social sciences

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How Practice-Oriented Research Is Essential for Transformation: The Case of Using Community of Practice as a Method

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Abstract

Practice-oriented or practice-based research is growing in popularity in the social, built environment and health fields for its important role in driving transformative changes at policy, programme/service and practice levels. As planning is a practice with performative characteristics occurring in a socio-political-legal context, practice-oriented research has been utilised to inform and help shape change. However, to be truly effective, practice-oriented research must be connected to day-to-day practices. In this article, we present our experience of using a Community of Practice (CoP)—that brings together people with shared interests and professions—to exchange learning and experiences and to help create knowledge to advance professional practice. In our case, we established a Community of Practice of Planners (CoPP) to help translate stage one findings into tailored knowledge resources to open up a dialogue and raise awareness on Planning for Disability Equity and Inclusion. In this article, we describe the method of CoP, how it works, including our reflections and learnings. We suggest that CoP are an underutilised method in planning practice and research. We argue that the CoP approach should be in a researcher and planner's toolbox for more transformative progress in equity and inclusion in planning.

Keywords: community of practice; practice-oriented research; practice-based research; participatory planning; community engagement; urban planning; inclusive communities; disability

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Academic Editor: Yolanda Abel

Received: 31 March 2026
Revised: 29 May 2026
Accepted: 7 June 2026
Published: 12 June 2026

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1. Introduction

Built environment and community planning professionals have long aspired to embed principles of equity and inclusion into everyday practice—yet we are still a long way from achieving this goal. Despite supranational instruments and policy frameworks such as the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) setting clear expectations in planning for equity and inclusion, there is often a gap between policy intent and planning outcomes (Stafford et al. 2022). There are many reasons for the lack of research on the translation from policy to practice. One such reason is that traditional methods of engagement and research in planning, such as committees, advisory groups, town halls and focus groups, are typically shaped by short timeframes, poor inclusivity, and/or project-specific objectives (Sanoff 2000). These formats can also limit opportunities

for deep knowledge exchange, critical reflection, and shared and continued professional learning that is key to making embedded change.

Disability equity and inclusion, as a focus of SDGs and a subset of equity and inclusion, has its own specific challenges. Instruments, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations 2006) and the Australian Disability Discrimination Act (Commonwealth of Australia 1992), require environments and transport to be accessible and inclusive, yet, there are vast gaps and variation in how legislation are interpreted and applied in spatial planning across layers of Government (Baldwin and Stafford 2019) in Australia this is at national, state and local government levels. Planners are also not provided with capacity building opportunities in disability equity and inclusion—such as education pathways, tools, and shared spaces—to learn from each other and help deliver aims into outcomes (Stafford et al. 2024a, 2025). Furthermore, planning is only one discipline in a multidisciplinary field that is responsible for delivering inclusive sustainable developments, so opportunities for exchange between professions is also warranted, but rarely enabled (Forester 2017; Fredriksson et al. 2026).

Advancing Inclusive Planning

Inclusive planning is growing in prominence globally as planners and policy makers recognise the importance of planning and designing equitable, sustainable environments for all, as declared in the United Nations (2017a, 2017b) in 2016 (Jaffe 2021; Terashima and Clark 2021). This is despite planning being interested in social justice and the health of people and places since its inception as a profession (Baldwin and Stafford 2019). A key aspect of inclusive planning is ensuring people with disabilities have the same opportunities to participate in everyday activities and live well, without barriers, through well-planned design environments and processes. This has been reinforced by the UNCRPD, which obliges signatory countries, including Australia, which ratified the convention in 2008, to ensure equal access to the physical, social, economic, and cultural environment (United Nations 2006). Article 9—Accessibility reinforces this requirement not only to remove environmental, systems, and process barriers, but to approach planning and design from the perspective of universal design. Conceptualised in 1997 by Ron Mace (Mace 1997), universal design is both an attitude and an approach to planning, building and communication that aims to design for all from the outset through to completion without barriers.

While there have been broad commitments, planning systems have struggled to meaningfully consider disability equity and inclusion or concepts like UD (Jaffe 2021; Terashima and Clark 2021). Planning legislation and practice frameworks frequently emphasise accessibility standards as compliance mechanisms, rather than embedding disability inclusion as a guiding principle of planning processes (Imrie 1996). This limited compliance-driven approach can result in piecemeal outcomes, reinforcing a narrow focus on physical access rather than broader, interactional, and dynamic considerations of equity, inclusion, and participation (Stafford et al. 2022).

Several key reports have highlighted the need for systemic change in Australia. The Productivity Commission's inquiry into Disability Care and Support (Productivity Commission 2011) and the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Commonwealth of Australia 2023) both highlight the continued exclusion faced by people with disabilities in accessing services, infrastructure, and community life. This presents an ongoing challenge from a planning perspective: how can the planning profession move beyond compliance to proactively create enabling environments that promote equity and inclusion?

The planning discipline can respond to these challenges, where it is inherently future-oriented and place-based, offering a unique opportunity to shape environments that reflect

principles of justice and inclusion (Fainstein 2010; Stafford et al. 2025). However, the translation of inclusive planning theory and education into practice often stalls due to poor research translatability, institutional unwillingness, lack of professional capacity, and limited engagement with lived experience (Baldwin and Stafford 2019; McLeod and Babb 2025). Addressing the gaps and challenges requires methods that not only generate new knowledge but also build collective professional capacity to act on it. It is within this context that collaborative practice-oriented methods (Albrechts 2013), such as Communities of Practice (CoP), can provide an avenue for more translatory practice research while fostering shared learning, generating practical tools, and embedding inclusive practices. In the remainder of the article, we outline the rationale for practice-based research and CoP as a method, followed by presenting the research design, including the establishment and processes of the CoP. Following this, we share our methodological reflections about the ways in which the CoP functioned as a site of collective learning and knowledge co-production in this project, and end with a discussion of key learnings and practice insights.

2. Methods: Research Design and Process

2.1. Methodology: Practice-Based Research and Communities of Practice as a Method

Practice-based research, also referred to as practice-oriented or practice-led research, is increasingly an important research and engagement method to address knowledge-to-practice gaps. Practice-based research acknowledges that acts of practice—in our case, planning—are sites of knowledge production, and planners are knowledge holders and producers. This approach is underpinned by collaborative inquiry in the everyday context, which, in planning, involves various actors (local governments, planning consultancy, state planning authorities, NGOs and community organisations, etc.) to translate and co-produce actionable insights (du Toit et al. 2025).

Co-production is directly linked to a transformative research shift in social research generally, that has moved away from dominance of academic-centric knowledge production, towards knowledge co-production with practitioners, affected citizens, and communities (Mertens 2021). This shift was also observed and argued from some domains of planning theory, where participatory knowledge production with communities and particular marginal voices is considered to have a key role in planning and design (Sanoff 2000; Sandercock 2003a). Co-production of knowledge by its very nature and grounding must also recognise the complex systems and wider politics that shape translation and outcomes (Rydin 2007, 2021).

Mertens (2021) argues that a transformative lens applied to research increases impact in the form of providing support for actions that increase social, economic, and environmental justice. In Urban planning, this means researchers, practitioners and affected citizens collaborating to co-produce knowledge to inform policy and plan development that is evidence-based, fit-for-purpose and socially responsive (du Toit et al. 2025). While practice-based research is still growing in urban and regional planning, there have been participatory approaches and methods used extensively in planning research and design (Sanoff 2000; Sandercock 2003a). What has been less used in a planning research context is knowledge translation through a Community of Practice.

2.2. Communities of Practice (CoPs)

The concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs) originates from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who view learning as a social process that occurs through a process of collective exchange with a common concern or interest. Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023, p. 11) later refined the concept to "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly".

A CoP has three defining characteristics. (1) Domain—a shared domain of interest, common interest or concern. Common questions asked: What is the community about? What do people identify with? (see Wenger-Trayner et al. 2023, p. 12). (2) Community—the composition of members who should/are involved, and how relationships and understanding between members can be fostered. Common questions asked here: Who should be at the table? What relationship should they form? (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2023, p. 13). (3) Practice—the methods or activities in which members exchange experiences and learnings. Learnings could be developing solutions, new knowledge, skills or different ways of thinking about something. Common questions asked: What should they do together? How can they make a difference in practice? (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2023, p. 13).

Wenger et al. (2002) assert that a Community of Practice is an intertwinement of these three elements and often occurs in a non-linear relationship. The outcomes produced by the Community of Practice can be tangible or intangible. This includes how people identify as part of the group, as well as what they offer from its formation, be it a sense of professional confidence, shared learning or goal, mutual respect and in our case, a tangible discussion paper for the planning profession and the Planning Institute of Australia (Wenger et al. 2002; Stafford et al. 2024b, 2025).

CoPs using the Wenger-Trayner and colleagues' framework (or variations) have been widely applied in fields such as education, social work, health, and business, where they have proven valuable for professional learning, knowledge exchange, and capacity building (Li et al. 2009; Ranmuthugala et al. 2011; Bicchi 2024). More recently, they have been used to advance global to local solutions and approaches to sustainable development and climate change (Maida and Beck 2018). Despite this uptake, CoPs have been less frequently utilised and/or written about in urban planning research generally. One example we did find was Gonzalez et al. (2011), where they utilised a CoP as research methods in developing and promoting sustainability indicators in planning practice, demonstrating their potential to support shared learning across professional and organisational boundaries, as well as to develop tangible indicators for policymakers and planning practitioners in their work. In planning practice, there has also been a tendency to rely more on focus groups and working groups than CoPs. These approaches often produce bounded outcomes tied to specific projects or policy cycles, rather than fostering professional learning, collective capacity development, and knowledge translation that can help shape practices (Maida and Beck 2018; Gonzalez et al. 2011). This suggests an underutilisation of CoPs as a means of knowledge mobilisation and transformation in planning.

In the broader discourse, there has been some caution raised with the use of CoP as a method. Amin and Roberts (2008) review of CoP literature found that the original intent of the approach has been frequently misinterpreted or diluted in practice, with some applications treating CoPs as generic networking groups rather than as dynamic learning communities. Other concerns included the difficulty of sustaining participation over time, managing power dynamics, and ensuring that CoPs produce outcomes beyond the immediate group (Roberts 2006; Bicchi 2024). The definition of practice itself and how it is inconsistently applied was also found to be a problem (Smagacz-Poziemska et al. 2021). These debates are relevant for planning research and practice, as planning is a profession situated and shaped by challenging interests, political pressures, competing regulatory frameworks and institutional constraints (Stafford et al. 2025).

At the same time, the potential of CoPs in planning research and practice aligns with growing calls for practice-oriented research that bridges the gap between research, policy and professional action (Smagacz-Poziemska et al. 2021). This is important as planning is increasingly understood as a performative practice embedded in socio-political contexts (Healey 2007; Forester 2017) requiring approaches that support reflective practitioners

and shared professional learning. CoP can offer one such pathway by creating a space where planners can collectively interrogate practice challenges, exchange tacit knowledge, and co-develop tools and strategies for change. This article builds on these insights by positioning CoPs as a methodological approach for planning research, with particular attention to advancing disability equity and inclusion in the planning profession. The following section outlines the process and establishment of the Community of Practice of Planners (CoPP).

2.3. Research Design: A Community of Practice of Planners (CoPP)

The Community of Practice of Planners (CoPP) was formed as part of a larger funded Australian Research Council project—Planning Inclusive Communities (DE190101512), which explores what makes or stops communities being inclusive, and what is needed to advance disability equity and inclusion in everyday planning practice. Stage one of the project engaged 97 members of the public and 30 practising planners to identify gaps in planning for inclusivity (see Stafford et al. 2023, 2024a, 2025). Findings from this stage provided the evidence base for the CoPP's work and served as the catalyst for the Stories for Change research activity (see Article 3 in this Special Issue). Stage 2, which included the CoPP and Stories for Change as research activities, was approved under the University of Tasmania's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC reference 27599).

A CoP, as a practice-oriented approach, was adopted to align with the transformative paradigm values of the research and aims and goals. The CoP approach is based on the premise that practice knowledge is most effective when shared through collective learning exchange (Gonzalez et al. 2011). In our case, the aim of the CoPP was to bring together urban and regional planning practitioners with shared interests in planning for disability equity and inclusion as a professional concern to translate research insights into a practical knowledge resource. The CoPP's semi-structured yet flexible online structure provides space for practitioners to share experiences and learnings, to undertake deliberative consideration of the data insights and stories from stage 1 of the research, and identify and decide on actions that could help produce practical strategies (outputs) to embed inclusive thinking and approaches within the profession's everyday practice.

2.3.1. Establishing the CoPP

An expression of interest (EOI) process was undertaken in 2023 to select up to 10 practising planners to be involved in a CoP alongside the lead researcher. The justification for having a small CoP membership was to allow for deep discussions and exchange in this emerging practice area and to build relationships across members (Wenger et al. 2002). In many qualitative research studies, quality and depth, not numbers, are often the focus, as reinforced by Bradshaw and Stratford (2010, p. 76): "with a small number of the 'right' people will provide significant insights into a research issue". Furthermore, there is no set size for a CoP—rather membership numbers are guided by interest and nature of the domain, in our case, planning for disability equity and inclusion, and mutual engagement in learning exchange, which was expressed through the EOI process.

The EOI was circulated through the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA), LinkedIn, and targeted invitations to stage one participants who were practising planners. Eight planners with expertise and an interest in inclusive environments were appointed through the EOI process, although only six continued throughout the duration of the CoPP. The group's composition reflected diverse planning experiences and varied planning roles, such as local and state government and consultancy planning, and was located across several Australian states (Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, South Australia). Three members also identified having lived experience of disability. The CoP members

ended up all known to the researcher due to previous work and the niche planning practice area, but not each other. The six practising planners, plus the researcher who is also a planner and member of PIA, were determined to be still suitable in meeting the CoPP's intent, given that the domain, community and process remained feasible. This is because the diversity and depth of experience and locations members brought to the CoP in terms of planning practice, and their commitment to mutual learning exchange. Participation was voluntary and included consent to record and transcribe meeting to inform CoP work (Stafford et al. 2025). Participants were provided a $50AUD participant thank-you gift card for being involved in each workshop.

2.3.2. Process and Format

The CoPP operated over six months in the second half of 2023. Meetings were conducted monthly via Zoom to accommodate members' work and personal commitments, with lunchtime identified as the most feasible timeslot. In total, six co-creation workshops were held, each recorded to support documentation and analysis.

The workshops followed an iterative and collaborative structure, outlined below.

- Workshop 1: Participants introduced their positionality in relation to disability equity and reflected on stage one research findings. Members brainstormed a wide range of practice needs and potential avenues for action.
- Workshop 2: Members prioritised feasible actions from the initial brainstorm, identifying the development of a professional discussion paper as a key deliverable.
- Workshops 3–5: Discussions centred on determining and refining the scope of the discussion paper, identifying knowledge and practice gaps, and collating examples of inclusive planning approaches from Australia and internationally. Members shared experiences from their own practice, using stories and case examples to ground the work.
- Workshop 6: Members confirmed the content contributions of the final paper and agreed on its key messages for the profession.

Between workshops, the lead researcher/CoP member synthesised discussions and actions into draft materials, which were circulated for review and served as the basis for the next workshop discussion, consideration and decision-making. This iterative composing and decision-making process ensured that the output reflected collective involvement and negotiated decisions among members in the CoP, resulting in a discussion paper for the planning profession (see outputs).

2.3.3. CoPP Dynamics and Co-Governance

The CoPP applied Wenger's and colleagues' framework (Wenger et al. 2002) core elements:

1. Domain of Interest: Shared interests in planning for disability equity and inclusion as a professional concern to translate research insights into practice resources.
2. Community: The community members were bound by being practising urban and regional planners in Australia with a common focus and interest in progressing disability equity and inclusion in planning. The members interacted in monthly online workshops and, in between, communicated through emails, enabling time to build relationships and establish trust, which is crucial for knowledge exchange, production, and collaborative learning.
3. Practice: Members actively engage in exchange experiences about the planning for disability equity and inclusion, including discussing good practices, problem-solving issues and ideas to progress change. This included a knowledge-sharing output to achieve in the CoP.

These principles distinguish the CoPP from more one-way processes such as interviews or focus groups and are instead practised as interactive shared transactions where all research members are practice knowledge holders, producers and part of a professional learning community.

The CoPP was also designed to operate differently from focus groups or advisory groups often used in planning research and practice. It operated under a non-hierarchical power-sharing structure, where knowledge contributions were valued equally regardless of professional seniority, lived experiences or institutional affiliation. Decision-making was made together around the key workshops described above. This structure enabled open dialogue and trust-building, both essential for transformative impact, reflection and innovation.

Engaging in reflexivity was an important part of the CoPP. Not only in how we went about working together—as a method and tool for learning and knowledge exchange—but most importantly, was the deliberative consideration of decisions around planned actions. An action in our case was the discussion paper which needed to be grounded in evidence and voices of participation from stage 1—maintaining data authenticity—while communicating insights to the profession to help inform practice change. This reflexive component occurred during and between workshops in recognition of how process and content decision are an "outcome of social transactions and negotiations" (Whitaker and Atkinson 2021, p. 82).

2.4. Outputs

The CoPP's central output was the co-produced discussion paper Planning for Disability Equity and Inclusion: A Discussion Paper for the Planning Profession (Stafford et al. 2024a) and a Viewpoint article: opening up the conversation on planning for disability equity and inclusion in Australia with a new discussion paper (Stafford et al. 2025).

While the outputs suggested that a CoP could serve as both a research method and a professional capacity-building mechanism, we felt it was important to deeply reflect on CoP as a method and learning experience using methodological reflexivity, to inform future research using CoP as an approach. This is the focus of the remainder of the article.

3. Reflections and Learnings of Community of Practice as a Method

3.1. Methodological Reflexivity

In this section, we share reflections and learnings on the Community of Practice as a research method. Guiding our reflections is methodological reflexivity. This form of reflexivity critically considers the choices and influences of methodological decisions, because all methods mediate knowledge and shape experiences (Olmos-Vega et al. 2023). Methods also create data in all forms—including quantitative, spatial, qualitative, and archival (Whitaker and Atkinson 2021). Methodological reflexivity also explicitly recognises that researchers hold assumptions and positions about types of methods that ultimately influence the selection of methods and shape outcomes. But it is also just as important to understand that reflexivity is not about finding methodological perfection or neutrality, as Whitaker and Atkinson (2021, p. 38) remind us, "There exists no such method".

Engaging in methodological reflexivity includes critical consideration of how methods frame "what is to be studied, how it is to be studied, what will count as a plausible outcome of the research" (Whitaker and Atkinson 2021, pp. 38–39). How do we make methodological decisions, and what are their implications?—as Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) asked—are important questions to consider and reflect upon not just at the beginning of research design but throughout and retrospectively. This is critical in a participatory co-research approach—where methodological reflexivity does not just sit with the academic researcher but all members of the research team, or in our case, CoP members. Also,

the process is not fixed in participatory co-research methods such as a CoP; it may start with an outline to begin with, but it is iterative in nature, and shaped by project scope, resources, alongside members' exchange, prioritisation and decision making on what to focus on. Thus, providing important insights into how such processes influence outcomes—in our case, producing a discussion paper (Stafford et al. 2024a). Engaging in retrospective methodological reflexivity gave us the opportunity to consider how CoP principles worked in practice—such as the actual ways the CoP operate and how this shaped and influenced the learning exchange, knowledge production (output) and experiences. The following section discusses the key learnings from our reflection on CoP as a process and experiences as a planning research method.

3.2. Learnings and Reflection on Being Part of the Community of Practice of Planners in Research

In this findings section, we share reflections from CoPP members on the following: experiences of being in a Community of Practice; and opportunities for Communities of Practice as a method in planning research. To guide the retrospective reflexive process, the CoPP developed three key questions that were emailed around to each other to think about and respond to if members wanted to:

1. A community practice is not a common method used in planning research, what benefits do you think they offer to advance applied research knowledge?
2. Can you provide few sentences on your experiences being part of community of practice in a research context?
3. The discussion paper was an output from the Community of Practice, how does having practicing planners' part of the research and co-producing outputs improve translation to practice?

Responses to the questions were sent by email. For the purposes of this paper, CoPP members have randomly been assigned a number to anonymise responses and reflect the broader thematic responses rather than focus on the semantics of positionality within the planning profession. For one member, they shared an overarching reflection instead of specific responses to each of the questions, which we include here.

> CoP member 6—"Planning practitioners should have a strong awareness of more inclusive planning and design—and this should be mandated by policy when assessing planning proposals. However, ultimately a planner cannot be across every issue that may impact an individual or group of people. This is why listening to and learning from lived experiences—not necessarily experts in the built form profession—but the everyday person navigating from one destination to the next, at homes, workplaces and public spaces is the critical step in planning for inclusive cities".

Presented below are excerpts from the reflections on questions, organised around key insights from the thematic analysis.

3.2.1. Experiences of Being in a CoP

One of the gaps that stood out in the literature is the limited reflection on the actual experiences of being in a CoP and its value to members in terms of learning exchange and new knowledge production. CoP literature is often overshadowed by discussion and articles oriented to CoP's set-up and process as found in Bicchi's recent article (Bicchi 2024). But going back to Wenger's (1998) original intentions, CoPs are about learning exchange and knowledge production between members around the common concern that brought them together. This certainly was a feature in members' reflections—that the CoPP offered

the opportunity to come together around shared concern for inclusive planning to share and learn from each other.

> CoP Member 3—Being part of a community of practice allows for the fostering of shared ideas. Matters that as an individual practitioner may feel is irrelevant or a trivial concern, are revealed as to be a common experience to others.
>
> CoP Member 4—I loved it as being at the intersection of practice and research and working to a defined goal collaboratively led to productive discussions, a practical document for practitioners in the profession, and lead to a sense of accomplishment.
>
> CoP Member 5—I found it to be a rewarding experience. The satisfaction of working with a cohesive group of highly skilled professionals who 'got it' and who generously shared their knowledge, experience and skill, applying them to the nuances faced when attempting to create greater inclusion and equity within the planning profession and by extension planning outcomes was refreshing and exciting.

Exchanging stories was not only interesting to hear but was also considered "refreshing" and somewhat of a cathartic exchange with others who had shared experiences or who "got it". Equally important in the reflections was the opportunity to grow and build capacity from the learning exchange due to the different perspectives members brought—roles, practices, and lived experiences perspectives in planning.

> CoP Member 1—I found my time being part of a community of practice for research very rewarding. Brings a slightly different lens to the research enabled me to not only provide insight that some people may not have yet considered but to also try and connect some of the real-world comments people were making with the . . .standards and frameworks. It enabled me to see where current deficiencies are in the work I do and how I could look at things differently.
>
> CoP Member 3—It has also allowed for an opportunity to learn from the group and understand situations or experiences of the environment that I would not personally encounter. The result of community of practice is that not only do I have a chance to pass my knowledge on, but my own knowledge grew through the collective dialogue.

The CoPP could also provide that time and space for self-reflection, both their contribution and influence on CoP, but also what they took back to their own everyday practice realities. As CoP 2 reflected, these exchanges "helps keep me accountable" to the group and their work when it comes to equity and inclusion.

> CoP Member 2—Being in planning practice I find my focus and energy increasingly dragged to working within a planning system that, all too often, is grounded in an exclusionary, extractive and ecocidal status quo. Being part of a community of practice helps pull me back out of the blinkered status quo ways of working, to thinking more expansively about what a more just way of working in planning might look like. It also helps keep me accountable to a community of practice, to learning together and to bringing back the lessons into my own planning practice.

CoPs are not just a method for learning exchange, they are also sites of reflective and transformative knowledge production, which members are actively shaping.

3.2.2. Benefits of Using CoP as a Method to Advance Applied Research Knowledge

The written reflections by members highlight that the CoP as a research method does work to generate knowledge, understanding, and help translate "data" into tangible output.

But methods are more than processes that shape outcomes (Whitaker and Atkinson 2021). The principles of the CoP and the nuances of applying these principles are where the power of CoP as a method is further realised in terms of learning exchange and knowledge generation.

The power of CoP as a transformative method was reinforced, with the CoP viewed as a collective. Not just space for bouncing of ideas, but as one member described, the CoP is a "Hive Mind" allowing for "cross-pollination between people with different experiences, insights and positionalities".

> CoP Member 1—I like the community of practice model because it enables greater collaboration and knowledge sharing between research participants/stakeholders than other models. It provides an opportunity for everyone involved to share their lived experience and to build upon and bounce ideas off everyone's ideas. You have time to sit and dwell on someone's comment and adding to it with your experience. I really like this way of learning and sharing ideas.

> CoP Member 2—One element I've noticed is the insight of a collective—a hive mind if you will—that allows for cross-pollination between people with different experiences, insights and positionalities. The Community of Practice model allows for a greater empathy to develop, but also for a deeper level of insight that comes from the testing and refinement of ideas by working together. By bringing insights from our diverse practice backgrounds, we can test questions around where gaps are in the status quo, and questions around implementation, together. My hope is that this means we are targeting intervention points and producing outputs that can provoke thought in changing the profession/planning practice and be operationalised in planning practice because they come from a nexus of diverse lived experience.

The CoP's ability to be a bridge between research and practice, which has commonly been discussed in the literature (Gonzalez et al. 2011), was also illustrated in this CoPP. However, what also emerged was that CoPP was seen as a potential solution for time poor individual planners, providing them with an important research engagement opportunity. While research plays a key role for planners, it often doesn't occur due to work constraints. Members reflected how a CoP could bridge this time/resource problem encountered by individuals by being an applied research space examining solutions to planning problems. Having the time to consider and examine the concern as a collective—in our case, disability equity and inclusion affords deeper contemplations of the challenges and potential solutions for research, for the profession, and for everyday planning practices.

> CoP Member 3—As an observation practicing planners do not partake in research outside of their daily role, like many they are simply time poor. However, planners need to be constantly researching and looking for problems and concerns to develop solutions as a means of a way to improve the future. Research and a broad understanding and knowledge is fundamental to the practice of planning. Partaking in such methods of research and co-participation unburdens the planner, providing more of an environment that they are willing to open and share their knowledge.

> CoP Member 5—Having practicing planners centred within planning research, such as through a COP, bridges the well documented gap between planning theory and on the ground implementation. This is to say, academia has the luxury of exploration of the possibilities but can sometimes be out of touch with what is happening on the ground. Whereas practice is fast moving and faced with huge constraints, but there is little time to consider let alone implement the range of possibilities available to ensure perhaps the most appropriate outcome that

> is equitable, inclusive and truly functional. Researchers and practitioners alike are ultimately aiming to improve urban environments, but we come at it from opposite angles, and often these positionalities are unable to meet in the middle. A CoP provides that bridge, whereby we all benefit.

Another strength of a CoP is its potential effect post completion. That is, members reflected on how the CoP not only engenders the building of a professional network around this common goal, but through the output, CoP members are positioned as "Champions for Change rather than passive responders". These experiential insights suggest CoPs are not only mechanisms to progress change, but they also can empower members by providing recognition to them as knowledge holders and change makers through the legacy of co-produced outputs.

> CoP Member 4—There are several benefits. One is to draw from practitioners directly their experience relevant to the research question. A second is by having multiple practitioners with varying experience interacting with each other and the research question, presents opportunities not realised through one-on-one interactions. Thirdly, the practitioners individually learn from each other. Fourthly, the practitioners build a greater professional network. . . . Principally by the outputs having half a dozen people likely to be champions for change rather than passive responders.

While it is well acknowledged that CoP as a research method allows the time and space necessary to share experiences and support learning, knowledge exchange, and production (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2023), as a method in research, they also provide members with the opportunity to contribute to praxis.

4. Discussion

4.1. Why Use a CoP Method in Planning Research

Researchers can select any number of methods to discover, explore or examine research questions and aims. In this section of the discussion, we focus on the methodological and epistemological value of choosing a Community of Practice (CoP) as a practice-oriented research method within the discipline of urban and regional planning. Building on the reflections derived from the Community of Practice of Planners (CoPP), we discuss four insights: 1. CoP is a powerful method to bridge research findings to practice application. 2. CoP is an iterative space for Collaborative Knowledge Producing—members exchange shape and produce transformative fit-for-purpose outputs. 3. CoPs are a two-way learning exchange that empowers members. 4. Legacy beyond the time-bound research activities. These insights align with the foundational CoP scholarship (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Wenger et al. 2002; Wenger-Trayner et al. 2023) as well as contemporary planning literature emphasising the importance of collaborative, relational, and practice-led research (Healey 2007; Forester 2017; Rydin 2021).

1. CoPs are a research-to-practice bridge. The CoPP demonstrated that, as a research method, a CoP offers an effective bridge between research findings and professional practice. This insight is not unique to our reflection; it is a well-articulated benefit in the literature for selecting a CoP—whether this is planning and sustainable development (Gonzalez et al. 2011; Maida and Beck 2018), health (Ranmuthugala et al. 2011), or business (Bicchi 2024). By enabling members, in our case, planners, to contemplate and discuss research findings through the lens of practice and lived experience, the CoP can facilitate a form of knowledge translation that is situated, relational and contextual (Gonzalez et al. 2011). These insights help to further strengthen the calls for adopting more practice-oriented research using CoPs. Additionally, CoP

can be a mechanism to advance praxis—that is, integration of knowledge/theory, practice/actions, learnings/reflections (Zuber-Skerritt 2001) to help drive practice change—in our case, planning more inclusive communities and cities that reflect disability equity and inclusion.

2. CoPs are an evolving, iterative method that generates collaborative knowledge production. While a CoP is organised around three CoP components: domain, community, practiceand starts out with a goal, time-bound resources and an outline (number of workshops, online, and timeframe), the power is that they are evolving and iterative (Maida and Beck 2018). They don't flourish with a predetermined imposed structure; CoPs work when the content and way they operate (in our case, workshops) are established by the actions from the last workshop and any prioritisation determined by the group in working towards the end goal (in our case, the discussion paper—see Stafford et al. 2024a). Such an environment not only provides time through a series of workshops) and power sharing among members, but it also evokes a space that supports learning exchange that has the potential to create collaboration—"mind hive"—that leads to knowledge production. By positioning planners as co-researchers and knowledge holders, not only did members shape both the process and the outcomes, but the co-production approach also strengthened the legitimacy of the outputs and ensured they were grounded in the realities of practice. Given the renewed interest in participatory research and co-creation (Albrechts 2013), our reflections suggest that a CoP is a practical method in planning research. This form of collaborative inquiry echoes arguments in transdisciplinary planning methods that emphasise co-production of knowledge as essential for addressing complex, systemic urban challenges (du Toit et al. 2025; Albrechts 2013).
3. Two-way learning exchange with benefits. Researchers who are invested in co-researchers'/participants' learning experiences, rather than the more extractive exchange in traditional methods, may find CoP a beneficial method to add to their research approach. A shared learning exchange was the very essence of (Wenger 1998; Wenger et al. 2002) CoP intent. And as a research method, a series of evolving workshops and power-sharing governance structures enables members to not only build trust over time but also supports an environment for open discussion of professional and personal experience, which can engender deep exchange and insights. The learning exchange provides the time to examine assumptions, share challenges, and test new ideas. This knowledge exchange also does not ignore the complex, messy world in which practice operates (Burnett 2024; Rydin 2007)—on the contrary, the exchange in the CoP helps normalise constraints of the multisystem, politics, top-down, compliance drive pressures that influence daily practices. Being part of a CoP exchange was heard to be beneficial for one's own practice, including applying new learnings or renewing their conviction on concerns. It also meant being part of something bigger to help drive change around concerns regarding inclusive planning. This is an important insight contribution, given that planning is a performative practice that occurs in complex spatial-socio-political contexts (Healey 2007; Forester 2017). As such, using CoP as a research method provides beneficial learning experiences for members by supporting reflective practice and shared professional learning to advance practice change.
4. Legacy Beyond time-bound research. Research is always time- and resource-bound; thus, impact can be difficult to achieve and often very long in realisation. The CoP method, however, offers the potential for impact beyond the research project and the researcher—this could be ongoing connections between members and informal or formal practitioner networks. This highlights a strength of CoP as a method for

exploring the nature of our legacy (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2023). The legacy output can also position members as "Champions for Change", providing recognition to them as knowledge-holders and change-makers, as reflected upon by one CoP member. Effectively, undertaking stewardship after the CoP dispersed. This is something that cannot be planned for, but it is a strength of using such a method. Our learning reinforces the power of the CoP method when based on the premise that practice knowledge is most effective when shared through collective learning exchange (Gonzalez et al. 2011).

How You Can Use CoPs in Planning Practice

One key limitation of CoP as a research method is that it is time- and resource-bound (Amin and Roberts 2008). This was a limitation of our CoP, which also meant outputs were shaped by time and resources. However, CoPs hold the potential to be an ongoing professional development learning environment within planning practice. CoPs can provide a more efficient and sustained learning space, acting as a resource for reflective research-engaged development, collective problem-solving, and sector-wide capacity building—as noted by several CoPP members. These benefits and qualities of CoPs as professional learning exchange have been found in other professions in health, education, and business (Ranmuthugala et al. 2011; Bicchi 2024).

The CoP demonstrates that, when structured around shared purpose, relational trust, and practical outputs, CoPs can cultivate communities of reflective practitioners capable of shaping more inclusive planning systems. From our experiences, there are several transferable lessons that could be applied in professional development:

- Start with a clear shared purpose: The CoPP was anchored in the goal of advancing knowledge in practice regarding planning for disability equity and inclusion, which provided focus and motivation.
- Value diverse expertise: Equal recognition of members' lived, practice-based, and academic knowledge enriched dialogue and exchange.
- Maintain flexibility and openness: Having a flat governance structure, keeping the goal in focus, and operating from an iterative process enables responsiveness to participants' needs, emerging insights, and decision-making.
- Prioritise relationship-building: Trust was essential for enabling open, critical conversations and required dedicated time for deep listening during the first two workshops.
- Aim for tangible outputs to set the CoP up for success: Due to time and funding restrictions, it is important to determine as a group tangible activities and outputs that can be realistically achieved. In our case, co-producing the discussion paper not only provided foundational knowledge for the profession but also provided a focal point and legacy for the CoP's work.

These emerging elements listed here also reflect some of the lessons gained by Gonzalez et al. (2011) in developing their urban sustainability indicators across countries in Europe using the CoP method. Embedding CoPs into both research and professional practice can help planners collectively navigate complex current and emerging challenges in which they plan (Maida and Beck 2018). This is certainly reflected in the experiences shared here.

4.2. Limitations

With all methods, there are limitations. As noted earlier, one significant limitation of using CoP in a research context is that they are bounded by time, ethics and resources. This was the case in this project, with only one year to undertake the CoP. Furthermore, the project needed to work with the availability constraints of the CoPP members, as they volunteer their time. These restrictions needed to be navigated up front regarding the

domain, project timeframe and scope limitations, and by determining, with members, the realistic processes and outputs within time, space, and resources when establishing a CoP. This also helped to not raise unattainable expectations or participation burden.

Another limitation of this study and method is generalisability. While this is not the intention of CoPs, as they are about learning exchange and the impact of that knowledge in shaping practice, there needs to be a clear statement of context and the limitations of application. In our case, the CoP is context-sensitive and thus not generalizable; however, the CoP findings/insights and discussion paper produced (Stafford et al. 2024a, 2025) are applicable at the conceptual, policy, and practice levels when considered in context.

5. Conclusions

This article has described the use of CoP as a method in planning research. By documenting the establishment and operation of the CoPP, we have demonstrated how practice-oriented research can be deepened through collective dialogue, shared learning, and the co-production of outputs made possible through the CoP. The CoPP's domain on planning for disability equity and inclusion highlights the value of bringing practitioners together to reflect critically on their roles, build capacity, and develop actionable strategies for more inclusive planning.

The reflections from CoPP members affirm several advantages of employing CoPs as a research method within planning:

- They provide a flexible and iterative framework for translating research findings into actionable strategies—addressing persistent gaps between planning theory and practice (Albrechts 2013; Sandercock 2003a, 2023b).
- They democratise knowledge production by valuing lived experience, practitioner expertise, and academic insight equally (Wenger 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al. 2023).
- They support capacity building through collective learning, providing benefits beyond the immediate research project (Ranmuthugala et al. 2011).
- They generate outputs with greater practice legitimacy, grounded in shared ownership and professional relevance that are context-sensitive (Maida and Beck 2018; Gonzalez et al. 2011).

Given the expanding interest in transformative, justice-oriented planning paradigms, CoPs offer a robust and ethically aligned approach to exploring and implementing equity-focused change within the planning profession. Through reciprocal exchange, the CoP provided space for practitioners to articulate the tensions between normative planning ideals and the political, regulatory, and resource-driven realities they navigate daily (Burnett 2024; Rydin 2007). This reflexive environment supported what several members described as renewed accountability to equity-driven practice. In doing so, the CoPP reinforced the planner's role not only as implementers, but as champions of change capable of shaping more just and inclusive built environments (Fainstein 2010; Forester 2017).

We argue that CoPs remain an underutilised resource within the planning field for the co-production of knowledge and practical insights, and for providing resources to help progress inclusive, sustainable communities for all people. Their adaptability, accessibility, and capacity to foster both professional growth and systemic change make them an important addition to researchers and potentially a planner's toolbox. Future research and practice should continue to experiment with and document CoP methods by applying them to inclusive sustainability challenges in urban and regional planning and climate adaptation. By doing so, the profession can strengthen its ability to respond creatively and collectively to the complex social, environmental, and political contexts that threaten the development of inclusive, sustainable communities for all.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, L.S., A.H., M.T., D.B., T.H., M.N. and A.T.; methodology, L.S., A.H., M.T., D.B., T.H., M.N. and A.T.; formal analysis, L.S. and M.T.; writing—original draft preparation, A.H., L.S. and M.T.; writing—review and editing, A.H., L.S. and M.T.; project administration, L.S.; funding acquisition, L.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This project was funded by the Australian Research Council under ARC Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA)—DE190101512.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This stage (stage 2) of the study was conducted in accordance with Australia's National Statement of Ethical Conduct of Human Research and in accordance with UTAS Human Research Ethics Committee approval (number: 27599, approval date 24 November 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all members involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to ethical restrictions.

Acknowledgments: We like to thank the Planning Institute of Australia for their support of the discussion paper. During the preparation of this manuscript/study, Copilot Version number: 2.20260319.58.0 was used for proof-editing and structure refinement. The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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