

THE ORGANISATION OF RECORDS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

by David Haworth

1. *Introduction*

This paper is based on a talk given to the Sydney Archivists' Group on 12th March, 1974. The purpose of the discussion is to highlight the aspects of local government that make their records different to those of other organisations.

2. *The operation of local government in New South Wales*

Records systems in local government are more diverse than in any other area of government. History, political necessity and the auditor often, dictate why records are kept in a particular way.

Three systems can be identified:

1. Departmental records systems.
2. Central records systems.
3. Combined central and departmental systems.

The pre-dominance of one of these systems depends on, or arises from, the political relationship between the salaried officers of council and the councillors; the confidential nature of information recorded; the non-systematic retention of records.

Regardless of which system is predominant, money matters such as rate collection are handled in a standard way under the Town Clerk's Department — due to the requirements of the auditor.

All other records arise from local governments' function in connection with land use and community service. These are reflected in such departments as Engineering, Health, Town Planning, and Building. Miscellaneous functions are variously divided among these departments with the Health Department being the main recipient since its function is least satisfactorily defined. However, operations (regardless of their nature) involving capital cost are sought by the engineer because his salary is linked to expenditure. The placing, development, and operation of garbage tips and sewage treatment plants are two common areas of dispute between the engineer and the health surveyor.

In some cases functions may be linked. For example, health and building; health and town planning; health/town planning/building.

Under the Local Government Act, the council can delegate authority to its officers, to exercise power on its behalf. In this way many matters of detail within policy guidelines can be handled efficiently. Most councils make very limited delegations.

The population in a given district is determined by land use in the area, employment opportunities, attractiveness of the environment to tourists, etc. Community needs and expectations will vary for different groups in the community. Some of the needs will be met by authorities other than the council, for example, sewerage may be controlled by a separate authority. The functions assumed by the Department of Primary Industry, the Health Commission, the Dairy Authority will restrict what council has to offer unless it wishes to compete with such agencies or duplicate the services offered.

Even given the activities of various other agencies the activities of local government in any district are extensive. They may include community health and welfare; town and country planning; building regulations, construction of roads, administration of public enterprises such as airports, electricity and markets; recreational facilities such as swimming pools and parks; promotion of tourism; provision of libraries; preservation of places of historical interest.

The policies and actions of such agencies as the Housing Commission, the Department of Decentralization and the Department of Immigration will affect a region, and are outside of the control of council. These agencies may, for example, effect shifts in population or build houses without co-ordinating their activities with local authorities.

Organisations in the community can often change the policy, attitudes and actions of council.

The personalities, internal political alignments and financial interests within council will also influence the kinds of community services offered and the style of administration.

3. *Land use as the key concept in records creation*

Council organisation and the records created are closely linked to land use. The record system needs to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate changes in land use both unforeseen and planned.

The case of Holroyd Municipality in the region west of Sydney is offered as an example of the kind of changes that must be accommodated in a system of record keeping adopted by councils.

4. *Holroyd — a case study in changing land use*

About eighteen years ago, Holroyd was basically a rural area with small town development and its main concerns were rural problems such as fly and mosquito control, noxious plants, and straying stock.

A decade ago, massive residential and industrial development commenced. Development applications were necessary and there were related town planning and health problems. It became necessary to write codes for various kinds of development. With intensive residential development came septic tanks and effluent problems. The nature of the soil, the terrain and closeness of construction led to a massive increase in building and health inspection activities. In 1959, the population numbered 50,000. In 1969, the population was 75,000 in an area of 15 square miles.

The change in land use from agricultural to residential and industrial has created problems in areas where few existed before. Water pollution from industrial waste is one such problem. All drains (other than those connected to the sewer) and water ways in the area, run into gazetted water courses, which in turn run into the Prospect Creek (which forms a boundary with other councils).

Industry brought problems of air and water pollution — a problem that has become significant enough for a separate state authority to be established to co-ordinate attempts at control.

Of late the Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board has carried out works in the area and the council's interest in sanitary

disposal has been relieved since much of this responsibility has passed to the Board.

As the area develops the emphasis on building inspection will probably be reduced. Inspection will concentrate more on building maintenance and extension rather than construction.

Even if the development of an area has been planned, different land use will exist side by side. However, in a period of rapid transition undesirable combinations of land use do arise. For example, "A" class residential housing may border on a poultry farm. Noise, nuisance or other complaints that arise are usually directed to the council. Pest infestations, initiated when land was under agriculture, sometimes affect houses and gardens that have been built on the site.

The type of developments outlined require vigorous programmes for the construction of roads, kerbs and gutters. Power supply and communications systems need to be constructed.

Already in Holroyd a change is occurring from single dwelling houses to flat development, and a suitable code for flats in the area had to be developed that took into account such matters as siting, land cover, car parking, garbage disposal, landscaping and the aesthetics of buildings.

As land use has changed the population has increased. In Holroyd Municipality, the population is predominantly Australian born and this contrasts with some of the densely populated inner city suburbs and with, for example, the City of Greater Wollongong where an influx of migrants has occurred due to the policies of the Australian Government. Immigrants make up about 30% of Wollongong's population. Holroyd has a young population and there are 30 schools in the district.

Holroyd Municipality has been chosen as an example; it is not atypical of the rapid changes in land use taking place, even if the manifestations of the problems are special to that area.

There are no State or Australian Government agencies subject to such stresses and change, and there are few that have such close and personal contact with the community they serve. Changes in land use are not new phenomena. What is significant, however, is the rate of change with respect to land use since 1945, and the connection between this and the record keeping practice of councils.

5. The records systems

Registration of communications with councils take many forms and this is a reflection of the diversity of council activities. Payment of rates, enquiries, complaints and everything from applications for dog licenses to building applications must be accounted for within the system. Registration may be on simple paper forms in the case of some complaints received by telephone or in continuous entry book registers used for recording receipt of building applications. Book registers are normally used for any type of application that has to be accompanied by a payment. Book entries normally begin with an application number for the year in which they are lodged, which leads one to enquire how they ever find anything.

The finding aid, which is the key to the system, is the property

card index. Much of a council's activity is linked to managing land use and problems relating to people dwelling on certain parcels of land. The card represents the parcel of land and on it may be recorded development and building application numbers, the file number for correspondence, the nature of complaints and the outcomes of inspections, and so on. The cards are filed alphabetically in street order for the municipality or shire, and then sub-filed by property number. The concept underlying the use of property cards is that residents and owners of land may move or change but the parcel of land will remain.

People making enquiries or complaints usually specify location rather than names of persons. Council officers can determine names when they arrive on the site. Because of this the property card index is as basic to local government as name and subject indexes are to the average State or Australian Government agency.

One rotary cabinet is sufficient accommodation for the property cards of a large sized municipality. The file can be conveniently expanded as sub-divisions takes place and new streets are built. From this one source all the other information recorded by the council becomes accessible.

An example of a double sided property card is reproduced opposite. The filing priorities can be discerned from the sample card. The date code along the top edge permits colour tabling for resubmit of files, re-inspection and other follow-up actions. Property cards are an extremely simple method of records control over changing land use and thus help to solve one of the more difficult problems encountered in local government.

In most councils this device had not been fully developed and currently separate property card indexes exist for building applications, complaints and so on. By inclusion of the rate assessment number on a single property card, very quick access could also be made to rate information and other transactions that use the same number. In Sydney this would include Metropolitan Water Sewerage and Drainage Board records concerning the property.

In the course of visits to 23 councils throughout New South Wales I observed that no two councils adopted the same procedures and forms for handling complaints. Some large urban municipal councils may receive as many as 40 complaints each day, requiring site visits and discussions with numerous persons. It follows that the processing of these complaints is a major activity. Complaints may range from requests to remove a dead dog killed by a passing car, to objections about the cleanliness of food premises; or in rural areas they range from the odour arising from a pig farm to the problem caused by a straying bull. Objection to other residents or their property give rise to many complaints to council. Such matters are treated as being confidential and records of complaint are usually kept in the appropriate department of council. The differences between complaint procedures and records arises, in part, from the attitudes adopted by council officers — whether they see their role as including community education or as purely one of law enforcement using powers conferred under the Pure Food or Local Government Acts.

The record systems of councils will increasingly be required to account for social and community activities, arising from the provision of such services as meals-on-wheels, home nursing, child minding centres, immunization clinics, playgrounds, youth centres, libraries and so on. This rapidly expanding aspect of council benefits from the economical and personal care that can be provided at the local level. In many instances, it is a member of a council's staff who makes first contact with people in need. The ability to assess and respond to an area's needs is a major reason why the Australian Government is increasing aid to this area of government.

Greater attention needs to be given to local government records. At present there is no programme for preservation of these records. They are important because they provide a record of changing land use and document, in a personal way, community problems and needs. Some regions are very conscious of their history and take great care to protect their holdings. However, record groups have often been handled by well-intentioned but untrained persons who have proceeded to regroup into subject classifications the records in their care.

Some councils have destroyed material when changing accommodation or when pressed for space in existing premises. In New South Wales provision could be made under the Archives Act, No. 46, 1960, to bring local government authorities within its jurisdiction.

Another approach in obtaining better records management would be through the further education courses provided for council officers. The New South Wales Department of Technical Education has recognised this need in the training of health inspectors by inclusion of a separate subject on records management in its Health Surveying Associate Diploma Course. A separate course also is offered for persons wishing to become records managers.

The development of local government in New South Wales has been unique. However, the administrative and social responsibilities are similar in each State of Australia. A concise short history of local government in New South Wales is presented in Part I of the Barnett Report, released in late 1973. If the recommendations of the report are implemented, significant changes in local government administration and records management will occur.

It is hoped that the current interest in local government in New South Wales will result in positive steps being taken to introduce efficient records management systems and to preserve local government archives. Delay will endanger the records and this detailed source for sociological research into changing patterns of land use and community life could thus be lost.

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