

PLA Member Research Information
Needs:
Results of a Survey undertaken July
2015 – September 2015

*A report prepared by the PLA Advisory Research
Working Group*

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GLOSSARY

Research information: is defined as new information which has been rigorously and systematically collected to increase the knowledge and understanding of an issue.

Practice information: is defined as new information which has been collected through the exploration and implementation of a strategy.

We have distinguished between research information and practice information in an attempt to recognise the important role of both, and differences between these types of information. Research information we take to mean **new information which has been rigorously and systematically collected to increase the knowledge and understanding of an issue**, whereas practice information is **defined as new information which has been collected through the exploration and implementation of a strategy**.

Research information would usually be collected by academic researchers or consultants. It is a process which clearly identifies a 'research question', considers existing information and understanding and collects new information to answer that question. Research information is frequently published as a peer review document, usually in academic journals. This means that other researchers familiar with the topic have reviewed the paper or report and critiqued the method, analysis and conclusion. The peer reviewed process is the most stringent checking process for the quality of research that currently exists.

Practice information would usually be collected by practitioners, or possibly consultants, and arises from a considered reflection on the implementation of policy and/or strategy. It closely aligns with what academics might call a 'case study' in that it offers concrete detail around a specific practice. Practice information is usually published as professional reports, conference papers or articles in professional journals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is based on feedback from a survey of PLA members around in 2015. 73 PLA members responded and their contributions and suggestions are gratefully acknowledged.

This report was prepared by members of the PLA Research Advisory Group comprising Penny Davidson (chair), Anand Pillay, John Wood and Michelle Prior.

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to outline the approach, conclusions and recommendations of the Research Working Group in response to the question ‘is PLA adequately connecting members to the latest research information’, and to recommend strategies which might be undertaken to improve information dissemination.

The National Board asked PLA Advisory to examine this issue in early 2015. Three PLA members, known to have expertise and an interest in research were approached and the Research Working Group was established, with the inclusion of PLA Advisory chair, Penny Davidson.

The RWG felt that recommendations needed to be based on a clearer understanding of PLA member needs and preferences regarding research information and so undertook a member online survey, followed up by a workshop at the national conference in Sydney, 2015.

This report considers past efforts, member input, and strategies used by other organisations.

Approximately 10 per cent of PLA members responded to the online survey (73). The results confirmed that access to research information is important in the work environment with 96% indicating it was moderately to extremely important. Members look to research information to ensure their knowledge is current, ensure policies and strategies are well founded, and to help justify particular approaches in service delivery. Whilst web-based searches were used by almost nearly all respondents to find information, conferences, workshops and colleagues were also important sources. Specifically, the PLA journal is used by 82% of members, and 62% of respondents source information through workshops and seminars. Industry related websites are also important sources of information for 61% of members.

As expected members information needs cover a broad spectrum of topics from open space planning and management, best practice, new technologies, governance and horticulture to name just a few. This diverse information requirement implies that PLA needs to continue to take a multi-disciplinary approach to member servicing, and can perhaps see this as one of their strengths.

The majority of respondents (66%) indicated that it may be possible to undertake research and/or share with PLA, and 16% said that their organisation would be interested in funding or partnering research with PLA.

There was no single suggestion that respondents foresaw as meeting PLA research information needs but 67% suggested that PLA host a web searchable research database. Also supported by more than 50% of respondents was the continuation of publication of abstracts of current research, inclusion of more research information in the journal, and developing partnerships with universities to advance priority research.

The workshop held at the PLA National Conference in Sydney, 2015 was attended by relatively few people (we couldn’t compete with the other more stimulating topics). The conversations in the workshop endorsed the survey findings, and added the need for greater promotion of existing information sharing opportunities such as the Research Connections newsletter. The workshop raised some additional issues that are useful to consider and these are given here in full:

- Not all sources of information are as valid as others
- When PLA provides information it is seen as an endorsement of that information
- Lack of common terminology makes finding relevant information harder
- Don't always know where to find information; and
- Having found the information there is sometimes a daunting volume to peruse / read

PLA is clearly providing very useful material to members and using appropriate strategies. The survey responses and workshop discussion both highlighted a desire for both practice information and research information. PLA provides both forms of information, but it may be useful to clarify when the information clearly fits into one or other category.

After reflection upon the information provided by the survey and workshop the following recommendations have been made:

1. Establish a single PLA point of contact for Research related matters to coordinate the approach to research, and undertaken any or all of the following recommendations. (in response to 4.2, 4.5 and 4.6) (See Appendix A for suggestions regarding this role).
2. Continue support for regional conferences and workshops and delivery of an annual national conference. Where applicable consider a research information stream focusing on a mix of practice and academic research (and/or make it clear which is which). (in response to 4.4, 4.5 and workshop)
3. Continue collation and publication of Australasian Parks and Leisure Journal which respondents rated highly as a source of research information. (in response to 4.4, 4.5 and workshop)
4. Consider a series of "how to..." research based topics for the journal or workshops to increase members' knowledge of searching for or facilitating research partnerships, understanding research validity, and where to find information. (in response to 4.4, 4.5, 4.9 and workshop)
5. Develop an information dissemination plan with a focus on tapping into and sharing research and practice information being conducted by members (in response to 4.8 and 4.9)
6. Develop a marketing plan to promote and measure the use of all PLA research information activities, particularly the Research Connections publication, and Parks Base Knowledge. This may be as part of existing PLA promotional vehicles and should include strategies for use of social media to share research information. (in response to 4.5 and workshop)
7. Add a 'useful link' page to the PLA website with links to sites that provide research information such as Clearing House, Sport England and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. (in response to 4.9 and workshop)
8. After promoting existing web based data bases, explore options for funding and managing an interactive, web based research information data base relating to Australian parks, leisure, recreation and sport related research activities. (in response to 4.5, 4.6 and 4.9)
9. Consult with members as to whether PLA should facilitate common national terminology. (wouldn't help for international information) (in response to workshop)
10. That PLA research activity, such as may occur in any or all of the above recommendations, should be allocated an annual budget.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 History

PLA has consistently recognised the need to be a conduit of research information for members, and to provide a link with research organisations.

In 2005 PLA prepared a draft Research and Development Plan for the Australian Parks and Leisure Industry 2006-2011. This plan identified several key areas that needed attention and further research:

- state of the parks and leisure industry;
- health through exercise;
- cultural advancement;
- outdoor leisure and conservation;
- effective horticultural operations and management; and
- sustainable park development.

A need to provide a mechanism for effective industry communication and information flow was also recognised.¹

Since the preparation of this plan some actions have occurred, some fortuitously, and others without regard to this original plan. Over a number of years a research funding application on the economic benefits of park use in Australia has been twice submitted to BUPA. Unfortunately these applications were not successful, but did result in the development of a Deakin University/PLA research group which focuses on measuring the economic benefits of parks and open space. They currently have a pilot study and systematic literature review near completion. PLA has also had regular involvement with other researchers and academic institutions.

With regard to information dissemination, PLA's current effort includes:

- Parks Base Knowledge, which was developed by IOSS with initial collaboration with PLA. IOSS owns and manages Knowledge Base as part of the Parks Base program.
- Research Connections, which is written and produced by John Wood
- PLA journal, which provides articles and case studies on current practice and occasionally, research
- PLA National Conference , which provides an opportunity for new research to be presented

2.2 Parks Base Knowledge

Parks Base Knowledge was commenced in 2008 as an online knowledge database for professionals in a number fields, including: public open space, urban greenery, urban ecology, conservation and protected areas, land management, arboriculture, horticulture, soils, turf, recreation and sport; and associated areas of sustainability and social research (see <http://www.parksbase.com/documents>).

Knowledge Base incorporates a wide range of material including:

- Local, state and federal government documents
- Professional articles

¹ Carter 2014

- Research papers
- Academic papers
- Legal materials
- Statutory plans
- Tribunal and judicial decisions

Knowledge Base was established as part of a fee for service program - Parks Base (the other component being the Comparison Program) - by IOSS in 2008, where participants could share relevant information, particularly internal organisational documents. The online resource was established due to client requests.

Parks Base was developed by IOSS with initial collaboration with PLA - IOSS provide the funds and expertise, and PLA provided initial input and facilitated initial input from the industry. In return for this initial input, IOSS paid PLA 12.5% of annual turnover of the Comparison Program since inception to 2015 (the payment has recently been re-negotiated, with IOSS waiting finalisation from PLA). IOSS has always owned and managed both Parks Base and Knowledge Base (Metric Engine is now a co-owner).

In addition to being a resource for Parks Base clients, Knowledge Base was opened to all PLA members in 2008, free of charge, to meet the stated needs for sharing all types of information. Any registered Parks Base client or PLA member could upload documents and links, and use the resources.

Knowledge Base was later expanded to include a wide range of topics and types of documents. However, as people rarely uploaded documents / links, IOSS undertook to post links or documents and to ascertain where the interest lay.

Uptake and use by PLA members has been extremely low; with the added dimension that for the majority of the time, the PLA access connection on the PLA website (for which PLA was responsible) was not operational.

2.3 Research Connections

Research Connections commenced publication in 2011, when John Wood (PLA Queensland member) undertook a project to publish a newsletter featuring current research projects as a joint initiative between PLA, New Zealand Recreation Association (NZRA) and the Australian and New Zealand Association of Leisure Studies (ANZALS). To date, 11 editions of the newsletter have been published (see <http://www.parksleisure.com.au/resources/research-connections>).

As stated in the first edition published in July 2011, the aims of this newsletter were to:

- Inform members about current research projects, particularly within Australia and New Zealand.
- Provide links to sources of information of potential interest to members.
- Facilitate information exchange between researchers and members.
- Identify member research priorities/interests.
- Identify potential research sponsors/funding sources.”²

Interestingly relatively few PLA members use Knowledge Base or are aware of Research Connections, indicating that PLA needs to increase member awareness of these endeavours.

PLA and its predecessor organisations have maintained affiliations with the research sector in Australia and New Zealand partly through the organisation ANZALS – the Australian New Zealand

² Carter 2014

Association for Leisure Studies but also with individual academic institutions such as University of Technology Sydney, Deakin University, and Griffith University .

2.4 Establishment of PLA Research Working Group

Following the 2014 conference Dr May Carter prepared a discussion paper overviewing the issues PLA faces regarding research; her paper (which can be found on the PLA website) highlighted numerous issues.

The key question for PLA Advisory to consider, she suggested, “is whether it is more important for PLA to initiate and undertake strategic research projects, particularly in key areas (such as open space planning and design, potential effects of climate change, or horticultural practice) or to develop more effective mechanisms for synthesis and dissemination of research published in academic journals and as industry reports.”³

In the 2014 member survey 89% PLA members indicated that it was either ‘Important’ or ‘Very Important’ that PLA was a ‘Portal of knowledge and research’. Following Dr Carter’s discussion paper the National Board and PLA Advisory decided to initially address the issue of ‘research synthesis and dissemination’ – to this end the Research Working Group was established: consisting of Penny Davidson (Chair), Anand Pillay, John Wood and Michelle Prior. The brief given to this group was to:

evaluate whether PLA is adequately connecting members to the latest research information coming from the research sector, and if not, recommend strategies which might be undertaken to improve information dissemination.

The Research Working Group (RWG) decided that whilst members’ interest in information is a clear need, a deeper understanding of the dissemination gap, and members’ preferences was needed prior to proposing strategies to the National Board. The RWG mapped their purpose and potential strategies in the document ‘PLA Research – where to from here’, and prepared a timeline for this activity . They chose to undertake an online member survey, which underpins the recommendations to the National Board in this report.

³ Carter 2014

3 METHOD

An online survey was prepared using Survey Monkey (to which PLA subscribes) and made available to all PLA members throughout July-September 2015. Members were notified of the survey through the monthly electronic newsletters (EDMs). Initially, there was a low response rate, and so each Regional Council was requested to remind members to complete the survey and also ask all Regional Councillors and National Board members to complete the survey. The response number increased from 36 to 73 after these reminders.

A one hour workshop at the National Conference Committee was planned, and offered, with the intention of validating the survey findings, exploring the issues raised in further depth, and identifying potential strategies.

A draft survey containing 14 questions was piloted with members of Regional Councils and the PLA Advisory Group in order to check the validity of the questions (that the responses do inform the research question) and the feasibility of data analysis (that the response format enables effective analysis).

As a result of this reflection the survey was modified and the number of questions reduced, the detail of which is contained in the RWG minutes.

4 RESULTS

The final survey, which contained 9 questions asking about members' desire and need for research information was completed by 73 PLA members.

4.1 Respondents

Whilst the response number is small it represents nearly 10% of PLA members, and it seems to provide a good representation of PLA members on the basis of gender and region (see Table 1). However, it over represents those employed by the state, and under represents the private sector, consultants and some regions.

Table 1: Profile of respondents compared to PLA membership

Answer Options	PLA membership %	Survey respondents%
Gender:		
Female	31	33
Male	60	64
Not identified / Unknown	9	3
Total	100	100
Region:		
ACT	1	1
NSW	23	19
NT	0	0
Qld	12	9
SA	10	14
Tas	1	1
Vic	34	33
WA	19	22
NZ		1
Unknown	1	
Total	101*	100
Employment sector:		
Federal		
State	0	0
Local	4	14
Private sector	61	62
Consultant	30	3
Academic		16
Student	2	3
Retired	1	0
Unknown	2	3
Total	100	101*
* Due to rounding up		

4.2 How important is research information in your current work environment?

Only 4% respondents indicated that research information was less than 'moderately important'. The remainder indicated that research information was moderately to extremely important in their work environment (see Table 2).

Table 2: How important is research information?

Answer Options	Response %	Response count
Extremely important	47.9	35
(Moderately to extremely)	37.0	27
Moderately important	11.0	8
(Not at all to moderately)	4.1	3
Not important	0	0
<i>answered question</i>		73

4.3 How members use research information

Respondents were asked ‘How do you USE research information in your work?’ and allowed to tick one or more options (see Table 3).

Table 3: How do you USE research information in your work?

Answer Options	Response %	Response count
To build on current knowledge	86.1	62
To develop better strategies / policies	83.3	60
To justify a change in direction / improved service delivery	70.8	51
To learn from the experience of others	65.3	47
To prove things to decision makers	62.5	45
To ensure money is spent most effectively	52.8	38
To justify claims for additional funding	37.5	27
Other (please specify)		4
<i>answered question</i>		72

Other uses of research information include use in grant applications, establishing case studies and benchmarking of facilities and services, cross checking that they are heading towards best practice, and early identification of trends and issues.

The top responses indicate that the majority of respondents use research to improve the quality of service they provide or for their professional development which would also enhance quality of service. The remaining responses indicate that research is also used as a support for good decision making.

4.4 How members currently find research information

Respondents were asked ‘How do you FIND research information when you need it?’ and were able to tick all applicable responses (see Table 4).

Table 4: How do you FIND research information when you need it?

Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
Web based searches e.g. Google searches	90.3	65
Conferences / seminars / workshops	75.0	54
Colleagues / word of mouth	62.5	45
Industry related websites e.g. Dept. Sport & Rec	61.1	44
Professional journals	59.7	43
Academic journals	38.9	28
Consultants	37.5	27
On line discussion forums, online networks	31.9	23
Library searches	26.4	19
Direct contact with researchers	22.2	16
Other (please specify)		7
	<i>answered question</i>	72

Other options given by respondents covered Google Scholar, specialist consultants, University studies, Clearinghouse for Sport, peak sporting agencies and websites, and the Department of Education.

Unsurprisingly web based searches were the dominant method of searching for research information, notably though a high percentage of people also use conferences, seminars, workshops and other industry related methods. Academic sources were least frequently used by respondents to find research information indicating a preference for practice generated information. The reasons for this however are not clear. There is a preference for industry focused information (information that has been written specifically for an industry audience), information collection that can be done at the desk, and also high use of face-to-face forums.

4.5 Specific sources of research information

Respondents were asked 'Which specific SOURCES of research information do you currently utilise?' and again able to tick multiple responses. A high proportion of respondents refers to the PLA journal, and attends PLA workshops and seminars (see Table 5).

Table 5: Which specific SOURCES of research information do you currently utilise?

Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
Australian Parks and Leisure Journal	81.8	54
PLA workshops / seminars	62.1	41
PLA national conference	47.0	31
PLA regional conferences	43.9	29
Academic journals	40.9	27
Research Connections Newsletter	13.6	9
IOSS Knowledge Base	6.1	4
NZ SR Knowledge Library	4.5	3
Other (please specify)		17
	<i>Answered question</i>	63

Other specific sources that members frequently use are:

- ABS
- Australian Leisure Management Journal
- Canadian Benefits e news and website
- CERM
- Clearing House for Sport Information - Australian Sports Commission
- Consultancy reports
- direct from facility managers
- Google to identify other data bases such as those provided by government or research centres
- Google web search
- Heart Foundations Physical Activity e-news and website
- Industry networks
- international networks
- Online reports and forums
- State Government reports
- University studies
- Yardstick IPWEA

The responses highlight the importance of industry bodies being able to provide access to research information and reinforce the role of PLA as a facilitator of opportunities to access research information. Also of note is that the Research Connections publication which was developed specifically to link practitioners to research information was not well recognised and consequently not well used by respondents

4.6 Issues which members would like further information

Respondents were asked ‘What broad ISSUES do you need research information about?’ and were able to tick multiple responses (see Table 6).

Table 6: What broad ISSUES do you need research information about?

Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
Open space (urban)	72.6	53
Planning	56.2	41
Recreation	56.2	41
Sport / sport facilities / sport development	52.1	38
Health and well being	50.7	37
Trends / future directions	50.7	37
Best practice	47.9	35
Urban planning & design	46.6	34
Leisure	45.2	33
Outdoor recreation	45.2	33
Facility management	43.8	32
Asset management	42.5	31
Parks & gardens	41.1	30
Community engagement	38.4	28
Aquatic activities & facilities	35.6	26
Play	35.6	26

Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
New technologies	31.5	23
Sustainability	31.5	23
Funding	28.8	21
Tracks & trails	28.8	21
Economic aspects	27.4	20
Governance	27.4	20
Natural area management (Indigenous, private, council, state, federal)	24.7	18
Tourism / nature based tourism	23.3	17
Horticulture / arboriculture / turf / grounds management	21.9	16
Arts / cultural	20.5	15
Legal aspects	13.7	10
Information dissemination (Interpretation)	11.0	8
Safety / accidents	11.0	8
Cemeteries	5.5	4
Other (please specify)		9
<i>answered question</i>		73

Other issues included public policy, management of areas with conflicting values, leadership and management, community development, research identifying what makes a healthy community, maintenance of water bodies, and how to engage and inspire.

Respondents were also asked to identify specific issues for which they require research information. Over a third of respondents provided input here which is summarised in Table 6. PLA members' request for research information spanned across better researched knowledge regarding management strategies (summarised in the column labelled How to manage), better information on specific topics, better tools and some suggestions regarding PLA services.

Respondents identified a wide range of topics that they require research information about. A reasonable assumption could be that most respondents work in multi-disciplinary roles where they cover a range of issues, which in turn is reflected in their responses. Additionally, the parks and leisure industry is multi-disciplinary, which is both a challenge and an opportunity. An extension of this thinking suggests that coverage of a range of the most popular topics (multiple streams) would provide some information of interest, for most people.

4.7 Specific issues requiring more research

The additional topics raised by respondents also cover a wide range of issues (as they did in Table 5) reinforcing the need for coverage of a broad range of content. The issues raised include a mixture of practice information based (standards, best practice, issue management), trend information and academic research. Categorisation of the research topics from the survey and the additional topics raised by respondents could provide a ready resource of areas for future research projects, conferences, workshops and seminars.

It should be noted that Table 7 was provided to the APL journal editors to help them in their 2016 planning.

Table 7: Do you currently have any SPECIFIC ISSUES (not covered in question 2) on which you would like more research information?

Specific issues raised	How to manage / Information *	Information	PLA Service	Tool
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> accessibility activation active travel aging population needs catalyst for change climate change coastal management competing needs developer fees green infrastructure ground water allocation increasing population density innovative construction planning provision resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> female participation health leadership and management multipurpose outdoor youth sting nematode 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cost sports participation economic benefits landscape architecture road widths new developments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> better connection between academics and industry parks back into PLA Parks managers forum professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> benchmarking community consultation culture decision making, better use of research identifying trends/issues education
* the respondent's response asked for information or data on this topic as well as knowledge around managing these issues				

The most important issues per region (highest number of respondents identified this issue) are provided in Table 8.

Table 8: The most important research issues by region

Region	Most important issue (based on count of responses)
ACT	*
New Zealand	*
South Australia	Planning
Victoria	Open space (urban)
NSW	Open space (urban)
Queensland	Recreation
Tasmania	*
Western Australia	Open space (urban)
* insufficient responses	

Care needs to be taken in interpreting these broad topics, however it is clear that open space in the urban context is a dominant issue across Victoria, NSW and Western Australia. That the three topics in this table match the top 3 in Table 5 suggests that all regions are concerned about these 3 issues.

More detailed analysis is found in Appendix B.

4.8 Current involvement in research

Forty eight percent of respondents indicated that either they or their organisation undertook research, although 7 respondents skipped this question so it is more likely that the yes response is only forty four percent, not forty eight percent (see Table 9).

Table 9: Do you or your organisation currently undertake any research?

Do you or your organisation currently undertake any research? Might it be possible to share this research with PLA? Would there be any conditions?	
Feedback	Synthesis
As a consultant I am continually developing new systems and researching best practice. happy to share information but not proprietary systems and models	happy to share information but not proprietary systems and models
Depends on the agreement of agencies who own the rights to the research	depends who owns the rights to the research
Happy to share	happy to share
Hard to say as some is what makes us industry leaders	happy to share information but not proprietary systems and models
Have to think about it.	Have to think about it.
Health and wellbeing, Resilience, Global Cities, CRC, Green Building Council, World Bank and UNICEF & Commonwealth Based organisations	x
Most universities can improve how they share information with the industry. Research Connections is a great mechanism for this but I don't think Research Connections has much impact at the industry level. There needs to be better ways to raise the profile of research.	find ways to help universities share their information
Possibly, but it is not peer reviewed research - like you get with a post graduate degree	Possibly, but not peer reviewed research
Project Managers contact relevant departments or engineering checks	
Research at present is only related to current Council projects that have been funded, or as a result of university studies.	
Sting nematode Terracottem turf	Would share Sting nematode research
Sure	Happy to share
The research we do is generally client drive and therefore client owned. There may be an opportunity to provide a consolidation of base level data from multiple consultant sources if there was a general / generic / cooperative approach to studies undertaken around the nation - gleaned from searching and analysing tenders - perhaps to which a common set of data could be collected - analysed and provided to the industry with a practical application.	There may be an opportunity to provide a consolidation of base level data from multiple consultant sources if there was a general / generic / cooperative approach to studies undertaken around the nation
We have undertaken projects utilising LG research and development grant funds.	Projects from LG Research and Development grants
We support research with small amounts of seed funding, but mainly in the transport space	Provide seed funding
web based research on risk management and safety at events	Event risk management and safety
When completed & published, it is shared	Do share
Yes - Our IP would need to be carefully controlled and referenced. It may not be possible to share aspects of our	Depends who owns the rights to the research, it may be possible to use the information / data

Do you or your organisation currently undertake any research? Might it be possible to share this research with PLA? Would there be any conditions?	
Feedback	Synthesis
work as they are principally owned by our clients and may contain sensitive information - therefore it may be possible to use the information / data generically but it would need to be determined on a case by case basis.	generically but it would need to be determined on a case by case basis.
Yes once completed we usually work with a uni who publish it but not always shared in operational circles	Do share, but not always with practitioners
Yes potentially	X
Yes, but not 'academic', rather service planning related. Generally recreation and parks people are good at sharing information.	Research is service planning related
Yes, no conditions unless council specifically requests otherwise	Happy to share

Sixteen per cent of respondents indicated that their organisation would be interested in funding or partnering to support research, and 66% indicated that this may be possible. Eighteen percent said that it wasn't possible to be involved. Some people clarified their response with the following points:

- issue needs to be relevant
- depends on capacity
- need better links between PLA and academic institutions
- no funds available
- can't comment
- might be able to partner
- would share cost of targeted workshops
- would be involved if properly structured

The majority of respondents indicated that their organisation does not undertake research. Of those that did undertake research the majority indicated that they would be willing to share their research information. However most respondents stated that there would be specific conditions attached to their ability to share information. This does lend itself to provision of a range of opportunities where individuals can determine the best option to share their research i.e. Conferences, workshops, or publications e.g. Research Connections or the PLA journal.

4.9 What could PLA do?

Respondents were asked to indicate which of the following services could PLA provide to assist access to research information (see Table 10).

Table 10: What SERVICES could PLA provide that would assist you to find useful research information?

Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
Host a web searchable research data base	66.7	46
Continue to circulate abstracts of current research projects quarterly (e.g. PLA's Research Connections Newsletter)	65.2	45
Include more research information in the Journal	62.3	43
Develop a partnership with universities to advance priority	59.4	41

research		
Include a research stream in the annual PLA national conference	43.5	30
Organise more regional / state conferences and workshops	39.1	27
Other (please specify)	24.6	17
<i>answered question</i>		69

Additional suggestions were made and these are summarised here:

- attend other organisations conferences/workshops
- commission/co-sponsor research
- do not duplicate existing services
- provide an edited highlights publication
- ensure information available outside national conference
- include how research can be used
- partner with State to develop research agenda
- share information on top 3 needs; establish forum
- share using social media, e.g. twitter
- provide specific workshops
- state based events that cover leisure planning
- utilise existing information services
- provide website links
- work with students

Discussion points: Five of the top six responses relate directly to activities that PLA is currently involved in. The hosting of a web searchable database, the top response, is the only mechanism PLA is not currently involved in, however as explained in Section 2 PLA did collaborate with IOSS to establish a knowledge base for the industry. The low member use of Parks Base indicates that providing a service is not simple! Its uptake requires members to be aware of its existence, see it as relevant and beneficial, and is easy to use. Some of the highly rated options, particularly development of partnerships with universities and inclusion of a research stream at the annual conference could benefit from further consideration, to maximise potential benefits.

5 NATIONAL CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

The RWG viewed the PLA National Conference as an opportunity to engage directly with industry professionals, both members and non-members about research. The workshop started with a short presentation of the preliminary survey results which was followed by a focus group exploring a range of issues raised from the preliminary survey results. Five people attended the workshop, but more came in late.

The workshop session at the National conference was intended primarily as a mechanism to validate the results of the survey of members.

Overall attendees confirmed the importance of research information to them as industry professionals. They provided a number of suggestions for increasing access to information and the majority of these focussed on connecting like-minded individuals, which supports the findings of the survey. The workshop group also confirmed the need for greater promotion of existing information sharing opportunities such as Research Connections newsletter. A focus on practice information was also apparent through the session.

The validity of the research information was raised by a few of the attendees and PLA endorsement, both formal and tacit, was considered as legitimisation of the information provided. A few related issues such as: the lack of common terminology; finding specific information within the considerable the volume available; and knowing where to find information were also raised. Additional information sharing solutions such as greater use of social media were suggested by the participants.

The notes from the workshop session are included as Appendix C.

6 DISCUSSION

The survey results highlight the importance of research information to the respondents and while sample size can be considered small in relation to the PLA membership of 817 it is large enough to draw some general conclusions regarding members' perceptions of research and their view of PLA's role.

Overall respondents viewed research as important to their professional roles with a focus on using it to improve service quality and as an aid for decision making. A strong theme in the results was practice based research information from peers and other industry sources was accessed and sought after more readily than academic research information. The reasons for this are not clear and it would be good to understand whether this is as a result of the subject matter and usefulness in application or more practical issues such as accessibility.

With the exception of internet searches PLA products and services feature strongly in both how respondents searched for research information and the sources they used. Survey respondents rated hosting a web searchable database as the number one thing that PLA could do to assist access to research information. A preliminary investigation into the feasibility of hosting a web searchable database should be considered. Given the prominence of web based searches for research information it may also be useful to include links from the PLA website to websites that contain relevant and topical industry research.

The current suite of PLA services, specifically workshops, seminars and conferences appears to provide both the opportunity to collect research information and swap information with like-minded professionals. These could include practice based information such as case studies or showcasing award winners and what constitutes excellence in those projects (e.g. as is done in the PLA Journal or via Regional Newsletters).

The wide range of topics indicated by respondents show the breadth of the industry and would appear to caution against streamlining of research content to just a few topics. The variety of methods used by respondents to find research information and the variety of methods used to share research also indicate that a broader based strategy to disseminate information is more likely to be successful.

The focus of this survey was access to research and dissemination of research information however there are other areas where PLA could benefit from either reviewing or refining their current relationship with research. These include investigating closer ties with academic institutions to further key pieces research and consideration of research streams within existing events.

In terms of research more generally, an analysis by John Wood and Dr David Lamb of the research reported in the first seven issues of Research Connections found that:

- **Affiliations** - most researchers are associated with universities. Government, industry and commercial sectors are poorly represented. This may be because researchers within these organisations are bound by confidentiality and cannot share their research findings.
- **Funding sources** – tend to be spread across most sectors with private funding sources the most common (i.e. not for profit clubs and organisations). There was no information available on the relative amount of funds provided by each sector.
- **Keywords** – 560 tags or topics were associated with the 103 research projects. These tags were grouped under 18 major headings with the most common being:
 - sport (133);
 - social (87);
 - tourism (42);
 - planning (49); and
 - health and well-being (40).

Given that the dominating issues from the member survey were open space, recreation and planning, if Wood and Lamb’s analysis reflects the overall body of Australian/New Zealand research in our industry there is perhaps a mismatch between research topic and industry need.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish a single PLA point of contact for Research related matters to coordinate the approach to research, and undertaken any or all of the following recommendations. (in response to 4.2, 4.5 and 4.6) (See Appendix A for suggestions regarding this role).
2. Continue support for regional conferences and workshops and delivery of an annual national conference. Where applicable consider a research information stream focusing on a mix of practice and academic research (and/or make it clear which is which). (in response to 4.4, 4.5 and workshop)
3. Continue collation and publication of Australasian Parks and Leisure Journal which respondents rated highly as a source of research information. (in response to 4.4, 4.5 and workshop)
4. Consider a series of “how to...” research based topics for the journal or workshops to increase members’ knowledge of searching for or facilitating research partnerships, understanding research validity, and where to find information. (in response to 4.4, 4.5, 4.9 and workshop)
5. Develop an information dissemination plan with a focus on tapping into and sharing research and practice information being conducted by members (in response to 4.8 and 4.9)
6. Develop a marketing plan to promote and measure the use of all PLA research information activities, particularly the Research Connections publication, and Parks Base Knowledge. This may be as part of existing PLA promotional vehicles and should include strategies for use of social media to share research information. (in response to 4.5 and workshop)
7. Add a ‘useful link’ page to the PLA website with links to sites that provide research information such as Clearing House, Sport England and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. (in response to 4.9 and workshop)

8. If after promoting existing web based data bases explore options for funding and managing an interactive, web based research information data base relating to Australian parks, leisure, recreation and sport related research activities. (in response to 4.5, 4.6 and 4.9)
9. Consult with members as to whether PLA should facilitate common national terminology. (wouldn't help for international information) (in response to workshop)
10. That PLA research activity, such as may occur in any or all of the above recommendations, should be allocated an annual budget.

8 APPENDICES

8.1 Appendix A: Suggestions regarding the role of a single point of contact for research

Possible roles of a PLA single point of contact for research

- liaises with the Research Connections author editor(s) - might mean feeding in information, helping co-ordinate information in the journal and/or EDM
- overviews, liaises and where appropriate coordinates PLA research involvement, including:
 - research working groups
 - positions on research advisory groups
- be responsible for supervising the management and upkeep of a searchable, web based PLA research data base
- updates links on the website to selected research data bases eg Clearinghouse for Sport, NZ database
- point of contact for PLA members who have suggestions regarding research topics, queries, sources of information, advice regarding research validity (the person could provide a simple set of criteria they could use to evaluate the information source such as date of publication, peer review, ... etc)
- may provide a regular article to the journal
- initiate links with research institutions to promote/encourage specific research questions
- collect 'research needs' from members whether that is by managing a site or portal where members regularly enter suggestions or other
- Monitor member use of the research web site and update member research needs on a regular basis (via member survey every 5 (?) years)
- Facilitate a research stream as part of the annual PLA National Conference
- Facilitate partnerships and cloud funding of research projects of specific interest to PLA members

The role would:

- Be responsible to PLA CEO
- Report to the PLA Board on a quarterly or half yearly basis

- Liaise with PLA Advisory and assist with any research related tasks

The role should be filled by:

- someone familiar with academic research (in order to liaise effectively, and understand the range of research forms)
- a PLA member

Additionally:

- if the job requires one day a week or more than it should be paid
- with technology they shouldn't need to be based in the national office, but it face to face communication helps a lot, so this may be preferable
- an annual budget should be allocated to work within.

8.2 Appendix B: More detailed analysis

Table 11: Count of issues which members would like further information by Region Part A

Region	Asset management	Best practice	Cemeteries	Community engagement	Economic aspects	Facility management	Funding	Governance	Health and well being
ACT				1					1
New South Wales	7	6	2	5	7	7	3	3	7
New Zealand	1	1			1	1			
Queensland	2	3		1		4	1	3	2
South Australia	6	7	1	6	3	7	4	5	7
Tasmania	0	1							
Victoria	9	9	1	7	5	5	7	5	13
Western Australia	6	8		8	4	8	6	4	7
Grand Total	31	35	4	28	20	32	21	20	37

Table 12: Count of issues which members would like further information by Region Part B

Region	Horticulture / arboriculture / turf / grounds management	Information dissemination (interpretation)	Legal aspects	Leisure	Natural area management (indigenous, private, council, state, federal)	New technologies	Open space (urban)	Outdoor recreation	Parks & gardens
ACT							1		1
New South Wales	3	1	1	7	6	9	14	7	5
New Zealand				1		1			
Queensland	1		3	3	1	2	3	3	2
South Australia	5	2	3	5	5	5	7	6	5
Tasmania	1						1		1
Victoria	4	4		9	4	3	17	9	8
Western Australia	2	1	3	8	2	3	10	8	8
Grand Total	16	8	10	33	18	23	53	33	30

Table 13: Count of issues which members would like further information by Region Part C

Region	Play	Planning	Recreation	Safety / accidents	Sport / sport facilities / sport development	Sustainability	Tourism / nature based tourism	Tracks & trails	Trends / future directions	Urban planning & design
Australian Capital Territory		1				1	1	1		1
New South Wales	7	10	8	1	7	5	3	4	9	7
New Zealand			1		1	1			1	
Queensland	2	3	5		4	2	1	3	2	3
South Australia	6	8	7	3	9	6	5	4	7	6
Tasmania				1						
Victoria	4	10	11		8	6	5	5	11	10
Western Australia	7	9	9	3	9	2	2	4	7	7
Grand Total	26	41	41	8	38	23	17	21	37	34

Table 14: Count of issues which members would like further information by Region Part D

Region	Open space (urban)	Planning	Recreation	Sport / sport facilities / sport development	Health and well being	Trends / future directions
Australian Capital Territory	1	1			1	
New South Wales	14	10	8	7	7	9
New Zealand			1	1		1
Queensland	3	3	5	4	2	2
South Australia	7	8	7	9	7	7
Tasmania	1					
Victoria	17	10	11	8	13	11
Western Australia	10	9	9	9	7	7
Grand Total	53	41	41	38	37	37

8.3 Appendix C: Notes from the workshop session

8.3.1 How to increase access and share research information?

- Newsletters
- Active social media
 - Instagram
 - Twitter
- LGAs and NGOs are not in competition with each other and information sharing is welcome
- Educate
- Advertise

8.3.2 What are your most useful sources of information?

- PLA journal
- Respected international movements eg PPS – Project public spaces
- Council email (one person sends a question through to their IT and they circulate it on some kind of local government email list – think the Council is Shoalhaven, NSW)
- Direct contact with professionals
- Open space planners network
- Green West
- Health Dept
- City West Water
- Twitter

8.3.3 Difficult things about finding information

- Uniformity of terminology, eg neighbourhood park, pocket park – mean different things, and valued differently – want standardised terminology
- Where to go
- Issues often have many layers
- Uses change
- Finding specific (and relevant?) detail
- Credibility and relevance
- Information not there
- Relevant examples, match own situation
- no common database
- being time poor to read 50pp just to reach the one useful paragraph
- need to understand how got data/ results because can find that it isn't credible eg economic value of trails – what were their assumptions; remember too that the assumptions may have been the best at the time of study
- would like feedback on the models being used – especially if they're not very good
- get councils to record/publish what you are doing esp if you know first to do it

8.3.4 How do we increase access to information?

- Forums – similar to Trip adviser, restaurant feedback
- Haven't had need for Parks base
- Need to promoted Research Connections to members – put link in the EDM
- Conference is good but it is 'crammed' eg social media
- Webinars? Most people hadn't used them
- If PLA endorses – they take it to be credible information
- More links on the website to sites from relevant sources eg key note speakers, Gil Penalosa, Ethan Kent/PPS – catalogue them
- Follow PPS on twitter
- Online forum or email discussion list.