan* project is consistent with two contemporary global trends in local governments throughout the western world. Firstly, the role of local government is increasingly being understood using the concept of 'local governance' as opposed to 'local government'. Application of the local governance concept means that local government is no longer simply being conceptualized as 'what the council does', but rather 'increasingly involves multi-agency working, partnerships and policy networks which cut across organisational boundaries' (Leach and Percy-Smith 2001, 1). Local governance implies a change in 'roles and relationships between actors from the three spheres of state, market and civil society' (Geddes 2005, 19). It can also be described as 'the increasing interdependence of public and private organisations [which has] reduced the capacity of any organisation to act unilaterally' (Gray 1989, 232).

For local government, this means that local councils are becoming more fragmented and there is thus an increasing need to establish and maintain relationships with other different types of organisations in order to provide goods and services to the community (Denters and Rose 2005). In this context, the *Redcliffe Community Plan* can be understood as an example of this international trend and as a potential tool for Council to further the ideals

of local governance in the city. On the one hand, the project is an example of Council and the community coming together in a partnership to develop a shared vision and a range of policy ideas for the future of the city. In addition, many of the strategies that make up the *Redcliffe Community Plan* actively encourage and promote the notions of 'collaboration' and 'partnership' in achieving the efficient and effective delivery of goods and services to the local community. For instance, as part of the 'community wellbeing' section of the document, one of the recommended actions is 'to monitor the need for affordable and appropriate housing and consider strategies in response to this need in partnership with community organisations, state and federal governments' (Redcliffe City Council 2005b). This aspect of the local governance process can also be described as 'collaborative action' between governments and the community which can be achieved through the 'implementation of participatory processes such as community visioning' as per the methodology used for the *Redcliffe Community Plan* project (Cuthill and Fien 2005, 68-70).

A key aspect of local governance is an increased emphasis on participatory democracy. Communities throughout the developed world have developed a more sophisticated relationship with their councils as evidenced by a growing demand for 'more extensive opportunities for political participation going beyond that of voting' (Denters and Rose 2005, 5). It can be argued that this change is due to local residents being better educated, more articulate and politically aware, as well as expecting improved levels of performance from councils at a reduced cost to the ratepayer (Denters and Rose 2005).

This trend is apparent in several different countries. For example, in Germany 'the repertoire of political action has broadened considerably' beyond voting in voluntary elections and membership of 'voluntary associations' (Gabriel and Eisenmann 2005, 134). Local government reform processes have institutionalised various forms of participatory ideals and processes, and as a result, people are able to participate in council decision making through referenda, citizen assemblies, council hearings, roundtables, planning

workshops and community surveys. In addition, e-participation is being trialed by some local authorities. Emerging projects in this area have included 'electronic voting, initiatives and referenda' whilst 'informal types of e-participation are more widespread' (Gabriel and Eisenmann 2005, 135). In contrast to Germany, Switzerland already has longstanding and well-developed participatory mechanisms known as 'local parliaments' in larger municipalities, or 'local assemblies' in smaller jurisdictions, through which people can initiate referendums in opposition to a municipal decision. However, in Switzerland efforts are currently being made to increase community participation 'in the planning process for municipal projects' in order to secure acceptance and a sense of community ownership so that these projects are not opposed through the referenda process (Ladner 2005, 152).

An increased emphasis on participatory democracy is not only being seen in federal countries, like Germany and Switzerland. Countries with unitary systems of government, such as the United Kingdom and France, are also influenced by this growing trend. In the Britain, the present Labour Government has transformed the previous Conservative Government's participatory processes - in which 'citizens were first and foremost seen as customers and consumers, not as voters' - into mechanisms seen by the government as being 'crucial to the health of local democracy' using 'citizens' juries, citizens' panels and visioning exercises' (Wilson 2005, 163-164). In France, 'new forms of non-electoral participation are emerging, including various types of consultations, referendums and procedures designed to promote dialogue' (Borraz and Le Galès 2005, 24-25). However, some commentators have observed that the implementation of such initiatives in France have raised issues about the compatibility of these forms of participatory democracy with existing representative processes and institutions (Borraz and Le Galès 2005).

Denters and Rose (2005, 261) conducted a detailed review of participatory democracy trends in these and other countries, including Australia, and

concluded that great diversity exists amongst different countries in the 'introduction of new forms of citizen involvement'. In the case of the *Redcliffe Community Plan* project, the application of community visioning as a new form of participatory democracy for the city is commensurate with a best-practice model for corporate planning in local government developed by the Queensland Government Department of Local Government and Planning (DLGP) as outlined below.

A Corporate Planning Project

The approach to corporate planning in contemporary Queensland councils is a result of previous reform processes in the sector to ensure local governments were more efficient, effective and accountable to the communities they service. Baker (2003, 126) has argued that when developing state legislation, such as the Local Government Act 1993 in Queensland, which instructs council in their operations, 'the approach taken … was to require councils to develop a plan to set out long-term objectives for the community'. Baker (2003) also argued that in addition to preparing corporate and operational plans, councils are required to develop a budget as well as an annual report which provides information on how the council has performed with reference to these objectives.

The Local Government Act 1993 in Queensland requires councils to develop corporate plans. In 2004, the Department of Local Government and Planning (DLGP) developed a document *Best Planning Guidelines: Corporate and Operational Planning*. The purpose of this publication is to provide a model to assist councils in relation to the corporate and operational planning requirements under the Act. The DLGP holds that for a local government the first step in the corporate planning process is the development of a community plan. Such a document 'ensures planning recognition is given to the needs of the next generation and acknowledges the long-term implications of many of the decisions taken by local governments' (DLGP 2004, 14). A community plan is an articulation of a community's vision for the future usually over the

planning horizon of between 20 and 25 years from which a council can base its other corporate planning documents.

The application of a community visioning process as a corporate planning tool can raise significant issues for local governments. For example, the quality of a community vision becomes largely dependent on those who participate in project activities. Cuthill (2004, 429) contends that 'development of a community vision is constrained by participants who enter such processes' and the reality is that many people would not approach a community visioning exercise with a 20 or 25 year timeframe in mind. Participants in a project of this nature would do so 'with quite different, and possibly conflicting motivations and objectives' (McArthur 1995, 70). Such intentions may be quite short-term and specific to their own experience rather than being altruistic in nature with the long-term future of Redcliffe in mind.

It can also be argued that there is an inherent risk in using community visioning as part of a corporate planning process in that 'a degree of control needs to be ceded to communities' (Smith *et al.* 1999, 197). If a council commits time, resources and engages the community in establishing a preferred future for a community, it is vitally important that the outcomes of this process become part of the council's vision for the future. If not, the entire consultative process and a council's commitment to the views and opinions of the community is brought into question. The Redcliffe Council's decision to adopt the *Redcliffe Community Plan* as its corporate plan certainly shows a commitment to the community visioning process. However, difficulties may arise when councils and communities desire a different future for an area and reconciling such differences may be very difficult for a council. In this situation a council may have no choice but to accept the ideas of a community to ensure political survival.

These issues raise a further set of questions over the methodology used in a community visioning process and the need to ensure the outcomes are reflective of the community. Community consultation methods, such as

surveys and focus groups, have the potential to be dominated by people who are available to participate in these activities and who have the necessary skills to do so. Cuthill (2004) has highlighted factors that can act as constraints to involvement, like socio-demographic characteristics, cultural background, disability, age and gender. Accordingly, rather than being a truly participatory process, a councils corporate planning could 'merely end up being conversations among the elites, new forms of an old corporatism' (Healey 1998, 15).

Local Government Reform in Queensland

The *Redcliffe Community Plan* project was being conducted at the same time as significant local government reform processes were being launched in Queensland. In 2004, the LGAQ resolved to consider the pressures confronting councils in Queensland and to explore the need for local government reform to ensure the long-run viability of local councils through the development of the *Size, Shape and Sustainability (SSS) Project.* In 2005, the methodology for this project was announced as a 'comprehensive reform blueprint' incorporating the *SSS* Project Review Framework, sustainability indicators, 'options for change', 'Independent Review Facilitators' (IRF), and funding arrangements for state government support. The reform program itself is outlined in the *Size, Shape and Sustainability: Guidelines Kit* (LGAQ 2006).

The *SSS* program is an initiative of the LGAQ aimed at enabling local government in Queensland to proactively 'investigate and reform its structural arrangements identifying this as essential to its long term sustainability' (LGAQ 2006, 1). The objectives of the project are to oblige local councils to examine four features of their operations: 'Size and geographic dimensions'; 'management, organisation and operational arrangements'; 'financial and accountability arrangements'; and 'service delivery mechanisms including contracting out and joint arrangements including, enterprises and resource sharing' (LGAQ 2006, 1:4). The options available to Queensland local governments for change through this process identified by the LGAQ include:

'Resource sharing through service agreements'; 'resource sharing through joint enterprise'; 'significant boundary changes'; and 'merger/amalgamation' (LGAQ 2006, 1:7).

In practice, the project is based on groups of neighbouring LGAs throughout Queensland employing an 'independent facilitator' from a pool of LGAQ-selected consultants to oversee the process. Each local council is required to assess its future 'sustainability' using a number of sustainability indicators whilst following a 'review framework'. It is interesting to note that the *SSS* project is also an excellent example of a government initiative consistent with the concept of local governance. It involves the state government working in partnership with councils and the LGAQ to implement local government reform. Furthermore, each of the possible options for change involves partnerships with other councils or the fragmentation of government services through joint enterprises. In addition, community participation is also a key aspect of the *SSS* project as identified by Dollery and Dallinger (2006, 14) who contend that 'the LGAQ appear to have provided local councils with a solid framework for planning and delivering community engagement activities'.

The sustainability indicator of most relevance to this paper is 'community of interest' which has two components 'service centre and community linkages' and 'community engagement' (LGAQ 2006, 3:16-17). It can be argued that the process and outcomes of the *Redcliffe Community Plan* project is sufficient evidence to suggest this is an area of strength for the Redcliffe City Council in relation to community linkages and community engagement. The high response rate from the community survey was evidence of a strong community of interest consistent with the boundaries of this LGA. Fulcher (1989, 2) argues that there is a 'perceptual, functional and political dimension' to the community of interest concept. The perceptual dimension is defined as 'a sense of belonging to an area or locality which can be clearly defined' (Fulcher 1989, 2). The current boundaries of the Redcliffe LGA combined with the geography of the peninsula reinforce a sense of community that is distinct from neighbouring LGAs. During the *Redcliffe Community Plan* project the

sense of community pride and community spirit that exists within the Redcliffe community was evident and people appeared to identify with the city as a whole, rather than identifying with a particular suburb or neighbourhood.

The functional dimension is defined as 'the ability to meet with reasonable economy the community's requirements for comprehensive physical and human resources' (Fulcher 1989, 2). In this sense Redcliffe's strong community of interest is demonstrated through the residents 'local activity patterns' (Fulcher 1989, 2). The majority of people in Redcliffe would access services and participate in community life within the city rather traveling to other LGAs. The one exception to this trend would be in the area of employment since many people travel into Brisbane for work. The political dimension is 'the ability of the elected body to represent the interests and reconcile the conflicts of all its members … which encompasses the organisational object of participatory democracy' (Fulcher 1989, 2). This dimension directly relates to the community engagement aspect of the community of interest sustainability indicator. The LGAQ states that a council scores highly on this aspect of the sustainability indicator if 'strong and regular engagement of the community through the use of community engagement methods which support the elements of information, consultation and participation' (LGAQ 2006, 3:17). The *Redcliffe Community Plan* project is an example of the council's commitment to community engagement as is the policy framework for community consultation discussed in detail above.

This strong community of interest across these three dimensions is the main reason why the *Redcliffe Community Plan* project generated so much local interest. Developing a vision for the future of the city resonated with people's strong subjective and objective connection with the city and many local residents wanted to take the opportunity to contribute their views and opinions to the project. However, it is important to note that the community of interest concept is only one of a number of *SSS* project sustainability indicators against which the council's performance will be measured. Therefore the

degree of influence the *Redcliffe Community Plan* project has on the *SSS* project is likely to be limited.

Critical Evaluation of Participatory Democracy and the Redcliffe Community Plan

Projects such as the *Redcliffe Community Plan* that are based on notions of participatory democracy and collaborative action as part of the local governance agenda have potential conceptual and practical shortcomings. These limitations can be explored using the concepts of public policy, community capacity building and by reviewing the community engagement activities used as part of the project. The *Redcliffe Community Plan* is also an example of a project which has the potential to be significantly affected by local government reform processes, such as the *SSS* project.

The Council's decision to adopt the *Redcliffe Community Plan* as the corporate plan for the organisation means that the community has played in integral role in developing public policy in Redcliffe at a strategic level. However, councils should be cautious when taking this approach and some confusion exists over what role participatory process should take within the context of a representative democracy. Within this system of government, it is important to realise that projects such as the *Redcliffe Community Plan* should never be considered as a 'form of direct democracy [whereby] policy is mutually determined' by government representatives and those who participate in consultative processes (Kane and Bishop 2002, 89). The clear and obvious role for community engagement in public policy is 'policy input' rather than 'policy determination' (Kane and Bishop 2002, 89).

The *Redcliffe Community Plan* project provides a good example of why this is the case. During the community engagement activities a number of potentially conflicting and competing interests became apparent such as 'development versus environmental protection' or 'growth versus lifestyle'. Given the nature of these debates, it would have been unlikely that a consensus-based

approach using community engagement activities would have yielded a clear policy direction. Whilst the *Redcliffe Community Plan* attempts to deal with these and many other issues by calling for 'a balance between moving forward and maintaining our enviable lifestyle [and] … promoting a greater sense of community wellbeing through sustainable development' in reality the detailed policy decisions about achieving this vision rests with the elected representatives (Redcliffe City Council 2005a, 3). In the case of the Redcliffe City Council this decision making will occur through a range of organisational processes as the Council attempts to operationalise the visions, strategies and suggested actions of the *Redcliffe Community Plan*. The value of this project in influencing Council policy will be revealed through the outcomes of these council processes. It can thus be said that the Council approached this community engagement process in an appropriate way and did not give false and unreasonable hope to the community that their views and opinions would definitely form the basis of public policy.

Councils should not view the *Redcliffe Community Plan* and other similar participatory projects as a sure method to achieve local governance or collaboration. Cuthill and Fien (2005, 70) maintain that 'to achieve this requires, first and foremost, the development of new and fundamentally different ways of thinking and working by governments'. Cuthill and Fien (2005, 73) go on to suggest that two issues of relevance in relation to this requirement for change is 'citizen ability' and 'community group ability'. In essence, this means that councils also need to view community engagement processes within the context of community capacity building. Put differently, 'local governments can contribute to building the capacity of citizens and/or community groups … in order to enable them to participate effectively in collaborative action' (Cuthill and Fien 2005, 73). Thus, in order to maximise the value of such processes, councils need to provide support by employing ongoing community development initiatives to build community capacity. For example, providing support to community groups through assistance in strategic planning and organisational development will build the viability and sustainability of these groups so they can contribute in a meaningful way to

projects such as the *Redcliffe Community Plan.* Another factor discussed earlier that affects the ability for people to participate in community engagement activities is the type of activities used. One of potential areas for improvement in the methodology for the *Redcliffe Community Plan* was greater consideration of how particular people groups could be more involved in the project. Groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disabilities, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were not well represented in the community engagement activities. These groups are described by Cuthill (2004, 442) as 'non-traditional' participants in these types of activities and require specially targeted community engagement techniques. Another area of improvement relates to the techniques used to engage the community and stakeholders. More sophisticated and effective processes could have been employed, like the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) and the Delphi technique, in undertaking the community engagement activities of the project.

The NGT 'can be used to … elicit information, and to determine solution options'. Nutt (1989, 363) list the following steps in the NGT process: 'Silently recording ideas; listing ideas; discussing ideas; and voting to select a priority list.' Such a structured approach giving all participants the opportunity to discuss their list of ideas not only ensures everyone can make a contribution, but it also creates an environment whereby a wider range of ideas are identified for discussion. The NGT would have been effective in some of the consultations conducted as part of the *Redcliffe Community Plan* project; at times the discussion focused too much on only a few of the relevant issues raised by only some of the participants.

The Delphi technique is a surveying process that 'systematically solicits and collates judgments' through a series of questionnaires (Nutt 1989, 352). In particular, 'the first questionnaire solicits ideas … subsequent questionnaires consolidate and feed back the ideas to the group ... until consensus is reached … or until a participant vote' (Nutt 1989, 353). This approach could have been used to engage more stakeholders in the *Redcliffe Community*

Plan process, especially bureaucrats from other levels of government who were not as well represented in the community engagement activities as originally intended. One of the main advantages of the Delphi approach is that it does not require participants to attend meetings and can be administered using electronic mediums such as email.

Whilst it was argued earlier that the *Redcliffe Community Plan* may have a limited impact on the SSS project, the value of the *Redcliffe Community Plan* into the future is largely dependent on the type of local government reform that will affect Redcliffe. It can be argued that should boundary changes or council amalgamations be proposed for the city, this document will not longer be relevant as a corporate planning tool. These types of reforms would greatly alter the nature of the community and would require the Council to revisit its corporate planning priorities. It is possible that if this did occur a similar project could be undertaken. However, boundary adjustments or an amalgamation would also seriously alter the nature of the community of interest in such a way that the methodology and approach would need to be reconsidered.

Concluding Comments

This paper has sought to explore the complexities that exist in community engagement at both the theoretical and applied levels, using the *Redcliffe Community Plan* as a salient example. Whether or not the *Redcliffe Community Plan* bears long-term fruit remains to be seen, but in the short-run it appears to have achieved its immediate objectives. Three general conclusions can be drawn from our analysis. Firstly, the success of a project of this type requires the support and commitment of councillors and senior staff alike. Since corporate planning is typically seen as an 'internal process', the decision to utilise community engagement activities must be supported by the key decision makers within the organisation. Secondly, a community visioning exercise of scale of the *Redcliffe Community Plan* requires a well-planned and documented methodology. This will enable the progress of the project to be closely monitored against the intended project aims and

objectives. Thirdly, closely associated with a well-development project methodology is the need for efficient and effective project management and adequate resources so that activities are conducted at a high standard and according to predetermined timelines in order to achieve project outcomes in a timely manner.

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