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Leisure planning process: systematic adhocracy

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Leisure planning process: systematic adhocracy

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ABSTRACT

Research Question: Guided by literature, a leisure planning typology was developed with four phases to identify how ARCs were planned. The typology guided the deductive analysis to address our research question, How is a leisure planning process applied in ARC planning?

Methodology: A qualitative multiple-case study design was applied. Data from document analysis ($n = 264$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 19$) were deductively analyzed based on a leisure planning typology.

Findings: A lack of adherence to specific planning models was evident. Instead, an ad hoc planning approach was applied, where planners relied on data collected to assist how an ARC should be planned. The characteristics associated with ad hoc planning led to this approach termed “systemic adhocracy”.

Practical implications: Planning, guided by a structured framework is crucial for maximising community benefits and addressing needs. Our study provides insight to the ARC planning process and the opportunity to apply the leisure planning typology to guide future investments, optimise planning, and enhance community outcomes.

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Introduction

Guidelines and commentary on leisure planning have existed for decades (Driver, 1973; Hamilton-Smith, 1993; Weaver, 1963), providing detailed steps for planners. However, how leisure planners “apply” the planning process remains unclear. Effective leisure planning is crucial, it involves significant capital investments in programs, facilities and services aimed at delivering community benefits (Marriott et al., 2021), including improved health and well-being and reduced crime. Aquatic and recreation centres (ARCs) play a key role in improving health benefits and maintaining

active lifestyles. These are examples of significant community leisure facility and service investments, for example over \$933 million was committed to ARC facilities in Victoria, Australia over four years (VAGO, 2016).

ARCs offer extensive benefits to their surrounding communities, justifying public investment by enhancing community welfare and contributing to health and well-being (Heckel et al., 2023; Yeomans et al., 2024). These centres form part of the overall community sport and physical activity delivery system that contributes positive outcomes via the economic, employment, education, and

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events activities (National Clearinghouse for Sport, 2024). The vital role ARCs play in the community, reinforces the need to understand the leisure planning processes used to develop these centres to assist optimize their impact and ensure effective public investment.

Leisure planning processes guide the delivery of leisure programs, facilities and services. Key features of a leisure planning process include (i) understanding the existing provision, (ii) conducting research to understand community needs and local characteristics and (iii) working with the community to prepare a delivery plan (Barth, 2020; Marriott et al., 2021). The emphasis on community engagement aligns with the globally recognised International Association for Public Participation framework (IAP2, 2019), which reinforces the need for public participation to ensure community involvement in decision-making processes. Despite the longstanding availability of guidelines for leisure planners, empirical research on the delivery of leisure planning practices remains scarce. To build understanding, the purpose of our study was to investigate how a leisure planning process was applied in ARC planning.

Benefits of ARCs

An ARC is defined as a community-based venue comprising several facilities, including swimming pools, gymnasiums, group fitness facilities, sports halls, cafés, crèches and office spaces (Butson et al., 2021; Rajagopalan, 2014). The size and nature of these centres vary due to their role in a hierarchy within the industry, comprising international, national, state, regional, and local centres. Centre requirements are determined according to the needs of user groups, levels of competition and the general community (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment Recreation and the Arts, 1997).

ARCs enhance community welfare through improved health and well-being (Eime et al., 2016; Tower et al., 2014). They provide

psychological benefits (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b), increased physical participation (Prins et al., 2011; Prins et al., 2012), and significant socioeconomic impacts (Barnsley et al., 2017; Tower et al., 2014). With 32% of Australians using gyms or leisure centres for physical activity (AusPlay, 2024), ARCs are highly valued (VAGO, 2016) to foster community connections and boost local economies through job creation (Stanway et al., 2020; Yeomans et al., 2024). Benefits are also gained by the non-users in the community. These benefits come in terms of perceived intention (Prins et al., 2010), by providing people with the option to attend a leisure centre for their social, mental, and physical health (SGS Economics and Planning, 2010).

ARC funding

Funding models for ARCs and community infrastructure can vary significantly across countries, reflecting diverse governance structures, economic conditions, and cultural priorities. Internationally, approaches range from centralised government funding (e.g. in European countries such as France and the United Kingdom) to public-private partnerships and community-driven initiatives (e.g. in Japan and Australia), to Danish local government subsidies to voluntary sport organisations to manage private non-profit sports halls (Iversen, 2017; Kondo et al., 2021; VAGO, 2011). Australia employs a multi-tiered approach involving local, state, and federal government initiatives, emphasising community health and well-being (McDonald, 2021). This system, rooted in federal sport and recreation policies dating back to the 1970s, including the influential Bloomfield Report (Bloomfield, 1974), continues to prioritize physical activity for people in local communities. Local governments play a crucial role to plan, build, and manage ARCs (Australian Electoral Commission, 2015), tailoring these facilities to meet community needs, while state and federal authorities

contribute through various policy and funding initiatives (VAGO, 2011). The funding breakdown in Australia typically involves a combination of sources, with local governments often bearing most capital costs. For instance, in a review of 14 projects, local governments contributed an average 64% of the total funding, with state and federal governments providing smaller portions (VAGO, 2011). The exact distribution can vary significantly between projects, reflecting the diverse needs and resources of different communities across the country (McDonald, 2021). A flexible approach is adopted to meet local requirements while maintaining a national focus on promoting community health and well-being through accessible recreational facilities (Bloomfield, 1974; VAGO, 2011).

Leisure planning principles

ARCs planning approaches have received minimal scholarly analysis, with existing resources primarily comprising books and guidelines (McDonald et al., 2023). In consequence, leisure planning principles guiding ARC planning remain unclear, which is surprising given the significant investment in ARCs by all levels of government in Australia.

Definitions of leisure planning have evolved, drawing on principles from earlier scholars (e.g. Driver, 1973; Hamilton-Smith, 1993; and Weaver, 1963), who emphasised it as a continuous, resource-driven process to create a desirable future for and with a community (Marriott et al., 2021). Leisure planning, as a field of study (Veal, 2013), was established in the early 1900s (Engels, 2019; Veal, 2009). Despite criticism, standards-based planning developed in this era, remains a consistent feature of leisure planning (Engels, 2019). In the 1970s, leisure planning scholars began explaining the complexities through books (Bannon, 1977; Gold, 1973), publications (Dustin & McAvoy, 1982); planning guides (Brown et al., 1973; Sandercock, 1975) and

conferences (Burton, 1970). This period was unique to leisure planning and produced extensive critical inquiry and widespread discussion. The 1980s saw the recognition of ad hoc planning, which addressed problems as they rose without following key principles (Jansen-Verbeke & Dietvorst, 1987; Marriott, 1980).

Veal (2011) conducted a review of leisure planning literature and identified 82 English language “how-to-do-it” (p. 2) guidelines written between 1965 and 2011, with most prepared by government and industry bodies. Only three were published in refereed journals (Steiner, 1991; Veal, 1984, 2011). Despite a call for research on leisure planning (Steiner, 1991; Veal, 2011), scholarly progress remains slow (McDonald, 2021; Veal, 2011).

Leisure planning typology

For our study, we do not intend to draw on past leisure planning books and guidelines to identify a leisure planning typology. Instead, we sought content from published research frameworks (Barth, 2020; Marriott et al., 2021; Veal, 2017), to guide a leisure planning typology. Veal’s U-Plan framework is a comprehensive participation-based approach, incorporating rational decision-making processes (Veal, 2017). Barth (2020) highlights the need to plan for sustainable, resilient leisure planning outcomes through a cyclical planning process, where the framework emphasises sustainability and resiliency outcomes. Marriott et al. (2021) note that planning is continuously circular rather than a linear sequence of phases, indicated within a Community Leisure and Recreation Planning Model where components are interconnected and need to be applied to ensure planning outcomes are achieved.

Guided by these three frameworks, our leisure planning typology is structured to include: (i) four phases, (ii) associated components, (iii) an explanation of the components, and (iv) the framework that sourced the phase/component (Barth, 2020; Marriott et al., 2021;

Table 1. Leisure planning typology.

Phases	Components	Explanation	Veal (2017)	Barth (2020)	Marriott et al. (2021)
Establish the planning context	Set the scene for the planning process by establishing what is to be achieved, stakeholder engagement and resources.				
	Mission, goals, objectives	Determine how the leisure plan's goals and objectives fit with the planning organisation's mission, goals and complements local government responsibilities, e.g. transport, health, welfare.	✓	✓	✓
	Community engagement	Establish internal and external systems and processes with community stakeholders to gain their input and commitment to the plan.	✓	✓	✓
	Governance	Determine who will be involved and how the decision-making process will be managed.	✓	✓	✓
	Costs / budget	Establish budget allocation for the planning process.	✓	✓	✓
	Plan the process	Document how the planning process will proceed.	✓	✓	✓
Data collection	Set participation targets	Document the levels of leisure participation to be achieved in the planning period.	✓		
	Gather data from existing sources and conduct research to inform decisions on plan development.				
	Community engagement	Gain insights from stakeholders to build data and from the data gathering processes.		✓	✓
	Community profile	Document community demographics (e.g. age, gender, housing, occupations), social and economic profile, and compare to region, state / province, country.	✓	✓	✓
	Existing reports	Review and document data from existing reports from stakeholders and complementary organisations that impact the plan.	✓	✓	✓
	Existing conditions	Document current status of leisure programs, facilities and services including the availability, location, accessibility and complementary leisure provisions from neighbouring communities.	✓	✓	✓
	Participation levels	Document leisure participation trends within the planning community-based on existing data or localised leisure participation research.	✓	✓	✓
	Community leisure needs	Conduct community consultations, including quantitative and qualitative data, to identify leisure aspirations.	✓	✓	✓
	Interim findings	Provide data-based reports to share with stakeholders to inform the plan. Recognise how data from one source may impact on other data sources.	✓	✓	✓
Write the plan	Draw on data collection sources to prepare a draft of the plan				
	Community engagement	Gain insights from stakeholders to confirm data analysis and response to draft plan.		✓	✓
	Evaluate collected data	Gather data to inform the plan and assess alignment to mission, goals and objectives. Revision of guiding policy may be required to embed new data.	✓	✓	✓
	Draft plan	Finalise the planning project's vision, mission, objectives, recommendations, etc. from the establish the planning process phase. Draft plan to include actions, timeframes, budgets, responsibilities and performance monitoring strategies.	✓	✓	✓
Implementation	Plan needs to be adopted for implementation.				
	Community engagement	Communicate with stakeholders by sharing information and seeking feedback throughout the plan's adoption and implementation.		✓	✓
	Adopt the plan	Plan formally adopted to proceed to implementation.	✓	✓	✓
	Monitor and evaluate the plan	Systems established to continually gather and report data about the plan's implementation. Assessment of outputs and outcomes will determine achievement of the plan's goals and objectives.			✓

Veal, 2017). Every phase, and 14 of the 19 components, were derived from all three frameworks (Table 1).

Given the substantial investment in ARCs, a notable gap exists in understanding the leisure planning process associated with these ARCs. Existing research remains limited, with most knowledge derived from practical guidelines rather than rigorous academic inquiry (McDonald et al., 2023). The purpose of our study was to build knowledge in this field and in doing so address the following research question: “How is a leisure planning process applied in aquatic and recreation centre planning?”

Method

Our study was exploratory in nature, necessitating a qualitative approach to understand “how” a leisure planning process could be applied (Yin, 2009). To facilitate this investigation, an explanatory framework (Andrew et al., 2011) was employed within a multiple-case study design.

Case selection

ARCs were purposefully selected using a convenience sample in Australia. A selection criterion was applied to ensure the cases aligned with the research objectives and provided rich informative data (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2012). The selection focused on five criteria: location in metropolitan Melbourne; operation for less than three years; multi-purpose functionality; redevelopment costs; and market catchment independence. These criteria ensured the cases were relevant and provided a robust basis for analysis. Two cases matched the five criteria. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, a pseudonym was applied to each ARC and from here on will be identified as ARC 1 and ARC 2. These cases were studied at the same time, with the understanding that findings from one study did not impact the other (Thomas, 2016).

Data sources

Documents and semi-structured interviews provided history, context, and tracked ARC planning processes. Documents are pieces of written material or produced under a “natural setting” by people who were actively involved in the process from which they were written (Karppinen & Hallvard, 2012, p. 5). Documents were gained from the case studies and selected based on an assessment of their authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning (Bryman, 2016).

Respondents were identified through two sources during document analysis and from referral during interviews, known as snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016). Semi-structured interviews captured respondents’ lived experiences (Yin, 2014), revealing insights into political, financial, and community issues (Andersson & Mattsson, 2010; Halinen et al., 2013). The interview schedule comprised 11 questions. The first, identified respondents’ organisation and role in ARC planning during that time. The second question gathered the respondent’s personal experiences from the ARC planning process. Questions three to six focused on planning processes, return on investment, market-oriented policies, and political factors in ARC planning. Questions seven to nine examined the rationality, resource use, and decision-making in the ARC planning process. Question 10 invited additional comments, while the final question sought to identify other key individuals involved in the ARC planning.

Interviews continued until thematic saturation occurred (Minichiello et al., 2008). To ensure respondent anonymity, a pseudonym was attached to each interview transcript. ARC 1 respondents were given a name starting with the letter O, and ARC 2 respondents were assigned a name starting with the letter T.

Data analysis

The four phases of the leisure planning typology guided the deductive analysis. Data

analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six-step thematic analysis. This process was employed as a data reduction strategy to identify the components that demonstrated how the planning process proceeded. The data were first analysed within the individual cases, then subjected to a cross-case analysis. Data were analyzed through a triangulation and pattern-matching process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation was conducted by comparing and integrating data from multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive and validated understanding of the ARC planning process (Patton, 2015). This approach allowed the co-authors who are experienced qualitative analysts, to identify robust themes related to how the leisure planning process was applied across different cases and data sources.

Results and discussion

Our study examined 264 documents including reports from local governments, specialist consultants, state government, meeting minutes, community newsletters, newspaper articles, and respondents' personalised materials. Additionally, 19 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the ARC planning

process, comprising 10 from ARC 1 and nine from ARC 2. These stakeholders included local government officers, Councillors, external contractors, and a local resident to analyze the ARC planning process. The analysis of this comprehensive dataset revealed the presence of all phases of the leisure planning typology, albeit with varying degrees of implementation.

An overview of the leisure planning typology results for ARC 1 and ARC 2, is provided in Table 2, indicating the presence ("✓") or absence ("x") of components. References to the frequency with which each theme appears in the documents and interviews are also included. Data collection was the most common phase noted to assist with leisure planning. Within this phase, community profile data was commonly referred to within documents, whereas interviewees were more specific and commonly referred to the need to identify data on the participation levels of community members to assist with planning.

The planning context

The planning context phase explains how the two cases approached the planning process. The two local governments focused primarily on community engagement and governance,

Table 2. Leisure planning typology results.

Phases	Components	ARC 1	ARC 2	Interviews	Documents
Establish the planning context	Mission, goals, objectives	x	x	0	0
	Community engagement	✓	✓	2	6
	Governance	✓	✓	12	32
	Costs / budget	x	x	0	0
	Plan the process	x	x	0	0
	Set participation targets	x	x	0	0
Data collection	Community engagement	✓	✓	25	18
	Community profile	✓	✓	16	72
	Existing reports	✓	✓	0	11
	Existing conditions	✓	✓	28	6
	Participation levels	✓	✓	46	4
	Community leisure needs	✓	✓	16	3
Write the plan	Interim findings	✓	✓	24	13
	Community engagement	x	x	0	0
	Evaluate collected data	✓	✓	8	7
Implementation	Draft plan	✓	✓	5	3
	Community engagement	x	x	0	0
	Adopt the plan	✓	✓	3	4
	Monitor and evaluate the plan	x	x	0	0

findings revealed the documents and interviewees neglected to recognise critical components such as the plan's mission, goals, objectives, planning project costs / budget, plan the process and participation targets. These findings suggest a lack of consistent structure and minimal guidance in the planning approach. For instance, it was anticipated that a budget or cost framework would be established to inform the planning process (Barth, 2020); however, the data did not provide evidence to support this expectation.

Community engagement

The two local governments actively engaged stakeholders during the planning context phase. Community engagement appeared in two interviews and six documents, indicating community engagement activities were undertaken in this phase, however, there was very little commentary on how this was undertaken. Documents included council reports, meeting minutes and community newsletters reflect this engagement. For instance, two documents state:

Community consultation has been an integral part of the process. A 15-member Community Consultative Committee representing community leaders, residents and businesses was set up at the beginning of the project. (ARC 1 Doc 29 & 30)

These local governments engaged with internal and external stakeholders to assist planners establish a community connection and understand their needs. Community consultation is a critical component in leisure planning (VAGO, 2016), where robust stakeholder engagement fosters lasting relationships and effective planning outcomes (Marriott et al., 2021). Our findings identified that engaging stakeholders early establishes a foundation for ongoing collaboration throughout the planning process. It is necessary to note that although documents state the community was consulted "at every stage", this was not the case, community engagement was not

evident during two phases: write the plan, and implementation.

Governance

The most active component referred to in documents across all phases was governance, appearing in 12 interviews and 32 documents. This involved the creation of committees to oversee the ARC planning process. The two cases established governing steering committees to guide and establish clear governance and decision-making avenues i.e. a project-steering committee (ARC 1 and 2) and a project control committee (ARC 2). Respondent Travis explained the governance structure for ARC 2:

There was a project control group and then there was a project-steering committee. The project control group, which was just essentially council officers, ... operational matters went through the project control group. The project-steering committee was where the more strategic items went for discussion.

The reliance on steering committees in local governance is consistent with findings from Richards (2024) and Sáenz-Royo et al. (2023). Our study extends this knowledge by unpacking why steering committees are relied on for ARCs; they provide a structured governance framework to integrate strategic planning and decision-making. For example, they addressed higher-level strategic matters, keeping the planning process aligned with broader organisational goals and provided oversight for the planning process ensuring accountable decisions were made. These findings demonstrate that committees, tailored to specific needs, were instrumental in guiding the ARC planning process and align with committee formation more generally in leisure planning (Barth, 2020; Marriott et al., 2021).

Data collection

Data collection was the most prominent phase referred to in our study with 282 references.

This explained how the two cases gathered information to inform their ARC plan. Every component identified in this phase (Table 2) was applied to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the community influenced the ARCs structure, services and programs.

Community engagement

Community engagement was a significant component in the data collection phase, appearing in 25 interviews and 18 documents. Communities were actively consulted to understand their recreational and community needs. Findings revealed that ARC 1 engaged through the formation of a consultation committee, information sessions, market research exhibitions and attending festivals over a long period. Instead of relying on a committee, ARC 2 adopted a four-phase consultation process over four years (Table 3).

Community engagement is crucial to understanding community needs (VAGO, 2016), especially when aligned with the globally recognised IAP2 Framework (IAP2, 2019). Our findings reinforce this importance specific to ARCs planning whereby a strong understanding of community consultation and engagement strategies were conducted to gather data. Theoretically, this shows an opportunity for the development of a consultation tool to assist ARC planners understand community needs.

Community profile

The most referred to component by respondents across all phases was community

profile, appearing in 16 interviews and 72 documents. There was a need to create inclusive engagement through understanding key characteristics and associated subgroups within the community. Documents identified demographic profiles including population statistics and trends, age, gender, income, education, health, disabilities, and culture. One document for example, highlighted the need for ARC 2 to plan for an ageing population:

[the] total population is projected to increase by approximately 18,000 people (to 136,000) by 2031, with the age cohort of 50–75 years expected to have the largest net growth = ageing population. (ARC 2 Doc 1)

These findings align with the literature emphasising data-driven, responsive planning in leisure and recreation (Barth, 2020; Marriott et al., 2021; Veal, 2017). They contribute to the ongoing discourse on adaptive planning strategies in leisure and recreational planning contexts, highlighting the necessity for more responsive planning models in light of rapidly changing population dynamics (Marriott et al., 2021). This approach ensures that ARCs remain aligned with the community's evolving needs and are strategically positioned to remain vital community assets, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness to enhance community well-being, amidst demographic shifts.

Existing reports

The two cases studied, utilised data from existing reports to assist guide their ARC planning process. A comprehensive review of existing reports was conducted by these two local governments, including national, state, and local government reports, exercise recreation and sports survey (ERASS) results, relevant local government policies, and industry benchmarking. Respondents recognised these reports provided clear guidance to facilitate efficient and sustainable management practices while

Table 3. ARC 2 consultation process.

Year of planning process	Consultation processes
Year 2	Phase one – Initial consultation Phase two – Public meetings
Year 3	Phase three – Public exhibition
Year 5	Phase four – Question and answer

Source: ARC 2 Doc 2; ARC 2 Doc 3; ARC 2 Doc 4; ARC 2 Doc 11; ARC 2 Doc 14; ARC 2 Doc 21; ARC 2 Doc 23.

establishing robust mechanisms for accountability. As Trevor noted,

We looked at different resources, you know trends, what has been happening and how this is likely to change the future ... these helped us a bit ... for demonstrating accountability for the future.

The reliance on these reports to guide planning may explain why a structured planning process was not conducted. Planners may have perceived referring to these varied reports provided the structure they needed. Regardless, findings signify the role of evidence-based planning to enhance accountability and credibility (Barth, 2020; Marriott et al., 2021; Veal, 2017).

Existing conditions

Existing conditions appearing in 28 interviews and 16 documents, refer to understanding the current state of leisure programs, facilities and services. Documents revealed that both ARCs commissioned specialists to identify the current status of facilities ensuring informed decision-making. For instance, ARC 1 engaged engineers to access an outdoor pool (ARC 1 Doc 10), while ARC 2 engaged a needs analysis specialist (ARC 2 Doc 2). These specialists identified current service provisions, pinpointed significant gaps and discerned areas requiring attention. For example, the needs analysis specialist for ARC 2 stated:

Gaps in the provision for recreation facilities are facility-orientated. The community and [consultant] studies have identified both the lack of adequate aquatic facilities and indoor multi-purpose sports facilities as a major concern. (ARC 2 Doc 2)

These findings are consistent with the importance of accessing current conditions to support effective infrastructure planning (Reiner & McElvaney, 2017). Building on this knowledge, is why assessment of existing conditions was vital. The two local governments in

our study believed such assessment informed their decision-making and enabled efficient resource allocation. The assessment identified gaps, prioritized improvements, and tailored future developments to community needs, maximizing the impact of infrastructure investments and enhancing recreational offerings.

Participation levels

Participation levels, appearing in 46 interviews and four documents, provided insights into the leisure and physical activity interests of the community via local, state and national leisure participation trends. Documents showed local data was gathered through community surveys, telephone interviews, local government participation data and consultant databases. A consultation document provided an example:

Future use of pools was a high priority for swimmers with (83.5%) of swimmers indicating they would like to make greater use of pools. The features that would encourage greater use of pools were: Heated water (54.7%), Open all year round (52.7%), Wave pools (33.8%), Indoor Pools (23.6%) and Water play areas (18.2%). (ARC 2 Doc2)

Leisure participation data provide ARC planners with crucial insights into municipal and regional sports participation patterns (Marriott et al., 2021), signifying the importance for local governments to continually update this data. Patterns of leisure participation are influenced by a myriad of factors, including cultural, social, economic, and environmental changes, such as shifts in social values, personal incomes, or technological advancements (Gale & Devine, 2023; Kono & Ito, 2023). These findings align with existing literature on the importance of understanding participation patterns for effective planning (Barth, 2020).

Our study builds knowledge for ARC planning, noting that in addition to data gathering for understanding participation levels is not just about gathering data; it is crucial for

tailoring recreation programs and facility offerings optimizing resource allocation, identifying underserved communities and informing strategic decision-making to enhance community engagement and well-being.

Community leisure needs

Community leisure needs appeared in 16 interviews and three documents. Our study identified the importance of understanding community leisure needs to ensure ARC facilities remained relevant and beneficial to the community. The two local governments undertook extensive research to identify the long-term leisure requirements, with a focus on future infrastructure usage and evolving user trends, as typified in one document (ARC 1 Doc 1) on future usage of swimming pools:

The [community needs] results indicate above-average future use of pools (area average +18%) is likely to be made by females (+15%) and people aged 20–29 years (+15%) and 30–39 years (+24%). People aged 60–69 years are also likely to make more use with an average increase of 17%, while those aged 70 years and above are also showing an increase of 9%.

These findings are consistent with the need for flexible recreational offerings in response to societal changes (Tapps & Wells, 2024). Systematically gathering data on community leisure needs provide a solid foundation for long-term planning. This approach not only supports theoretical frameworks that emphasise community engagement in public service planning (IAP2, 2019), it has practical implications. Practically, it underscores the importance of data-driven planning to maintain the relevance and adaptability of ARCs (Cushman et al., 2005).

Interim findings

Interim findings, appearing in 24 interviews and 13 documents, were commonly referred to across both sources, noting these were

presented in reports and provided critical data to inform stakeholders and guide decisions in the ARC planning process. These findings highlighted the dynamic interaction between various data sources, shaping key issues and priorities (Veal, 2017). The reports were presented to community stakeholders and Councillors through the Councillor meetings including discussion papers (ARC 1 Doc 2; ARC 2 Doc 2), progress reports (ARC 1 Doc 5; ARC 2 Doc 13), community consultation report (ARC 1 Doc 32; ARC 2 Doc 1) and council reports (ARC 1 Doc 212; ARC 2 Doc 14). Interim findings reports ensured planning was responsive and effective, addressed significant deficiencies in the community on recreation facilities and justified the existence of the ARCs in the community.

Write the plan

The need to write the leisure plan was recognised in 13 interviews and 10 documents.

While planners evaluated collected data to forecast ARC provision of leisure and recreation services, no evidence existed on community engagements to validate the collected data. This omission potentially jeopardises the plans' relevance, as action recommendations, including policy directives, may not fully align with the community's preferences (Barth, 2020; Marriott et al., 2021; Veal, 2017). The lack of draft plans for analysis hindered the assessment of alignment with project objectives, timelines, and evaluation strategies, despite indications from interviews and meeting minutes that such plans were created. This indicates a potential disconnect between data interpretation and community engagement, a critical element in effective public planning. The lack of community engagement represents a missed opportunity to reinforce the plan's legitimacy and effectiveness for the community. Overall, this phase was less documented or discussed compared to

other phases, with notable gaps in community engagement and formal draft plan production.

Evaluate collected data

Evaluating collected data, appeared in eight interviews and seven documents. Such evaluation often requires revisiting initial policies to ensure decisions and recommendations are well-informed (Dalheim, 2023). Despite the importance of clear missions and goals (Marriott et.al., 2021) neither ARC developed missions or project-based goals, which complicated decision-making and alignment with broader local government objectives (Veal, 2017). Instead, evaluation of collected data assisted to inform decision-making on the need and demand for a new ARC:

The detailed Aquatic and Leisure Centre Market Research findings clearly demonstrate both a need and sufficient user demand to support the XXXX vision for the development of new regional aquatic and leisure centre (ARC 1 Doc 14).

The absence of the planning process' mission and project-specific goals highlights a broader issue in ARC planning, where foundational elements were overlooked and potentially hindered decision-making, and the alignment to local government strategy. The gap identified in the two ARCs' planning process highlights the need for a strategic planning framework to guide an aligned mission, goals and outcomes.

Draft plan

The draft plan appeared in three interviews and five documents. This document consolidates research findings and collaborative efforts, outlining strategies to meet current and future community needs (Dalheim, 2023). Typically, this document is reviewed by local government Councillors and presented to the community for feedback (Dalheim, 2023). In our study,

neither case provided a draft plan for analysis, precluding an assessment of its alignment with the project's mission, vision, objectives, timelines, and evaluation strategies (Barth, 2020; Marriott et al., 2021; Veal, 2017). However, meeting minutes documents and interviews stated that a draft plan was to be produced, i.e. "a comprehensive draft report will then be produced for further consideration" (ARC 1 Doc 12). The lack of access to the draft plans hinders the capacity to determine if there is alignment between the planning process and strategic objectives as articulated in existing literature (Dalheim, 2023).

Implementation of plan

The implementation phase was the least planned for, appearing in only seven mentions across interviews and documents, and involving just one out of the three components. This phase involves transforming a written strategy into actionable outcomes, including monitoring its effectiveness (Dalheim, 2023). Our findings indicate a plan was adopted and implemented by both the local governments. The concern was these plans were not distributed for community feedback, nor were any systems established to monitor the adopted plans.

Potentially this action is no surprise, research indicates many leisure planning processes end prematurely once the plan is written and adopted, leaving the implementation phase unfinished (Marriott et al., 2021). Improved community transparency and follow-up is needed to ensure intended outcomes and impacts are achieved, which requires monitoring and evaluation.

Adopt the plan

The adoption of the plan, appearing in seven interviews and three documents, marked the final stage of the planning process. While referred to in the data, the adoption of the

plan lacked specific documentation detailing the final Council decision. Although no formal documentation was found, the process of endorsement was corroborated by respondents. Tori, for example, described how the plan was presented and approved, “The Councillors came to agreement... to endorse this plan”. Formal adoption ensures legitimacy and accountability of Council plans (Barth, 2020), and reinforces the concept that governance processes rely on structured procedural steps to transition from planning to action (Dalheim, 2023). These steps provide evidence of clear documentation and transparent decision-making processes to enhance public trust and administrative efficiency. If procedural steps are required, these were not evident in the two cases studied, instead an ad-hoc approach was adopted, which could question the transparency of decision-making and engagement.

Systemic adhocracy

Reactive, ad hoc planning was evident in the two cases studied rather than adherence to a formal leisure planning framework (Jenkins & Young, 2008). Combined, these characteristics form a systemic adhocracy approach. The term “systemic adhocracy” is used to represent the similarities in how both ARCs proceeded through the planning process. There appeared to be a system to their approach, however when respondents were questioned about this, there was no indication the planning process had any prescribed planning process. Instead, an ad hoc approach was adopted with ARC planners taking steps deemed necessary and addressing issues as they arose. The rationale was this approach allowed for tailored responses to issues however, omitted essential components of the ARC planning process, including mission, goals and objectives, costs / budget, plan the process, set participation targets (refer to Table 2). Despite the data collection phase being heavily relied upon for

evidence, an evidence-based framework to guide the process was absent. As noted by one respondent, “There was not any guidance provided in the planning process, we used our intuition by following our gut instinct” (Olivia, ARC 1). Our finding presents the potential risk of relying on intuition rather than a formalised framework to lead to effective outcomes.

Limitations and future research

Our study provides insight into how ARCs are planned. At the same time, limitations must be acknowledged. First, the decade-long planning process, created a significant gap between the initial planning stages and the implementation of the ARC plan. Such delay, which extended up to five years for participants, potentially affected respondents’ recall of events. This underscores the importance of document analysis to verify timelines and events. Future research could involve an ethnographic study of an ongoing ARC planning project to gain direct insights into the planning phases as they unfold.

Second, our study focused on a metropolitan location to explore the planning approaches of two urban cases. The interpretation of our findings should be approached with caution, the strategies identified may not be applicable to other settings within Australia or internationally. Future research could adopt quantitative methodologies in the planning of ARCs or similar sport and recreation infrastructure, to gain a broader perspective at the state, national, or global levels. Quantitative data collection based on the newly formed leisure planning typology could provide a benchmark to expand understanding of the ARC or more broadly, the leisure planning process.

A critical element in the leisure planning process is the role of various committees (i.e. the community consultation committee, the steering committee and the project committee). Committees play an essential role in overseeing

the planning process, to ensure diverse perspectives are considered and maintain transparency and accountability (Drake & Bekker, 2023). Our findings show the involvement of a committee can address strategic matters, align the planning process with organisational goals and provide accountable decision-making. Future research could explore how the composition and function of committees impact the effectiveness of ARC planning and outcomes.

Our study serves as a foundation for future research. The findings indicate the two local governments did not follow an established framework to guide the ARC planning process. There is potential for an intervention study with local governments using the leisure planning typology to guide them on a structure planning approach. The framework could potentially assist local government beyond the ARC planning process into other planning settings including community libraries or open space planning. Given there is no rigorous research on ARCs leisure planning (McDonald et al., 2023), such an investigation could explain the influence of the planning process on the outcomes of infrastructure projects.

Conclusion

Examining the leisure planning processes within two ARCs reveal a significant reliance on a systemic adhocism approach that highlights a lack of adherence to specific planning models. While this approach offers flexibility in achieving outcomes, it introduces a level of ad hoc decisions that may overlook crucial planning components. A reliance on perceived components exists rather than a structured planning framework. Local government officers making intuitive and gut instinct-driven decisions underscores potential shortcomings to developing plans comprising comprehensive strategic goals (Dalheim, 2023), aligned to the local government governing body.

Our study notably reveals shortcomings in the planning process, specifically in establishing

the planning context, as it lacked clearly defined missions, project goals, budgets, and participation targets to inform the development of project plans. This oversight emphasises the necessity of dedicating sufficient time to the planning context to ensure a robust foundation for effective project advancement. Findings reveal heavy reliance on the collection of data phase to guide decision-making, in particular community engagement and understanding the community profile. To provide a more robust and transparent approach, focus instead should be on integrating all the four phases of the leisure planning typology within the planning process. A robust implementation strategy is essential for successful plan execution, as many leisure planning processes often falter after the plan is formulated (Marriott et al., 2021). Establishing phases that include monitoring systems to track and evaluate outcomes is crucial for gauging the plan's effectiveness and ensuring alignment with intended objectives (Barth, 2020). Ultimately, these outcomes could lead to enhanced resilient and responsive ARCs to meet the needs of diverse community populations.

Our study highlights the challenges and intricacies inherent in leisure planning. It calls for a more structured and comprehensive approach to mitigate risks associated with ad hoc decision-making and ensure the effective realisation of community-centric leisure plans. Findings from our study not only builds knowledge, but it also provides practical applications that could enhance the delivery of ARCs in Melbourne and beyond.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [KMCD], upon reasonable request.

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