

Align your business plan with local council policies and objectives

The following is an edited transcript of a presentation made by Andrew Overton from Overton Creative Consulting at the Regional Public Galleries Strategic Planning Seminar held on 20 March 2015 at Art Gallery of NSW.

I have been asked to share my experience and knowledge on how business plans benefit from being aligned with your council's broader policies and objectives. Everything we understand about arts and culture, in its broadest sense, can form part of the fabric of local government decision making and the community's expectations.

Research the local council policies and plans

Local planning is informed by local circumstances, priorities and resources. Community needs, values and experiences define the priorities and can contribute to a very broad range of outcomes including urban regeneration, employment opportunities, safer and more liveable communities and improving community wellbeing.

The current [Integrated Planning and Reported Framework](#) is mandated to councils to ensure there is an established Local Area Planning process. The framework includes Social and Community Plans, Land Use Plans, the Health Plans, the Local Environmental Plans and even locality based plans.

Some councils will have a plethora of plans and policies, others will have a set of core documents that outline their underlying goals and directions. In most cases, there is a shared perspective being brought to issues, concerns and ideas that already are on your council's current agenda. Your organisation simply finds and maximises this overlap by actively researching these plans and finding connectivity. Being able to mind-map connections between plans and policies is a valuable process in developing your organisation's business plan.

This systematic process is also a healthy, grounded experience to go through, and a way to reaffirm and consolidate a lot of your thoughts and programs. Engage with local decision makers. Be prepared to dig. Be prepared to have conversations and have your decisions questioned. Being strategic is often re-asking simple questions: Why are we currently doing what we're doing? What should we be doing? As Steve Jobs once said, 'Deciding what not to do is just as important as deciding what to do.'

Developing a strategic plan is about recognising that all parts of the organisation can have an effect on the viability of your cultural activity and its contribution to community concerns and priorities. It's about finding the connection points and the internal partnerships. How might you leverage some of your resources to get the best arts and cultural outcomes for your centre?

The best way to start is often to target planners in council, individuals who are at the forefront of council's big picture concerns. They also have access to good statistics and data that will help you understand the local issues.

Documents like the Community Strategic Plan and Statutory Land Use documents, like the Development Control Plans, will have interlinking and key strategic directions and visions that will capture your council's and community's priorities. These priorities are often presented as key



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directions and will directly align with your council's operational plans and the budget decision making processes.

It's important to dovetail neatly with these themes as the development of these plans have been researched, underpinned by evidence and are reported on at regular intervals with agreed measurements of success.

Key strategic directions will often include broader sustainability outcomes such as leadership, brand, community diversity, biodiversity, technology, education, liveability, economic investment, innovative and creative outcomes. Each of these directions gives a clear entry point into further investigation because of their sub-plans like tourism, festivals, and cultural plans. Collectively and individually these strategies and directions provide your arts business plan with a valuable way to validate new opportunities, programs and activities for the future.

Furthermore, digging deeper into the next layer of plans; the Social Plans, the Youth Development Strategies, the Ageing and Cultural Diversity and Disability Action Plans, will often assist you in interpreting and endorsing your Arts Centres' key target markets. This in turn has the capacity for you to concentrate your artistic program around these key participants and audiences.

Use language consistent with local council

One of the most critical aspects of making your plan relevant and credible is the transfer of consistent language to articulate these key policy directions. Hook into words or phrases that complement your council's corporate values or planning visions

The long accepted planning vocabulary and its assumptions are important. Whilst you shouldn't use government clichés and obtuse language (e.g. Kevin Rudd's 'programmatically specific'), you should embrace the lexicon of government to deliver confidence to non-art readers.

I was in a workshop last Tuesday with a council working on some of their guiding statements and a staff member questioned how these descriptive words would help them. A senior manager replied, "These words are essential. The language is essential to council being able to understand what

the arts centre does. These words become an easy and understandable way I can continually advocate strongly for the arts centre moving forward."

Often what is required is a set of universally understood and communicable phrases that can make all the difference. These are probably best reflected in the set of guiding principles. You can also draw out this language by mapping common associations across your research.

Why this process is important

An arts centre business plan needs to consider beyond the day-to-day activities and integrate its policy and actions into a cohesive whole.

Mapping directions such as visions, values, key drivers and issues, contributes to a framework that is consistent and effective by having an agreed purpose, goals and targeted strategies

This helps council understand the interrelationship between their activities and that of the arts centre. The resulting business plan is also a tool to prove links with other spheres of government in order to increase opportunities in partnership and funding.

If your business plan is interlinked with council's vision and priorities, it will also have the ability to reflect and measure the impact of your activity on the sustainability of the community including specific outcomes such as personal growth, lifelong learning, even social and cultural change.

The business plan effectively becomes your tool to use and define relevance and success. It also ensures the broad scope of your influence as the art centre.

Summary

- Meet and talk with colleagues and peers and share that information.
- Use a mind map or visual process to chart and connect these strategic links, issues and key trends.
- Assess both the internal and external environments.
- Identify your strengths, weakness, challenges and opportunities.

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- Detail your markets, key community stakeholders and strategically important partners.
 - Strategic planning is a process that is not fixed and should always be ongoing.
 - Go beyond operational and day-to-day concerns.
 - Build a narrative to describe your overall strategic approach.
 - Distil the research that underpins your artistic rationale and goals by formulating guiding principles.
 - Use language that is consistent to council vision and ways of working.
 - Synthesise your priorities into five or six top goals.
 - Detail those strategies that will satisfy a number of goals.
 - Above all, prioritise.

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