Multicultural Services in Local Government in Australia: An Uneven Tale of Access and Equity

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores equitable access to local government services and participation in decision-making processes for ethnic communities in Australia. The findings are from the first national survey of local government's response to the needs of diverse cultural groups. Given the current context of profound cultural diversity across Australia, local government is compelled to institute a systematic response to the needs of different cultural groups. Our research reveals a mixed response including some innovative and inclusive approaches, as well as pockets of conservativism and resistance to multiculturalism. Much more must be done to ensure that all citizens are accorded full access to local services and the decision-making processes of municipal government. Access to both is critical in the development of citizenship rights in a multicultural society.*

Key Words: access and equity, citizenship, consultation, cultural diversity, local government, multiculturalism, participation

Introduction

The development of modern Australia has been characterised by the entry of wave after wave of migrant groups. Since 1788 more than 9 million immigrants have settled in the nation (Burnley *et al.*, 1997, p. 1). Up until World War II, the majority constituted English-speaking people, principally from the UK and Ireland. After the war, Australia accepted many middle European refugees. There were also substantial flows of Greek, Italian and other southern European migrants. In the 1970s and 1980s large numbers of South East Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants settled in the country. At the beginning of the 21st century Australia has one of the most culturally diverse populations in the world.

In this paper we discuss local government's response to this cultural diversity. In a context where almost nothing was known about the extent of incorporation of local, multiculturally sensitive policies, our first step was to survey every local government in Australia requesting a 'self assessment' of their work. We were particularly interested to analyse how policies and practices had been developed around the following issues:

- equitable access to services and decision-making processes;
- symbolic representation, local identity and citizenship;
- inter-communal relations and ethnic tolerance.

This paper reports the findings in the first of these policy realms: equitable access to services and participation in local decision-making processes. This embraces a range of specific policies and programmes, including language services, staff training and recruitment, outreach to excluded groups, and community political participation in the processes of local government. Our aim here is to outline the extent to which Australian local government has embraced access and equity policy. A central assumption underpinning our analyses has been that multicultural policies and programmes have a key bearing on the extent and depth of citizenship in Australia. We conceive of citizenship as the political circumstances that determine an individual's ability to exercise their capacities and to pursue collective endeavour (including group identity and action). To our mind, this makes citizenship a form of political identity (Mouffe, 1992, p. 231). In the language of political theorists this unevenly distributed status determines 'the right to have rights' or the 'rights to the city' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 174; Isin and Wood, 1999, p. 161). Citizenship is an enabling political status that influences the 'competent membership' of, or active participation in, various political fields (Mouffe, 1992, pp. 235–237), including those within local government.

All 666 local councils across Australia (excluding the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory) were invited to respond to the survey, which requested information about policies and practices for addressing cultural diversity. Five separate questionnaires for each council targeted key personnel in Administration (General Managers), Community Services, Town Planning, Engineering and Health departments. Our response rate, measured in terms of at least one questionnaire being returned from a council, was close to 50 per cent. Thirty-eight per cent of councils in the State of New South Wales (NSW) and 45 per cent of Victorian councils returned all five questionnaires. Councils with greater proportions of residents from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) were generally more likely to return a response to the survey. Whereas 71.3 per cent of those councils with 10 or more per cent residents born in a non-English speaking country (NESC) returned a completed survey, only 44.3 per cent of those with less than 10 per cent NESC did so. Also, there was a lesser response rate from very small councils. We received many letters from such authorities, sometimes about to undergo amalgamation, apologising for not having the staff or the departmental structures to complete the questionnaires. It is likely that our sample of councils would be slightly more interested in, and sympathetic towards issues of multiculturalism than the entire group of Australian local government. Respondents were also asked to forward relevant documents on multicultural policies and indigenous/non-indigenous relations. Both quantitative and qualitative responses were received and analysed.

To set the context for the research, we begin with an overview of the theoretical and political challenges of local cultural diversity. This is followed by a brief history of federal and state policy approaches to access and equity. The rest of the paper presents detailed research findings on the different mechanisms currently being used at the local government level to address access and equity.

The Theoretical and Political Challenges of Local Cultural Diversity

There are many political constraints to an incorporation of multiculturalism across all spheres of government. In part, these limits are under-pinned by the rhetoric of civil rights, specifically the mantra of equality of treatment. Critics of multiculturalism use this discourse to oppose the altering or sensitising of service delivery, arguing that people should be treated the same. In political theory this has been termed the dilemma of difference (Minow, 1990). That is, the democratic discourse of equal treatment appears to be in tension with the ideal of culturally flexible governance.

Opponents of multiculturalism in Australia have drawn upon this theoretical tension to oppose multiculturalism (see MacGregor, 1997, pp. 46–47). The current Federal Government has replicated this rhetoric with reference to a so-called 'politics of division' (Howard, 1995, pp. 5, 17, 43). In this conservative political context, governance that is sensitive to cultural difference has been represented as culturally divisive. Ethno-specific service provision has been portrayed as 'special treatment', and vilification legislation dismissed as a project of 'political correctness'. In this political environment social security services have been removed for most new migrants, the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research dismantled, and 'English as a Second Language' funding has been drastically cut back. Isin and Wood (1999, p. 63) referred to this rhetoric as the "reasonable-sounding argument that serves to perpetuate racial, ethnic, gender and sexual divides (not just differences) and hierarchies".

Similarly, some staff of local councils in the present study insisted that they treat everyone equally, in preference to helping different groups in need of special assistance. Of course, it is clear that residents are unequally empowered in their access to services. Barriers to services, information and participation, are related to language competency and education. Blackwell concluded that "lack of English is the greatest barrier to access to services and participation in the local community" (Blackwell, 1994, p. 27). Other barriers include cultural under-standings of the locality and of the way bureaucracies operate. In terms of town planning, Qadeer (1994, p. 190) argued that it was evident "that planning goals and standards reflect values of the historically dominant group". A formative step in incorporating multiculturalism at the local government level is the recognition that "the public interest is composite rather than unitary" (Qadeer, 1994, p. 187).

According to traditional theories of democracy, citizenship has generally been considered to be a unitary political status afforded to people in a more or less equal manner. For example, theories of liberal democracy assume a neutral state, which aims to assist the pursuit of self-interest among more or less equally empowered citizens (see Isin and Wood, 1999, pp. 7–8). Our view of citizenship and democratic process breaks with these models in at least two important respects. First, we do not accept that individuals are in any sense equally empowered to participate in political processes, being cognisant of the structural effect of various regimes of oppression, including elitism, racism, sexism and homophobia. Second, a diverse citizenry demands a diverse polity, including varied means by which citizens can actively participate, or pursue their 'rights to the city'. These two recognitions draw us closer to the models of 'radical democratic citizenship' espoused by Mouffe and others (Mouffe, 1993, p. 71; Isin

and Wood, 1999, p. 22). Radical democratic citizenship in a context of cultural diversity demands more than the simple assimilation of minority groups within extant political processes. There is an a priori requirement for reform, the dismantling of barriers to political participation, and weeding-out systemic discrimination. But radical democratic citizenship entails a re-casting of the state, and the citizenry, and this is as applicable locally as it is at the level of the nation-state.

Accordingly, equity refers to the recognition of different needs and to varied modes of political participation. The council quoted below ultimately recognised that cultural sensitivity and flexibility were essential for ensuring wide local citizenship. As we show in this paper, the development of better mechanisms for access to local government resources by people of NESB is essential to widening and deepening local citizenship.

> It is about a new way of thinking and acting ... it is about working from a social justice framework ... Access is about providing all our citizens with the same opportunities to maximise quality of life objectives. Equity ... is about recognising that although all citizens are meant to be equal in their rights and in the way they are treated by government, they are in fact very different in their needs, interests and values. Treating everybody the same simply perpetuates existing inequalities ... intervention must provide appropriate rules, programs and service provision to combat barriers on social markers concerned with language, culture, race or religion, [and] gender, if we are to provide a socially just customer service commitment to our NESB community. (Liverpool City Council, 1993, p. 2)

One of the recognised limitations of the radical democratic citizenship model is that much of this theorising remains too abstract. Urban researchers and geographers are well placed to ground such theorising (Painter, 2000). There is an obvious spatiality to citizenship. "The resources available for the development of radical democratic citizenship vary markedly across space" (Painter, 2000, p. 7). Citizenship is spatially uneven for cultural groups. This is quite clear from the findings presented in this paper. Some councils recognise diverse needs, others insist upon treating all citizens equally (as if they were equally politically empowered). Citizenship is spatially contained and conditioned. Our view is that the uneven adoption of multicultural policy in local government, and specifically access and equity policy, has an important impact upon the spatial conditioning of citizenship. For example, the pursuit of radical democratic citizenship in local government requires language systems that cater for a linguistically diverse and uneven citizenry. Another requirement is varied and dynamic political processes that enable widespread and meaningful community participation in local government. Both of these depend upon an a priori recognition that the local citizenry is multiple and that the processes and rationale of the local state must be re-cast.

Analysis of data from the 1996 Census reveals widespread patterns of cultural diversity at the local government level across Australia (Burnley, 1998). There are few regions that have insignificant representations of migrant or indigenous communities. The major urban areas have the largest NESB immigrant populations in both a proportional and an absolute sense. Every local government area in metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne has a significant level of cultural

diversity. Rural areas do have lower levels of cultural diversity. However, persons of a NESB are present in all but a few extremely remote local government areas (LGAs). Furthermore, indigenous people are located throughout rural and remote Australia. Given such profound and widespread levels of cultural diversity, local government is compelled to institute a systematic response to the needs of the different groups who live and work in their regions. Local government rejection of multiculturalism is a means of selectively determining—either overtly or implicitly—who is and is not a local citizen.

Federal and State Policy Approaches towards Access and Equity

Even though Australia has had a diverse population for many years, its political institutions have until recently, tended to operate as if society was homogeneously Anglo-Celtic. The Federal Government's *White Australia Policy* was actively supported by both major political parties throughout the first three-quarters of the 20th century (Jordens, 1997). This was coupled with the attitude that migrant people were expected to 'assimilate' to the dominant Anglo cultural norms. In addition, there was a failure to recognise the existence of indigenous Australians, who were not even considered to be legal citizens of the nation until the Referendum of 1967.

Although demographic diversity in Australia has increased rapidly since World War II, it was first acknowledged politically in 1973 with the publication of *A Multi-Cultural Society for the Future* (Grassby, 1973). This statement emphasised the nation's ethnic heterogeneity and cultural diversity and was further developed in *Multiculturalism for All Australians: Our Developing Neighbourhood* (Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs, 1982). Here a model of cultural pluralism was advocated, based upon principles of social cohesion, cultural identity, equality of opportunity, and full participation in Australian society.

The *Galbally Report* was another landmark national statement on multiculturalism (Review of Migrant Services and Programs, 1978). This laid the foundation for a significant change in the official construction of national identity: away from the racist monoculture of a White Australia, towards a multiplicitous understanding of the nation as multicultural. The *Galbally Report* established four core principles of federal multicultural policy:

- maintenance of cultural heritage;
- equal opportunity and access to services;
- modified mainstream services with appropriate ethno-specific programmes;
- client consultation and community self-help.

The latter three principles entrenched access and equity and political participation as core components of multiculturalism.

In 1986, the *Jupp Report* recommended the establishment of an Office of Ethnic Affairs to oversee the implementation of an 'Access and Equity Strategy' (Committee of Review of Migrant and Multicultural Programs and Services, 1986). Subsequently, the Hawke Labor Government established an Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) which had responsibility for co-ordinating the inculcation of access and equity principles throughout the federal bureaucracy. The 'Access and Equity Strategy' advocated that the above-mentioned principles guide "all aspects of the structure of Government programs" (OMA, 1991,

p. viii). However, clients and client-advocates have found access and equity to be an abstract ideal which government agencies tended to tack on to programme formulations as an "afterthought" (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1996, pp. 21–22, 49; Kang, 1991). An OMA annual report on the 'Access and Equity Strategy' concluded that "there are obvious discrepancies between agency statements of their performance and community perceptions of that performance as expressed at the community and client consultations" (OMA, 1994, p. 93).

At the state level, similar problems of access and equity policy implementation occurred. In NSW for example, under the 'Access and Equity Strategy', all government agencies were initially required to produce 'Ethnic Affairs Policy Statements' (EAPS). The aim was to "ensure that all members of the NSW community, regardless of their language, ethnic, racial or cultural background, had equal access to Government services, and that such services were culturally appropriate and non-discriminatory" (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW, 1990, p. 6). In March 1993, the EAPS Program was replaced by the *NSW Charter of Principles for a Culturally Diverse Society* (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW, 1993). The *Charter* required departments and agencies to produce a 'Statement of Intent' on how they planned to "diversify their policies and activities" and implement access and equity principles (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW, 1993, p. 1).

Access and equity issues have also been addressed at the local government level. In 1987, the NSW Department of Local Government and the Ethnic Affairs Commission helped co-ordinate a pilot 'Local Government Ethnic Affairs Policy Statement' (LEAPS) Project. The broad based goals were to assist local councils "develop new models of service provision" and assist "people disadvantaged by linguistic and cultural barriers" (OMA, 1989, p. 24). LEAPS tended to concentrate on improving translation and information services, liaison with local migrant resource centres (MRCs) and staff training (Liverpool City Council, 1992, pp. 10–13). However, many LEAPS initiatives were only selectively taken up and even more were tied to the short-term appointment of an 'ethnic worker' (Blackwell, 1994, p. 61).

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs (HRSCCA, 1996, p. 32) found local government's commitment to NESB constituents to be "patchy". Access and equity had only been recently considered, the level of consultation with NESB residents varied, and councils generally lacked data on the cultural composition of their own localities (HRSCCA, 1996, pp. 32–33). Community groups were particularly critical of the poor and uneven access and equity implementation (HRSCCA, 1996, p. 43). This can be partly attributed to a lack of input by the community due to poor consultation mechanisms, ironically a blatant contradiction of access and equity policy (OMA, 1993). Participation is a key aspect of access and equity, and together with access to services, and the related reduction of barriers, it is essential for wide and full citizenship.

The voluntary nature of the 'Access and Equity Strategy', EAPS and LEAPS has been highlighted as a general cause of the failure to institute the necessary reforms for equitable access to mainstream services (Pebaque, 1991, pp. 10–11). NSW is the only Australian state which currently has significant legislation in place to encourage local government to act responsively towards its diverse constituents. The *Local Government Act* requires councils in NSW to report

annually on programmes undertaken to promote services for people with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (*Local Government Act, 1993 (NSW)*: Sections 8(1) and 428 (2j)). These legislative stipulations have compelled many organisations to confront the need for reform, and to embrace, rather than shrink from cultural difference. Other NSW laws acknowledge local government as a significant player in service provision for different ethnic and cultural groups. It also recognises the important role of encouraging participation in the processes of governance, especially through effective consultative techniques. Most recently a new regulation was added to the NSW *Local Government Act* mandating councils to develop a detailed social plan integrating issues relating to indigenous and NESB people (*Local Government (General) Amendment (Community Social Plans) Regulation 1998 (NSW)*).

No other Australian state has introduced specific legislation requiring local government to address multicultural issues. However, we found some significant policy initiatives including the 'Local Area Multicultural Partnerships Program' (LAMPP) in Queensland (Local Government Association of Queensland, 2000). This is innovative in that it offers resources to councils willing to become involved. Documents such as the 'Principles for Tasmania's Culturally Diverse Society' (Tasmanian Government, 2000) and 'WA One' (WA Office of Multicultural Interests, 1995) provide guidance for those states. The latter includes a 'Living in Harmony' community relations strategy focusing on local government, and 'Valuing Diversity Guidelines' to assist both state and local authorities develop culturally appropriate services.

There have been substantial recognised deficiencies in the application of the 'Access and Equity Strategy' over the last decade and a half. Nevertheless, the access and equity project is a just and necessary one. It has caused many institutions, including local government, to overtly recognise their diverse constituency, to integrate this recognition into corporate level planning, and to engage with requisite issues of service delivery. These have the potential to move Australian local government towards radical democratic citizenship.

Access and Equity in Practice

In our national survey of local government, respondents were asked to identify the ways in which they endeavour to make their services accessible and equitable for both indigenous people and those from a NESB. Mechanisms which enhance access and equity range from culturally sensitive employment programmes to specific staff training, the use of translation and interpreter services, communication strategies, and data gathering and review techniques. We included questions about the utilisation of these different mechanisms and found that councils are making *ad hoc* use of such initiatives, with no systematic approach evident. The rest of the paper discusses the research findings in detail, concluding with suggestions for a way forward.

Staff Issues: Employment of Specialists and Skills Training

The recruitment and training of staff is a key area in developing accessible and equitable service provision (Blackwell, 1994, p. 12). Local government cannot build its cultural sensitivity if it does not have appropriately skilled officers. Of

those councils surveyed, only 11 per cent of General Managers had hired specialist personnel such as disability workers, community development officers and ethnic and indigenous liaison officers to deal with specific ethnic community needs. There were, however, some council-wide attempts to expand the diversity of staff by providing a culturally aware and sensitive work environment. Eighty-four per cent of respondent councils had equal employment opportunity (EEO) policies. These aim to remove structural and attitudinal impediments to employment, address biased practices and ensure that organisational decisions are fair (Blackwell, 1994, p. 13). EEO also encompasses policy and practices which recognise and nurture the diversity of staff who can then deliver the best possible service to a multicultural citizenry.

The workforce in some councils was representative of the local ethnic population. Nevertheless, only 18 per cent of councils reported having culturally sensitive leave requirements. Twenty-two per cent had instituted policies for recognising overseas qualifications and 13 per cent had affirmative action practices aimed to advance the career development of officers from an indigenous or NESB. Some councils used customer service teams with bilingual staff, and others had access to language aides and used them when necessary. Councils also reported working in partnership with migrant resource and neighbourhood centres to improve their sensitivity to the needs of different community groups living in their region. On average, incorporation of the above programmes was confined to around one in five of the councils that responded to the survey.

General Managers estimated that 25 per cent of staff were schooled in access and equity issues. Respondents identified a range of training activities including education in cross cultural communication, customer service courses and individually tailored programmes to raise awareness levels of the needs of ethnic and indigenous communities. Some training was done in-house and some by specialists and government departments. There did not appear to be any institutionalised access and equity training programmes. Most access and equity programmes were offered on an informal and 'as needed' basis. This is problematic if local government is to adequately address access and equity issues across the breadth of its service delivery. The survey revealed that Community Services staff had the best knowledge of access and equity issues (77 per cent either excellent or good), followed by Town Planning and Health both with 59 per cent, and Engineering with 53 per cent. While this is a reasonable indication that access and equity training programmes are having some effect, there remain many council employees who have a very poor understanding of these principles.

Use of Interpreting and Related Services

Councils have a responsibility to ensure that they communicate to all residents about available services. Blackwell (1994, p. 27) asserts that the use of council resources, time and money can be maximised if there is adequate communication. A manager of a Town Planning department in Sydney similarly noted that:

> It is important for Council to know [the] composition and languages of its local area so appropriate communication strategies are put in place

and all residents have equal access to Council services. (Town Planner respondent, metropolitan council NSW)

However, the survey results indicated that interpreting and translation services in Australian local government were grossly underutilised. Community Services departments had the highest rates of use, although only 9 per cent used interpreting services at least once a week. A mere 4 per cent of Town Planning and 2 per cent of Engineering and Health departments called on interpreting services once or more each week. Only 13 per cent of Community Services departments had a dedicated budget allocation for the purchase of interpreting and translation services. In Health departments the figure was 9 per cent, and in Town Planning and Engineering, only 6 and 3 per cent, respectively. The underutilisation of language services mirrors these low levels of financial planning for their use. It may also reflect a hesitancy to develop programmes which target specific groups. As one community services officer stated:

> They [councils] will do the minimum, they will do what's required for the absolute minimum bottom line. That's been true of the three local councils that I have worked in, really. Anything that points it out as being there on the front counter or there publicly is not really promoted. Doing things in languages was a real battle. (Community Services respondent, metropolitan council NSW)

Although councils reported the availability of a broad range of translation services, these were only used sparingly, reflecting the situation with interpreting services (Table 1). Community Services departments had the best overall rate of useage, although in the case of multilingual pamphlets Health departments reported the highest rate of use (36 per cent). Together with community notice boards, bilingual staff, telephone interpreter service and on site interpreters, these were the most frequently used services. However, even with these, the use was not nearly as great as expected given the relatively low cost of these services. Only a minority of councils had instituted programmes for accrediting bilingual staff as language aides (Table 1) and a low 4 per cent of Engineering departments reported that they provided notifications of new works in languages other than English.

Some councils took a very hard-nosed and exclusionary line regarding the provision of translation and interpreter services, suggesting that it is the responsibility of immigrants themselves to learn English. As one respondent stated, "Everyone in Australia should be able to speak and read English. Those that can't should be educated" (Town Planner respondent, rural council South Australia). Given the extent of diversity across the nation, combined with federal government cuts to English language courses, these are unreasonable expectations, and they serve to exacerbate barriers to accessing services. This again demonstrates the earlier theoretical point that equality of treatment (e.g. council services in English only) can generate unequal access and citizenship.

The adoption of a plain English policy for councils' official correspondence, documents and regulations is an integral part of any broad-based communication strategy. Our research revealed that 61 per cent of Town Planning, 40 per cent of Community Services, 52 per cent of Health and 50 per cent of Engineering departments had instituted plain English practices. Of course, perceptions of

Table 1. Use of interpreting and translating services, by council department, Australia

Use of interpreting/translating systems	Council department			
	Town Planning (%)	Community Services (%)	Health (%)	Engineering/ Technical Services (%)
On-site interpreters	12	17	16	10
Language identification charts	3	7	5	4
Telephone interpreter service	11	24	16	10
Multilingual signs	13	2	19	12
Bilingual staff	24	29	24	26
Multilingual pamphlets	18	35	36	16
Accredited language aides	3	6	4	3
Multilingual letters	10	11	8	8
Dual handset phones at counters	2	4	3	1
Community notice boards	17	34	8	14

Source: 1997 Survey of Local Government and Multiculturalism.
Note: valid cases only.

plain English vary, and many government documents can unwittingly include jargon and unnecessary technical language.

Councils also reported getting assistance from outside sources as a way of developing their communication strategies. Information was frequently gleaned from those councils with high profile ethnic and/or indigenous populations. Respondents mentioned the assistance of voluntary regional organisations of councils and how this facilitated information sharing. Local government publications from the state and commonwealth also provided useful material in the following areas: development control and planning processes; food handling for different ethnic restaurants; requirements under different food legislation, particularly food hygiene; immunisation; maternal and child health; home care for elderly residents; waste and recycling; swimming and surfing; tree preservation orders; and rates notices. Nevertheless, only 5 per cent of Town Planning, 14 per cent of Health, 8 per cent of Community Services and 2 per cent of Engineering departments identified external agencies and resources as important. Accordingly, opportunities for implementing low-cost multicultural initiatives are not being pursued as well as they might be, which further raises the need for greater information sharing across government levels and between different agencies.

Expanding Usage of Council Services

The survey results revealed a wealth of different ways in which councils tried to reach specific cultural groups. These programmes varied across departments with Town Planning, Health, Community Services and Engineering providing the most interesting and in some cases, innovative examples of practice.

Town planners were working through the consultation process to specifically target different cultural groups (12.5 per cent). One Sydney council planner stated, "In exhibiting planning related material we target the ethnic groups

which would be affected and prepare translations or use language aides to ensure they have the opportunity to comment." Other town planners identified particular cultural groups to consult (for example, indigenous people, gays, and those with disabilities) if there was a development proposal judged to directly impact upon them. Town planners also used special programmes and officers, cultural or community networks, general customer service improvements in accessibility, and in some cases, the development of cultural and economic policy statements.

Many Health departments had been trying to increase immunisation rates through the distribution of multilingual educational brochures in child-care centres, schools and places of employment. About 16 per cent of council Health departments targeted specific community groups. In some areas, local ethnic community workers assisted with initiatives to increase immunisation rates. Departments reported the provision of training in food handling for small businesses, focusing on specific ethnic groups. Rubbish removal, recycling and waste reduction were also areas of concern and multilingual pamphlets were frequently used to help educate the community about these issues.

Community Services departments reached local groups in a variety of ways. Survey respondents cited examples of where they fund training for different service providers to help raise levels of cultural awareness. Other programmes included the employment of specialist staff to research, understand and target disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Some councils provided part-time staff to work in the community, as well as with different organisations, such as migrant resource centres. These initiatives helped generate local NESB and indigenous community profiles, a recognition of different needs, and the identification of appropriate services across the whole of council. Particularly disadvantaged groups (e.g. NESB and indigenous elderly and women, and smaller cultural groups) were targeted to improve their access to council services and facilities. However, interest in reaching out to these specific groups was confined to only 20 to 30 per cent of councils. For example, senior citizens of NESB were the subject of special programmes in only one in five councils. These programmes included fostering the involvement of different ethnic groups in senior citizen centres, providing special recreational activities and supplying culturally appropriate home delivered meals. Educational courses for particular ethnic groups were also run by Community Services departments. These ranged from anti-drug programmes and women's health advice to videos about local government processes and activities. Local libraries were often a focal point for the dissemination of information packages and the provision of multilingual material.

Very few Engineering departments (only 8 per cent) targeted groups traditionally disadvantaged in accessing services and facilities. Mechanisms to expand programme and service usage included consultations, networking forums and special committees to help officers gain the views of indigenous and NESB immigrant groups. Brochures were produced in community languages to inform local residents of the availability, and means of accessing council services, as well as education programmes in road and vehicular safety (for example, providing multilingual instructional brochures to increase child restraint use in cars). Traffic and parking proposals were sometimes advertised in other languages and children were targeted in an effort to reduce pedestrian and bicycle accidents.

Table 2. Councils that had set targets to expand service usage by all cultural groups in locality, by council department, Australia

Targets set to expand service usage by all cultural groups in locality	Council department			
	Health (%)	Community Services (%)	Town Planning (%)	Engineering/ Technical Services (%)
Yes	10.5	30.1	3.9	2.6
No	89.5	69.9	96.1	97.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: 1997 Survey of Local Government and Multiculturalism.
Note: valid cases only.

Few councils had established regular community input from indigenous and ethnic groups. Such formal contacts can promote the involvement of indigenous and NESB people in developing culturally appropriate services as well as encouraging their participation in the management of services and programmes, and the development of policy and legislative responses. Only one-fifth of respondent councils had regular formal contact with local ethnic organisations (22 per cent), religious leaders (21.3 per cent), migrant resource centres (16.1 per cent), and local indigenous organisations (25 per cent).

Some councils set targets for expanding usage levels of their programmes by all community groups. These initiatives were most likely located within Community Services departments, and were rare within Town Planning and Engineering (Table 2). The results in Table 2 paint a disappointing picture of council attempts to expand service usage for people from traditionally excluded groups. Without remedial and purposeful action to reach out, many such people will remain ostracised from council services. Such exclusion is a reflection of the flawed 'equality of treatment' rhetoric which has the practical effect of narrowing citizenship.

Information Gathering Techniques

Data collection is a key aspect of local government multicultural policy development, practice implementation and review. We asked councils about their use of different techniques to assess diversity levels. An understanding of diversity is critical if a council is to gain insights into alternative perspectives on local issues. Not only does a council have to know who makes up its community, it needs to closely monitor service usage levels. The national survey posed questions about the review mechanisms used by local government.

A majority of councils (64 per cent) used Australian Bureau of Statistics figures to develop a better understanding of the people who live and work in their areas. As well as traditional research and data collection techniques, a variety of mechanisms were employed to gather alternative perspectives on local issues. Directories of religious and ethnic community organisations were reported by just under half of all respondents as useful for identifying particular community representatives. Access and equity implementation guides (for example, Black-

well, 1994) also assisted with ideas about inclusionary practices and policy development.

A formal review of whether programmes to expand usage are working is essential. Some councils had institutionalised review mechanisms which involved examining and reporting on census data, as well as conducting regular user needs surveys, gathering customer feedback and collecting client statistics. Surveys were used to generate specific input on a proposed facility (for example, open space) or service (for example, home meal delivery). In some cases, an issue was examined in relation to the needs of different cultural groups (for example, domestic violence).

Although regular reviews of who uses department services by ethnicity are an essential part of council practice, our research revealed that such reviews were rare. Only 2 per cent of Town Planning and 3 per cent of Engineering departments conducted such evaluations. Community Services and Health were slightly better, with 17 and 11 per cent, respectively, undertaking regular reviews. Without a systemic understanding of department service use, particularly low usage by some communities, it is very difficult to measure the success of programmes. Excluded groups can remain hidden from the policy realm. In the absence of data on community profiles, as well as service usage by ethnicity, it is difficult to argue for the allocation of additional resources to reach out to members of excluded groups. If these service gaps remain hidden this will confine local citizenship.

Opening up Council Services and Processes to the Community

Participation techniques are now widely advocated for use in Australian local government (Sarkissian *et al.*, 1997; Carson and Gelber, 2001). However, the rhetoric of participation is sometimes used without special commitment to empowering the community (Filippeli, 1989). The act of asking people for their views on plans, policies, programme design and development proposals, does not guarantee that opinions are carefully considered nor incorporated into the decision-making process. Neither can it be assumed that all community groups feel comfortable using formal or established participation techniques. This can result in a frustrating and alienating process.

The national survey revealed a substantive level of use of various participation techniques. Mechanisms included the use of liaison officers (39 per cent of councils), forums (59 per cent), workshops (54 per cent) and advisory/consultative committees (73 per cent). Councils utilised a wide range of localities to facilitate communication with different cultural groups. The sites used included local libraries, community centres, social and sporting clubs, post offices and banks, religious organisations, ethnic day schools, child-care centres, and ethnic print media and radio. Special programmes and officers were also employed, as were cultural or community networks, general customer service improvements in accessibility and in some cases, the development of cultural and economic policy statements. Consulting with indigenous communities was achieved through Aboriginal liaison committees. Notwithstanding the existence of these laudable programmes, a considerable proportion of councils admitted having little or no client input (of whatever ethnicity) into the development of new programmes and policy. This included 19 per cent of Health departments, 18 per

Table 3. Local government self ratings of cultural sensitivity and flexibility of service provisions, by council department, Australia

Council department	Excellent (%)	Good (%)	Poor (%)	Very poor (%)	Total (%)
General Manager	7.4	65.1	23.7	3.7	100
Town Planning	7.2	71.1	18.5	3.2	100
Community Services	9.7	71.7	17.3	1.3	100
Health	7.6	67.2	23.7	1.5	100
Engineering/Technical Services	7.3	69.1	21.5	2.0	100
All departments[a]	8.0	69.7	20.0	2.0	100

Source: 1997 Survey of Local Government and Multiculturalism.

Note: valid cases only.

[a]Excludes General Manager responses.

cent of Engineering, 13 per cent of Town Planning and 11 per cent of Community Services departments.

Council meetings are where formal decisions are made and it is important that members of all community groups are encouraged to participate at this level. Around one in five councils actively encouraged indigenous people (22 per cent) and people of a NESB (18 per cent) to attend council meetings. Strategies of inclusion encompassed personally approaching and inviting members of generally excluded communities to participate. Some councils encouraged NESB and indigenous individuals to stand for election to become councillors. Information about council meetings can be distributed through the ethnic media, particularly if the issues to be discussed and voted on are particularly relevant or culturally sensitive. Information about new council programmes or policies was distributed through the ethnic media by one-fifth of Community Services departments. These types of formal involvement foster the potential for greater participation of members of such groups in the central decision-making role of local government.

The Success of Access and Equity Programmes

We asked councils across Australia to judge the success of their access and equity programmes. Most respondents reported, perhaps not surprisingly, that they had responded positively to diversity (Table 3). But over one-fifth of all council departments self-assessed their cultural sensitivity as poor or very poor. In terms of self-evaluating the success of their access and equity programmes, Community Services departments put themselves ahead of other departments (Table 3). The departments of General Manager, Health, and Engineering accorded themselves the lowest average performances in this regard.

In relation to overcoming barriers experienced by indigenous communities trying to access council services, only 5 per cent of General Managers believed that there had been significant improvements. A total of 48 per cent of General Managers reported no change, and 31 per cent considered that there was some improvement. In relation to barriers faced by NESB communities, 4 per cent of councils felt they had made significant improvements, 22 per

cent some improvement, and 58 per cent no change. So while most council Managers thought their policies to be culturally sensitive and flexible, most could not declare that their programmes had expanded access for members of NESB cultural groups.

Conclusion

Our research points to the necessity for change across all levels of government to ensure that local services are equitable and accessible for all citizens (Thompson *et al.*, 1998). Part of this change involves further research as well as practical approaches to policy development and implementation. In particular, we have been interested in finding and assessing locally based initiatives that are reaching immigrant and indigenous groups. We are also concerned about the inadequate funding mechanisms available at the local government level and the way in which money is distributed. Resource kits to assist in both policy development and practical programme implementation must also be researched and devised for use by local councils. A coordinated, systematic and committed programme of supporting access and equity by all local citizens must be seen as a cornerstone of local government democracy, supported at the state and federal level.

There is a problem in maintaining multicultural programmes within local government. Innovative programmes can disappear when a project worker's contract expires, or when an ethnic liaison officer is transferred to another council department (Blackwell, 1994, p. 61), or a new council is elected with different political priorities. An overall finding from our survey is that councils are not building on each other's work. Nor are they readily sharing information and strategies as much as they could. The sharing of information on innovative programmes and good practice is a relatively low-cost initiative. The failure to capitalise on sharing and networking detracts from lasting institutional transformation and unnecessarily drains limited public resources. The irony here is that many council officers have complained about the lack of adequate resourcing of access and equity policy development and implementation (Dunn *et al.*, 2001, pp. 2489–90).

The principle of access and equity refers to fair provisions to meet service demand. It also involves expanding demand to those who have no knowledge of available services, or who experience some other barrier to access. Although our research uncovered many creative access and equity programmes to address and celebrate local cultural diversity, the survey data reveal a less encouraging general picture. There is a very uneven commitment to implementing policies and programmes of inclusion to ensure that people from different cultural backgrounds are afforded the opportunity to participate in the processes of local governance. Given the widespread levels of cultural diversity across the country, a more comprehensive response is demanded. Not only should councils systematically develop an awareness of the nature of their local diversity, they have to identify and abandon discriminatory and iniquitous practices in the provision of services and facilities. Even in those areas which have lower percentages of indigenous or NESB groups cultural sensitivity and flexibility is required. The argument that the principles of equality preclude such sensitivity is a cynical theoretical position that reinforces and generates inequality.

Acknowledgements

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