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Climate Change and Local Government: Effectively responding locally to the global challenge

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ABSTRACT

Local government as the sphere of government closest to the Australian community has an important role to play in responding to the challenge of climate change. Community has expectation that councils will lead mitigation measures. There already exists a substantial range of initiatives that have been introduced at the local level. Financial constraints are inhibiting the ability of local government to be more proactive in leading climate change responses.

Keywords: climate change, local government, sustainability,

1. Introduction

The world is confronting the need for an unprecedented era of co-operation to combat climate change. Utilising the term ‘hot breath of civilisation’ Ian McEwan has suggested

The sheer pressure of our numbers, the abundance of our inventions, the blind forces of our desires and needs, appear unstoppable and we are generating a heat whose effects we are beginning to comprehend only too clearly (McEwan I 2009).

In recent years local councils in Australia have recognised the importance of adaptation to and mitigating against the impacts of Climate Change

and have made some progress in leading effective responses to this global challenge at the local community level, often with meagre resources. These responses have largely been uncoordinated in the local government sector and with quite limited support, expertise or direction from the other spheres of Australian government.

This paper outlines some of the climate change response initiatives taken by Clarence Valley Council, a 2004 forcibly amalgamated New South Wales local government entity. It will also briefly describe the new council and suggest by way of background some particular problems facing the council; offer a local government practitioner personal perspective on the climate change issue in a strategic planning and policy context, and outline specific mitigation measures and successes, suggesting a vital leadership and response role for local government as part of the National response.

2. What role for Local Government?

Nick Rowley, the former environmental adviser to New South Wales Premier Bob Carr and later to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, has argued that the public must be continually engaged on climate change to keep finding new ways to address the issue and that local government needs to reinforce to its constituents that the climate change problem will be ongoing (Rowley N 2007). 2007 Australian of the Year Professor Tim Flannery believes that local government has been doing much of the heavy lifting on climate change and suggests that the closeness to communities of local government leaders is the key to this success (Flannery T 2007).

An April 2008 Climate Institute report found that 89% of Australians had become concerned about climate change. These people all live within a

local government boundary. The report also found that 94 per cent of Australians recognised that they needed to make changes to their own lives to prevent further climate change impacts (The Climate Institute 2008). These people expect local leadership to respond to climate change. Local government is well placed to provide such leadership.

Professor Garnaut stated in his interim Climate Change Review report to the Australian government in February 2008 that

The world is moving towards high risks of dangerous climate change, more rapidly than has generally been understood. This makes mitigation more urgent and more costly. The challenge is to end the linkage between economic growth and emissions of greenhouse gases. Australia must now put in place effective policies to achieve major reductions in emissions (Garnaut R 2008).

Professor Garnaut was blunt and clear of message. Local government as one of the three spheres of Australian government, has a clear role to play in developing effective local climate change response policies.

3. Financial constraints to climate change responses

How local government might respond to climate change is impacted by several factors, the most significant of which is the need for adequate resourcing. This issue is impacted by the ever present challenge of maintaining long term financial sustainability. Serious questions surround the ongoing viability of many local councils both in terms of financial sustainability and operational efficiency.

Since 1977 there has existed a system of rate pegging in New South Wales (Local Government and Shires Association of NSW 1996) (Local Government Managers Australia NSW Division 2003). As a consequence of years of rate pegging, rate revenue growth in the State has fallen well behind local government jurisdictions elsewhere in Australia. Real New

South Wales council rates growth between 1995 and 2004 was negligible (Local Government and Shires Association of NSW 2001).

Rate pegging has created a disincentive to invest in less visible and less politically sensitive responsibilities such as infrastructure maintenance and renewal, as councils confront ever increasing community expectations without the option to increase rate revenue to meet those demands or the ability to secure 'special rate variations'. In the long run it is demonstrable that rate pegging has resulted in the under-provision to community of infrastructure and services and the deferment of vital infrastructure maintenance and renewal expenditure (Tiley I 2003). This ultimately has meant in many instances the undermining of financial sustainability and effectiveness of many NSW councils.

Federal Financial Assistance Grants have substantially declined in real terms since their introduction in the 1970s (Local Government Managers Australia NSW Division 2003). In addition cost shifting and unfunded mandates imposed by succeeding State and Federal governments of both political persuasions have severely impacted upon local government's financial sustainability because of non-provision of adequate commensurate resources to discharge the additional devolved responsibilities (Dollery B, Crase L et al. 2006; Dollery B 2008). Local government's ability to adequately maintain existing assets or provide the essential infrastructure urgently required and rightly demanded by communities has thus been severely eroded in many instances (Tiley I 2003) (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics Finance and Public Administration 2003) (Dollery B, Byrnes J et al. 2006).

Whilst local councils have significant economies through scale, size and rationalising service levels to the wider community over the years, it is uncertain and probably unlikely that existing service levels will be maintained which in turn will impact on local government capacity to respond to climate change.

4. Increased community expectations and disconnection

Service level expectations of community have substantially increased in recent years, including the desire that local government respond to climate change. The sea change/tree change phenomenon has taken a firm hold. People are moving from cities where their former, usually long established council, with a sound rating base, was able to offer a broad range of services to constituents. They bring with them higher service level expectations. Some new citizens participate in consultations on a broad range of strategic planning, usually resulting in councils signing off on ambitious new strategic goals. A high focus of many of these new arrivals is upon climate change.

The Clarence Valley Council imposed amalgamation has also caused varying degrees of disconnection from local government within the community compared with the involvement that previously existed when Councils were smaller and the councillors were perceived to be more local and accessible. For some this perception has arisen through the size and geographic spread of the new ‘super’ council. Others particularly in the coastal areas believe themselves to be the amalgamation ‘milking cows’ of the financially strong locality which is now being used to sustain other less viable localities.

5. A practitioner perspective on climate change

Climate change, whilst undoubtedly a major global issue is also about the way we do business, about the way we live our daily lives. The planet's ability to absorb the impact of humans is approaching its limits. The highest priority for our nation should be the survival and sustainability of our society and the planet. Climate change is indeed the great challenge of our time. The science is now clear and compelling. The need to act is now overwhelmingly supported by indisputable fact so that conventional economic growth and unbridled consumerism cannot continue without eventually destroying the planet. Committed leaders need to think in the long term, to face up to the stark challenges of the global emergency and build a consensus for change, however unpalatable, uncertain and difficult that task. Pollution must be priced and penalised. A revolution in sourcing energy is essential especially in energy use, transportation and in the home. Much greater energy efficiency and sound alternate clean energy technologies are essential.

6. National local government policy on climate change

National local government policy in relation to climate change was clearly articulated in the 2008-09 Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) federal budget submission. The peak national local government body has committed to work collaboratively with the Australian government to develop a national emissions trading scheme and to establish a strong working partnership to address climate change. ALGA has also welcomed the government election commitment to introduce practical measures to improve household energy efficiency (Australian Local Government Association 2008). Federal and local cooperation and collaboration is essential if the great climate change challenge is to be effectively addressed.

7. Clarence Valley Council

Council was formed by New South Wales Government Proclamation (2004) on 25th February 2004 by the imposed amalgamation of four general purpose councils and two county councils, one a water supply authority and the other a flood mitigation authority. The local government area became 10,442 sq kms which includes over 70km of coastline, a population approaching 51,000 persons and growing at in excess of the New South Wales State average by over one per cent per annum. The Council area services 43 towns and villages including the city of Grafton and major coastal towns of Yamba, Maclean and Iluka (Clarence Valley Council 2004).

8. Clarence Valley Council climate change policy development

As an example of what can be achieved at the ‘grass roots’, Clarence Valley Council has undertaken extensive strategic planning for the new local government area. The most significant developed strategic instrument is the Sustainability Plan, also known as the Sustainability Initiative or Framework. The plan is a high level strategic framework, establishing a new corporate philosophy and is the driver for all actions and policy development throughout council. A key component of the Plan is the “planning web”, which is based on five key elements - ecology, economy, society and culture, human habitat and governance.

The framework provides a guide to what our community cares for, its values and goals as well as establishing a consistent holistic approach to reporting and decision making that embraces the principles of sustainability (Clarence Valley Council 2006). For example, every officer’s report to the council has to address these five key elements so that the thread of sustainability permeates the council organisation. The

Council Annual Management Plan and Budget, Annual Report and State of the Environment Report are also structured to take account of the five elements and objectives of the Sustainability Initiative. Having such a single minded approach to sustainability through the Sustainability Plan is perhaps the most important way in which the council and local government more broadly can address climate change. Few New South Wales councils have such a framework.

In July 2008 Council endorsed another important strategic plan, its Community Based Corporate Strategic Plan, the broad aim of which is to collate and connect all the good council strategies which have been developed since amalgamation (Clarence Valley Council 2008). This plan provides strong linkages to the State Plan, to Council's Local Environmental Plan and to the Mid North Coast Regional Strategy. This overarching plan needs to continue to enjoy broad community input and ownership, and to reinforce the Sustainability Plan in terms of providing clear direction on climate change mitigation measures. Council's sustainable environment officers are currently developing a Local Climate Change Action Plan which will embrace many of the initiatives and mitigation measures already being undertaken.

9. Clarence Valley Council successes

In October 2007 Clarence Valley Council received a high commendation in the prestigious NSW A R Bluett Memorial Award for best performing Council in 2006/07. In December 2007 Council secured the NSW Local Government and Shires Association of NSW peak annual award for Environmental Excellence for the Sustainability Plan. This recognition highlights that the council is being effective in addressing sustainability and thereby responding to climate change.

10. Climate Change responses by a local Council

Clarence Valley Council has commenced to locally address climate change and recognises it has a clear responsibility to respond to community concerns regarding climate change. Council has solid linkages with and connection to community and accepts that it has a lead role in highlighting and educating communities about the increasing reservoir of workable climate change adaptation and mitigation measures. As well the council plays a key role in initiating participatory actions concerning climate change, as detailed in the following points.

10.1 Sea level rise – house retreat policy

Clarence Valley Council is actively planning for sea level rise and increasing flood levels in all its strategic land use planning and is aided by New South Wales Department of Environment and Climate Change guidelines. For example, Council has in place a planned house retreat policy for the most vulnerable frontal dune erosion area at the coastal fringe village of Woolli (Ulmarra Shire Council 1997), a policy now under review in light of latest International Panel on Climate Change maximum sea level rise projection data and the New South Wales Draft Sea Level Rise Policy (Department of Environment and Climate Change 2009) which, if adopted, would require councils to factor into development applications sea level rise of 90cm by year 2100.

10.2 Partnership with Catchment Management Authority

The council has an effective Memorandum of Understanding with the Northern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (CMA) and has cooperatively undertaken a range of remedial environmental projects with that institution since 2004. In February 2008 the CMA developed and released a Statement on Climate Change (Northern Rivers Catchment

Management Authority 2008) whilst its ten year Catchment Action Plan (CAP) for regional natural resource management (NRM) has provided a blueprint for responding to climate change. Local government on the NSW Northern Rivers will need to engage more effectively with the CMA so that more CAP targets on climate change may be achieved as quickly and effectively as possible. The partnership has provided an effective mechanism for local government to genuinely engage in NRM on a regional basis.

10.3 Clarence Floodplain Partnership

With the ongoing support of the CMA, one of Council's success stories has been a project partnership involving farmers, government agencies, conservation groups and local government cooperating on Clarence floodplain wetlands restoration. The project has achieved the capture and locking away of large quantities of carbon. Associated drainage works has increased the health of the Clarence river to such an extent that the floods of early 2008 resulted in no fish kills as there were on the neighbouring Richmond river. The Clarence Valley oyster industry has applauded the improved water quality in the Clarence River which means that this industry sector is now capable of growing oysters in the river all year round.

10.4 Mayors Climate Change Agreement

As Clarence Valley Council Mayor early in 2008 the council became a signatory to the New South Wales Mayor's Agreement on Climate Change. Such agreement has committed council inter alia to determining a 2006/07 baseline on the council's greenhouse gas emissions, which it has achieved. Council is also committed to encouraging all sectors in the local community to adapt to the impacts of climate change, to reduce

their greenhouse gas emissions and to make public their commitment to such actions. The agreement requires council to resource climate change initiatives and to adopt a range of climate change response actions contained in the Local Government and Shires Association's 'Action Pack' (Local Government and Shires Association of NSW 2008). Through the Mayors Agreement Council acknowledged the increasing impact climate change will have on community and committed to tackling the causes and effects of climate change in the Clarence Valley local government area. The Agreement commits council to setting reduction targets through participation in the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) Climate Protection Program within two years of the date of the Mayors Agreement.

10.5 ICLEI Climate Protection Program

In October 2007 Council joined the ICLEI Cities for Climate Protection Program (CPP) (Wescott W 2008) which at that time had a global membership of over 800 local governments. This move was a key response of Council to the issue of climate change. The primary aim of the program is for Council to cut its greenhouse gas emissions and for Council to help facilitate reductions in the wider community. The internationally recognised program commits Council to five key milestones:

1. Establish a base line inventory and forecast for greenhouse gas emissions for the council area for both Council operations and the community. This milestone has been achieved and acknowledged by ICLEI. It entailed retrieval of data to establish energy usage in the key energy sectors of fuels and fleet, waste, water, sewerage and electricity.

2. Set an emissions reduction goal, a task which is well under way.
3. Develop and adopt an Action Plan to achieve goals for both council operations and wider community.
4. Implement projects under the action plan. A recent council determination to establish a community-based Climate Change Education Committee to work in community to educate citizens about how they might individually respond to Climate Change is one such project.
5. Monitor and report on greenhouse gas emissions and actions.

10.6 Celebrating World Environment Day

Council has celebrated World Environment Day (Clarence Valley Council 2008) and taken it as an appropriate opportunity to again commit to reducing the impact of global warming through its membership of the Cities for Climate Protection Program and its clear commitment to reduction of the Clarence Valley carbon footprint. In a practical sense this has meant for example, encouraging households to change to energy efficient light bulbs, switching off lights and appliances when not in use, changing to water efficient showerheads, car pooling, switching to Green power and use of solar energy.

10.7 Clarence Community Climate Challenge

The Clarence Community Climate Challenge, held in mid 2007 with New South Wales Nature Conservation Council support, was the first such Challenge conducted in the State and was held over a three month period. 432 households participated across Clarence Valley, 31,000 light bulbs were changed and it was assessed that 19,000 tonnes of emissions reduced (Clarence Valley Council 2008). Council has since been exploring mechanisms to provide ongoing status and impetus to this

initiative and to enable engagement with those who did not participate in the Challenge.

10.8 Local Government and Shires Association Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Program

A substantial local government resource available since late 2006 to enable Councils to engage and obtain expertise and support has been the Local Government and Shires Association's sponsored Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Program (Local Government and Shires Association of NSW 2007). This project has six primary aims relating to raising community awareness, building community capacity, and identifying workable local strategies. Clarence Council has commenced the program.

10.9 Clarence Valley Council Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Initiatives

Practical Council measures in recent times to reduce greenhouse gas emissions have included:

- Council area wide streetlight replacement project with support from supplier Country Energy.
- Investigation of a landfill gas reduction project involving possible methane capture and burning.
- Solar power grid connection system at the Grafton Materials Recovery Facility.
- An upgrade of the energy management system at Councils two primary administration offices.
- Purchase of 10% certified green power.

- Promotion of use of bicycles and cycleways and funding an annual program of cycleways to enhance more bicycle and less vehicle usage.
- Introduction of a water demand management program, including full flush cistern and shower replacement programs and subsidies for water tanks over and above available NSW Government subsidies.
- Collaboration with North Coast NSW Councils through the NRM group, the North East Waste Forum and the Northern Rivers Energy Group.
- Utilisation of sewer scheme energy efficient designs, for example pumps that minimise energy consumption have been incorporated into the design of all new sewer infrastructure and treatment plants.
- A revised policy in respect of Council's light fleet management is realising a reduction in greenhouse emissions and fuel consumption by approximately 18.5 per cent from 50 vehicles recently changed over, equating to an annual 62 tonnes of CO₂ reduction and an annual cost savings to council of \$32,000.

10.10 Sustainable Choice Purchasing Program

In 2008 Clarence Valley Council joined the free LGSA Sustainable Choice Purchasing Program which provides encouragement to undertake sustainable purchasing practises for local government by providing staff education and information sharing. The Program is an important tool in assisting council to achieve its sustainability goals under the Sustainability Action Plan and has assisted achievement of improved efficiency, reduced waste, saved funds and highlighted council leadership on waste management.

10.11 Clarence Valley Council Waste Levy

A Waste levy of \$15 per tonne with annual CPI additions and generating about \$500,000 revenue per annum was introduced in 2007 to offset greenhouse emissions from Clarence Valley Regional landfill. The projects to date earmarked for funding from this new levy include the street light energy efficient light bulb replacement program, a bicycle use promotion strategy, and putting new energy management systems into Council administrative buildings creating approximate 30 percent energy use savings. The levy also was utilised as a contribution to a local environmental tidal return/fish passage project.

10.12 Compacting the Urban Footprint in Clarence Valley

Council has a number of important and climate change relevant current strategic directions. Perhaps the most important of these is a desire to effectively compact the urban footprint in the Clarence Valley. Through its land use planning strategies Council is encouraging more compact urban form and a more constricted urban footprint, hence minimising reliance on private motor vehicles. It is achieving this goal in a number of ways - through locating new land releases in areas that build on existing settlements and infrastructure, requesting a range of dwelling types and densities, increasing densities where land use constraints permit, allowing more flexible zones that incorporate a greater mix of uses including local shopping and community facilities and working from home and finally by requiring incorporation of design principles and development standards which will minimise energy demands.

10.13 Local Population Hub Planning Initiatives

Clarence Valley Council is planning to integrate into existing residential localities and to provide within new suburbs and precincts facilities

including local shopping, localised community facilities such as a child care centre, active and passive parks, school sites, a range of housing types to cater for varying ages and living styles from traditional housing, to medium densities, aged care and relocatable and manufactured housing. Providing 'close to home' facilities are designed to result in lesser vehicle reliance and greater pedestrian and bicycle mobility.

10.14 Coastal Management

Council is reviewing existing and undertaking new coastline management plans to take into account climate change scenarios and their implications. A longer term project has been identified to prepare an Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan to compact existing coastline and estuary management plans and enable a more holistic approach across the Valley's coastline and estuaries. Council is working with community through the Coastline Management Planning process to develop long term management strategies and planning responses which will incorporate relevant development standards and planning policy through the Local Environment Plan and Development Control Planning Instruments.

10.15 Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS)

Council has been assessing its likely exposure to costs under the CPRS when eventually introduced by the Federal Government. It has been ascertained that Council will exceed facility thresholds and have liabilities in respect of its waste landfill from 2018 and possibly have some exposure in regard to its Sewerage Treatment Plants. Other liabilities will be incurred as other transport and energy industries pass on CPRS costs to Council (Wilson K 2009). Council has determined to not simply pass on such additional costs to service recipients but to be

proactive and take reasonable measures to reduce emissions and thus at least some of the liability under CPRS. The CPRS and also the New South Wales State Waste Levy provide incentives to reduce waste, particularly organic waste to the landfill. Council is examining alternate waste treatment methods, inter-regional cooperation and landfill gas capture and flaring as possibilities for mitigating against additional liabilities and costs.

11 Conclusion

Charles, Prince of Wales encapsulated the priceless value of natural capital and argued:

Our grandchildren will not care very much about whether early in the 21st century we sustained 20th century-style growth. They will be far more concerned about climate; about whether there is sufficient food and water; about the security measures and economic resources needed to cope with millions of environmental refugees. That will require the emergence of an economy that not only takes care of both people and planet but also breaks the mould in terms of how we look at the world (Charles Prince of Wales 2009).

There is no doubt that local government needs to engage and play a vital leadership and practical role in coordinating effective local responses to the threats posed by climate change. Through web site use and a range of other communication mechanisms, Clarence Valley Council is endeavouring to get its climate change initiatives message across to the people of the Clarence Valley.

There are undoubtedly resourcing issues and costs to local government budgets which need support and partnership from the other spheres of government to effectively address climate change mitigation. Legislation to enforce planning constraints is essential so that councils are able to directly plan to respond to climate change. Reduction in New South

Wales council planning powers during 2008 under the guise of the ‘Sartor reforms’ has probably not assisted this vital issue.

In New South Wales, local government’s hands are ‘tied’ in planning terms in respect of mitigating against climate change impacts. Local government needs to be able, for example to properly plan and regulate, given the certainty of future massive fires, floods, category five cyclones and the like, so that in the year 2100 buildings will still be safe.

Local government is definitely challenged by the complexity of the climate change issue as well as by the need for effective and integrated responses. The climate change challenge is obviously very complex but whilst the world needs a global climate change treaty, a global response can only occur if there is individual and local level commitment.

Ultimately it will be individuals who will have to make a difference. Adequately addressing global warming must eventually devolve to ordinary people exercising people power and grass roots determination. Behavioural change and a commitment to doing things differently will become essential, such as for example travelling less frequently, using family friendly video conferencing and the like. Those who will follow us deserve nothing less than such levels of commitment from this generation. A new more selfless culture as a nation is required. The next decade has to become a period of massive transformation.

Climate change initiatives and leadership in climate change mitigation measures at the local level should continue to be a very high focus. Local government needs to be key players in climate change initiatives, in partnership with other governments, business and community. Some councils are leading climate change mitigation projects and are at the forefront in areas including the Cities for Climate Change Protection

program, innovative landfill programs, Greenhouse Alliances and community information, beachfront stabilisation, habitat protection and education programs.

There is increasing recognition of the need for adaptation strategies to allow local communities to deal with the effects of climate change and reduce exposure to the possible impacts. Councils need to be promoting and introducing measures such as increasing the efficiency of lighting, alternative technology for heating, cooling and water treatment plants and promoting climate-friendly built and natural environments.

At the wider community level councils can initiate environmental education and awareness raising, promote energy efficiency in residential, industrial and commercial settings, and promote alternative methods of transport and waste management services and policies. The imperative for genuine local government engagement is surely indisputable.

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