CULTURAL SHIFTS IN PLANNING

Supplementary Submission to the NSW Planning Review, prepared by the NSW Division of the Planning Institute of Australia.
November 2011

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) is the peak body representing professionals involved in planning Australian cities, towns and regions. The Institute has around 4,500 members nationally and around 1,300 members in New South Wales. PIA NSW plays key roles in promoting and supporting the planning profession within NSW and advocating key planning and public policy issues. This paper has been prepared on behalf of PIA NSW by Members of the Institute.
Cultural Shifts in Planning: Submission to the NSW Planning Review Panel

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Purpose of the Paper

The NSW Division of the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) commends the NSW Government’s current review of the Planning System. In support of the review the PIA has prepared a detailed paper regarding new legislation for NSW. To be truly effective however, the PIA believes the review should be broader reaching than the preparation of a new planning act. Whilst a new act could give the structure to a broader change, a review of the NSW Planning System should also focus on the ‘glue of planning’ – its culture - and how it could be improved.

The PIA identify that a cultural shift in planning is required first and foremost to set a framework or foundation to enable a new act to be most effectively and efficiently implemented.

The following paper has consequently been prepared as a short and complementary submission to the NSW Planning Review Panel on the key issues influencing / affecting the culture of planning in NSW today. The paper seeks to identify practical and realistic mechanisms by which to improve the culture of planning from the perspective of the planner, developer and broader community. The paper recognises that effective changes to the culture of planning are a longer term prospect. The PIA along with other industry bodies, government authorities and individuals representing planning in NSW will need to lead by example and work collaboratively to achieve lasting outcomes.

To inform this paper, PIA NSW has consulted with a range of stakeholders, hosted workshops and participated in a number of broader industry forums. Accordingly the paper has been informed by comments and ideas from local and state government planners, consulting planners, planning academia and developers.

What is the Practice of Planning and the Planning Profession?

The Planning profession is often described as an interdisciplinary profession that seeks to improve how communities live, work and play. The profession requires an increasing diversity of skills and a focus on community engagement. Professional planners work in private industry, all levels of government, non-government organisations, teaching and research institutions and organisations. The behaviour of professional planners is guided by the PIA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct.

Marshall (2007) recognises that the practice of planning (i.e. what planners do) contributes “to the development and management of safe, healthy, nurturing and sustainable physical, economic and social communities. The sociocultural, political and economic systems of the contemporary world are becoming inextricably linked, and planners are becoming increasingly central to the successful balance of this ‘triple bottom line’.”

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1 Marshall, N Planning as a Profession, in Planning Australia. Ed Susan Thompson, 2007 Page 49

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Planning Institute of Australia. NSW Division. PO Box 484 North Sydney NSW 2059
What is the Culture of Planning?

The ‘culture’ of planning is an often referenced, yet little understood concept. Similar to the concept of planning as a profession, the culture of planning is difficult to define, has many different facets and can be subjectively interpreted. In fact one planner consulted for the purposes of this paper recognised that planning today is made up of “a combination of many different cultures”. These cultures are created by planning professionals, the political process, the community and property industry. Other attendees identified planning’s culture as an ‘attitude’ or a professional approach embodied in the ethics of the Planning Institute of Australia’s Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct.

Professional planners have identified that the culture of planning should be positive, should seek to find solutions rather than barriers through creative thinking. It should seek to identify the bigger picture, build trust and manage risk whilst negotiating positive outcomes for change that are in the interests of the broader community of both today and the future.

Marshall (2007) recognises that “The professional culture of planning is also underpinned by shared values in relation to social, economic and environmental sustainability and the production of ‘good places in which to live’.”

Key Issues Affecting the Culture of Planning in NSW

In order to find solutions or means by which to improve the culture of planning in NSW, our analysis commenced with an investigation of factors that presently adversely affect it.

A summary of the key factors identified by the professionals consulted are summarised below.

Lost Vision – Planners are at the forefront of many of the ‘big picture’ concerns of our time including climate change, sustainability, demographic and lifestyle change, housing affordability, peak oil and infrastructure provision. Notwithstanding this position, numerous longstanding planning professionals identify that planning had lost its focus on strategic planning. That is the ‘science’ of planning and the practice of its professionals is no longer synonymous with a vision for our communities and cities.

Rather planning and planners had become increasingly focused on regulatory outcomes (i.e. the assessment of development applications). This is in part a result of building and planning regulations being integrated within the one act. As a consequence, the culture of planning has become reactive and can be readily and frequently undermined by plans that have lost their currency or do not have up to date ‘visions’.

This predicament often results in greater uncertainty in all aspects of the industry and community and thereby confusion and mistrust. Without a strategic vision and plan there will be a lack of clarity as to what we are planning for, and what our priorities are, resulting in an active persistence to maintain the status quo. As a consequence the planning system has developed to reward proponents with the greatest stamina and the deepest pockets as opposed to those that propose change of the greatest merit.

2 Marshall, N Planning as a Profession, op cit. 2007 Page 62
The planning system has also developed a series of ‘rules’. Whilst many planners recognise that rules can be useful as guides, they do not always generate the best outcomes. Accordingly in a profession that largely deals with people and a complexity of intangible variables, planning intuition and experience can often generate the better outcome.

Without a strategic vision and plan, the community cannot appreciate the need for change. It is recognised that a “very gutsy and courageous” planner is required to make a case for change, particularly in the absence of supporting research (evidence) of the need. Many planners felt there was a lack of political, government and professional support for making the case for change in the public interest resulting in planners finding it far easier to reinforce the norm.

The concept of planners as vision makers has been weakened along with an understanding outside of the profession as to ‘what planners do’. Confusion as to what the term ‘planner’ encapsulates may have been exacerbated with recent changes to the profession’s title (i.e. from ‘town / urban planner’ to simply ‘planner’) leading to confusion with other professions such as financial planners or business planners. This lost appreciation has anecdotally led to lower levels of attraction, recruitment and retention to the profession and missed opportunities for high quality candidates.

**Complexity, Uncertainty and a Stressed Workforce** – the challenges of balancing the needs and interests of the community, local interest groups and elected representatives with the intentions of developers in a designated time period and a litigious society has led to immense pressure and stress for planners. This is recognised as a particularly acute matter for local government planners at the ‘coalface’. This stress can be exacerbated through a lack of senior leadership, resources, staff, mentoring, training and education.

Particular gaps in education have been identified in relation to matters such as community engagement and consultation, project management, development feasibility and negotiation.

Education and training becomes a key matter when the practice of planning is in a constant state of flux as new plans, policies and regulations are prepared and released for implementation. In turn strain can be created for the planner who is required to constantly keep ‘up to date’ with recent and complex changes, explaining their implications to the community and local representatives whilst establishing a sense of certainty and clarity. As a result the majority of planners have spent their time focusing on the legal implications of policy rather than establishing a sound evidence based ‘strategic vision’ for an area by which to plan.

**Disconnect between Politics and Planning Expertise** – Planning has become a political process. It may be argued that at the local government level the process is increasingly politicised as other functions (building certification, rates, waste management etc.) have become more heavily regulated. As a consequence planning is one of the remaining areas whereby local government can maintain a degree of discretion.

In this regard, a key influence to the culture of planning (at both a local and state government level) has been cited as the common disconnect between the interests and decisions of local councillors / politicians and the professional expertise of planners. Whilst elected politicians seek to represent the current interests of their constituents during their 4 year electoral cycle, planners seek to represent the interests of the broader community / city / state over a far greater temporal period i.e. 25 years.
This disparity can become particularly pronounced when elected politicians become the decision makers and override the recommendations of the planner. When these decisions do not align with current policy/the planning vision, it can lead to inconsistencies and thereby greater uncertainty for the planner, the community and developer over the longer term. In turn this can undermine the role of the planner and their ability to successfully negotiate positive ways forward for major developments that require approval from elected representatives. The politicisation of the ‘planning debate’ in turn impacts on development assessment and plan making timescales, further frustrating and complicating the planning system for users.

**Planning as an Imprecise Science** – in many instances planning is a subjective profession, relying on the interpretation of legislation, plans and policies. Planning can also rely on value judgements to identify the merits of a proposal or policy and therefore important values, ethics and codes of conduct must be installed in the professionals that make these judgements. This requires sound education, support and ongoing training for planning professionals.

Whilst the interpretative nature of planning can facilitate greater flexibility in the process, it can lead to a misunderstanding of how planning operates for those not within the profession. This uncertainty can be exacerbated when there is a lack of evidence to support strategic visions or decision making processes or where there is a lack of consultation/engagement with stakeholders. Accordingly whilst some planners seek flexibility or discretion to find solutions, the community seeks certainty and requires others to adhere to ‘rules’.

**The influence of Media to the Perception of Planning** – a study of planning related media between April 2007 and April 2008 found that across Australia, 85% of all stories relating to planning were negative. Furthermore the stories reflected the high degree of tension between community interests (the public) and developer interests (private) with the planners caught in the middle of the debate. This has real and wide reaching influence to the perception of planning. Poor perception can hinder recruitment to the profession, willingness for the community to engage and adversely affect the broader culture of planning.

The poor perception of planning in the media, along with ICAC investigations and associated publicity has resulted in greater fear and thereby barriers for planners when negotiating developments and possible ways forward. This professional ‘fear’ can break down negotiations and limit mechanisms to progress development. Furthermore many planners feel that the system is heavily weighted towards success in the Land and Environment Court. Furthermore planning is a ‘heavy handed’ system that punishes consequences with little or no reward for the planner when they “get it right”. Rather there is reward or benefit in not making a mistake which results in planners having greater comfort or cause to ‘do nothing’.

Furthermore challenges arise as a result of the timescales associated with updating strategic plans. In some cases outdated planning instruments have led to the development of planning knowledge and the subsequent use of alternative planning mechanisms “to get around the system”. Inevitably this inconsistent and unsubstantiated approach can lead to conflict and even the perception of corrupt behavior.

As a result of this predicament, planners have surmised that:

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3 Positions, Perceptions and Promotions Project, Elton Consulting, 2008
• It is easier not to make a decision;
• There has been a focus on passive planning and keeping things as they are compared to active planning that seeks to find solutions;
• There is a lack of values and priorities in planning – for example affordable housing is a right that needs to be planned for and addressed, its provision should not be dictated by the perception of the local community;
• Planning is trying to please everyone but is in fact not pleasing anyone;
• Planners need to become fearless – rather planners have become fearful; and
• Planners need to shift the culture from control to desired outcomes, from fear to independence.

**Nine Ways to Positively Change the Culture of Planning**

Based on our analysis of the key issues discussed above, the following section identifies nine key ways in which the culture of planning in NSW could be positively influenced and changed. Each idea or approach is explained in brief below.

**Idea 1: Positive Attitude to Change**

When questioned, most planners will tell you that they became a planner to “make a difference”. That is a positive difference to how people live and enjoy their lives. Therefore as a first principle for cultural change, we identify the need for a positive attitude towards good / appropriate longer term planning and development that helps to achieve these plans in the interests of the broader public, both today and in the future. There should be a positive culture towards supporting good development in order to make a difference and improve how people live i.e. through the provision of housing, jobs, infrastructure, services etc.

The role of the planner as visionaries and decision makers that favour the interests of the wider community and future generations needs to be better communicated. In addition their role as facilitators of change not for financial gain, but for ‘the greater good’ should be reinforced.

To facilitate this positive culture, leaders in planning must foster ‘a can do attitude’ and language with support from peers and government to allay fears of litigation or undue criticism. To enable this culture, planners need to communicate to the community and elected representatives the importance of, and subsequent evidence for change in a positive and clear language. The language of planning should be utilised as an important aspect of its professional identity and culture.

**Idea 2: Strategic and Evidence Based Planning by Planners**

Planners seek to rebuild their role in the community as vision makers and keepers rather than regulators. To facilitate this shift, the skills, resources and priorities in planning need to be refocused back to strategic planning to develop a clear vision of what our local communities aspire to become. This idea also recognises the major challenges
associated with the increasing technical complexity and access to technical information by non-planning professionals. As a result the human element along with the technical side of planning needs to change.

A critical means by which to gain political, community and industry ‘buy in’ to strategic plans and their visions is the development of plans that are well researched and underpinned by evidence. It should be recognised that “proper planning takes time” and that the development of 25 year plans need time to research and test. To do this planners need the right tools and resources such as integrated property information systems; a planning portal (i.e. similar to the UK) and training. Furthermore the logic or rationale behind the preparation of a plan needs to be clearly explained so that all levels of government and the community can align their actions to achieve positive change.

Furthermore planners will not always ‘get it right’ the first time. How we live and work will change over time requiring a consistent and transparent process of monitoring outcomes by both local government and state government. With respect to monitoring, the outcomes of government policies to deliver housing and affordable housing should be measured and annually reported. With respect to amendments, for plans that are well researched and engage the community, there should be no penalty for recognising the need to make adjustments so as to enhance outcomes.

Idea 3: Recognition of the Bigger Picture

It is recognised by planners that there is a tendency in the planning system to listen, and respond to, the vocal minority. Those that are silent however often have the greatest need yet are unaware of their rights to comment. Too great an emphasis on the needs of the vocal few can result in a focus on the perceptions of some, but not the needs of many.

Accordingly planners recognise the importance of understanding and working towards the bigger picture as opposed to individual or local agendas. A recognition of the bigger picture is required to address major issues that will be influencing our cities in the future including housing affordability, climate change and energy provision.

The focus of planners should be towards outcomes rather than process, vision rather than assessment. Rather than measuring outcomes with respect to development application determination timescales, greater commitment should be given to help deliver and measure outcomes such as job generation, social improvements and the quality of living in the public interest.

Idea 4: Courageous Leaders and Champions

To implement positive change and to undertake quality strategic planning, strong and courageous champions of planning need to be developed and nurtured. Such leaders and champions need to recognise the challenges of the profession yet send the message that the future can be bright. Furthermore, leaders in planning are required to understand that the process of ‘balancing’ different interests in planning has the potential to result in poor compromise for its own sake. Courageous leaders are therefore required to have the strength and commitment to identify, focus on and champion the best outcomes for the broader community.
It is recognised that leaders are not necessarily managers but champions of the industry and the need for cultural reform. Courageous leaders and champions of the industry need support from their peers as well as education and mentoring as discussed further below. In turn they can mentor and train younger and less experienced planners.

**Idea 5: Developing Smart Planners**

To deliver great planning we must have first-class planning professionals. Excellent planners are a result of strong secondary and tertiary education, mentoring and guidance from experienced planners in addition to ongoing training and professional development. The latter is particularly important in an industry that is subject to rapid change with respect to social, economic and environmental matters. Accordingly it is important for planners to continue their professional development to ensure they are up to date and fully aware of all of the factors influencing their analysis and decisions.

It is also important for planners to have dialogue with, and support from, their peers so that they are reminded of their ethical duties in accordance with the PIA Code of Conduct. When addressing ‘grey areas’ planners need to have confidence in their integrity to know where to ‘draw the line’.

The PIA identifies its role as the professional industry body in NSW to lead on the creation and support of ‘smart planners’. The PIA will enhance its work with NSW based universities, identifying gaps in current knowledge and education to host and advertise Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses to its members and others in the field. The PIA will also continue to emphasise the importance of a supportive culture in planning, the need for respect of and in the profession and the value of consulting with the community.

The PIA will also emphasise the need to increase education in the field of community consultation during university training and working practices as well as other relevant skills for planners such as project management and negotiation. Furthermore to facilitate good development and to achieve regenerative change, the knowledge of planners with respect to the financial and economic parameters of development needs to be advanced and thereby better commercial awareness to enable more sustainable outcomes.

State and local government organisations will also play a key role in supporting the ongoing education and training of planners – both government and private. The State Government already has an emphasis and dedicated budget to support the development of its staff through various external and internal courses. The Department of Planning & Infrastructure also supports the development of young planners through the mentoring of 10 student staff members each year.

For local government planners, owing to resources, geographic and funding constraints, options for training and education can be less accessible. This creates challenges for local government planners at the coalface of community and emerging planning issues. To address these matters, it is recognised that greater collaboration can and should be fostered between state and local government planners. State Government planners could take a greater leadership role, leading by best practice and re-establishing the Department of Planning and Infrastructure’s role in training and education for the profession and in undertaking or funding planning research.
This could be achieved practically and cost effectively through the provision of free training sessions / workshops to local government planners on key issues either at State Government offices or at Councils. The latter approach being particularly beneficial for regional councils.

Having regard to the stressful and politically conflicting position many planners find themselves in at times, the PIA could also undertake a greater role as the ‘guardian’ of professional planning ethos and values.

Idea 6: Supporting Community Engagement

Effective community engagement is a critical component of preparing a successful and truly representative strategic plan. Consultation with planners has identified however that there is growing confusion or a misunderstanding as to the purpose of community engagement. Rather than it being an opportunity for members of a community and the development industry to ‘have their say’ as to what they would like their locality / city to become, it has become an opportunity for individuals to vote for or against individual developments at the development assessment stage.

Idea 6 therefore identifies the need to engage and empower the community at the appropriate planning stage. There is strong consensus that the strategic planning stage is the most appropriate phase in planning to prioritise community involvement. Improved community involvement at this stage would improve input to plans so that the outcomes are truly reflective of what a community considers beneficial to their area. It is also an ideal time to inform and educate the public as to the research underpinning the strategic vision for an area and all of the elements and options that must be considered / balanced in preparing policies.

As a result of better community engagement at the strategic planning stage, the prospective assessment of any future development in the locality can be undertaken in accordance with the resulting plan. As a consequence planning decisions can be made in light of the public interest of today and the future, in accordance with the role of planning as a profession with a longer term perspective. This would assist planners in moving forward with their valuable work rather than having to operate in a continual state of conflict.

Idea 7: Planners as Professionals and Decision Makers

With the successful implementation of Idea 5 – Smart Planners and Idea 6 - Supporting Community Engagement it is intended that the professional capabilities of planners, the plans they design and their knowledge of community expectations and needs will be significantly enhanced. In turn this would facilitate trust in the decision making ability of planners and should therefore further reduce the need for the involvement of elected representatives or additional consultation with the community at the development application stage.

Decisions made by planners (or others in the system) should remain transparent with all justification and supporting information made readily available (i.e. online) for the community. Where Idea 2 – Strategic Planning has been successfully implemented, the consistency and reasoning behind decisions should also be improved in accordance with the use of ‘up to date’ plans that reflect the thoughts of the community. In the case where elected representatives are required to make decisions, it is recommended they undertake an education program that explains how the planning system works and the many factors a decision maker must balance.
Idea 8: Aligning the Culture of Planning and the Act

The current reform of the planning system is incorporating a review of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979. To ensure the most effective outcomes of the review and subsequent reform, this paper identifies the importance of aligning the intended changes to the culture of planning in the preparation and particularly the implementation of a new act.

As one example of how this objective could be supported, the objectives of a new act for NSW should reflect the broader intent to improve the culture of planning. As another example, a new act could better align the process for government agency referrals regarding development and policy development thereby better coordinating government agencies and the efficiency of the planning system in NSW.

Idea 9: Positive Media

As a final, yet critical idea, this paper identifies the need to provide a balanced perspective of planning and its outcomes in the media. Rather than the media being a symptom of the challenges facing planning, it should be managed to cure the planning system. The media should be employed as a means of preventing consultation breakdown, mistrust and confusion whilst reinforcing planning’s ‘culture of achievement’.

Positive news stories and publicity should be encouraged by government, the PIA and other industry stakeholders to recognise and promote good planning outcomes. This would help to inform the community as to the benefits of good planning, clarify what the profession does and reinforce its value. This would in turn encourage more members of the community to get involved with planning during appropriate stages (i.e. the strategic planning stage) improving recognition of planning as a valuable exercise.

Positive media and the recognition of good planning outcomes would also help to support a positive and supporting culture in planning, attracting more talented planners and encouraging experienced planners to stay in the profession to pass on their skills / mentor others.

A relationship with the media could be built so that planners could contribute to a story prior to its release, and have the right to correct them if they are inaccurate.

Summary and Next Steps

This paper has identified and discussed a number of factors that adversely influence the culture of planning in NSW. In preparing this paper and consulting with over 100 planners, we have been heartened by the consensus that a change is not only needed but should be actively implemented by planners first and foremost with the intention of having a positive flow on effect to the broader development industry and community.

To initiate this change, this paper has summarised the key comments and ideas raised during consultation into the following nine areas for implementation:
1. A Positive Attitude to Change
2. Strategic and Evidence Based Planning by Planners
3. Recognition of the Bigger Picture
4. Courageous Leaders and Champions
5. Developing More Smart Planners
6. Supporting Community Engagement
7. Recognition of the Status of Planners as Professionals and Decision Makers
8. Aligning Changes to the Culture of Planning and the Act
9. Encouraging Positive Media

While effective change, as canvassed in this paper, will be the result of cooperation amongst several sectors including the development industry, politicians, the community, planners, and the tertiary education sector, there are several key areas in which the Review of the Planning System can contribute towards that change. For the purposes of this submission, we reiterate them below.

**Idea 2 Strategic and Evidence Based Planning**

The Review should develop options to ensure that the NSW planning legislation is reweighted towards strategic planning with less emphasis on the myriad development controls that have arisen.

The Review should develop options to ensure that the State Government takes a leadership position in the development and publication of data and evidence around key planning indicators such as infrastructure, population and employment figures and related landuse development. State Government should work with Local Councils to expedite a common planning portal with key land use information and land development data.

**Idea 6 Supporting Community Engagement**

The Review should ensure that planning legislation re-emphasises the importance of community engagement. While planning will always involve disparate views, evidence of overseas and interstate systems shows that appropriate community engagement facilitates understanding and agreement and assists in minimising conflict.

**Idea 7 Planners as Professionals and Decision Makers**

The Review should ensure that the planning system has a clear process of strategic planning and assessment so that transparency and consistency of decision making is respected by the community, development industry and politicians alike.

**Idea 8 Aligning the Culture of Planning and the Act**

The Review should ensure that the legislation, especially the objectives of the Act, reflects respect for the practice and integrity of the planning process.
The PIA will be seeking to practice what it preaches and leading by example by implementing these cultural changes.

Looking forward, it must be recognised that many of the existing cultural blockages in planning are endemic. Accordingly to truly achieve change, it will be necessary for both PIA and non PIA members in NSW, as well as those that work with planners (i.e. other property professionals, developers and politicians) and the community, to support a cultural change in the practice and profession of planning whilst acknowledging the need to adjust their own perceptions and relationships with the practice.

This submission therefore becomes just an initial step in mapping out the process for implementing positive cultural change. As planners we have collectively prepared this paper and identified solutions recognising that their implementation requires collaborative work with the community, government and elected representatives if they are to effectively achieve lasting change beyond any legislative reform.