

NOT JUST A WALK IN THE PARK



There's a lot more to creating parks that are clean, green and serene as governments look into each other's backyards for lessons on how to keep community spaces in top shape, **Paul Hemsley** reports.

It's all too easy for ratepayers to forget that councils do much more than more than "rates, roads and rubbish", especially with large tracts of publicly owned land to manage in the form of parks in the suburbs and towns.

They are a crucial component in metropolitan and regional planning because of the rooted belief they provide much needed natural and open space for communities to interact, meet and socialise.

But when all the planning is consulted, said and done, it becomes the permanent duty of the council to maintain that open space as it otherwise would for roads, footpaths and nature strips.

The rates collected from communities ensure that at least there's a salary available for the council workers to cut the grass, trim the bushes and raise the signs.

But underneath that tranquil setting of an urban park environment is the reality of crucial local government management that requires finely honed skills in asset management, project management, public policy and urban planning to keep grounds in the shape they're expected to be.

A key challenge in juggling all these interconnected components is that frequently numerous issues arise that are either difficult to solve or require solutions that might be too risky to realistically implement.

In other words, the council park manager has no idea what to do.

The issue might fester in the long term if the council managers haven't ventured out of their own local government area borders and sought solutions elsewhere.

Most community members are likely to be oblivious to the management issues that councils have faced in their administrative settings like financial sustainability and asset management, but local governments have been clamouring for solutions to these woes.

Historically, councils have often depended on their own internal administrative directives about how to run parks in urban areas, but the surge in technological and communications advancements over the last decade has fostered conditions allowing councils to go beyond their own boundaries.

But a breakthrough program formed over the last decade has

created the means for councils to participate in a wider knowledge community on a global scale.

It allows organisations to upload their case studies and lets councils see what's been done and potentially implement it into their own strategies.

The project is known as 'Parkcheck' and now runs under the not-for-profit banner of 'Yardstick', which was established in New Zealand in 2002 as a benchmarking tool to collect management and planning information to measure the performance of councils' parks managers.

And while benchmarking may not grab big headlines for mayors, few would contest its value in ensuring best practice and value are delivered.

Parkcheck is a key element of Yardstick's areas of activity (the other being Leisurecheck, the group's branch that measures performance of pools and leisure facilities) and includes two "benchmarking" projects that are designed to grade performances.

The projects have been running since the inception of Yardstick, which are "Management Measures", a "quantitative measure" of how the managers and operators of leisure facilities are performing, and "Visitor Measures", a qualitative survey measuring user satisfaction against user expectations.

But the Management Measures aspect is the big attraction for councils wanting to learn from what other councils across the country and across the globe are doing to better manage their own parks.

The end result is that managers can now see another organisation in the body's annual report with a solution; and they can easily email them or call them for a copy of their documentation or policies. The relevance, savings and benefits are plain to see.

It was such a successful venture for Yardstick's founders at the national peak body the New Zealand Recreation Association and recreation consultants at Xyst Ltd that around 70 per cent of New Zealand councils have subscribed to the program.

A tender process has never been necessary for councils to participate in the project because of its subscription-based platform.

Following the program's expansion from New Zealand to Australia where it partnered with the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia (IPWEA), it now serves 35 councils across Australia in every state and extends internationally.

Yardstick project director, Jayson Kelly says Management Measures allows councils to provide and share information in "quite some detail" about a whole range of parks activities.

That includes information on the provision of parks and parks assets, financial information like cost and service delivery as well as capital works, policy and planning, sustainability and "social outcomes".

"There's a series of questions that we roll up into a standard of key performance indicators (KPIs) that members can cherry-pick to use in their own annual planning processes," Mr Kelly says.

The Parkcheck program has been pushed to the local government sector because of its need to handle its sustainability, long term financial sustainability and asset management, but this has become a problem for councils lacking the financial resources to improve these elements.

According to Mr Kelly, councils in Australia, New Zealand and worldwide have been implementing capital programs but they haven't been funding the renewal of those assets once they've been built.

Instead councils have just been maintaining them, he says.

"And so those assets have gone to the decrepit stage where most of them are falling over and communities have been struggling through rates to replace them," Mr Kelly says.

However the greater significance for councils using the sharing services of Yardstick means that parks organisations are able to demonstrate whether or not they are efficient.

Mr Kelly says they are able to set externally measured performance metrics and use Yardstick to identify where they

are not improving and have continuous business improvement plans in place.

"Essentially it's being able to see outside the square and comparing their operation with other organisations," Mr Kelly says.

He insists that it's "really valuable, leading edge" information on asset management, policy and planning.

As an illustration of sharing information, Mr Kelly cites the example of an organisation in Australia that was developing a street tree policy and all of the results were recorded against the organisation because there is no anonymous reporting.

"So with one organisation, you'll see all the other 35 or so Australian organisations that are participating, they see other organisations with a street tree strategy," he says.

He says one organisation can contact its peers and ask if they can have a copy of their street tree strategy and that this is not restricted to organisations within Australia.

Mr Kelly describes Yardstick and Parkcheck as a "big club" where Blacktown in Sydney can contact Copenhagen in Denmark if it is interested in developing a cloud-based management plan.

It is a "club" where interested parties appear to be deeply conscientious about their park management plans and eager to improve their game. Mr Kelly asserts that there haven't been any major problems with a particular council that was a challenge for Parkcheck.

"Everyone who joins up with Parkcheck are generally professionals who are not embarrassed by the fact that they're not doing well," Mr Kelly says.

He says they're looking for information to be able to justify increasing resources and to demonstrate that they're not performing well against other organisations.

"As you could imagine, it's pretty hard when you're talking around a council table saying that 'I need this, this and this' if the council doesn't understand the fact that your organisation isn't performing because they haven't looked outside the boundaries of their jurisdiction," Mr Kelly says.

As a result, Yardstick clearly identifies what is best practice and an organisation can then measure against that best practice and therefore identify how it can make improvements.

Mr Kelly illustrated another example about a council where Wingecarribee Shire Council in New South Wales used Yardstick to identify that it had a significantly lower in-house staff resource compared to other similar organisations.

"On the back of that they were able to seek funding from council for employing more staff," Mr Kelly says. **GN**

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