

Chapter 2: Program, Service and Practice Responses to Homelessness in Queensland

The Benefits of Good Governance

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Introduction

The *Queensland Housing Strategy 2017–2027*¹ ('the Strategy') commits a \$1.8 billion investment toward improving the current housing situations of the vulnerable. While service delivery is often considered the most practical and worthwhile area for expenditure, a large focus of the Strategy is on prevention and early intervention through investment in corporate governance and strategic business areas. While many see 'feeding the corporate agenda' as an ineffective use of resources and a diversion of funding from service delivery, if done effectively, good governance, strategic leadership and an effective corporate business model increases an organisation's ability to not only do more to assist the vulnerable, but also to deliver services in the most effective way. Ultimately, if we are without effective governance, we are without strategic direction and sustainability.

The purpose of this article is to show a clear link between effective governance and strategic business focus with strong promotion of the core values of the organisation and its service delivery approach. If an effective balance can be created, implemented and maintained then this enables more effective and efficient service delivery in the homelessness sector. This in turn creates a substantial and lasting improvement to the situation of many vulnerable people in Queensland.

Ultimately this article will emphasise the interdependent nature of effective governance and effective service delivery, while also providing an outline of how organisations can better balance these factors so they work in harmony rather than in competition.

The Tension Between Corporate Governance and Service Delivery

With service delivery being historically, and rightly, the core focus of the social services sector, governance is often seen as an impediment to the provision of services and corporate functions as a drain on resources that could be better spent on services and front-line workers.

Governance is often seen as an overhead or a compliance requirement rather than as a genuine value adding function for the organisation. There is often a lack of knowledge about what elements of governance are critical to service delivery and how to integrate governance into service delivery.²

Further discrepancies, perceived or real, exist between the overarching goals of governance and service delivery. While service delivery primarily centres on achieving responsive, rapid action — governance is focussed on ensuring the long-term viability and continued success of an organisation. Often, the perceived divergence of goals for these areas result in organisations viewing the functions as disparate elements that do not work well together. This can lead to these factors being in direct competition for a limited number of resources. If this occurs then it is impossible for organisations to effectively meld these two functions, leading to decreased forward planning and less than effective service delivery.

What is actually most important in this context is that the goals should in fact be linked and shared under the same vision for the organisation. Effective

strategic planning and alignment of goals and aspirations that both areas feel ownership over is essential.

The benefits of governance can be seen in stronger links between the strategic response of an organisation to service delivery challenges. Value is added and gained when an organisation can organise itself more fully to optimise opportunities, strategic partnerships and to consider the key elements to growth and sustainability. Simply put, they can do more with what they have if governance is effective.

This value however, can only be realised if governance is effectively integrated and perceived as adding value by all members of the organisation, including those on the front line of service delivery.

An example of the need to integrate governance more effectively with service delivery is seen through a review of the actions of the Wiluna Government, a Shire in regional Australia with high levels of homelessness, poor health and wellbeing, a lack of elderly care facilities, child neglect, poor education outcomes, alcoholism, violence and poverty.³ Reviews of government practices found that service delivery outcomes had been unsuccessful due to inconsistent governance policies. Poor governance had created a lack of integration and coordination between departments, causing service delivery to be inconsistent and often not occurring at all.

As a result of this, new practices were put in place to develop consistency between governance and service delivery. This case highlights the consequences that

result from under valuing governance, particularly when considering the social services sector, which requires widespread communication and understanding about organisational direction and viability. This case also highlights the symbiotic nature of these two factors, as they allow for cohesion, coordination and integrated forward planning among a number of departments or functional units — which is crucial when considering the number of individuals and teams often involved in service delivery.

When considering the recent release of the Queensland Government's housing strategy, it is evident that finding a balance of governance and service delivery will be crucial. A focus on long-term outcomes and prevention means that the processes and practices put in place must be sustainable and able to be repeated over time, all the while lessening the reactive nature of services. We do not want to just respond to homelessness; we want to eliminate it.

In order to create sustainable processes that will also bring about sustainable service delivery benefits, governance must be a core focus. This focus enables service delivery processes to be consistent and efficient across departments and organisations. Effective governance practices should include appropriate separation between board and executive functions; clear policies and procedures on all aspects of service delivery; human resources and other organisational functions; strategic and operational risk management; fiscal due diligence and sustainability; and informed executive oversight of all functions of the organisation. Done correctly, focus in these areas avoids the problems highlighted in the Wiluna case study and instead facilitates more effective service provision that aligns with organisational goals and corporate structures in a sustainable way.

A Key to Balancing Corporate Governance and Service Delivery

While it is evident that a shared approach between governance and service delivery reaps rewards for an

organisation, a balanced view can be hard to achieve.

In thinking this dilemma through, it is helpful to reflect on the fact that organisations typically operate over three levels — *Strategic, Tactical and Operational*. In order to strike a balance between the commitment to governance and delivery there must be a clear line of sight from strategy to operational execution and how the day to day actions of staff feeds into, and is reflective of, the strategic agenda.

At the executive level, establishing a clear line of sight will create a process for decision-making that sets and aligns organisational direction and expectations. This will ensure that corporate governance processes and overall organisational objectives are defining strategy and not hindering it. Ensuring a clear line of sight does not just inform strategy — it asserts that operational actions and decisions directly impact on the organisation's overall strategy in an everyday sense.

This approach ensures that strategic governance at the executive level and service delivery at an operational level are working cooperatively and in harmony to achieve the same overall goal. By demonstrating, talking about and linking a clear line of sight for all staff, organisations can ensure that governance and service delivery are focused on the same outcomes albeit via different contributions. This in turn eliminates resource competition, elevates the importance of service delivery and practice methodologies and ultimately enhances outcomes for clients.

In a more pragmatic sense, having a clear line of sight also helps employees to recognise what is expected of them in their roles, and the potential positive or negative ramifications that their performance can have on the organisation. This greater insight into individual roles and expectations allows employees to take initiative and respond rapidly and appropriately to changes without instruction from their managers. Successful service delivery outcomes are more likely to occur as a result of increased employee autonomy, as the organisation is able to remain flexible and respond to changes in the market or with clients.

Conclusion

Governance and service delivery must no longer be viewed as separate, and often conflicting, factors competing for organisational resources and focus. Ultimately, in order for the community services sector to thrive and achieve its intended outcomes including lowering homelessness rates and improving the situations of vulnerable clients, a shift toward embracing governance and service delivery as symbiotic forces must occur. To achieve this, organisations must provide clear line of sight to their employees that celebrates both good governance and a maturing practice model that delivers for vulnerable clients.

Ultimately, if an organisation in this sector is not able to achieve its outcomes, it is not able to assist vulnerable clients to its full potential even with great staff and a mature practice approach. It is through collaboration that both governance and practice can coexist to see substantial statistical improvement in the rate of homelessness and to provide clear link to relevant strategies such as the *Queensland Housing Strategy 2017–2027*.⁴

While it is tempting to think that a focus on governance may only seem to deliver benefits for the organisation, the greatest benefit of this balance is that it can create substantial and lasting positive developments for the lives of our most vulnerable.

Endnotes

1. Department of Housing and Public Works 2017, *Queensland Housing Strategy 2017–2027*, Queensland Government, p.13.
2. *Integrated Basin Development and Livelihood Promotion Programme*, unpublished working draft, *Understanding the Linkages between Governance and Service Delivery in Meghalaya: A Literature Review*, Meghalaya Institute of Governance, p.5.
3. Lange C 2005, *Local Governance in Remote Regions — Models and Issues: Governance and Service Delivery in Wiluna*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra, p.4.
4. Department of Housing and Public Works 2017, op cit.