

Local governments' decade of organisational change to promote child health and wellbeing: a Western Australian qualitative study

Melissa Stoneham,¹ Melinda Edmunds,¹ Christina Pollard^{1,2}

Western Australia faces significant tyranny of distance with a total land area of 2,529,875 km², accounting for 33% of the Australian landmass and a population of 2.76 million at the end of June 2020, rising from 2.30 million in 2010 and expected to reach 2.9 million in 2027.¹ As well, the low population density of 0.89 people per kilometre (one of the least densely populated states in the world) presents specific challenges to the local government authorities who govern local areas, as more than two million people live in the Perth metropolitan area.¹

Legislation oversees local governments under the *Local Government Act 1995*, with additional legislation influences in Western Australia (e.g. health, environmental management, traffic and road safety and community governance). As of 2021, there are 139 local governments in Western Australia. Many of these are experiencing reductions in financial contributions and are striving to make efficiency savings at a time when demand on community services is growing due to demographic and political changes.² Driving this increase in community demand is a gap that has emerged between the community's propensity to pay for various amenities and the cost to the council in providing those services. An example of this expanded role is the requirement to develop public health or municipal health plans, which often provide a mechanism to improve all aspects of wellbeing, build strong social networks and promote health,

Abstract

Objective: We aim to reflect on the introduction of risk-based approaches to public health, driven by legislation outlining the expected local government public health functions and roles by identifying factors that most influenced organisational change within the Western Australia local government sector when developing and submitting child and young people's health and social policy to an annual Awards program.

Methods: This paper uses 10 years of data from a WA-based Local Government Policy Awards scheme to identify planned organisational change within the local government sector by applying a tangible organisational change model to develop a change narrative to describe factors that influenced local governments to address public health. Semi-structured interviews of 83 local government officers over the 10 years since implementation were used to create the narrative and identify factors that strengthened or hindered policy development and implementation at the local organisational level.

Results: Participant interviews highlighted that the Policy Award Scheme contributed to steps outlined in the Pettigrew et al. (1992) stepped model of organisational change theory to support policy development.

Implications for public health: Few studies have explored these elements in their own right. We argue that advocacy for structured policy development is continually needed to support and promote internal policy prioritisation and implementation in practice.

Key words: policy, local government, advocacy, children, health, environment, organisational capacity

as required by *Public Health Acts* in several Australian states. Being the closest form of government to the people,³ local government is increasingly seen as well-positioned to achieve these wellbeing outcomes and engage and partner with local communities, other levels of government and private and non-government organisations across many issues, including child health and wellbeing.⁴ Organisational change theory can be applied to examine how public organisations have adapted in an effort to remain relevant in a changing environment. Specifically, this study

aimed to identify planned organisational change within the local government sector by applying a tangible organisational change model to track the successes and challenges of policy change as influenced by a Local Government Policy Awards Scheme (referred to as the Awards hereafter). The Pettigrew et al. (1992) organisational change model⁵ was selected to apply to this research, as it focuses on differentiating change by type, where change is seen in the context of its phases as continuous change or stepped change. Results show how local governments

1. Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia, Curtin University, Western Australia

2. Chronic Disease Prevention, Health Department of Western Australia

Correspondence to: Dr Melissa Stoneham, Curtin University – Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia, Health Research Campus, GPO Box U1987, Perth, Western Australia 6845; e-mail: M.Stoneham@curtin.edu.au

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can be in a constant process of learning, improvement and evolutions.⁶ Few studies have explored these elements in their own right, and we argue that organisational change should be applied more purposefully to policy development and capacity building, if local government social and health policy is to be strengthened.

Much has been published on the role of organisational change within systems, although there is insufficient evidence to establish a robust understanding of change success, as outcomes often depend upon the conceptualisation, perception and measurement of change.⁷ This current paper does not attempt to summarise or critique this enormous body of work but instead focuses on common elements that inform the understanding of organisational change for local government social and health policy.

This study was conducted in Western Australia and tracked all submissions from the inception of the Awards in 2011 through to 2020. During this period, local governments were progressively incorporating social and health agendas as required under the *Public Health Act 2016*. These agendas included strategies to prevent chronic disease and mental health issues, and a greater emphasis on Aboriginal health and community-led programs.⁸ With the introduction of this Act in 2016, local government policy makers and health professionals were starting to recognise the influence on health and wellbeing of inter-related social, economic, cultural and environmental factors.⁹ While policy has often been seen as synonymous with legislation and regulation within the Western Australia local government sector,¹⁰ the introduction of the *Public Health Act* saw this expanded to include a broader range of activities that emphasised the social, economic and environmental determinants of health and strategies to reduce differentials in health status.

The advocacy intervention: Local Government Policy Awards

Founded in 2011, the Local Government Policy Awards scheme is a local government-based project conducted annually and auspiced by the Public Health Advocacy Institute (PHAI).¹¹ Established in 2008, the PHAI aims to raise the public profile and understanding of public health, develop local networks and function as an umbrella organisation capable of influencing public health policy and political agendas. The

PHAI convened an Environment and Health Advocacy Committee comprising 22 members who identified the need to increase advocacy in the area of children's environment and health. This committee, made up of mostly external representatives, guided the development of the Awards. The committee designated the area of children's environment and health as the highest priority and identified and canvassed a range of ideas focusing on how to advocate for improved children's environments and health. A consensus-based workshop of more than 100 public health professionals, which was led by the committee members, identified the local government sector as the most suitable target for action as they manage many settings where children congregate. Further, it was agreed that a strengths-based approach recognising local government efforts in sustainable child-focused policy interventions would be an appropriate strategy.

As a result, the Awards focus on policy influencing the nature and quality of the built and social environments in which children grow up, as these have a significant impact on their health and development and are often managed by the local government sector. Award categories were generated based on a Western Australian evidence paper¹² and local governments were invited to submit applications under each category. In addition, local governments were required to submit three pieces of evidence to demonstrate that the policy had been developed, ratified and implemented. A range of feedback mechanisms was considered, and the committee agreed on a 'report card' style feedback system. The report card feedback graded applications using assessments from A to C (A being exceptional and C needing further work). The report cards allowed comparative information for the local government sector in a standardised format. Comments and suggestions were provided to guide further applications and focused on evaluating program quality, promoting program improvement, stakeholder and partnership development, and informing community members of the policy developments across many settings including schools, urban planning and health services. The Awards employed the report card as an innovative advocacy tool that acted as both an effective evaluation mechanism of local government corporate strategy and an instrument to promote positive change in the local government sector.¹³

Committee members and other invited experts within the public health field scored the applications each year. Based on their scores, winners were nominated against each category and considered for the overall 'Best in WA' and 'Best Rural Local Government'. There is an annual Awards ceremony and a printed Showcase document that feature winners in all categories. Case studies within the Showcase document, including photographs and contact details, provide detail regarding the demographic diversity of children and young people reached, political systems, size of local government, policy outcomes and breadth and depth of lessons learned.

Many Western Australian local governments have made significant investments in children and young people; however, overall, local governments find it challenging to widely promote their interventions.¹⁴ With the introduction of the *Public Health Act* and State Public Health Plan,¹⁵ this has been expanded to include a broader range of activities that can influence residents and communities.

The Awards provide a vehicle to showcase policy interventions that may be replicable in other areas and stimulate innovative ideas to address child health and wellbeing through local policy. They also address the lack of recognition that the local government sector receives in the areas of policy, environment and health and child health.¹⁴

Organisational change within the local government sector

Organisational change management is described as "the process of continually renewing an organisation's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers".^{16(p111)} Change can adopt a number of different forms, including small yet distinct incremental adjustments or continuous ongoing developments, and can be planned or emergent.

There is no single theory that succinctly explains how organisations change. Some suggest that organisational change is neither clearly defined nor interpreted consistently,¹⁷ leading to a fragmented approach and inconsistent findings.^{18,19} Much of the literature relates to change management within the private sector, whose core business is to create profit rather than improve social and health outcomes. Others suggest that although much has been published on

the role of organisational change within systems, there is insufficient evidence to establish a robust understanding of change success, as outcomes often depend upon the conceptualisation, perception and measurement of change.⁷ There is a scarcity of literature that gives practical examples of managing change in the social and health policy fields within the local government sector. The Pettigrew step-by-step model of organisational change theory,⁵ as explained below, was selected as it focuses on differentiating change by type, where change is seen in the context of its phases as continuous change or stepped change. This model provides an explanation of change that can be of interpretive value for the local government sector. In addition, the theory was developed from empirical research in settings to guide organisational change for health. Consideration of the organisational change process in a step-by-step process is relatively straightforward, but rarely deliberated. Frameworks tend to reduce action to strategies that are manageable and discreet. Organisational change is perceived as intangible, so it is often overlooked or forgotten. This paper uses this reductionist approach by applying this tangible tool to develop a policy narrative associated with local government actions to submit to the Awards. The Awards are valued within the sector; however, further analysis will provide specific explanations as to the way the advocacy approach contributes to change.

Applying the Pettigrew model of organisational change

Pettigrew et al. (1992) applied their model to the National Health System in the United Kingdom. It proposed that change within an organisation could be understood within the organisation's historical, cultural and political context.⁵ The model outlined successful change as a result of interaction between the context, process and content of change. It includes eight features including: the quality and coherence of policy-analytic and process components; availability of key people leading change; environmental pressure – intensity, scale and orchestration; a supportive organisational culture; effective managerial/clinical/staff relations; co-operative interorganisational networks; simplicity and clarity of goals and priorities; and the fit between the change agenda and the locale.⁵

For the purposes of this study, the features were simplified and described as the quality and coherence of policy, availability of key people leading change, environmental pressure, supportive organisational culture, effective managerial-staff relations, co-operative inter-organisational networks, simplicity and clarity of goals and priorities and organisational fit. Seven of the eight features were used to assess organisational change. The feature that was not used in this study was 'environmental pressure – intensity, scale and orchestration' as Pettigrew (and others) define orchestration and scale as measuring how formal leaders across different public service system levels mobilise and mediate large-scale change. This feature did not fit well with the diversity of local governments across Western Australia, some of which employ only four office staff.²⁰

The model aims to identify the degree to which a public sector institution is amenable to change, and the combination of variables needed to perform process and change.

This paper tracks local government's policy narratives over the ten years of the Policy Awards, provides qualitative data around seven of the eight variables listed above, and illustrates how local governments navigated the move from the traditional approach to health and social policy for young people through to newer transitional strategies for policy development.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 83 local government officers who were Policy Award participants from 2011 to 2020. The four most-common local government respondents included community development officers (25%), youth officers (15.6%), health promotion/public health officers (13.2%) and environmental health officers (10.8%). Participants were drawn from metropolitan (57%) and regional areas (43%) and not all participants had been successful in winning an Award category. Most respondents had been employed in the local government sector for more than five years (62%). The interviews were analysed collectively to describe the organisational change narrative around the development and implementation of social and health policy, as opposed to evaluating the Awards and category changes over time.

Taken from the model developed by Pettigrew et al., seven of the eight variables were used to analyse organisational change in the participating local governments.

The sample included every Western Australian local government that submitted an application within each category over the ten-year period. The sample comprises 83 local government officers from a total of 81 individual Western Australian local governments that participated over the decade. These 81 local governments represent 58.7% of the total number of local government areas in Western Australia.

Survey instrument

Semi-structured interviews were conducted annually following the Awards ceremony. Standardised questions were used each year to ensure consistency, quality, breadth and depth of data. Surveys were designed around seven elements of the Pettigrew model and focused on the role of the local government officer's involvement in the submission process, support systems, alignment to corporate strategy, ongoing challenges in relation to the development, implementation and evaluation of policy that is relevant to child and youth populations, perceived benefits and priorities for future policy work.

The coding structure was based on categorical analysis of the existing evidence-based policy Award categories. The coding structure was tested with local government policies from non-submitting councils. A total of five local government policies with the descriptors of child, youth, family or public health were examined using this method. In this study, the adaptations to the coding structure were discussed and agreed upon with the research team throughout the course of data collection and analysis.

A constant comparative approach to thematic analyses^{21,22} was used to find patterns within themes while maintaining as close to the construction of the world as the participants originally experienced it. This method allowed the exploration of the key organisational change themes presented in qualitative responses, as outlined in Pettigrew's model.

Results

This section presents a short description of respondents but focuses on the key findings related to the factors that most influenced organisational change within the Western

Australia local government sector when developing child and young people's health and social policy. These factors are critical to understanding interim steps towards policy change, triggers for action and challenges faced.

Applicant details on the Award applications from 2011 to 2020 were collated and presented to identify participation trends. Figure One demonstrates these trends over time. During this period, 48% of submissions were from regional local governments, with the remaining 52% from metropolitan local governments. Changes over time reflect the reduced category numbers and willingness of local governments to commit to submitting an application, given changing local political landscapes and events.

Since 2011, 157 individual applications have been submitted by local governments and this is inclusive of multiple submissions by individual local governments over different years. A total of 1,514 category applications have been submitted across all categories for the period 2011–2020 (Figure One). Policy Award categories have changed over time due to a lack of applications in specific categories or in response to emerging evidence of public health priorities in the area of children's environment and health. Table One demonstrates this change in priority categories over time and includes the number of applications for each category by year.

The categories of child health and development, environments that support physical activity, healthy eating, shade creation, child friendly planning approaches and smoke-free environments were identified

as priority areas in the 2011 evidence report and remain as categories in the current Awards.

Table One identifies that, over time, seven award categories have been discontinued and four have been combined with other categories. Over the decade, an additional ten categories have been added to reflect emerging evidence, local government nomenclature and policy environments.

Perceptions of local government stakeholders

Data from 83 semi-structured interviews with local government officers who submitted an Award application were analysed to develop a narrative, providing insights into organisational change that are discussed under seven of the eight variables of the Pettigrew model.

Quality and coherence of policy

The importance of policy within the local government sector was mentioned by many officers with comments including that they felt a "reassurance that policy is needed". Another participant highlighted the value of the Award process as it "highlighted the fact that policies and planning documents could be better prepared to surround such programs to be more planned and less ad hoc".

External policy drivers were mentioned including "pressure from youth-focused organisations" and "ensuring we comply with the State Public Health Plan" with insights that these also placed an emphasis on the need for quality and coherent policy.

A number of observations about the quality of policy implementation within the sector were received and reinforced the need for policy not only to be developed, but also implemented and evaluated. Some participants stated that often policy within their local governments was created and passed, but never implemented due to a lack of resources or accountability. This is explored in the comment below:

The Awards only look at written council documents and policies to assess what local governments have done for children in their communities. Whilst I understand this is about embedding a culture in the organisation, there are times where policies and plans exist, but no activity actually occurs. Therefore, I think it is important to look at the outcomes for children and families rather than documentation as such.

Availability of key people leading change

The ability of the local government officers to work strategically within council and lead the Award submission was integral. It often involved identifying staff with compatible interests and engaging them early in the process of submission development.

The officers leading the submission identified important steps to ensure organisational buy-in, including making the project visible, securing time at council and executive meetings to present the submission and developing strategies to "bring other officers along on the policy journey".

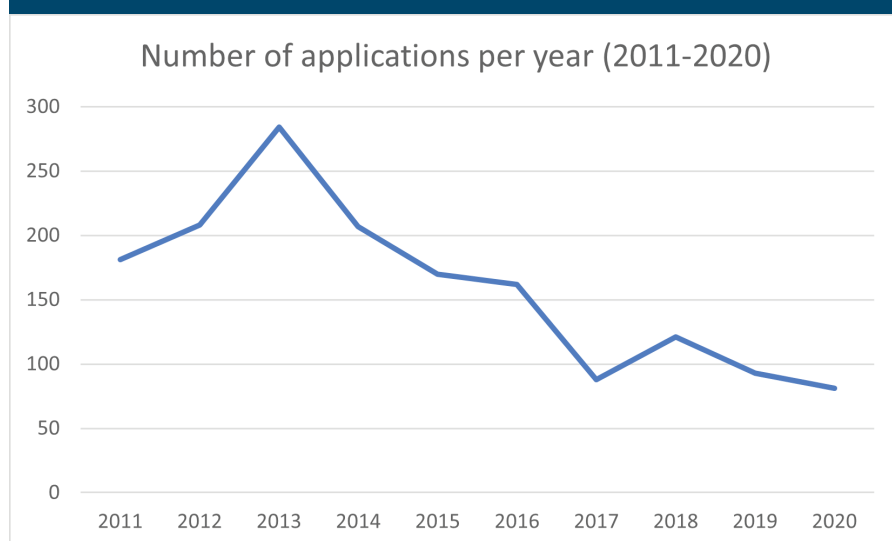
Supportive organisational culture

Participants said that support from the organisation's chief executive officer, and others in senior management, was a key factor in generating a whole-of-local government submission. As one informant stated:

We have always been able to work across council departments on specific projects, but when it came to documenting policy wins and outcomes, we struggled a bit. I approached the CEO and asked him to contribute to the submission. This was a great move as he identified the council's strategic policy approach to social and health outcomes and got everyone together in the same room – on the same page. The submission became easier to develop after that.

Another respondent stated that "senior management played a crucial function in supporting the submission. They were receptive to the Awards and saw them as

Figure 1: Number of Award submissions received per year.



promoting not only the council but also health within our community”.

Some respondents commented that being involved in the Awards was beneficial and contributed to an increased awareness of the importance of public health and “a new way of working” within their own organisation, which led to greater commitment from senior management. This is demonstrated in the following comments:

It is a valuable tool to highlight internally each department's role in public health. It is also a great opportunity to highlight to council and executive the importance of public health initiatives and give them reward, recognition and support for further projects.

When new policies and plans are developed such as the Public Health Plan, we will push our areas of interest to be included and considered. Without the Awards to trigger this, it is challenging to get many to commit to public health initiatives and change the thinking from regulatory roles to more community-focused approaches to health policy.

Readiness to change was identified by respondents as a factor to either promote or delay policy development and organisational change. It was important at different levels within the organisation including the officer, department and organisational level. One

officer stated that, “I was dead keen to submit this year as I wanted to move our department in a different direction and the Award submission instigated that”. Many respondents stated that having specific health or social references in the Corporate Strategic Plans made it “easier to get organisational support to submit the application” and ensured that the application was more of a “team process”.

A couple of participants advised that despite their efforts, the policy agenda within their local government was difficult to influence due to factors including “insufficient knowledge, capacity and will” and a reluctance from some local government officers to engage in the process as indicated by the following comment: “we’re all so stressed out and busy already – why should we bother?”

Effective managerial–staff relations

Managers commented that policy changes need to occur from the top down, while the officers were more inclined to argue for the need to develop skills in “managing up”. This perception varied with the size of the local government, whereby the larger organisations enabled more autonomy at the officer level. Participants articulated that

understanding what it meant to really engage with the community and incorporate their issues, needs and perceptions within the organisation and its policy instruments was seen to require “a big shift in culture”.

Local government officers described that it was important to be acknowledged by their managers for the work they do every day. Many reflected that the Policy Awards enabled them to “demonstrate to ourselves, council and community”, “be recognised for the everyday work” and “be valued for the work being done with children and young people in the council”. There was also a narrative around the importance of having colleagues from other local government see their efforts through recognition from both the Awards ceremony and in the Showcase document.

Cooperative inter-organisational networks

The Policy Award submission process was looked upon favourably, as it allowed officers to consult with peers from local government departments across their organisation to identify their responses to child health and wellbeing. These collective, cross-council discussions were not considered normal business for many officers, however proved valuable. This is explored below.

Table 1: Number of annual applications per WA Local Government Policy Award category and changes in category titles between 2011 and 2020.

Categories	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Child health and development	11	14	18	15	14	13	8	17	12	12
Environments supporting physical activity	19	15	20	17	12	17	13	12	14	11
Healthy eating	14	10	15	11	11	12	5	7	7	5
Child friendly planning approaches	19	15	20	11	10	8	6	10	9	6
Shade creation	15	13	16	10	8	8	3	6	3	1
Road safety	17	14	20	13	10	7	7	7	d	
Stimulating learning environments/early literacy	19	15	20	15	13	11	7	12	c ¹	
Adventurous play spaces	19	15	20	18	c ²					
Child care centre placement	8	8	12	6	d					
Prevention of disease	12	10	19	14	d					
Housing density/affordability	14	15	20	d						
Outdoor air quality	14	15	19	c ³						
Indoor air quality	0	d								
Smoke free environments		6	6	0	10	8	3	4	5	2
Children's consultation		15	20	13	15	12	9	13	11	12
Nature play		15	20	16	11	10	5	5	c ⁴	
Food safety & security		13	19	12	c ⁵					
Climate change				13	11	10	4	8	7	8
Aboriginal child health				10	12	9	5	5	5	7
Injury prevention				13	10	11	3	4	d	
Young people making a difference					14	15	10	11	13	12
Promoting healthy behaviour					9	11	d			
Action on Alcohol									7	5
Total applications per year	181	208	284	207	170	162	88	121	93	81

Notes:

d=discontinued, c1= combined with child health and development, c2= combined with nature play, c3= combined with smoke free environments, c4= combined with environments promoting physical activity, c5= combined with healthy eating

It is very helpful internally, collecting all the information about what colleagues are doing and showing us opportunities for cross-promotion or working in partnership.

Participation between areas within the council was needed and will encourage future cooperation. It was good for making the Managers think about community development and the potential interaction between areas in the council.

We actually talked to other departments about how they impact the health and wellbeing of children. This is not something we do often. At first, many didn't think they had any influence but once we started a conversation using language other than public health speak, they were surprised just how much they did impact on this area. It was a really positive experience.

This importance of language and the size of the council, where larger local governments reported to have greater difficulty in bringing a diverse range of staff and departments together to contribute to the submission, are demonstrated by the following comment:

In a large organisation like this one, it's always a challenge to bring so many different departments together to talk about an issue where sometimes, they don't feel they have a role. I have learnt to tailor the invitation emails in the language used by that department. For example, when I invited the recreation team, I told them we would be considering issues like play spaces for young children and access to sport for teenagers. If I hadn't done that, I would have had to develop the submission alone.

Simplicity and clarity of goals and priorities

In terms of clarity, it was evident that some local governments were actively using the Awards submission process and Report Card feedback to advocate for the health of future generations and to promote more effective policy and models of service delivery in order to achieve this. Phrases such as "will assist to obtain council support for future projects supporting young people" and "being more proactive in developing services and infrastructure for children" were common among the local government officer narratives. One respondent advised that the Awards "made me assess some of the projects that the Shire has run previously and will run in the future. I assessed the clarity of the projects and asked what sort of value they are adding to the community". Another stated, "these Awards are great to bring attention to projects and initiatives that should be applauded and used as best practice, and as a

checklist to identify areas for improvement. It also helps us to advocate for better resources to maintain or improve existing facilities".

Organisational fit

Organisational change literature states that the articulation of a vision for the desired future is essential to implementing change.²³

For many local government officers, a critical factor in being allocated time to develop policy and the Awards submission was the ability of management to communicate the council's vision, values and priorities as outlined in the Community Strategic Plan. One officer was surprised that the Community Strategic Plan was even used by management and stated that they "thought it was just words on paper and never used". Others used phrases including "alignment with the corporate plans" and "lines of sight" to illustrate organisational fit.

The importance of addressing child health within core business of local government via policy, was commonly addressed with statements like: "investment in early childhood is the single most important and valuable action that can be undertaken in creating long-term improvements in health status and health equity", "well, child health is vitally important as it is the children who are our future" and "it gave focus to the importance of child health in the community and even though we don't do the projects to win awards, it was an opportunity to talk about what we do and be taken seriously about the positive impact these programs have". Another officer stated that, "the challenge for local government health policy is to identify and act on the relationships between the individual and the environment at those points at which the cost of intervention is lowest and the effectiveness of intervention is highest".

This respondent went on to state that the Awards process addressed this challenge to a point by "shining a light on how other local governments have addressed children's health and environment policy through the Awards ceremony and Showcase document". Not all officers had positive feedback about the fit of child and youth policy within the organisational framework. One officer stated that, "I guess as the Awards have child and health in the title, I found it hard to engage with departments such as works or recreation, because they just didn't think this had anything to do with them".

Other organisational change factors

Many respondents believed that local government was seen as the "poor cousin to the State" and organisational change would never happen quickly until others in the state and federal spheres of government recognised that local government was a legitimate and needed level of bureaucracy. Many respondents stated that the Policy Awards enabled this. One local government officer stated, "these Awards shine a light on the great work local governments do – the diversity – the collaboration – the impacts we can have at the grassroots level. No other level of government has that type of influence".

There was also a narrative around the importance of having colleagues from other local governments see their policy efforts through recognition from both the Awards ceremony and in the Showcase document. One respondent stated that they "had always wanted to show we could do better than our neighbouring council, and to win the category with our project that had a clear policy framework and actually addressed the priorities of our community, was just fantastic".

Another factor that led to local governments developing policy was related to the importance of sharing successes and being inspired through the Awards ceremony and the annual Showcase document. Many respondents commented on the importance of "gaining ideas about what is going on in other councils", "getting ideas for policies within our own council" and having "exposure to what other councils are doing and the health impacts on the community".

Others signalled that the Award successes were fed back to the community because they felt that "celebrating success instils positive attitudes in the community and sharing this success with the children involved also encourages participation in future activities". Another local government respondent stated, "I was so proud and excited to share the achievement with our Youth Advisory Council who put work into the initiative and policy".

Discussion

Local government staff described all seven of the eight steps of Pettigrew's (1992) organisational change model⁵ that were included in this study. Narratives around how

organisational change theory can support and encourage the development of child and environmental policy development in the local government sector, as a result of being involved in the Policy Award Scheme, have been presented. The step-by-step model of organisational change⁵ is a straightforward approach, but it is rarely described. Pettigrew's organisational change management model provided a useful framework to uncover the main enablers and barriers to change and to understanding the cultural, political and historical contexts within the organisation that either supported or hindered policy change.

Diagnosing and visualising how policy is being implemented and promoted, together with understanding the multi-layering required within an organisation and how to facilitate a whole of local government process to support change, were described as key characteristics of managerial effectiveness within the local government sector.

Respondents identified a number of triggers supporting policy and, in turn, organisational change, resulting in improved or more effective promotion of child health. At an organisational level, having a policy strong culture, robust leadership, readiness to change, relevant choice of language to facilitate collaboration, a sense of responsibility for future generations and integrating community needs were strong factors for developing and implementing policy. Influences from outside local government also had some impact on the degree of support and the level of change for child-focused policy at the local government level.

Organisational culture can amplify the change valence associated with child health policy, depending on whether the change fits with cultural values as espoused by corporate policy described in documents such as the Community Strategic Plan. Aligning with corporate strategy represents a cultural shift from pursuing independent, siloed, topic-based interests to embracing shared beliefs and pursuing common goals.^{24,25} Given the siloed nature of many local governments, it is important that advocacy projects such as the Policy Awards continue to provide an avenue for cross-council conversations.

The topic of the Awards, being child health and social policy, was regarded as a good fit for local government. Participants described that among the local governments

taking part in the Policy Awards, there was widespread recognition of the links between child health and the culture of councils as developers of infrastructure for young people, providers of recreation facilities and child-focused programs, and providers of stimulating social and physical environments for young people.

Senior management leadership was described as a clear prerequisite for local government staff being given the time and opportunity to develop an Awards submission. Given that there are no legislative mandates for local government to specifically address child health policy in their remit, it is important to identify those factors that will facilitate change within the sector. Responses from officers indicated that advocating for community-led policy change, rather than top-down policy, remains a challenge in this sector. The *Public Health Act 2016* states that when a local government is developing the Public Health Plan, one of the sources of evidence should be community consultation and priorities and should align with the State Public Health Plan.¹⁵ This Plan was introduced in 2019 and advocates for improving the surrounding environment to create vibrant, liveable neighbourhoods that offer a sense of belonging, culture and spirit, and by facilitating behaviour change to support people to lead healthier lifestyles.

As MacLean et al. (2003) reported in their review of the engagement of municipal organisations in Canada in health promotion policy, leadership plays the critical role of enabling organisational linkages and partnerships needed for planned health promotion.²⁶ Organisational culture is determined by leadership within the local government as it affects the way cross-council working is undertaken and the extent to which there is a value placed upon the corporate outcomes that can be achieved by councils, above those of individual departments.

In an evaluation of physical activity strategies by local councils in Melbourne, Victoria, Thomas et al.²⁷ reached similar conclusions about the influence of senior leadership and internal management processes. Enabling a project officer with skills to engage senior managers and to facilitate collaborative planning within the councils was found to be a feature of those councils that were successful in achieving the program's objectives.

Developing policy is an intertwined web of political and policy implementation actions. This study demonstrates that strength is gained through collaboration between local government departments and recognises the importance of language. With a diverse set of skills within each local government, it is imperative that for different disciplines to work effectively together, consideration of tailoring language to engage across areas is important. Where collaboration did occur across a local government, it enabled not only a more robust and comprehensive Policy Award submission but also a deepened understanding of the issue across other local government departments, increasing the ability to move collaborative policy solutions forward, and provide a more holistic service. The Awards facilitated local government officers to advocate for public health. Many who did not initially consider that their work impacted on child health and wellbeing understood that, as a result of participating in the Policy Awards, the services and infrastructure they provided did – in fact – contribute to child and community health outcomes. The interview data demonstrates the importance of framing conversations to enable resonance with other local government departments, which in turn allows them to move towards a common vision, shared goals and an understanding of their sphere of influence in the child health area. Many councils have been able to capitalise on this cross-council representation to promote policy development and Award submissions.

Closely associated with collaboration was the evolution of the Policy Award categories. The changes in Award categories, as outlined in Table One, highlight that it is critical to engage with local government to address issues that are important to them in order to facilitate change. In the first three to four years of the Policy Awards, many category titles changed or were combined, reflecting issues that were more relevant to local government services. These early changes were cognizant of the language used within the sector and were essential for developing relationships, creating momentum and establishing a track record that encouraged future investments in the Awards process. As the Awards grew in popularity and prestige, and as more local governments made the decision to enter, the categories were condensed, and while always reflecting local evidence, were seen as more appropriately badged for local governments.

Readiness to change is an important factor facilitating organisational change,²⁸ and this study showed that readiness can be present at the individual, department or organisational level. Organisational readiness for change is situational and not a general state of affairs.^{29,30} Based on participants' perspectives, the Policy Awards appeared to provide a trigger for receptiveness to innovation and change.

At the individual or officer level, it appears that one of the strongest ways to influence policy change across the sector was to recognise internal capacity and garner external pressure from other local governments. The Awards ceremony itself, where peers are recognised by the local government sector, non-government agencies, academia and politicians, together with the Showcase document, demonstrate progress and inspire non-participating local governments to consider developing policy and influences organisational values around the importance placed on addressing child health and wellbeing. There was recognition that learning³¹ and sense-making³² can lead to the replication of policy in additional local governments, when policy outcomes are identified as being innovative or successful.

An interesting finding from this study was the discussion around the role and importance of policy within the local government sector. Narratives around needing reassurance that policy was needed, or that policy was required to avoid ad hoc responses, indicate the lack of a supportive environment for the development of community-based policy across some local governments. Despite a dearth of literature in this area, one study investigating the potential for regulatory intervention at the local government level to prevent obesity³³ described the importance of evidence in supporting policy change as well as the vital role of leadership within the local government. Reeve (2020) analysed six inner-Sydney local government policies that impacted on nutrition and healthy eating and found no dedicated policy on nutrition, suggesting that while it was common for local governments to have discrete initiatives related to improving nutrition, there was limited evidence of a comprehensive, 'whole-of-government' approaches to diet-related health.³⁴ One reason for this may be the difficulty local government's face in delivering less-tangible wellbeing programs compared to other services such as parks and recreation or environmental health. Support

from external agencies and the community they serve may help to overcome this barrier. Aligned, was the finding that when policies were endorsed there were some cases where implementation did not occur due to limited resources, management and accountability.

Further research is needed to understand the type and level of constraints on local government policy development, and how they can best leverage their powers and functions to develop and implement community-specific policies.

Conclusion

The Local Government Policy Award Scheme addressed a diverse range of children's environment and health issues over the past decade. It also highlighted advocacy strategies of Western Australian local government staff who participated in the Awards, and how these have contributed to organisational change. The organisational change model was used to describe the policy narrative within the local government sector as a result of the Policy Award scheme. This statewide Award scheme has seen Western Australian local governments move to include broader public health issues in their health provision remit, despite there being no specific legislative mandate for them to focus on these issues. The introduction of the *Public Health Act 2016* (WA) and the State Public Health Plan reinforced the integration of public health improvement as central to local government's agenda and these have been demonstrated in this research. The key learnings from this study included ensuring goals are aligned, using language relevant to the sector and facilitating local leadership and readiness; using award ceremonies and showcase documents to inspire engagement across the sector will support this legislative imperative and support organisational change.

Action and advocacy by many stakeholders from both within and external to local governments is needed to overcome barriers and promote the development of public health policy. The policy narratives within this research provide pathways for the local government sector to integrate issues that have no legislative mandate into their agenda. The Local Government Policy Awards were used in this research to provide one mechanism to influence internal change management and community outcomes for Western Australian communities.

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