

Mission unaccomplished:

COUNCILS ARE STUCK AT HOW TO MEASURE AND ASSESS SUSTAINABILITY, WHICH IS WHY CLEAR EXAMPLES OF WHAT IS ACHIEVABLE ARE IMPORTANT, WRITES **PROFESSOR MICHAEL PADDON, STEFANIE PILLORA AND JADE HERRIMAN.**

It is almost 20 years since the adoption of Local Agenda 21 at the Rio Earth summit, which many people identify as the international impetus for local government taking sustainability seriously. We have seen over that period that many, if not all, local councils in Australia have identified sustainability as a key focus in strategic or management planning for future visions. In that sense, sustainability is on everyone's agenda in local government.

Across local governments we can also point to major achievements where councils are implementing sustainability initiatives in the wide range of activities from planning to day-to-day operations. So we see local government responding to the issues of sustainability in its own corporate planning: in land use planning and obligations to prepare environmental plans.

Councils around Australia are engaging directly with issues of climate change in their infrastructure risk management, by attempting to reduce their operational emissions and carbon footprints and in their role in supporting business and community emission reduction.

Here we can draw just a few examples from the diverse range of council activities. Domestic recycling collections have been operated by councils for many years with the type of materials collected continuing to expand. Individual councils and groups of councils have developed purchasing programs to reduce energy or water use and increase recycled content in the goods and services

they buy and use. Councils have taken the opportunity to reduce emissions in their fleet purchasing and maintenance and/or are looking at sustainable transport options through urban design and providing infrastructure such as bicycle paths and preferential parking for electric hybrid or car-share vehicles. They have taken a role in natural resource management including a wide range of catchment focused projects. And there have been a multitude of local initiatives for biodiversity protection, conservation and habitat enhancement including riparian vegetation protection, parks and public lands management and bush care.

BOTTOM LINES

Much of the focus has been on responses to environmental impacts, and preservation/ restoration of assets (natural, built and financial). For this reason much of what councils refer to as their as 'sustainability' work relates to environmental protection or restoration. This is important in addressing an historical imbalance in priorities and reflects growing community concern about key environmental challenges – most recently, from climate change and drought or water supply.

However, we have seen a growing awareness that environmental concerns are intertwined with an area's local economic activity and social wellbeing. So councils increasingly talk of a 'triple bottom line', which incorporates social and economic considerations along with the environmental. Some add a 'quadruple' element to cover their own governance. This implies not only that councils add social and economic activities and measures to their thinking about sustainability, but that they also focus on how they engage with local communities and involve them in making decisions about future 'sustainability'.

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THE DRIVE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

This has also been part of a shift that has seen councils acknowledge that they need to think and act in partnerships. Individual councils are major players in local areas on sustainability issues and can make a significant impact through their planning role or in directly reducing their own water or energy use, for example. But to be effective in achieving greater sustainability they will need to operate in partnership with other local organisations. And providing leadership at the local level on sustainability issues can also mean educating or advising communities on the impacts of their activities and the alternatives when these are negative.

“AS ANYONE CLOSE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT WOULD ACKNOWLEDGE, THE PATTERN OF ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS IS VERY UNEVEN”

HOLDING BACK

With sustainability so clearly on the local government agenda and with this apparent wealth of activity, what remains to be done? The truthful answer is: a lot (and probably more than we can manage in the short term). As anyone close to local government would acknowledge, the pattern of activities and achievements is very uneven. While we could say with confidence that all councils in Australia are doing something to enhance or contribute to sustainability, most are not doing as much as they have planned or would intend.

There are a number of practical constraints. Major ones are resources, both human and financial, and the competing priorities they have to address. These are particularly acute for smaller and more isolated regional councils.

As a result, if you ask councils what the major challenges are in working on sustainability and what forms of support would assist them, as we have done recently, they reply that challenges are less about understanding the issues and making plans to address them and more to do with translating plans or objectives into action.

Councils tend to be looking for practical advice on the ‘how’ of achieving and promoting greater sustainability, rather than the ‘why’. Having access to examples and illustrations of what is practicable from other councils, particularly those of similar size and resources, is always welcomed, as is training to generally enhance the capacity of council staff to address the issues. And having or getting access to financial resources is often the key, which is why so many of the successful initiatives have been driven by funding provided by state or federal government.

One area where local government says it would like to learn more is how to measure and assess how well it is proceeding towards greater sustainability. Hence the importance of a recently completed guide for councils to the tools available for measuring their progress. The local government ‘Sustainability Tool Selector’ has been developed by the Institute of Sustainable Futures on behalf of the Urban Sustainability Support Alliance. It is being launched at a series of council workshops in NSW in March.

For local government then, the challenge is not to prepare the grand design or plan for sustainability; it is to provide tools, illustrations and resources to assist councils in taking appropriate steps, then having some sense of how well they are proceeding.

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