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Challenges and Opportunities for a Local Government Implementing a Human Rights Policy in Australia

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Abstract

This article considers how a human rights culture in urban policymaking fits within wider theories of human rights cities. Specifically, it considers practical ways to bring together what local government officers consider the most important initiatives to enhance human rights in the city, and which initiatives are feasible to implement in the context of complex urban governance structures. It argues that principles of leadership, accountability, and operational capability are all integral to the successful implementation of a human rights approach in the city. This account is informed by empirical data from a research project undertaken in a city council located in Melbourne, Australia. This study used a mixed-methods approach combining conversations, focus groups, and a co-designed workshop with local government officers working in various departments in the city, local politicians, and community representatives. The workshop collected ideas on how to work successfully towards the implementation of a human rights policy in the city council and to understand how obstacles to implementation can be overcome by changing the culture in the organisation. The findings show that a lack of leadership, an overreliance on quantitative monitoring, and diffused operational capability hamper the implementation of a local human rights culture in this local government council. Recommendations are for councillors and CEOs in local governments to take a stronger leadership role and for residents to be more involved in the co-design of human rights initiatives in the community.

Keywords

accessible services; focus groups; human rights culture; social cohesion; social inclusion; urban governance

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1. Introduction

Urban local governments in Australia increasingly apply a human rights lens to their work. Human rights policies and procedures have proliferated across the local government space ever since their declaration by the United Nations in 1948, focusing on the city's role in creating inclusive and accessible services, advancing inclusion and social cohesion in the community, and ensuring all human rights are respected (United Nations, 1948). The United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights stated in 2022 that local councils play an important role in the promotion and protection of human rights. However, local councils face many challenges in doing so (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022). It is yet unknown whether human rights do indeed make a difference in local government policymaking and whether we can identify policies that are directly the result of a normative commitment to human rights. This article uses the conceptual framework of "human rights cities" (Davis, 2019; Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014) to analyse the ways in which a local government body ("council") in metropolitan Melbourne, which we will call Northfield, has worked to create a positive human rights culture and to achieve greater equality and inclusion in its area.

Creating a human rights culture at the local government level is a key challenge. Research on local human rights perspectives has been extensively carried out in both Europe and the United States. For instance, some research, particularly those conducted in the United States, underscores the challenges local governments face due to limited budgets or a lack of understanding about the importance of human rights (Blau, 2014). Other research delves into the growth of local human rights movements (Mnisi Weeks et al., 2022) or investigates participatory methods for public problem-solving that involve citizens and local government sectors (Lozner, 2004). Importantly, our research fills a void in the existing theoretical literature: The lack of studies focusing on smaller local councils within the framework of human rights cities.

To fill this knowledge gap, this study explores how local government officials charged with implementing a new human rights policy have faced challenges and opportunities in developing a "human rights culture" (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission [VEOHRC, a statutory body charged with protecting and promoting human rights in Victoria], 2023a) in their council. Four years after the Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act* (Victoria State Government, 2006; the Charter), the Australian government launched the National Human Rights Framework (the Framework) in 2010, which committed to strengthening, promoting, and protecting human rights in Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010). The Framework also included a new *Australian National Action Plan on Human Rights 2012* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). At the time of writing, the Framework has not been reviewed, nor has the Action Plan been implemented, and only the state of Victoria (where this research was conducted) and the Australian Capital Territory have a Human Rights Act. Furthermore, there is no regional or national court like the European Court of Human Rights to hold these jurisdictions to account. Some Victorian local governments provide optional human rights education to their employees, but local governments are not obliged to have a human rights policy. The Charter does, however, point out that public authorities must act compatibly with human rights and give proper consideration to human rights when making decisions (VEOHRC, 2023b).

Drawing on one author's observations from her time as a researcher-in-residence in the Northfield Council's Community Development and Social Cohesion team, as well as focus groups and interviews conducted

with council workers, this study aims to inventory the practices that were most feasible and effective to implement a more positive human rights culture in this Council. Further data were collected at a workshop where local government officers, councillors, and community members reflected on the findings and provided more detailed accounts of the successful application of a new human rights policy to various departments of the council, such as public space, buildings, libraries, human resources, business development, procurement, and finance.

The importance of leadership, transparency and accountability, and operational capability in cultivating a human rights city emerged strongly from the data collected from people working within the local government. These themes align conceptually with the pillars of a "human rights culture" (VEOHRC, 2023a). We argue that developing an organisational human rights culture is essential for the successful creation of a human rights city. We show further, however, that there is a likelihood of tension between a governance-focused approach to an organisational human rights culture and the need for adaptability and flexibility in working with the community in an urban setting. Building on this, we propose that the concept of a human rights culture will help local governments understand and counter the internal and external obstacles they may face to the implementation of a human rights policy, thereby maximising their potential as human rights cities. We suggest that addressing issues relating to leadership, transparency and accountability, and operational capability within a local government organisation can improve the prospects of short- and long-term change in the community.

This article will first provide a theoretical framework introducing the concepts of a "human rights city" and a "human rights culture" and explain how these concepts relate and are used throughout the article. The methodology is then described, providing useful contextual information about the local government case study and the mixed methods approach to data collection. Three key findings are then introduced and elaborated on as components of a human rights culture that facilitate the work towards becoming a human rights city: leadership, transparency and accountability, and operational capability. A discussion and conclusion section covers the implications of this work for local governments in Australia and overseas and reflects on the limitations of taking a "human rights culture" approach in human rights cities.

2. Human Rights Cities and a Human Rights Culture

A "human rights city" is broadly defined as any "city or community where people of goodwill, in government, in organisations and institutions, try and let a human rights framework guide the development of the life of the community" (People's Movement for Human Rights Education [PDHRE], 2007, p. 3, as cited in Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014, p. 714). Indeed, any municipality that attempts to implement human rights standards and/or law in their policies, statements, and programs, regardless of whether they formally claim the moniker of human rights city, can nevertheless be understood using the concept of the human rights city (see Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014). In this section, we introduce the human rights city as a distinctive concept in the human rights localisation scholarship, tracing its origin and its various applications to local governments around the world.

The PDHRE's initial conceptualisation of the human rights city recommended a focus on civic engagement and community education alongside government enforcement as steps to achieving the designation (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014). In many cases, the process of becoming a human rights city is a complex interaction

between local advocacy, community organisations, social enterprises, and local councils. An important motivation for the shift may be that engagement with human rights can enhance a city's capacity to govern (Grigolo, 2017). For example, becoming a human rights city creates opportunities for cities to promote human rights awareness, increase participation in decision-making, and improve their own internal monitoring systems (de Feyter et al., 2011; Oomen, 2016). The World Human Rights Cities Forum (2024) and the United Cities and Local Governments (2024) are currently the global network of cities and other levels of government focusing on human rights. As cities start to take leadership roles in human rights policy creation and implementation, local governments must use human rights norms in their operations (Davis, 2019). Dozens of cities worldwide have declared themselves human rights cities, including Rosario (Argentina), Porto Alegre (Brazil), Nagpur (India), Korogocho (Kenya), Thies (Senegal), and Mogale (South Africa; see Blau, 2014).

This study is not the first to investigate human rights locally. There is an abundance of research in Europe and the United States on local orientations of human rights. A clear gap in this conceptual literature, to which our study responds, is the absence of smaller local councils in the available analyses of human rights cities. Although a human rights city can be a local municipality of any size or character, almost all the municipalities commonly profiled in the literature are larger cities such as Barcelona, Graz, and Utrecht. Other case studies can be found in African cities of Francistown, Mogale, Mutare, and Livingstone, as well as Falun in Sweden (Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy, 2024). Furthermore, there are no Australian councils formally recognised as human rights cities. The geography of Australia and the way in which cities tend to comprise major central business districts surrounded by sizeable municipalities stretching from the inner city to the outer suburbs makes a council like Northfield a particularly interesting case study of a human rights city. Northfield has a similar population to the human rights cities of York in the United Kingdom and Jackson in Mississippi. However, York is a major urban centre and Jackson a state capital, while Northfield is primarily a residential area that includes inner-city and outer-suburban areas.

The concept of a "human rights culture" has been used in different contexts with slightly different definitions. In line with Grigolo (2016, p. 276), we refer to a human rights city as a "city which is organised around norms and principles of human rights" while also acknowledging that this can be driven by either civil society, local government or both, or within a broader context. A number of studies conceive of a human rights culture as something that can be developed at the nation-state level, usually in response to and as part of a national reckoning with an atrocity. The development of a human rights culture as a national political and juridical project has been studied in Uganda (Dicklitch & Lwanga, 2003), South Africa (Gibson, 2004), and Cambodia (Marks, 2005), to name just a few. A human rights culture has also been understood in relation to the way cultural institutions, such as art and the media, have the potential to cultivate understanding and respect for human rights (Galchinsky, 2010; Nash, 2005).

Various uses of the concept share some essential features. The notion of a human rights culture appeals not just to the legal or political systems of a society but to "a set of cultural values among the populace" (Gibson, 2004, p. 5). A human rights culture is found in societies with a "popular political culture" of support for human rights, where members subscribe to a set of shared values that align with human rights instruments (Nash, 2005, p. 337). These values are not just held by elites but also by the common people, cultivated by law but "from below": from grassroots consciousness and demands (Dicklitch & Lwanga, 2003, p. 485). Indeed, they are held so deeply and so broadly that they become "integrated into the way people behave…into the prevailing moral framework" (Marks, 2005, p. 261).

In the state of Victoria in Australia, where this research was undertaken, the concept of a "human rights culture" has been formalised in the VEOHRC's instructions for the public sector implementation of human rights. VEOHRC (2023a) defines a human rights culture as "a pattern of shared attitudes, values and behaviours that influence the policymaking, decisions and practices of government to uphold the human rights of all people."

The Victorian state government supports public authorities, including local governments, to build and maintain strong human rights cultures. Given the absence of formally designated human rights cities in Australia, we suggest a human rights culture conceived and adopted formally may provide useful guidance for local governments. To do so, VEOHRC encourages public authorities in Victoria to follow its formal document, the Human Rights Culture Indicator Framework (VEOHRC, 2023a), listing a series of benefits associated with human rights cities: improving democratic legitimacy, encouraging community participation in decision-making, establishing clear non-negotiable legal standards, and improving the quality-of-service design. By presenting a case study of a local government's experience with human rights implementation, this article intends to fill a research gap. Local human rights implementation has yet to be the subject of significant research, although work is starting to emerge. A case study of European cities (Barcelona, Graz, Lund, Nuremberg, Utrecht, Vienna, and York) outlines the shared characteristics of human rights cities, which are also shared by our case study Northfield (Rayfield & Casla, 2021). First, all these cities aspire to use human rights principles to guide their work. Second, they want to allow the participation of all those concerned in governance and empower citizens as right-holders. This includes events, awards, art installations, and training and education. Another shared characteristic is the focus on non-discrimination and equality in the process of policy formation, as well as the intended outcomes (Rayfield & Casla, 2021). Finally, and this is also true for our case study, human rights cities focus on transparency and accountability through monitoring and evaluation.

In this article, we focus on leadership, transparency and accountability, and operational capability as integral characteristics of a human rights culture in a human rights city. We have chosen these three themes because our analysis showed that local government officials experienced most tension in these areas when developing a human rights culture. We analyse participants' narratives of this process against these characteristics to better understand the opportunities, challenges, and successes Northfield has experienced in becoming a human rights city. This further ensures our findings contribute to and extend the prevailing understanding of a "human rights culture" in the Victorian context and the relationship between a "human rights culture" and a "human rights city" in both a national and international context.

For example, as Gready (2019) has shown in the context of the city of York, sometimes it is important to rethink collaborations and partnerships. Similarly, Wolman and Chung (2022) focus on the work of local human rights commissions in Korea, with similar findings. What is interesting, though, is the difficulty and struggle between diverse groups in the city (Oomen et al., 2016) in many studies. How can human rights materialise in urban spaces? Who has the right to the city? Our case study illustrates this same tension with an example of a conflict between user groups in the local libraries.

3. Case Study and Methodology

In Australia, a local Council governs a locality. In urban areas, the Local Government Authority is called a city, like Melbourne, within the larger Melbourne Metropolitan Area. In Victoria, where our case study is, over half of Council funding comes from land rates, 20% from Commonwealth and State, and the rest from fees, fines, contributions, and other sources (VIC Councils, 2024). The funding is used for capital works, job stimulation, and improving facilities, community hubs, leisure centres, parks, and streetscapes.

3.1. Case Study

This article uses Northfield (pseudonym) as a case study. Northfield, near Melbourne's CBD, stretches from metropolitan suburbs to the outer ring. It includes gentrified suburbs near two universities and migrant reception suburbs near former industrial sites. Northfield is diverse and progressive, with over 170,000 residents (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021) and a left-leaning Council.

Northfield's population is well-educated and has above-average income. It is culturally diverse, with a third of households speaking a language other than English. The population is religiously diverse, with 23% identifying as Western (Roman) Catholic, almost 10% identifying as Muslim, and 41% as having no religion (ABS, 2021). Some estimates are that 24% of residents in this Council identify as LGBTQIA+ (Brown, 2022), compared to 3–4% nationally. A quarter of residents have been diagnosed with anxiety or depression in their lifetime (Victorian average is 21%), most likely due to higher mental health literacy (ABS, 2021).

3.2. Data Collection

Using a combination of focus groups, conversations, and a workshop event, we gained insight into the ways in which council workers refer to the human rights policy through group discussions and individual conversations. Triangulation of these methods allowed us to understand ways in which everyday workplace actions facilitate (or hinder) the development of a human rights culture that empowers local government employees to work towards a more inclusive and cohesive city.

Ethics approval was provided by the university (No. 2023–26794-21539), and data were collected between July and November 2023. Participant names were not recorded to ensure confidentiality. Consent forms were signed, or consent was given verbally. All sessions were in English and lasted 45–60 minutes. Details of the data collection can be found in Table 1.

All respondents were over 18 years old, and 40% were male. To protect the anonymity of the participants, further disclosure of age, gender, and role within the council will not be made here. We worked with the council on refining the study objectives and questions (see Table 2) for participants, as well as the workshop design. Focus group discussions provided insight into how participants constructed shared meaning on the topic of the implementation of the human rights policy.

The triangulation of data from diverse sources increased the ecological validity of the findings. First, the conversations were used to explore emergent themes and the phenomenon of the implementation of a human rights policy in this city council context. Then, the focus groups followed a structured approach,

Table 1. Number of participants per data collection method by policy area.

Participant category	Invited #	Participated #	Section of Council represented
Conversations (face-to-face and online)	13	14	Directorate of Community, Directorate of Place and Environment
Focus groups (online)	16	22	Directorate of Business Transformation, Directorate of City Infrastructure, Directorate of Community, Directorate of Place and Environment
Workshop (hybrid)	52	40	CEO, Directorate of Business Transformation, Directorate of City Infrastructure, Directorate of Community, Directorate of Place and Environment

Table 2. Focus group topic guide.

Questions for local government employees
What is your role, and how long have you been in this role?
Which stated outcome of the human rights policy are you working towards?
What is the problem you are trying to address?
Which activities are implemented to achieve the outcomes you are after?
Do you think you are doing the right things to achieve your outcomes and tackle the problems?
Can you tell me about successful activities and why they were successful?
Can you tell me about activities that can be improved and how you think they could be improved?
What would be the best ways to capture progress on the human rights policy?

asking for examples of successful implementation and lessons learned, as well as indicators of success. The transcripts of the focus groups were analysed, coded, and interpreted by a team of four researchers who debriefed iteratively as they developed the themes and verified links between the data and the findings.

3.3. Data Analysis

Sessions were transcribed and checked for accuracy by the research team, with a second researcher involved in transcription in case of unclarities. The data were analysed using thematic analysis techniques and read several times by different researchers to search for patterns and interpretations. Notes taken during the conversations were used to assist with the interpretation of the data, and themes were discovered, discussed within the team, and sorted into groups. The data were then re-interpreted based on those themes and discussed in weekly meetings to achieve a common interpretation.

4. Findings

Northfield introduced a human rights policy in 2016, which focuses on offering residents the rights and protections afforded by international human rights law. The council aims to apply a human rights lens to the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of all policies, services, programs, and infrastructure. At its core, the policy intends to address inequalities and inequities amongst the area's diverse residents, and

further considers social justice, equity, inclusion, and diversity. It specifically prioritises the following groups: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; people with a disability; LGBTQIA+ communities; migrant, refugee, and faith communities; women and girls; and gender diverse communities.

4.1. Leadership and Resourcing

There are many ways to define leadership (Winston & Patterson, 2006), but for the sake of simplicity, we will keep it brief and refer to leadership as:

> One or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) on the organisation's mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend their spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organisation's mission and objectives. (Winston & Patterson, 2006, p. 7)

The VEOHRC (2023a) human rights culture indicator framework refers to leadership as follows:

1) Leaders demonstrate their commitment to human rights and the Charter (see above) both publicly and within their respective organisations.
2) Discussions on human rights are included at leadership forums (including at business and branch planning forums).
3) Executive performance review documents include metrics on human rights.

At Northfield, staff charged with the implementation of the new human rights policy shared a perception that there was a low level of interest in human rights among the councillors (local government politicians) and senior leadership team members they reported to. Staff described how the human rights policy was not a priority for the council's leadership: "It's just not a commitment from the organisation at this point," one employee stated. They explained that an important responsibility of their role was to increase the level of buy-in within Northfield as an organisation to encourage support for their initiatives: "We're trying to tell stories of what happens in Northfield, and we're hoping that this will get the human rights policy on the agenda...of the councillors."

The disinterest of Northfield's leaders in the human rights policy harmed the development of a human rights culture. Leadership practised by senior individuals is instrumental to how "organisations, networks and communities are mobilised" as well as the principal values of the organisation (Hoddy & Gray, 2023, p. 635). Workplace culture constructs the ethos, values, and norms of an organisation (Lagoutte et al., 2021), and the low buy-in from council leaders discursively contributed to a workplace culture that deprioritised human rights despite the stated importance of the new policy. Operationally, this translated to a lack of resourcing, which limited the capacity of council employees to apply the human rights policy: "We just don't have the resources. So, it all comes down to resourcing. Because I think we have the potential to do so much more if the resourcing was there."

The council leadership's failure to provide necessary funding and resources amplified the prevailing view of insufficient commitment to the human rights policy. This narrative, when viewed in the context of workplace

culture, further undermines the validity of human rights and its cultural significance due to this apparent lack of priority. By contrast, when projects were well funded and resourced from above, council workers felt more positive about the success of the human rights policy in improving equity and inclusion in the local area. One example of this was a transport infrastructure project that staff felt confident had been implemented according to the human rights policy, mainly because they had been able to conduct a community consultation process that ensured diverse voices and views on the project were heard. The success of this project was attributed to its resourcing, particularly in terms of support, funding, and staffing:

> So that was a very good example [of a successful initiative under the human rights policy], I think in the end…because it seemed like there was a lot of executive support for that. There was a lot of councillor support. We got quite a big budget. We seconded [staff member] one day a week to the team to do it. So just sort of putting out there, it was also backed up with those things as well.

According to many of the employees interviewed, good leadership meant an active and visible investment in human rights policy and practice backed up by adequate resourcing, regardless of political expedience or gain for councillors. Visibility in this context links to the perceived authenticity of the executive support. In other human rights cities, the institutional constraints (such as limited available funding) associated with the local government sphere have also frustrated human rights implementation (Pieterse, 2022), and the participation of stakeholders at all levels of the organisation has been key to successes (Oomen, 2016). In Northfield, visible and active engagement in human rights practice by senior leadership was similarly essential to creating and maintaining a positive human rights culture.

An executive leader affirmed her constant availability when required and her proactive support for human rights, with her team always spearheading it. Yet, at the same time, she noted that not everyone everywhere in the organisation has human rights on top of their list of priorities:

> Interviewer: Do you think there is support for the human rights policy in the organisation?

> Executive leader: Ooh, you know, I think there is support….But I think they're all busy. The whole organisation is just busy, and they wonder, how does this relate to me? I think we need to be better at it. [Asking the question] "How *does* this relate to you?" [emphasis in recording].

The council executive has expressed backing for the human rights policy, fostering a supportive culture for the cause. However, there appears to be minimal support from local politicians. This was evident when our human rights workshop saw the attendance of 40 council employees and two executives, but no councillors (politicians). This could be interpreted as a lack of support from councillors, yet this conclusion may be premature. Indeed, Northfield councillors were one of the first in the country to declare the City's support for the Yes vote for Indigenous Voice to Parliament. In doing so, they deviated from the State and Federal standpoint, displaying what Scholten (2015) refers to as "frame divergence": contradictory politics between local and higher government levels, using international human rights laws to decouple local politics from higher levels (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014).

4.2. Operational Capability: Knowledge, Resourcing, Systems, and Processes

The VEOHRC (2023a) human rights culture indicator framework indicates that operational capability is high when:

1) Staff understand the human rights charter ("the Charter" see above) and how to apply it in their work.
2) Relevant human rights days and achievements are articulated and celebrated.
3) The organisation has dedicated resources (both time and funding) to embed human rights.
4) Champions or influencers of human rights are empowered and resourced.

In line with the framework, respondents demonstrated a high understanding of international legal benchmarks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which indicates that children and young people should have a voice in shaping their world. As one respondent stated:

> The youth Ambassador programme level…really honours lived experience and representation. And I think it, you know, gives legitimacy to Youth Voice. And I think more and more rather than us kind of pushing our young people into forums where they're being consulted…their opinions matter and make a difference in the decisions that are being taken.

Conversely, the approach towards marginalised communities, particularly First Nations Peoples and other vulnerable groups, by some respondents reveals a disparity between support for some groups and public labelling of this support as a human rights policy. A participant noted:

> Talk about First Nations….We have a couple of Socialist Party Councillors who'd always talk about…refugees, asylum seekers, and particular cohorts or communities they hear from. So, I think they do see that as important, but I don't know whether any of them will openly say: "Oh, that's in our human rights policy."

This hesitance to overtly integrate discussions about these groups into the human rights policy might point to a gap in understanding and application of the human rights policy locally.

In addition, the Economic Development Department's perspective shows this department's focus on economic viability, which reveals a tendency to prioritise economic growth, sometimes at the potential expense of a broader, more holistic human rights agenda. The participant expresses a commitment to environmentalism but a lack of understanding of the ways in which that impacts the human rights agenda—"I'm all for saving the planet," yet reveals a primary focus on economic growth: "My thing is to try to help our businesses be more economically viable, make more money, if you want to call it that."

The success of human rights cities in implementing their human rights policies or practices often depends on a single actor who is highly motivated to champion human rights and to act in a "translator" role to ensure human rights are well understood across the organisation (Oomen, 2016). As outlined by Neubeck (2017) in the case of Eugene, Oregon, members of a Human Rights Committee can also function as champions, which means that city staff feel supported in their implementation efforts by executives and managers employing a human rights lens. In Northfield, attempts had been made to create these roles. The Community Development and

Social Policy (CDSP) team took responsibility for socialising the human rights policy across the organisation and supporting different branches in implementing it. Some teams reported this functioning well. For example, one team spoke of the value of having a member of the CDSP team seconded to their branch for the length of a particular project, which was understood to have made the implementation of the human rights policy throughout that project more successful.

Community engagement and participation is one of the goals of Northfield's human rights policy. One respondent was keen to point out that the project was considered a success in this respect because of the "executive support" (leadership), "big budget" (resourcing), and the secondment (operational capability), connecting multiple aspects of a human rights culture. Indeed, working closely with the CDSP team member developed trusting relationships which allowed this branch to progress on disability inclusion. These examples show how combining government action, civic engagement, and community education collectively supports local human rights (Oomen & Baumgärtel, 2014).

The human rights culture indicator framework suggests that operational capability is high when relevant human rights days and achievements are articulated and celebrated. This is exemplified in the celebration of cultural diversity at a council event, which was inclusive, inviting Northfield's diverse community to participate, and featured a variety of activities such as performances by dancers, talks, and the sharing of international cuisine. An interviewee described it as "celebrating cultural diversity...with Greek dancers and...food from different countries....A good turnout and...people talking to each other, which was lovely."

The Greek celebration refers to local stalls set up by residents, small businesses, and artists, showcasing Greek coffee and street food, children's activities, and Greek music. This celebration not only highlighted cultural appreciation but also facilitated active community engagement and interaction, promoting understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures. Such events demonstrate a strong commitment to recognising and celebrating important aspects of, and alignment with, the principles of human rights.

4.3. Transparency and Accountability

The VEOHRC (2023a) framework indicates that organisations with a strong human rights culture:

1) Encourage good human rights practice.
2) Know what they have achieved and what still needs to be done to embed a positive human rights culture.
3) Understand and comply with human rights reporting mechanisms.

Aligned with the recommendations, Northfield collects data to monitor progress. As one participant revealed: "[They've] come up with this beautiful spreadsheet...there's a lot of data that needs to be put in there." However, the participant found the spreadsheet intimidating and overwhelming to fill out. Observations show that there is a belief that collecting data signifies an attempt to create measurable, tangible outcomes that can be evaluated and reported. The quantitative measures aim to serve as a concrete foundation upon which the impact of policies can be evidenced, aligning with the principles of evidence-based policymaking emphasised in urban governance literature (Mills et al., 2022).

However, the focus on quantitative indicators, while providing objective evidence crucial for accountability, may not fully encapsulate the qualitative impact of human rights policies. The narrow quantitative focus is shown in a participant's statement: "I'm thinking of different ways, other than just quantifying things; it's better to have a qualitative approach based on people's unique experiences."

This quote underscores the perspective that a focus only on one aspect of measurement is not able to fully encapsulate the story of the Northfield community and the services and work the employees are implementing.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned practices provide some insight into the experiences of employees and their understanding, planning, and implementation of human rights-focused services. Integrating both a pre-and-post-implementation engagement method, qualitative measures may bridge the gap that these respondents consider limiting their ability to highlight the depth and breadth of their work. Overall, we noticed a concern among council workers about the exclusive use of quantitative data to measure the effectiveness of human rights policy and practice, and a view that adding qualitative data may improve evaluation.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The Northfield findings illustrate the institutional constraints and resource dependencies characteristic of local governance in human rights policy implementation (Pieterse, 2022). This study observed a lack of commitment from the organisation's leadership to human rights practice. The staff experienced this lack of leadership as an obstacle to developing a human rights culture. These findings align with Lagoutte et al. (2021), who emphasised how a human rights organisation's cultural ethos can normalise attitudes and values that are inconsistent with the promotion of human rights. A lack of leadership commitment manifests as unclear expectations and pessimism regarding the council's human rights policy. It was also associated with operational under-resourcing, limiting the effective implementation of the human rights policy.

The findings from Northfield demonstrate an alignment with the VEOHRC's (2023b) roadmap through efforts to establish a structured approach to human rights. This includes promoting community participation and enhancing democratic legitimacy, which resonates with the experiences of cities like Barcelona and York. These cities have successfully integrated human rights into their governance models, fostering a culture that values inclusivity and participatory governance, as noted by Rayfield and Casla (2021).

The findings indicate that Northfield's staff demonstrate an understanding of human rights principles, particularly in engaging youth through the Youth Ambassadors Program. This is consistent with the theoretical framework that emphasises the importance of educating municipal staff on human rights as a critical aspect of operational capability (Neubeck, 2017; Oomen, 2016). Such understanding leads to robust, more inclusive and representative participatory practices, potentially resonating with some of the foundational principles of the Human Rights Charter, thereby displaying a high operational capability in Northfield. Observations regarding the celebration of cultural diversity and the dedication of resources to human rights initiatives align with operational capability indicators identified by Oomen and Baumgärtel (2014).

Of course, it is hard to say if actions undertaken by the local Council are the direct result of the human rights policy or if they were undertaken before that and are now labelled as part of the human rights policy. The researcher who spent three months "in residence" in the local Council believes that it is a combination of the two. Some activities already existed before the policy, whereas the increased awareness of a human rights approach through communication and education has increased the number of activities that work towards human rights.

The tension between economic development priorities and human rights obligations noted in Northfield mirrors challenges discussed in existing literature (Barker & Casla, 2022; Davis, 2019). The Economic Development Department's focus on economic growth, potentially at the expense of broader human rights, echoes Lefebvre's concerns about urban development driven by business interests (Harvey, 2012; Lefebvre, 1967).

Northfield's population is diverse, even by Australian standards. A human rights policy within councils like Northfield enables effective governance of diverse populations. Tensions within diverse populations in urban regions like Northfield can be challenging. Human rights policy focuses on preventing inequality, inequity, and injustice from becoming normalised in these environments. For instance, Northfield has suburbs known as safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ communities, with queer bookstores and businesses. Northfield's cultural events reflect an emerging human rights culture, celebrating diversity and inclusion. These principles promote cultural rights, encourage participation and non-discrimination, and foster understanding across communities. Literature often links a city's human rights culture to the acknowledgement of cultural diversity (Galchinsky, 2010; Nash, 2005). Cultural events can cultivate understanding and respect for human rights, highlighting commitment to shared values that align with human rights instruments, resonating with the grassroots consciousness fundamental to developing a human rights culture (Dicklitch & Lwanga, 2003).

This article adds to the existing body of knowledge on human rights policy implementation at a local level and provides further evidence that human rights policy implementation is rarely spread evenly across all parts of a local Council. The hesitancy among some respondents to integrate discussions about marginalised groups into official human rights policies may also be found elsewhere. Literature indicates that while local governments may prioritise certain human rights initiatives, integrating these policies across all community segments often poses a challenge (Blau, 2014; Kaufman & Kamuf-Ward, 2017). These problems with implementation are also found in other literature where the effective integration of human rights into local governance is often uneven and faces resistance or insufficient understanding among local officials, or specific departments focused more on economic than social objectives (Pieterse, 2022; Wolman & Chung, 2022).

The findings illustrate this government's focus on accountability, aiming to count all actions and put the emphasis on quantitative data for policy evaluation. We argue that the focus should be on how participants communicate and make decisions together and how these discussions relate to policy. As suggested by Fung (2006), institutional design can address issues of democratic and inclusive governance. Our participants spoke of lengthy implementation plans that provide little guidance on community outcomes and focus instead on council actions. Northfield's current approach, depending on quantitative analysis, risks overlooking the subjective, qualitative aspects of policy impact integral to addressing a diverse population's needs. Maxwell (2020) discusses the indispensable contributions of qualitative inquiry to public policies' development and evaluation, arguing that qualitative research is essential for understanding how

stakeholders interpret and respond to policies, the variability of contextual effects on policy implementation, and the processes through which policies produce outcomes. For Northfield, applying qualitative methods would allow policymakers to grasp how different community members perceive and are impacted by human rights initiatives. This understanding is crucial for adjusting policies to better meet community needs and ensuring that policies are inclusive and equitable.

Localising human rights encounters opposition during the shift towards a human rights culture. In local government, a human rights culture necessitates council leadership's belief in and endorsement of a human rights policy. It requires transparency, accountability in its implementation, and adequate operational capacity. We hope these findings incentivise further research in this field, particularly data collection amongst residents to inform successful local human rights policies and create inclusive communities. Future studies can focus on diversity, city management, and how this affects diverse community participation.

The limitations of this study are that we relied heavily on the brokering function of the CDSP team to recruit the focus group participants, conversation participants, and workshop participants. This may have resulted in a biased sample and reduced the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation is the absence of the voice of residents or service providers that collaborate with the local government. Future research could include a residents' survey and/or data collection among service providers. On the other hand, the establishment of rapport and effective communication with the local government employees resulted in respondents who spoke with ease and confidence to the researcher as an outsider in face-to-face, online, and hybrid environments.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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