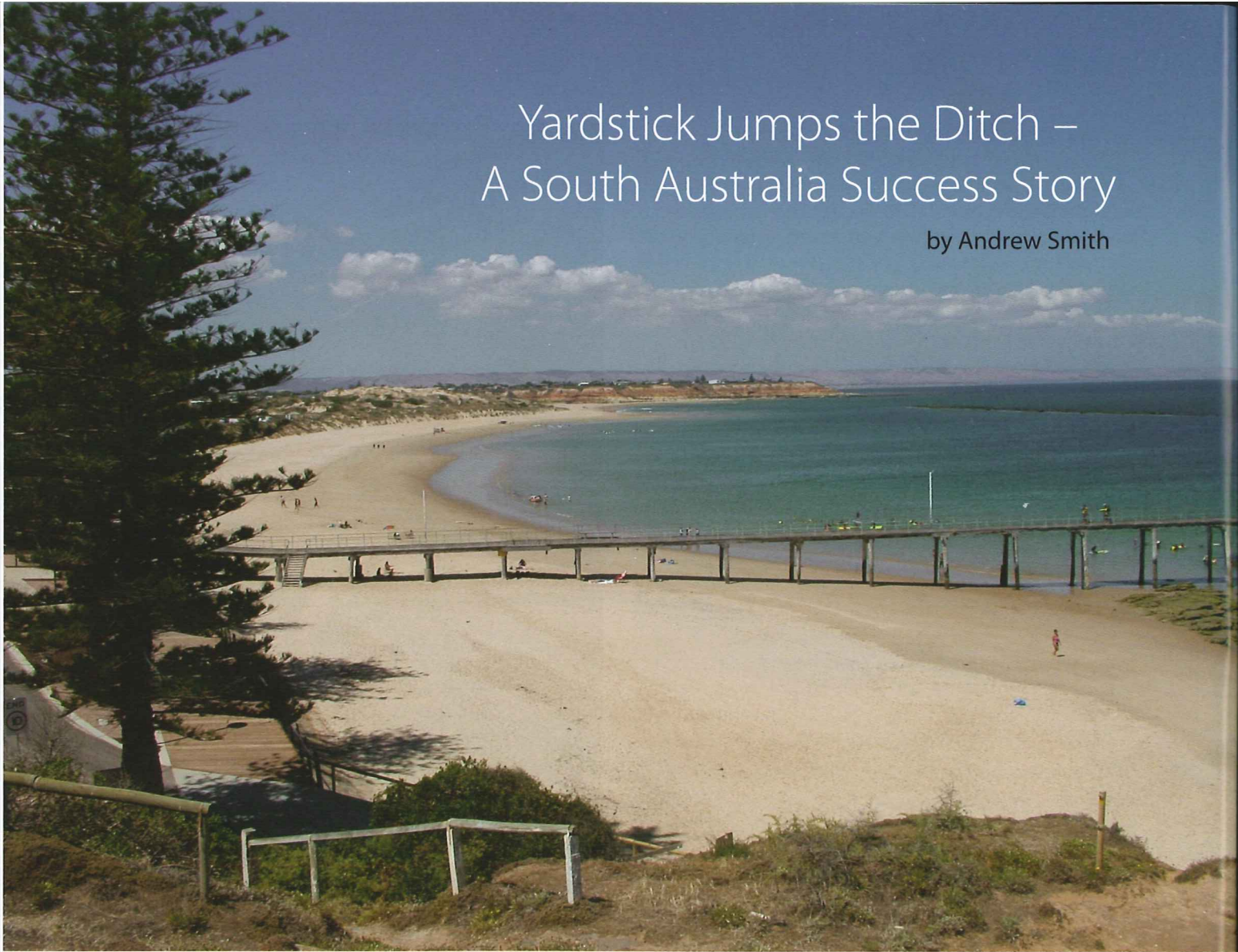


Yardstick Jumps the Ditch – A South Australia Success Story

by Andrew Smith



The City of Onkaparinga is South Australia's largest metropolitan council with a population of over 160,000. The 30 Year Plan for Greater Adelaide has set population targets for this area of at least 40,000 new houses and over 80,000 people. This increase, combined with the public response, has highlighted the need for the City of Onkaparinga (CoO) to ensure that all of its services are efficient, cost effective and good value for money.

A number recent local government elections in South Australia have seen the emergence of new elected members whose political platforms include ensuring that Councils are resourceful in their programme delivery and that wastage is minimised. Staff are being asked to demonstrate programme efficiencies supported by evidence that highlights best practice. And the community is demanding that local government deliver high quality programmes and services. Yardstick™, the New Zealand-derived benchmarking service, has been used by CoO to facilitate these practices.

'Yardstick is seen by many participant councils as a tool that assists in the analysis of programme efficiencies and a robust way to compare performance against other similar organisations, which is precisely what it's done for us,' said Andrew Smith, work group coordinator for Open Space, City of Onkaparinga.

CoO has been using Yardstick since 2004 and has found it useful in a number of areas. When CoO first engaged Yardstick's services, it was clear that many Australian councils were not as advanced as their New Zealand counterparts in the area of data collection and asset management. Yardstick has helped to identify a number of deficiencies and CoO now has a much better understanding of its assets and how they are performing.

To continue to supply the high level of service that is currently provided in Onkaparinga, it will be essential for CoO to be extremely efficient and proactive in order to ensure that standards and service levels are met and maintained as this area of Adelaide grows.

The Yardstick report created for CoO in 2010 was used by its maintenance team to help form the argument and rationale to successfully increase the 2011/12 maintenance budget. Having been flat lined for a number of years, the team was able to show that efficiencies had been exhausted. The report demonstrated that CoO's Operations and Planning KPI was 78% - the highest of all organisations that took part. This served to reinforce that, as an organisation, many of CoO's maintenance operations were best practice and room for further improvement was limited.

Of particular interest to CoO now is the 2010 Yardstick International Report. 'We feel we can learn a lot from looking at what activities and practices organisations in other countries are engaging in,' said Smith. He highlights the focus on sustainability in recreation that is summarised in the report. 'Nordic countries appear to be highly advanced in a number of areas. The countries outlined all have sustainability strategies and policies in place, and a majority have a clear policy of no chemical use in their parks. CoO's Sustainability Unit has taken this information on-board and is now actively looking at ways of improving its approach to sustainability. Energy audits and the development of a carbon reduction plan for its parks are of specific interest.'

As part of Onkaparinga's Asset Management Plan for Open Space, information from the Yardstick project is also being used to help develop demand forecasting, including capital upgrades, capital extension and service levels. The focus areas contained within Yardstick have been useful as well in establishing a discussion associated with the impact of trends on infrastructure. Additionally, CoO believes Yardstick will be a useful tool in the development of its Asset Management Improvement Plans.

The Yardstick project, operated by NZRA and Project Managers Xyst Ltd, is a business improvement initiative

developed by those in the industry to ensure that benchmarking is effectively conducted across the parks and recreation sectors with accurate and detailed results. By collecting and comparing a range of information relating to the provision of services, cost of service provision, asset management processes and planning and policy information, Yardstick enables its members to make

comparisons against other similar businesses' provisions and operation. In addition, Yardstick provides an annual benchmarked customer survey of park and facility users which measures users' expectations against levels of satisfaction.

To date Yardstick has helped to:

- ❖ Clearly define areas in which data collection is necessary
- ❖ Emphasise areas in which CoO is succeeding and those that need improvement
- ❖ Justify CoO's position regarding service standards
- ❖ Provide a way to measure itself against similar organisations
- ❖ Highlight best practice and programmes in other organisations from which CoO can learn

The Yardstick group of projects has been widely adopted by New Zealand's local government sector and, more recently, the project has grown internationally. Membership now also includes organisations throughout Australia, South Africa, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Canada with 93 Parks members and 42 Pools members across the world.

'Yardstick has been a valuable tool providing an independent snapshot of Onkaparinga's position in the efficient and effective delivery of our projects and programmes. For that reason we will continue to use it as we continue to grow our vibrant and city,' said Smith.

Andrew Smith is the work group coordinator for Open Space at the City of Onkaparinga in South Australia.

