

PLAN IMPLEMENTATION: The Reality of Land Use Planning in Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper considers the question as to whether urban planning documents actually achieve their desired planning outcomes, or do we just assume they do? This paper argues that planners need to gain a deeper understanding of the outcomes of planning methods used within their plans, and critically evaluate whether the appropriate institutional structures are in place to enable the plan making and implementation process to deliver the desired planning outcomes. The paper draws on findings from 18 in-depth interviews with urban planning practitioners and analysis of 24 case studies of plan implementation in three existing Auckland councils. The case study results suggest there are critical disconnections between the planning policy intentions, plan methods designed to give effect to those policy intentions and the actual planning outcomes achieved on the ground.

The paper presents some potential reasons for these disconnections. It suggests that the local government reform of the late 1980's and early 1990's, where the activity of plan making was separated from plan implementation have in part shaped these critical disconnections within the planning process. A further difficulty is that the separation of urban planning functions within councils has created a knowledge gap between the plan makers and the plan implementers which further exacerbates the gap between policies and implementation.

Introduction

It is generally assumed by plan makers, politicians and their communities that desired planning outcomes, once developed and expressed through urban planning documents, will be delivered through the implementation process. A fundamental belief about the plan making process is that it provides a planning framework which delivers the planning outcomes as negotiated and agreed public planning policy.

This paper examines the assumption of whether urban planning documents (district plans) actually deliver their stated outcomes or do we just assume they do? It considers this within the context of New Zealand's devolved land use planning mandate of the Resource Management Act 1991 (the RMA), and in light of the public management reforms of the 1980's and 1990's, which at local government level, resulted in the separation of planning policy development from implementation. The research involved the examination of 24 planning case studies selected from three of the RMA's first generation district plans within the Auckland region to assess whether they delivered their stated planning outcomes. The planning case studies were supported by 18 semi-reflective in-depth interviews of the practitioners involved in the plan making process for the district plans considered. Case studies relating to a landscape and

ecological perspective were chosen, given the significance landscape and ecological issues contribute to New Zealand's cultural identity (Park and Potton 1995).

The RMA uses a rational-conformance based planning model for implementing its desired planning outcomes. A conformance based model assumes that plans are effectively implemented if 'on the ground' results accord with the plans' stated policy goals (Laurian *et al* 2010 and Laurian *et al.*, 2004). To achieve this, New Zealand's district plans provide for a wide range of permitted (able to proceed without the need for planning permission) and similar land use activities requiring only minor planning permissions (controlled and restricted discretionary resource consents), which by their inherent nature are designed to meet the plan's stated planning outcomes. These are developed through the district plan development process and become agreed public planning policy.

The district plans constructed under the RMA are based upon a simple public policy cycle. Under this model, planning issues are identified, objectives and policies are developed to address the relevant planning issues, methods are designed to implement the policy framework, stated planning outcomes are given which will address the planning issue and the policy loop is then completed with evaluation of the methods proposed. This cascading approach to plan development and review is set out within s75. This enables the development of clear articulated linkages between issues, the objectives designed to address those issues, the policies that support the objectives, the methods to achieve the policy framework and the anticipated planning outcomes (environmental results expected) which set out the stated planning outcomes based upon each of the relevant issues. These are supported by mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of the district plan's policy frameworks.

In practice, the majority of New Zealand's district plans are multi-layered, beginning with strategic or citywide policy directions (including their methods) for the council's overall planning responses to the issues the district/city faces. The strategic policy frameworks are supported by a range of 'lower' or specific policy frameworks setting out their desired policy responses to the particular issue e.g., policy frameworks for residential development or policy frameworks for ecological protection and enhancement. Each of these lower level policy frameworks also contains methods to give effect to their stated outcomes. Each layer is developed in accordance with the policy model outlined above. This requires the district plans to be internally consistent both vertically and horizontally i.e., the specific policy frameworks, with their methods, are required to integrate vertically with, and give effect to the higher strategic policy. The specific policy frameworks along with their methods should also integrate horizontally with the other specific policy frameworks, and their methods to ensure that the district plan is consistent and coherent. Adherence to this process should create a planning document that is capable of delivering agreed planning outcomes without internal conflicts.

Methodological approaches to the research

The research design developed for this investigation encompassed several steps, including the development of methodologies for council selection, case study location, ways of determining the individual district plan's landscape and ecological desired and stated planning outcomes and ways to attribute the case study to the relevant district plan policy framework.

Councils selection

The Auckland region was chosen to undertake this research given its diverse nature, which results in a wide range of planning issues, (e.g. urban, rural and coastal planning). It is also the region experiencing some of the greatest growth pressures in New Zealand and, given its overall size, it usually influences the economic, cultural, and social developments of the rest of the country (ARC 2006, MFE, 1997; Perkins *et al.*, 1993). The region currently has seven local city/district councils, each with a district plan setting out the relevant planning matters for their district, policy responses, methods to give effect to those policy intentions, and their stated planning outcomes. Three of these city councils, North Shore, Auckland and Manukau, were selected for this research as they provide a representative cross-section of the development pressures and challenges currently facing the Auckland region.

Case study locations

The planning staff administering the district plan within each of the three council areas chose the case studies used in this research to remove any chances of self-selecting bias. The case studies were selected using a criterion requiring planning applications (as near as possible to) that were in accordance with, and encouraged by the district plan's stated policy intentions. This would include, for example, land subdivision applications that meet the district plan's minimum density standards and land use activities that only required planning permission for limited discrete matters.

Determining district plan's desired and stated planning outcomes

This was achieved by reviewing both the strategic and the relevant specific policy frameworks against their stated planning outcomes (Environmental Results Expected) throughout the complete district plan. This enabled both an issue specific and a strategic overall policy intention for each of the individual district plans to be articulated. From this a theoretical policy intention map could then be constructed, setting out how each of the planning case study proposals (both land subdivision and land use applications) should have proceeded if they were to be in accordance with that district plan's stated planning outcomes for landscape and ecological matters. Each of the three district plan's methods designed to guide development proposals were then evaluated to determine whether these methods would actually give effect

to their plan's stated planning outcomes, thus testing the linkages between district plan policy intentions and plan methods for all of the 24 planning case studies.

Results

District Plan internal Consistency

The mapping of the policy intentions of the three district plans revealed weak or poor linkages both vertically and horizontally within each. In most situations the strategic or city wide policy frameworks were not consistent, or not horizontally integrated with the individual specific policy frameworks. The exception to this was the Manukau City Council's district plan, which does not contain a strategic or citywide policy framework within its district plan, so consistency could not be established. These results were complicated further by the failure of the policy intentions in the three district plans to link in any meaningful way with their stated planning outcomes, with many reading as policies rather than stated planning outcomes.

District Plan Methods

While all the individual district plan's policy frameworks sought landscape and ecological protection and enhancement, all the plan methods examined, except two, favoured development with the potential protection of existing features, but did not require any form of enhancement, save for minor landscaping of building forms through the land use application process. However, these methods were limited in the outcomes sought, requiring minor building landscaping did not mitigate the adverse impacts generated by these buildings forms upon the surrounding landscape values. The two methods requiring enhancement were attributed to engineering and the need to control and mitigate stormwater run off as opposed to the district plan's stated aims for landscape and ecological enhancement. The results showed disconnections between the majority of the district plan's policy intentions (desired planning outcomes) and the actual plan methods.

Planning Case Studies

All of the 24 planning case studies were chosen to represent development proposals that were in accordance with, and encouraged by the district plans. In all the case studies, apart from three cases there was a failure to give effect to the relevant district plan's desired policy outcomes for ecological and landscape enhancement. In addition, in five case studies, the development areas actually lost ecological features, 15 lost landscape values and in nine case studies there was no change to the site's conditions. The analysis demonstrated that the district plan process failed to improve the existing level of landscape and ecological values present on these sites, let alone protect those values. This raises serious questions about these plans ability to deliver on the community's agreed outcomes.

In-depth interviews

To gain a deeper understanding as to why the disconnections were present 18 semi-reflective in-depth interviews of the practitioners involved in the plan making process were undertaken. While all the practitioners agreed that their plans sought, or intended to provide for landscape and ecological protection and enhancement, many differing reasons were given for the case study results. A number of explanation given have been previously covered by others authors (Laurian *et al* 2010, Laurian *et al.*, 2004 and Erickson *et al* 2003) including factors such as, the pressure to develop plans under politically motivated and unrealistic time frames, the low level of financial and policy commitment from central government and the planning's profession's ability to come to terms with the new and fundamentally different planning mandate. However, concerns were also expressed about the existing local government institutional arrangements and how the separation of the differing aspects of the planning process, usually within different council divisions, created a 'silo mentality' to planning, leading to a knowledge disconnection between the plan makers and plan implementers. Many practitioners, especially the more senior practitioners did not understand the rationale for the planning reforms with some suggesting they were undertaken because they were the 'flavour of the month' to do so, without an analysis as to their impacts on the planning process. All agreed that disconnecting policy development from implementation was a backward step and suggested that reintegration of the planning process would lead to better planning outcomes.

Another significant issue highlighted through the interview process, was the low level of commitment to policy effectiveness monitoring, with many suggesting there was no political will to undertake this process or did not see the need to evaluate the effectiveness of their plan's policy approaches. A number of practitioners did however, raise concerns over the complexities involved in development of effective indicators to determine if the plan's stated outcomes had been achieved. These results suggest a low level of commitment to policy effectiveness monitoring and raises questions about the willingness to complete the public policy cycle on which the RMA is based.

Conclusions

The research found the overwhelming majority of the planning case studies examined (21 out of 24), failed to give effect to the district plan's desired policy intentions and, in some situations, the results showed the opposite being realised by a loss of ecological and/or landscape values. In the remaining cases, there was no change to these values as a result of the planning process. However, of more significance was that the majority of methods in each district plan also failed to meet stated policy intentions, highlighting a structural failure and internal disconnections within the three district plans examined. Moreover, there were structural failings (both vertically and horizontally) consistent with previous research findings, between the policy

intentions in each of the district plans. This generated planning documents that were inconsistent and confusing and raises questions about their effectiveness as tools for implementation.

These findings also raise questions for plan making about the quality of the planning outcomes possible. It raises concerns about the implications of the new public management reforms separating planning policy development from implementation. It appears this separation has created a knowledge disconnection between plan makers and plan implementers. There are also concerns about commitment levels required to evaluate the effectiveness of district plan policy approaches and complete the cascading approach to plan development. This raises the issue as to whether the current local government institutional arrangements are assisting in the delivery of urban planning? However, of more concern is the potential 'loss of public confidence' in these plans if the agreed planning outcomes are not delivered through the plan development and implementation process.

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