



PLA NATIONAL ADVISORY

REPORT

How have Global Issues impacted
Parks & Leisure Australia
Members and Their Workplace?



BACKGROUND

Members of Parks and Leisure Australia (PLA) have not been immune to the impacts of global issues such as COVID-19, extreme weather events, fires and floods, financial fluctuations and other unplanned events. These global issues have potentially impacted some member's personal health, their homes and workplaces, their work-life balance and their ability to carry out their work functions. However, these issues have also provided some opportunities to make changes or improvements which could benefit members and the industry more broadly.

Parks and Leisure Australia National Advisory Committee members observed a number of outcomes of the disasters and disruptions occurring locally, nationally and internationally. They circulated the following discussion points for consideration with the PLA regional boards prior to holding workshops between August and October 2022.



BACKGROUND


- ***There has been an increase in use of parks and public spaces.*** Has this resulted in over-use of certain spaces or activated spaces that were previously under-utilised? Is this an opportunity to advocate for continued investment in facility upgrades, maintenance, flexibility and capacity?
- ***During the pandemic many services had restrictions placed on them in some states (such as closures of aquatic centres and playgrounds) and may have led to job losses.*** Are trained staff returning to the workplace or are there skills shortages?
- ***Organisational budgets may have changed.*** Has your budget increased, decreased or remained the same? Is your expenditure being directed to other areas? Can you access sufficient budget to deliver the programs, services or facilities to support the health, wellbeing and resilience of your community in times of change?
- ***Fire, floods and severe weather events have more than physical impacts on a community.*** Are there hurdles in addition to replacement of damaged infrastructure that you are facing? Community sport and recreation spaces are often the place for community connection – are you receiving support to prioritise the redevelopment of these spaces?
- ***Changes in the global political landscape have impacted building supply chains causing significant delays for materials and cost escalations.*** How is this impacting your ability to provide facilities and services to meet community need?
- ***The wellbeing of some of our members has been impacted by COVID-19 and the stresses associated with responding to extreme weather events.*** How are we managing in uncertain times?

Two questions were posed as part of these workshops:

1. In what ways does your workplace, or your work with community, continue to be impacted by COVID-19, fire, floods, extreme weather events, global strategic influences or other unplanned events?
2. How could PLA better support members and the industry in relation to these impacts?

A workshop was also held with members at the National PLA Conference in October to clearly identify the impacts felt and to identify ways in which Parks and Leisure Australia could more effectively support members. Feedback from each of these two questions follows.

IMPACTS OF GLOBAL ISSUES ON MEMBERS AND THEIR WORKPLACES



Key themes identified by members through state-based and national workshops

Rising costs and supply issues for goods and services

Members told us that the cost of materials, infrastructure, services and facility developments have increased significantly over the past few years (by 20-30%) and that there can be a very long wait time to receive goods and services. In some instances, member's workplaces have set aside inadequate allowances or contingencies due to unexpected price rises, thereby impacting the delivery of projects. Some members have found that projects that they have put out for tender come back in much higher than their allocated budget, thereby causing challenges to deliver the project and challenges dealing with managers about cost blow outs. This is creating additional work for members as well as contributing to stress. Funding bodies are reporting challenges in terms of managing grants and delivering projects with higher than anticipated costs too.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in creating and leveraging opportunities:

1. PLA National to hold a free online workshop targeted at all staff involved in the delivery of capital works and planning projects, as well as funding bodies and suppliers to discuss the current issues around costs and supply of goods and services from the perspective of each different group. This will potentially create dialogue and a greater understanding of costs and timeframes and potentially more accurate budget and timeframe allocations by all.
2. PLA National to produce a resource comprising of case studies listing actual costs and timeframes of certain projects. This could be used as a learning tool by members of the industry and others within their workplaces such as managers and procurement officers.
3. PLA State Conferences to hold an informal session around project management from beginning to end, focusing on learnings around cost escalations and supply issues.
4. PLA State and / or PLA National to advocate to state funding bodies around realistic grant allocations and timeframes in which to deliver projects.

Difficulties recruiting and retaining staff / contractors

A considerable number of our members said that recruiting suitably qualified and experienced staff is a major challenge, particularly for leadership positions and for staff with planning and engineering qualifications.

Retaining staff has also been identified as an issue. There appears to be a lot of movement within Local Government Authorities (LGA) and often people are only staying in their roles for a year or two before moving on, being poached by another LGA, or migrating into higher paid positions in State Government.

The constant movement of staff impacts delivery of projects in terms of oversight, quality, and timeliness in addition to lack of continuity.

Members have reported that there are limited mentoring opportunities and support available to workers in the sector. Attracting young people is particularly difficult and young people in the sector are not offered many or any training opportunities.

Members have also reported that existing staff are tired and more vulnerable following the disasters and disruptions that have occurred in recent years; and some have lost their passion for their work. In some instances, management is expecting more from staff. It was acknowledged by one workshop participant that globally the employer and employee relationship has changed and that we need to adapt to this new circumstance.

In addition to considerable movement in the Local Government sector, some of the more experienced members of the industry are retiring early. The succession planning that may have happened in the past has often not occurred due to the unexpected early departure of these workers. Therefore, industry knowledge is being lost and some people may be recruited to a position that is potentially beyond their ability. However, with the departure of some members of the industry, there are opportunities to attract new people to the industry from the private sector and other levels of government who can bring a fresh, new approach to the delivery of facilities, programs and services.

Members acknowledge that the parks and leisure sector is incredibly diverse and that many positions require a university degree. Other positions, such as lifeguards and swim teachers don't require the same level of qualification. However, these positions, which are typically casual in nature generally don't offer employees a career structure or a sense of belonging to the industry and therefore recruitment can be difficult.

Difficulties recruiting and retaining staff / contractors

STRATEGIES

PLA National to explore opportunities with universities and organisations such as Rec Relief to deliver a series of short courses on relevant topics to the industry to skill up workers (particularly in areas where specialised experience is required).

1. PLA National to establish dialogue with universities that deliver parks and leisure type courses to articulate the types of skills that we require of new graduates.
2. PLA National to introduce learning credits for people taking part in courses, all of which contribute to ongoing membership of PLA (perhaps a tiered structure).
3. PLA National to develop a section on its website / social media platforms whereby members can pose questions about specific issues and other members can respond (a bit like LinkedIn or a Facebook chat).
4. PLA State Bodies to provide regular informal networking opportunities at various locations throughout the state

(outside the scope of state conferences) that enable people to get together and discuss specific issues and support one another.

5. PLA to have a presence at careers expos and at universities with courses broadly related to parks and leisure to ensure that job opportunities are promoted.
6. PLA to ensure that young people who enter the industry are signed up to Generate Network immediately and training, conferences and journals are all provided at a very reduced rate. This will hopefully develop some 'brand loyalty' and a feeling of belonging in the parks and leisure family.
7. PLA to consider partnering with bodies such as Municipal Association of Victoria, YMCA etc to promote the benefits of working in the parks and leisure sector.

Political environment driving development rather than planning

The parks and recreation industry have always been dominated by political influence. In order to attract votes, political candidates from all three levels of Government make election commitments (promises) to their constituents to fund certain initiatives. Often these commitments are driven by a sports or community group that is pushing for the project. It is common for a project to be advanced where the local government authority has limited to no visibility of it, moving past the funding phase and into the approval phase without council having input.

Increasingly our members are seeing a lack of planning around these election commitments and challenges dealing with the community if these promises are not delivered. In some instances, the election commitment is for something that the community does not need or want or is for a very small group within the community, but where the project will have a dramatic impact on the wider community.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in either avoiding or mitigating issues raised by this occurrence:

1. LGA's have an adopted project process that requires sports or community groups engage with council before discussing the project with elected members
2. Like point 1, have an adopted grant funding process (in the form of a flowchart) that guide community groups in the process of advancing a project.
3. LGA's to ensure that they have an adopted Open Space and Recreation Strategy, that includes a works schedule (action plan) that provides a prioritised list of projects for the life of the Strategy. This will ensure that elected members and community members have a source of "truth" to check to ensure their project will be progressed.
4. State and Commonwealth funding agencies to include in their funding guidelines and application a requirement for applicants to demonstrate that the proposed project and application is a joint submission between the applicant and the LGA. This would be over and above the current requirement in grant applications for the applicant to demonstrate landowners permission. The requirement for landowners permission is not sufficient to ensure a collaborative approach to grant approvals.

Increasing community expectations and reactions

A number of our members have reported an increase in community expectations around the delivery or provision of certain programs, services or facilities, particularly from new residents who may have moved from metropolitan areas to regional / rural areas. Members have found that the community (sports clubs, environmental groups and individuals for example) have been more reactive when engaging with LGAs and other levels of government, especially if resources are not there to meet their needs and expectations or if timeframes are not met. This potentially creates a confrontational experience for members when dealing with the public.

Our members are also reporting that facility developments are moving towards 'bigger and better' and away from 'local and community', based on community expectations for higher quality facilities.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in either avoiding or mitigating issues raised by this occurrence:

1. PLA National Board to provide a statement encouraging local government authorities to emphasise their harassment policies in regard to treatment of staff.
2. Industry colleagues encouraged to work closely with their communication and engagement officers to ensure that interactions with the community are undertaken within an adopted Engagement Strategy framework.
3. Industry representatives to develop an evidence-based approach to dealing with sports clubs and community members, with a focus on actions being based on latest research. This will provide a rationale to decisions and helps to alleviate conflict.
4. Increasing expectations in facility provision and quality of provision can be negated through strategies highlighted in Theme 3, especially in relation to funding bodies having an evidence-based approach to assessing potential projects, as well as removing the "political" nature of recreation funding.



Increased asset maintenance requirements

The COVID-19 restrictions placed on community physical activities in a number of states resulted in cessation of some group-related activities and an increase in individual / family / small group activities such as walking and cycling. Along with an increase in participation in activities such as walking and cycling, members also reported a correlating increase for maintenance of trails. In many instances, organisations have not had the resources to support this extra demand for maintenance.

Some members also reported that due to lengthy project time delays and rapidly increasing costs, some facilities that would ordinarily have been renewed or upgraded have remained in their current state of poor condition or disrepair. This has caused higher than anticipated asset maintenance budgets to keep these facilities in a usable state until such time as they can be renewed or upgraded.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in creating and leveraging opportunities:

1. Investigate new technology solutions that provide either cost savings or long asset lives to offset rising maintenance costs.
2. Show case new construction materials and methods that will ultimately reduce the maintenance burden of an asset.
3. Develop case studies that demonstrate the life cycle cost of new assets within standard categories with a focus on the ongoing maintenance costs attached to new capital costs.
4. Emphasis should be given to financial impact models that highlight the financial impacts of recreation infrastructure.
5. Use KMPG's Value of Sport to Australia report (2021) which highlights the BCR return on investment.

Displaced and disturbed communities

Following events such as floods or fires, members report that community spaces such as sports fields may be taken over by emergency management agencies to house residents until such time as they can return to their own homes (which could be 12-18 months), therefore a new home may need to be found for tenant clubs. Members also report that residents who experience natural disasters can also experience trauma and other issues. Young people in the community are noted to be particularly susceptible to anti-social behaviour in flood-related areas.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in creating and leveraging opportunities:

1. Local government authorities to identify key public open space that can be allocated to emergency responses during natural disaster events.
2. Local government authorities and other land managers to petition state governments for specific funding to upgrade those key public open spaces so that they are fit for purpose when required. This will ensure they meet the disaster requirements, but also means that they are more likely to be able to come straight back on-line when they are not needed for disaster recovery.
3. Ensure that alternative sites during disaster recovery are upgraded to at least the standard provided for in the regular facility so that clubs that are displaced are not disadvantaged.
4. Industry members, in particular those working for government agencies, to take opportunity to communicate with community groups and encourage them to promote triage care for their members during disaster events.
5. Promote to the community, through media opportunities, the value to the community of sports clubs and the need to provide support to them during disaster events.

Community organisational challenges

Our members who work closely with community volunteers have reported challenges in relation to ongoing sustainability of sports clubs, environmental groups, friends' groups and community committees, due to the decline in volunteerism from COVID-19 restrictions, cost of living pressures and the personal impact of floods and fires clean-ups on volunteers. These community-based organisations are also experiencing challenges related to insurance and utility costs and replacement of assets damaged or destroyed through floods and fire.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in creating and leveraging opportunities:

1. Industry members to be communicated with, through current mechanisms, that the issue of volunteers has been recognised and that there is no easy solution to the issue.
2. Opportunities to be sought to cross-pollinate volunteers between those community groups that are performing well with their volunteers and those that are struggling.
3. Industry planners to ensure that the issue of volunteers is highlighted in planning documents so that non-industry colleagues are made aware of the issue.

The need for new partnerships

Our members highlighted the need to identify new opportunities during disasters and disruptions and to establish new partnerships with non-traditional organisations, businesses and educational institutions to help our members potentially deliver better outcomes. An example provided by one member is to partner with water authorities around flooding issues, rather than working separately on the same issue. Several members suggested working in partnership with universities to help develop skills of future employees so that they are better equipped to work within the parks and leisure sector and so that they see the sector as a viable employment option. It was noted that there is a lack of courses such as recreation planning and management and horticulture currently offered in Australia.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in creating and leveraging opportunities:

1. PLA Vic/Tas currently sponsors the recreation HR company Rec People to run their recreation planning course. The course has put 127 students through the two parts of the course over the last 2 years. This sponsorship should be taken over by the national PLA body and the sponsorship and support expanded.
2. A few of our industry's more senior members sit on several joint working groups, such as the National Sport Research Advisory (NSRA). This involvement by individuals should be recognised and promoted by the national PLA body to highlight the activities of our members to promote these activities to other industry members with the view of encouraging more such collaboration.
3. PLA national to create a working group whose primary purpose is to develop opportunities to work with universities, notably to provide industry leaders to present to sport, recreation and open space courses.
4. PLA national to create an online skills database where individual members can go to input their skills and qualifications. This skills database can then be accessed by anyone looking for a specific skill set.

Responding to climate change

Responding to climate change such as extreme weather events, fires and floods continues to be a challenge for our members. They acknowledge that whilst fires and floods are not new phenomena, the scale seen in recent years is more significant. Some members question what the industry has learnt from disasters such as floods and want to know how we can better respond and plan in the future.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in creating and leveraging opportunities:

1. Seek opportunities and experts within the industry to educate on the adaptive management model of resource management.
2. Advocate to government to ensure that there are implementing “build back better” principles when funding recreation infrastructure.
3. Likewise advocate for the inclusion of universal design principles so that facilities are less impacted by climate change related events.
4. PLA National to promote our Climate Change policy and the importance of our industry as a lead industry for climate change mitigation.



Changing organisational focus

Some members have reported that the focus of their workplaces has shifted from a community development focus to an economic and asset management focus. Their values and the role for which they were originally employed may not necessarily align with this changed workplace focus and thereby may provide a level of discomfort.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in creating and leveraging opportunities:

1. PLA National to communicate to our industry that their passion for the industry is still valid and that they can work within a more economically focused environment.
2. Seek opportunities to leverage the new focus on asset management to advocate for better through design principles.
3. Create opportunities, such as council briefings, workshop and reports to promote the value that open space and recreation plays in enhancing community outcomes, such as improvements in health and wellbeing.

Shift towards environmentally sustainable design

Whilst the industry as a whole is moving towards environmentally sustainable design and the use of environmentally sustainable materials to help reduce the impact of facilities and programs on the environment and on operational costs, a proportion of our members do not feel equipped, supported or resourced to make the necessary changes required, or understand the options available.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies can assist industry professionals in creating and leveraging opportunities:

1. Use industry publications, such as the PLA Journal to focus on articles that are providing solutions through facility design.
2. Educate industry members that facility provision involves many different groups with different outcomes.

**WAYS IN WHICH
PARKS AND LEISURE
AUSTRALIA CAN BETTER
SUPPORT THE
INDUSTRY TO DEAL
WITH THE IMPACTS OF
GLOBAL ISSUES**

Through the state-based and national workshops, members were asked how they believe Parks and Leisure Australia could better support the parks and leisure industry to deal with the impact of global issues. Their suggestions are as follows:



1. **Collective response** - we need a united voice and national response to clearly articulate the impacts and opportunities created by global issues on the industry and to identify and an agreed direction.
2. **Sharing of information** – we need to share our learnings about the impact of global issues on the parks and leisure industry and identify ways to respond to such issues and impacts.
3. **Mentoring, training and support** – we need to provide more accessible mentoring, training and support for our members to increase their skill level and to help them adapt and respond to the impact of global issues.
4. **Developing new partnerships** - we need to identify new partnerships with other organisations to help deliver better outcomes in recruitment, training, technical skills, project delivery and response to global issues.
5. **Employment advocacy** – we need to work in partnership with parks and leisure industry employers to promote the benefits of working in the sector; to encourage employers to establish apprenticeships / internships to attract more young people to the industry; and to establish improved career pathways.
6. **Sector advocacy** – we need to advocate on behalf of and work with organisations within our sector (e.g. sports clubs) which have been impacted by declining volunteerism and issues which impact participation and ongoing sustainability such as utility and insurance costs and replacement of assets damaged or destroyed by floods and fire.
7. **Funding body advocacy** – we need to advocate on behalf our members to funding bodies to ensure some flexibility around project delivery impacted by global issues.
8. **Champion the establishment of new training courses** – we need to prioritise the provision of courses (at various levels) in recreation planning and horticulture.
9. **Support when working with community** – we recognise many front line staff and LGA officers who engage with the public are encountering more occupational violence in their work. We need to actively support our members, and applaud LGAs who show leadership in their approach to providing safe work environments.
10. **What action can we propose about rising costs and supply issues for goods and services as well as unmet budget pressures with increased maintenance (due to increasing use)?**



PARKS & LEISURE
AUSTRALIA

www.parksleisure.com.au
08 8332 0130
admin@parksleisure.com.au

