

42 The Systemic Review

Because systemic problems demand systemic solutions

The Equilibrium of Delay

A systemic reading of the City of Playford's capital-works backlog — conventional and systemic approaches to a persistent gap between infrastructure demand and delivery capability

Theoretical basis: the laws and principles of systems theory, applied here as a diagnostic framework rather than as a source of opinion.

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Executive Summary

This paper asks a bounded question: why does the City of Playford's capital-works portfolio keep producing the same pattern — commitment, partial delivery, rollover — despite a sustained history of management intervention, and what would actually have to change for that pattern to break? It is not a judgement on any individual project, team or person. It applies the framework consistently, naming the governing principle before stating what follows from it.

CENTRAL FINDING

The City of Playford's recurring capital-works backlog is best read as an emergent, self-sustaining pattern rather than a simple case of over-commitment or under-performance. Unavoidable, growth-driven infrastructure demand is being regulated through a governance model that tracks financial affordability far more closely than delivery capability, and a reinforcing loop — in which delayed and on-hold projects continue to consume the management capacity needed to progress the rest of the portfolio — helps hold the backlog in a stable but undesirable equilibrium that repeated changes of working method have not been able to shift.

The five findings that follow are set out in full in the next section. In summary: the portfolio is better understood as a continuous stock-and-flow system than as an annual admissions problem; planning and design, not funding or headline delivery statistics, is the binding constraint; the mechanisms available

to regulate the portfolio have far less variety than the demand they are managing; a reinforcing feedback loop, sharpened by frequent changes of working method, is a strong candidate explanation for why the pattern has persisted; and the practical answer is a double bind rather than a single lever.

Findings

These findings are the headline output of the diagnosis. The technical analysis that follows names the specific systems principle behind each one and traces how it plays out in the capital-delivery system.

Finding 1. The backlog is a stock-and-flow problem, not an annual admissions problem.

The roughly \$80 million capital program is not \$80 million of new work approved each year: it already contains prior-year rollover and multi-year commitments, and Council has indicated it is already close to the leanest that figure can go while still covering asset renewal, critical growth infrastructure and grant-funded deadlines. The active portfolio of approximately 185 projects, and the load it places on the system, has to be understood as a continuous stock crossing financial years, not a series of independent annual decisions.

Finding 2. Planning and design, not funding, is the binding constraint.

Financial capacity ($\approx \$80\text{m}$) currently exceeds effective delivery ($\approx \$50\text{m}$), and the identified constraint sits earliest in the pipeline, at planning and design. Read this way, the number of projects simultaneously active in planning/design — rather than total portfolio value — is the more useful measure of system load, and adding funding without addressing that constraint is likely to add more waiting work rather than more delivered work.

Finding 3. The regulating mechanisms have far less variety than the demand they manage.

Executive approval, funding availability and prioritisation are the principal levers available to match commitments to capability, and they operate mainly on a single dollar figure. The portfolio's demand is highly differentiated — renewal, growth and grant-funded work each draw differently on planning/design, contractor and utility capacity — so a regulating mechanism

built around cost alone has structurally less variety than the system it is trying to control.

Finding 4. A reinforcing loop, not simply insufficient capacity, may be keeping the backlog in place.

Delayed and formally “on hold” projects continue to consume management and reporting attention, leaving less capacity available to progress the rest of the portfolio, which increases the likelihood of further delay. The range of management responses already tried — reprioritisation, changed working methods, collective working sessions — are each, in turn, disturbances to a system that may not have had time to settle from the last one, which can help explain why genuine effort has not shifted the underlying pattern.

Finding 5. The apparent solution is a double bind, not a single lever.

Reducing the program to match demonstrated capacity would improve the portfolio’s own statistics while leaving unmet infrastructure need to queue outside the formal program rather than inside it. The system needs both tighter regulation of commitments against demonstrated capability and greater capability to meet demand that cannot reasonably be deferred — not a choice between the two.

Technical Analysis

The remainder of this paper sets out the evidence and the systems-theory mechanism behind each finding above: the boundary of the system under examination, the situation on the ground, and the principle-by-principle diagnosis and its cross-cutting dynamics.

1. System Framing and Method

1.1 System Framing

Systems laws describe the behaviour of a defined system in relation to its environment and are only meaningful once that boundary is set explicitly.

System	The City of Playford's capital-infrastructure delivery system — the governance, planning/design and delivery functions that convert approved capital commitments into completed public infrastructure
Key components	Council and Executive approval processes; the annual capital-works program (currently around \$80m, comprising new work, prior-year rollover and multi-year projects); the active portfolio of around 185 projects; the planning/design function; delivery and construction teams; management and reporting processes; internal prioritisation mechanisms
Environment	Rapid population growth (Playford is among the fastest-growing local government areas in Australia, forecast to grow from around 113,000 residents in 2025 to around 184,000 by 2046); an ageing existing asset base requiring renewal; state and federal grant programs with fixed delivery deadlines; external delivery partners — contractors, consultants, utility providers and funding bodies — whose capacity and responsiveness Council does not directly control
Key dynamic	A persistent mismatch between the level and variety of infrastructure demand the environment generates and the effective throughput of the delivery system — concentrated at the planning/design stage — compounded by a reinforcing loop in which undelivered work itself continues to consume the management capacity needed to progress new and continuing work

1.2 Method

Each section below identifies the governing principle first, states the mechanism by which it operates, and only then derives the practical implication, so that findings remain traceable to a named principle rather than appearing as free-standing opinion. Principles are drawn from the full set of systems laws, thinking patterns and miscellaneous systems ideas, and are reported only where they materially apply to this situation — not as an exhaustive checklist. Interaction between principles (“splicing”) is noted at the point each connection is found, rather than deferred to a single later section.

2. Conventional Model and Systemic View

Compared

Before turning to the situation itself, it is worth setting the two approaches side by side, since the contrast is the organising question of this paper.

Conventional assumption	What the systemic view reveals
The backlog is caused by Council approving too much new work each year; tightening the entry gate will fix it.	The ~\$80m program is already mostly rollover, multi-year and largely unavoidable commitments; the entry point is not where the constraint sits, and gating it harder would push unmet need outside the formal portfolio rather than remove it (Law of Requisite Variety, §4.3).
A project’s formal status — active, on hold, delayed — tells you whether it is still consuming the system’s capacity.	Moving to “on hold” is an administrative state change, not necessarily a systemic exit: a project still generating reporting, review and decisions is still inside the system, consuming capacity (Law of Crossing, §4.6).
185 projects is a large, complex portfolio primarily because of the network of dependencies between projects.	Most projects are relatively independent; the complexity driver is instead many independent projects competing for the same scarce shared subsystems — planning/design, management attention (Complexity Instability Principle, §4.5).
If performance is disappointing, the fix is to keep adjusting	Each adjustment is itself a disturbance; arriving faster than the system can settle from the last one, repeated adjustment can itself be part of

priorities and ways of working until something sticks.	what prevents stable performance from emerging (Relaxation Time Principle, §4.9).
Backlog and delivery performance are separable from the question of whether the program itself is appropriately sized.	The two are structurally coupled: unless growth-driven demand and delivery capability are brought into balance together, resizing the program only relocates where unmet need shows up, rather than resolving it (Viability Principle / Double Bind, §4.10–4.11).

3. Situation Brief

Playford is a local government area in Adelaide’s north, South Australia, seated at Elizabeth; it is one of the fastest-growing local government areas in Australia. Population is forecast to grow from roughly 113,000 residents in 2025 to around 184,000 by 2046 — an increase of about 62% — adding roughly ten residents, or three new homes, a day. Major greenfield growth fronts include Riverlea Park (ultimately expected to house around 30,000 residents), Angle Vale, Virginia and Munno Para.

Council’s 2026/27 Annual Business Plan and Budget sets an operating and services budget of around \$168 million alongside its infrastructure investment program, funded in part by a 3.5% rate increase; the 2024/25 plan separately allocated around \$29 million specifically to renewal of existing roads, footpaths, kerbs, stormwater and sporting assets, funded by a 6.5% rate increase that year. Council’s public business-planning material describes sustained infrastructure investment tied squarely to this growth and to asset renewal, but does not, at the level of public reporting, break capital works down into the operational categories — active/on-hold project counts, planning/design queue length, work-in-progress — this review draws on.

What is unverified or unknown: the operational detail underpinning this review’s diagnosis — the approximately \$80 million capital-works program (comprising new work, prior-year rollover and multi-year commitments), the roughly 185-project active and on-hold portfolio, the identification of planning/design as the principal constraint, the approximately \$50 million

actually delivered in a recent year, and the range of management responses already tried — was supplied directly by Council staff as part of the working assessment prepared for this review. It is treated here as first-hand operational information rather than independently verified public data: Council's published financial statements and annual reports report capital expenditure at a more aggregated level than the project-level detail this review relies on, and this review does not attempt to reconcile the two.

4. Systemic Diagnosis

The table below sets out the principles that materially apply to this situation, the mechanism by which each operates, and the impact it implies for the delivery system and the organisation. Discussion of each, and the connections between them, follows.

Principle & Core Statement	Predicted / Observed Systemic Effect	Delivery & Organisational Impact
Principle of Emergence <i>A property can exist at system level even though it is not a property of any one component; the whole is more than the sum of its parts.</i>	Individual projects fail for many different, unconnected reasons — contractors, funding, utilities, design, internal performance — yet the portfolio produces the same aggregate result regardless: a persistent stock of unfinished work.	Fixing individual project or team performance problems one at a time is unlikely by itself to remove a pattern generated at the level of the whole delivery system rather than by any one project.
System Survival Theorem <i>A system survives only if it can change at a rate greater than or equal to the rate of change in its environment.</i>	Population growth, asset renewal and grant deadlines are expanding the infrastructure Playford needs at a pace the delivery system's own capability is not demonstrably matching.	The comparison that matters is the rate at which need is growing against the rate at which delivery capability is growing — not the annual dollar figure — and on present evidence the system is not closing that gap.
Law of Requisite Variety <i>The control achievable over a system is limited by the variety of the regulator relative to the variety of the system being regulated; only</i>	The portfolio's demand is highly differentiated — renewal versus new growth infrastructure versus grant-funded work, each drawing differently on planning/design, contractors and utilities — while the tools used to regulate it operate	A regulation mechanism built around one variable (cost) has structurally less variety than the differently-constrained system of project types it is trying to manage.

<i>variety can destroy variety.</i>	mainly on a single dollar figure.	
Conant–Ashby Theorem + Redundancy of Potential Command Principle <i>Every good regulator of a system must be a model of that system; and effective action in a complex situation depends on bringing together the right combination of information.</i>	Council holds a comparatively strong model of financial affordability but a much weaker model of delivery capability; the annual program decision draws heavily on environmental information (growth, grants, need) and much less on the system's own internal state (planning/design queue length, work-in-progress, capacity consumed by stalled projects).	Executive and Council may be making reasonable decisions from the information available to them while still generating a load the delivery system cannot absorb; better modelling of internal capability, not more approval scrutiny, is the more direct lever.
Complexity Instability Principle <i>Systems with too many active, changing dependencies between their parts tend to become incipiently unstable.</i>	With most of the ≈185 projects relatively independent of one another, size alone does not explain instability through project-to-project dependency; the more defensible complexity source is many independent projects competing for the same scarce shared subsystems — planning/design capacity and management/reporting attention.	Interventions aimed at inter-project coordination are likely to have limited effect; the more productive target is the shared, scarce subsystems every project draws on.
Law of Calling + Law of Crossing <i>Difference creates boundaries and boundaries create difference; crossing a boundary is a change of state.</i>	An administrative status change from active to on hold does not necessarily mean a project has stopped interacting with the system: one still generating reporting, review, meetings and decisions has not actually left. The delivery system's real boundary also extends past Council's own staff to contractors, consultants, utilities and funding bodies.	Measuring the portfolio by formal status understates true management load, and treating capacity as something Council alone possesses understates how much of it is genuinely held outside the organisation.
Homeostasis Principle <i>A system survives only so long as its essential variables are maintained within their physiological limits.</i>	Despite changes in projects, priorities, working methods and personnel, the same broad pattern persists: program, partial delivery, rollover, next program — suggesting a stable equilibrium is being actively maintained, not that stability has simply not yet been achieved.	The task is to identify what is holding this specific, undesirable equilibrium in place, since a homeostatic system defends its current pattern against exactly the kind of input changes already tried.

Feedback Dominance Theorem <i>Strong feedback structures determine a system's characteristic output across a wide range of starting conditions.</i>	A plausible reinforcing loop connects delay to further delay: projects that fall behind remain in the portfolio and continue to consume management and reporting attention even when formally on hold, leaving less attention for the rest of the active portfolio, which increases the likelihood of further delay.	If a feedback structure like this is operating, changing inputs — which projects are prioritised, how teams are organised — without changing the loop itself is unlikely to change the portfolio's characteristic output.
Relaxation Time Principle <i>A system can only remain stable if its relaxation time is shorter than the average interval between disturbances.</i>	A range of management responses has already been tried — reprioritisation, changed working styles, collective working sessions — each a reasonable response to disappointing performance, but each also a disturbance to the working environment in its own right.	If these disturbances arrived faster than planning/design could settle into a stable operating rhythm after each one, the interventions themselves may be part of what has kept performance from stabilising, independent of their individual merit.
Viability Principle <i>A system's viability depends on balancing the autonomy of its sub-systems against the cohesion of the whole, and stability against adaptation, over time.</i>	Council's stated desired state — stronger alignment between demonstrated capacity and commitments, without abandoning necessary infrastructure — asks for stability (commit only to what can be delivered) and adaptation (grow capability to meet unavoidable demand) to be held in balance simultaneously, not traded off.	Treating this as a one-off decision — set the program at a sustainable size and move on — misreads the tension as resolvable rather than as something requiring continuous rebalancing as growth, grant cycles and delivery capability all keep changing.
Double Bind (miscellany) <i>A situation constrained by two mutually contradictory imperatives, where satisfying either one means failing the other.</i>	Committing only to what can realistically be delivered, and funding the asset renewal, growth and grant-funded work that cannot realistically be deferred, pull in different directions once demonstrated capacity sits below the level of unavoidable demand.	Simply shrinking the program to fit current capacity would produce healthier portfolio statistics while leaving genuine infrastructure need to queue outside the formal program; the practical answer has to hold both imperatives at once rather than picking a side.

4.1 The recurring backlog is an emergent property

The Principle of Emergence holds that a property can exist at the level of a whole system even though it is not a property of any single component. Playford's individually delayed projects have many different, unconnected causes — contractor availability, funding timing, utility works, design complexity, internal capacity — yet the portfolio keeps producing the same

aggregate outcome: a persistent stock of unfinished work. That repetition across otherwise unrelated causes is the signature of an emergent, whole-system pattern rather than a coincidence of many separate project failures, and it means resolving individual performance issues one at a time is unlikely, by itself, to remove the pattern.

4.2 A viability gap between demand and capability

The System Survival Theorem states that a system survives only if it can change at a rate greater than or equal to the rate of change in its environment. Playford's environment — population growth, asset renewal, grant deadlines — is generating a minimum level of infrastructure demand that is not obviously discretionary, and the relevant comparison is not "\$80m budget versus \$50m delivered" but the rate at which that demand is growing against the rate at which the delivery system's effective capability is growing. This is the mechanism behind the pattern named in §4.1: an emergent, repeating shortfall is what a system generates when it is not adapting as fast as what it depends on.

4.3 A requisite variety problem in how the portfolio is regulated

The Law of Requisite Variety holds that control of a system requires variety at least equal to the variety of the system being controlled. Playford's capital demand is highly differentiated — renewal, new growth infrastructure and grant-funded work each draw differently on planning/design, contractor and utility capacity — yet the mechanisms available to regulate the portfolio are, in effect, Executive approval, funding availability and prioritisation, operating mainly on a single dollar figure. This connects directly to §4.2: a regulator with less variety than its environment is one structural reason a system fails to keep pace with that environment, rather than a separate problem.

4.4 An inadequate model of capacity

The Conant–Ashby Theorem states that every good regulator of a system must be a model of that system; the Redundancy of Potential Command Principle adds that effective action in a complex situation depends on bringing together the right combination of information — about both the environment and the system’s own internal state. Council appears to hold a comparatively good model of financial affordability but a much weaker model of delivery capability: the annual program decision draws heavily on what is known about growth, grants and need, and much less on what is known about planning/design queue length, work-in-progress or the capacity consumed by stalled work. This sharpens §4.3 — the narrow variety of the regulating mechanism is partly a symptom of this narrower, asymmetric model — and means Executive and Council may be making reasonable decisions from the information available to them while still generating a load the system cannot absorb.

4.5 Complexity from shared, scarce subsystems, not a project network

The Complexity Instability Principle holds that systems with too many active, changing dependencies between their parts tend to become incipiently unstable. It might be assumed that a portfolio of 185 projects is inherently complex because of dependencies running between them; since most projects are in fact relatively independent of one another, that assumption over-states the case. The more defensible complexity source, consistent with §4.4’s point about a missing model of internal capacity, is that many independent projects compete for the same scarce shared subsystems — planning/design capacity and management/reporting attention — rather than for each other directly.

4.6 Boundaries: on hold is not gone, and the system reaches beyond Council

The Law of Calling holds that drawing a distinction is the act of drawing a boundary, and the Law of Crossing adds that moving across a boundary is itself a change of state. A project moved to “on hold” has crossed an administrative boundary, but if it still generates reporting, review, meetings and decisions, it

has not crossed the boundary that matters systemically — it is still inside the system, still drawing on the scarce subsystems named in §4.5. The same logic applies to the system's outer boundary: contractors, consultants, utilities and funding bodies are not outside the delivery system simply because they sit outside Council's own organisational chart; the delivery system still needs sufficient variety to work with them.

4.7 A stable but undesirable equilibrium

The Homeostasis Principle holds that a system survives only so long as its essential variables are kept within their physiological limits — and that the resulting equilibrium need not be a desirable one. Despite changes in projects, priorities, working methods and personnel, the same broad pattern persists: program, partial delivery, rollover, next program. Read alongside §4.1 and §4.6, that persistence is best understood not as a system that has simply failed to stabilise, but as one that is actively, homeostatically maintaining an undesirable pattern — which is why inputs can keep changing while the pattern itself does not.

4.8 The feedback structure, not the inputs, sets the pattern

The Feedback Dominance Theorem holds that strong feedback structures determine a system's characteristic output across a wide range of starting conditions. This names the mechanism behind §4.7's equilibrium: projects delayed remain in the portfolio; because they remain, even on hold, they continue to consume management and reporting attention (§4.6); that consumption leaves less attention for the rest of the active portfolio; which increases the likelihood of further delay. If a loop this strong is operating, changing which projects are prioritised or how teams are organised — changing the inputs — without changing the loop itself is unlikely to change the portfolio's characteristic output.

4.9 Repeated intervention as its own disturbance

The Relaxation Time Principle holds that a system can only remain stable if its relaxation time is shorter than the average interval between disturbances. Council has already trialled a range of reasonable responses to disappointing performance — reprioritisation, changed working styles, collective working sessions — and each, however sensible individually, is also a disturbance to the working environment in its own right. Read against §4.8, if these disturbances have arrived faster than planning/design could settle into a stable operating rhythm after each one, the interventions themselves may have been reinforcing the very feedback loop they were intended to break, independent of their individual merit.

4.10 Balancing stability and adaptation

The Viability Principle holds that a system's viability depends on balancing the autonomy of its sub-systems against the cohesion of the whole, and stability against adaptation, over time. This reframes §4.2's viability gap as a standing tension rather than a one-off decision: Council's own stated desired state — stronger alignment between demonstrated capacity and commitments, without abandoning necessary infrastructure — is a request to hold stability and adaptation in balance continuously, not to resolve the tension once by picking a program size and leaving it fixed.

4.11 The double bind at the centre of the practical answer

The double bind names the same tension identified in §4.10 from the other direction: only committing to what can realistically be delivered, and funding the asset renewal, growth and grant-funded work that cannot realistically be deferred, pull against each other once demonstrated capacity sits below the level of unavoidable demand, and satisfying either fully means failing the other. The systemic response to a double bind is not to pick a side but to treat both imperatives as jointly-tracked variables: simply shrinking the program to fit current capacity would produce healthier portfolio statistics while leaving

genuine infrastructure need to queue outside the formal program rather than resolving it.

5. Cross-Cutting Dynamics

Read together, the principles above converge on a single structural account rather than a list of independent findings. A widening variety gap between the portfolio's demand and the tools used to regulate it (Requisite Variety) is sharpened by a regulatory model that sees financial affordability far more clearly than delivery capability (Conant–Ashby, Redundancy of Potential Command), and both feed a viability gap in which growth-driven demand is outrunning the delivery system's own rate of adaptation (System Survival Theorem, Viability Principle) — which is what produces the emergent, repeating shortfall the portfolio actually displays (Principle of Emergence). That shortfall is not merely tolerated; it is actively held in place by a reinforcing loop in which projects that cross into delay or “on hold” status do not really leave the system (Law of Calling, Law of Crossing) and continue consuming the scarce shared subsystems — chiefly planning/design and management attention — that the rest of the portfolio also depends on (Complexity Instability Principle), which is precisely the mechanism sustaining a stable but undesirable equilibrium (Homeostasis Principle, Feedback Dominance Theorem). Because each attempt to break that pattern has itself been a disturbance, arriving faster than the system could settle from the last one (Relaxation Time Principle), well-intentioned intervention may have reinforced the very loop it targeted. The practical consequence is a double bind rather than a single lever (Double Bind): neither tightening commitments to fit current capacity nor pushing harder on delivery alone resolves a mismatch that is systemic rather than local, and the framework points toward holding both discipline of commitment and growth of capability as continuously balanced, jointly-tracked variables, not sequential or competing choices.

Conclusion

Applied consistently, the laws and principles of systems theory suggest that the live question — reduce the program, or push delivery teams harder — is largely the wrong axis. The more consequential questions are whether Council holds an adequate model of its own delivery capability rather than only its financial affordability, whether the mechanisms used to regulate the portfolio have enough variety to match the demand they manage, and whether the recurring backlog is being actively sustained by a reinforcing loop that repeated, well-intentioned intervention has not yet broken. None of these are answered by treating the backlog as either a performance problem or a budgeting problem alone. The practical implication is that a durable resolution needs both tighter regulation of commitments against demonstrated capability and greater capability to meet the level of demand that cannot reasonably be removed — pursued together, and continuously rebalanced, rather than as a single one-off adjustment to the size of the annual program.

Appendix A — Glossary of Systems Principles Referenced

Principle	Definition
Principle of Emergence	A property can exist at the level of a system even though it is not a property of any one of its components; the whole is more than the sum of its parts.
System Survival Theorem	A system survives only if it can change at a rate greater than or equal to the rate of change in its environment.
Law of Requisite Variety	The control achievable over a system is limited by the variety of the regulator relative to the variety of the system being regulated; only variety can destroy variety.
Conant–Ashby Theorem	Every good regulator of a system must be a model of that system; the ability to act effectively on any situation depends on the adequacy of your model of it.
Redundancy of Potential Command Principle	Effective action in a complex situation depends on bringing together the right combination of information.
Complexity Instability Principle	Systems with too many active, changing dependencies between their parts tend to become incipiently unstable.
Law of Calling	The act of making a distinction is the act of drawing a boundary and defining a system; difference creates boundaries and boundaries create difference.
Law of Crossing	Crossing a system boundary is itself a change of state, for both what crosses and the observer.
Homeostasis Principle	A system survives only so long as its essential variables are maintained within their physiological limits.
Feedback Dominance Theorem	Strong feedback structures determine a system's characteristic output across a wide range of starting conditions.
Relaxation Time Principle	A system can only remain stable if its relaxation time is shorter than the average interval between disturbances.

Viability Principle	A system's viability depends on balancing the autonomy of its sub-systems against the cohesion of the whole, and stability against adaptation, over time.
Double Bind (miscellany)	A situation constrained by two mutually contradictory imperatives, where satisfying either one means failing the other.

References

Sources consulted for the factual grounding of the Situation Brief (Technical Analysis §3). Theoretical statements throughout the paper are drawn from the systems-theory reference framework and are not separately footnoted.

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6. **Working assessment**: *internal operational analysis of the City of Playford’s capital-delivery system — including project counts, budget composition, the identified planning/design constraint and management responses already trialled — supplied for this review.*