

# Monitoring and review of planning schemes



INFRASTRUCTURE

October 2000

This information sheet provides guidance and discussion for councils about the monitoring and review process for planning schemes.

It provides background information under the headings:

- What is meant by 'monitoring and review'?
- Why does council need to carry out monitoring and review?
- What are the steps in monitoring and review?
- Deciding what to review
- Techniques for data collection.

## What is meant by 'monitoring and review'?

Monitoring is essentially the process of observing how things are working and the gathering of data that contributes to these observations. Data may be gathered from quantitative data sources or from interviews or other qualitative methods.

Reviewing uses the outcomes of monitoring to determine how the planning scheme or approvals system can be improved. There is not much point in undertaking monitoring if the results will not be used or will not be helpful. Monitoring needs to be carried out as a means to an end, not as an end in itself.

The monitoring and review process should be focused on answering specific questions. These questions might be broad questions about whether the right issues have been covered in the scheme or detailed questions about form or content. The first task of a review program is to decide what these questions will be.

The questions fall under four broad headings:

- Do the MSS and planning scheme cover the issues they should, and do they have the 'right' policy settings?
- Are the objectives being achieved on the ground?
- Are the objectives being achieved efficiently?
- Does the scheme conform to VPP Practice Notes on form and content?
- Can the people who need to use the scheme understand it easily?

These questions range from issues of effectiveness (are we achieving the outcomes we set out to achieve) to issues of efficiency (how much time, money or effort are we putting into the planning system).

Measuring the inputs (for example, what does it cost to process an application) or even the outputs (how many applications are processed) is meaningless unless we know what outcomes are actually being achieved on the ground.

It is important that in the review process clear distinctions are made between:

- inputs - what you spend, in time, money, staff, etc.
- outputs - what you produce, permits decisions, appeal cases
- outcomes - how the world is changed as a result of your outputs.

Keeping these distinctions will make it easy to see if you are:

- effective - the right outcomes are achieved
- efficient - the outcomes are achieved in a cost-effective way.

## Why does council need to carry out monitoring and review?

Section 12 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* requires a planning authority to:

*review regularly the provisions of the planning scheme for which it is a planning authority.*

Section 12A(5) provides that:

*A municipal council must review its municipal strategic statement at least once in every 3 years after it is prepared.*

The *Manual for the Victoria Planning Provisions* explained that:

*Monitoring and review is an integral part of the new system. As the system becomes operational, its effectiveness and components will be reviewed on an ongoing basis.*

Councils were required to include a section on monitoring and review in their MSS as part of preparing new format planning schemes.

The VPP Practice Note *Format of Municipal Strategic Statements* says:

*The focus of performance monitoring at the local level should be:*

- *the extent to which the Local Planning Policy Framework (MSS and local policies) has been successful in:*
  - *articulating and communicating planning objectives, strategies and policies for the municipality*
  - *guiding land use and development decisions to achieve the land use and development outcomes specified in the planning scheme.*
- *the extent to which council procedures and decisions have been successful in implementation of the planning scheme.*

## What are the steps in monitoring and review?

There are five steps to carrying out a review of the planning scheme.

### Step 1: Scope the review

It will not be possible, and it is not desirable, to review everything about a new format planning scheme.

The first task is to identify what matters should be reviewed and the aims of that review. You should first check the requirements of the Minister's approval letter for the scheme and review any recommendations of the panel that assessed your new format scheme that may need to be followed up.

You also need to identify any major policy issues that you want to review at this stage.

You may find it useful to run some focus group meetings or call for suggestions from across your council or community about what issues need to be reviewed.

### Step 2: Refine your review questions

Once you know the general areas that you want to review, you should specify clear and precise questions for the review. Examples of the questions you might ask are:

- Is council's approach to managing residential conversion of industrial uses still appropriate - does anything need to be added or anything changed?
- Is council's objective to improve the energy efficiency of buildings being achieved?
- How much time is spent to implement council's policy on rural land subdivision?
- Has council chosen the best overlay to protect its coastal areas?

All reviews should check that schemes conform to the *Ministerial Direction on the Form and Content of Planning Schemes* and relevant VPP Practice Notes.

### Step 3: Decide what data you will collect

There are three basic techniques you can use to gather data as part of your review. You can:

- carry out an audit of existing documents
- seek community feedback
- develop performance indicators and collect data.

Different review questions will need to be answered using different data gathering techniques.

Developing a series of indicators on the operation of the planning scheme or processes may be a useful part of your program. In each case, you should be clear as to why something is being measured.

Using indicators and quantitative measures is not the only approach possible. You could seek community feedback from questionnaires or surveys. Lastly you could implement a more formal 'audit' where the scheme is checked for completeness and consistency against VPP Practice Notes and plain English guidelines.

You should also consider whether a monitoring process could serve more than one purpose or objective. If so, this may influence how you implement the monitoring process.

### Step 4: Analyse the data

The data that you have collected should be focused on specific review questions. This will make analysis much easier. It is easy to be overcome by a wealth of data or to try to measure too many things.

In analysing your data you should consider using statistical tests to see whether trends that you identify are significant. Don't make the mistake of treating the results from focus groups as statistically significant.

### Step 5: Recommend changes

The final stage of the process is to develop clear recommendations for changes that can be presented to council, or can be implemented in the day-to-day operations of your planning department.

## Decide what to review

While it is important to review the overall direction of your planning scheme, it is important that the review process does not merely change the MSS. You should also critically assess how your strategies are being implemented and how well your assessment processes are working.

### Reviewing implementation methods

Local planning policies should be a means of implementing strategies in the MSS. You may need to review them, as a result of the review of the MSS. Additional policies may be required.

You should review local planning policies to see how well they achieve their objectives. They may also need rewriting in accordance with the VPP Practice Note *Writing a Local Planning Policy*.

You should review the content of schedules. They may need rewriting in accordance with the VPP Practice Note *Writing schedules*.

Zones and overlays should be reviewed to ensure they are the most appropriate means of implementing the strategies in the MSS. Multiple overlays applying to the same land should be reviewed to see if they can be simplified.

### Reviewing process

There is no point in having strategic policies articulated in the scheme if they do not contribute to day-to-day decision-making.

While it may be tempting to begin the review process by counting the number of different applications processed, this information is likely to be of only marginal relevance to an assessment of your planning process. Rather, planning authorities should review the way in which they handle planning permit applications to ensure that:

- strategic issues are adequately addressed
- decision guidelines are taken into account
- the resources devoted to assessing various matters reflects their comparative importance to achieving strategic outcomes.

#### What's happening next door?

Don't forget to talk to your neighbouring councils. What issues are of common concern? Are common approaches being used? Have you chosen similar indicators? What scope is there for cost sharing or other efficiencies? Has someone already done the work you need?

#### What about the VPP?

Planning authorities should review their experience of the operation and interpretation of the VPP to identify any problems or improvements. The Department reviews the operation of the VPP regularly as part of a program of continuous improvement. Problems or suggestions should be raised with your regional office.

## Techniques for data collection

### Auditing existing documents

In many cases your review questions will be answered simply by looking at the planning scheme and other documents.

Whether or not your planning scheme complies with the relevant VPP Practice Notes requires a thorough examination of the scheme.

Whether your scheme is consistent with the corporate plan, or whether policies have been applied consistently can be evaluated by a study of existing documents.

### Community feedback

Simply reviewing existing documentation will not be enough to tell you if your scheme is achieving its objectives in practice. You can gain data for your review by directly seeking community feedback by way of questionnaires, surveys or focus groups.

One method that has been used successfully is to convene a workshop of community interests and to have the workshop identify those things that have helped achieve a particular objective over the past year (or three years) and those things that have worked against the achievement of objectives.

It might be useful to hold some of these workshops before embarking on a detailed program of developing indicators.

### Using indicators

An indicator is the name given to measures of trends. Indicators can be developed to measure economic, social or environmental trends.

Examples of indicators might be:

- hectares of agricultural land lost from production
- open space per head of population
- vacancy rate of shops.

There is no point in measuring things in the hope that it will help you answer one of your review questions. Indicators must be carefully constructed to be useful. For example, if the issue you want to monitor is the loss of agricultural land, then simply counting the number of permit applications for subdivision of agricultural land that are refused will not tell you whether or not this objective is being achieved.

Indicators require an appropriate time-span to show trends. It may be possible to compare existing historic and current data to identify these trends. If not, it may be necessary to set up a data collection program so that the indicator can be evaluated in future.