

99

CONSULTING
Good thinking

Planning for Community Facilities

Working with local governments on reviews and plans for their community halls and venues recently has highlighted some big issues and opportunities for all local governments.

Queensland local governments are grappling with financial constraints, amalgamation impacts, population growth, and new requirements for community planning and improved asset management.

Most local governments have an assortment of community facilities of various ages and configurations. Our clients wanted to think about their community halls and venues portfolios in the context of their regional social infrastructure strategies. They wanted to identify ways to get the best from their community facilities, socially, physically and financially.

The project highlighted some findings that may be relevant to similar planning exercises for other types of facilities or other local governments.

We've summarised some of our thoughts below:

- It's not simple: The "legacy" issues (such as old facilities, donated facilities, mismatch between need and supply, accessibility limitations, bureaucratic arrangements, changing community aspirations) all contribute to a challenge for local governments or other large property owners (like churches) to realise the benefits of their holdings.
- It has to change: Enterprise Asset Management Planning and tight budgets, community expectations and liabilities among other things all mean doing the same old thing is not a smart option (particularly continuing to under-invest in maintenance and renewal).
- We need to think long term: A 10 to 20 year strategy can really position Councils to shed or transform poor performing assets and use other community spaces with more potential to deliver on their community sustainability agendas.

- Halls are part of a bigger picture: Halls and cultural venues are part of a larger suite of social infrastructure. Thinking about halls or venues as a portfolio within a broader local context allows planning for alternative or specialist roles for particular facilities, exit from some assets (we know this is hard!) and identification of alternative ways to deliver activities. One big consideration is the proliferation of Building the Education Revolution halls on school sites across the country.
- It's not just about money: Community facilities are not businesses, although a business-like approach to things like marketing and customer service is a real plus. Planning needs to take into account the interplay between social, financial, physical and operational objectives.
- Simple changes can make a big difference: Working with Architectus highlighted how some simple design changes informed by users or potential users can transform the role played by halls. Similarly, alternative management and tenancy models can change the way community facilities function.
- We need to plan for the unexpected: Plans need to build in flexibility to take advantage of state, Commonwealth or corporate opportunities. A textbook community facilities strategy won't cut it. A plan has to be carefully customised to suit individual Councils, specific sites and local communities.