

PRACTICE

Planning for Sustainability in NSW Local Government

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Introduction

Local councils in the state of New South Wales (NSW) in Australia are starting to give serious consideration to how they can include 'sustainability' in their planning for the future. There is no statutory requirement to create a sustainability plan – and therefore no standard definition of what constitutes such a plan for local government in NSW. The same is true of the term 'sustainability', for which there is no standard or legislative definition. However, the NSW state division of Local Government Managers Australia (LGMA - a professional organization for council managers) has recently released a 'Sustainability Health Check' as a resource to assist councils in assessing their current performance and devising appropriate strategies and action plans for sustainability. In addition, several individual councils have used the opportunity provided by the state government's Urban Sustainability Program to make a first attempt at developing a sustainability plan.

This practice note reports on work undertaken by the Sydney-based Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) with three councils: Hunters Hill, a small council in the middle-ring suburbs of Sydney; Hawkesbury City, the largest council (by area) in metropolitan Sydney, situated on the Hawkesbury River approximately 50 kilometres north-west of the CBD; and Gosford City, on the NSW Central Coast midway between Sydney, where many of its residents travel to work, and the industrial city of Newcastle to the north. In this work the approach taken has been either to

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adopt the definition of sustainability used by the council already,² or to work with the council to establish a definition appropriate to its concerns and circumstances, rather than impose a notion of definition of sustainability from outside.

Hunters Hill and Hawkesbury

Both councils initiated their sustainability programs after receiving grant funding from the state government. The grant conditions and guidelines did not define what constitutes a sustainability plan, but left this up to individual councils to determine. This provided a high degree of flexibility for councils to approach the task of sustainability planning in different ways depending on local context and need. However, it also left room for a degree of confusion about what a sustainability plan might consist of and how councils should go about preparing one.

Broadly, sustainability planning could relate to either the council's own operations (governance and/or organisational functions), or its programs for the community (in any of its roles, including strategic land use planning, development control, provision of public works, regulation and enforcement of activities, provision of community services and provision of information). It might encompass both internal and external elements. The potential for confusion is exacerbated by the fact that a recent review of planning and reporting in local government, carried out by the NSW state department of local government in 2006/07, does not make reference to 'sustainability' plans in its description of either current or possible future planning and reporting models, although it does refer to a 'quadruple bottom line' and notes that some innovative councils have attempted to adopt sustainability frameworks as an overarching planning mechanism.

At both Hunters Hill and Hawkesbury there was an interest in discussing all these various ways in which sustainability might be relevant. Consequently the approach taken was a broad one, which aimed not to specify what particular approach to sustainability planning to take, but to assist each council to develop a strategy that was appropriate for its situation. There was also a desire in both councils for staff training and capacity building on core concepts of sustainability. At Hawkesbury the focus was on building the capacity of the strategic planning team to initiate a broader process within council, while at Hunters Hill, there was an interest in involving all staff early in the process, via a discussion about how sustainability might relate in practical terms to a diverse array of work areas.

Hawkesbury City Council had an existing commitment to 'sustainable and liveable communities' and 'sustainable development' in its draft strategic plan. Also, the council was already undertaking many activities that relate

² Where this has been informed by a range of commonly accepted sustainability principles and existing definitions.

to the various dimensions of sustainability. However, strategic planning staff identified a need to achieve a better integration of sustainability issues across council. In response, ISF worked with the strategic planning team to explore the concept of sustainability and how a sustainability framework might be applied at a strategic level within council.

Training and interactive workshops were used to help strategic planning staff understand some core sustainability concepts, and to develop a set of sustainability principles, objectives and approaches that suited the specific needs of the organisation. The workshops drew on aspects of the 2007 LGMA Sustainability Health Check, mentioned earlier, as a framework for reviewing strategic planning and corporate systems, processes and culture in relation to sustainability.

The report produced at the conclusion of this work provides a framework for sustainability planning at Hawkesbury City Council. It contains:

1. A series of **sustainability principles**. These are based on leading-edge thinking about sustainability, and can be used to guide a high-level strategic approach to sustainability at the council. They can also function as a 'check' on planning and decision-making: in other words, various options for action can be assessed according to whether they will effectively implement these principles.
2. A number of **sustainability objectives** for the council to work towards.
3. Suggested **strategic directions** for council. Tailored to the specific context of Hawkesbury City, these demonstrate a variety of approaches that the council might take in working towards the sustainability objectives.
4. A range of **implementation examples**. These are specific actions that could be taken under each of the strategic directions. The implementation options included are practical, workable examples, many of which are based on work undertaken elsewhere, both in the local government sector and beyond.

The report creates a strategic sustainability framework for Hawkesbury City Council and provides a set of appropriate objectives and suggested directions and implementation examples that would build on what already exists within the council. The strategic planning team will now seek endorsement of this framework by the elected councillors. Once endorsed, actions can be taken within the broad framework, however the precise details of implementation can be discussed internally to ensure that the implementation process is appropriate and realistic.

Hunters Hill Council took a slightly different approach. Council staff decided that as the smallest (by area) council in NSW they would design a very inclusive, 'bottom-up' process that involved every single staff member in the first phase. They also chose to use the whole of the LGMA Sustainability Health Check as a means of assessing current practice and future opportunities, and to inform the later development of a sustainability plan.

ISF designed and developed a staff training and engagement workshop for all council staff. The workshop had multiple objectives. Firstly, it aimed to help all staff understand the concept of sustainability, and its relevance to their own jobs. Secondly, it provided an opportunity for staff to be involved in and consulted about the sustainability planning process from the outset. Thirdly, it allowed council sustainability officers who would be leading the planning process to better understand how staff currently relate to issues of sustainability – this was useful in helping to inform the subsequent steps in the sustainability planning processes. In practice, the workshops were also a valuable opportunity to promote cross-team discussion on sustainability, allowing staff to prepare for the subsequent Health Check workshop.

Various interactive techniques and strategies were used in the workshops to help staff members think about the kind of future they would like to see in the Hunters Hill area. These visions were then linked to aspects of sustainability, and the various roles and functions of the council. Staff members were given an opportunity to brainstorm the ways in which sustainability might relate to their individual jobs, and to their day-to-day work, and to discuss what the challenges and opportunities might be in relation to implementing sustainability in their particular section of the council. Material was also presented that assisted people to understand the 'bigger picture' – explaining sustainability as a concept, and as a planning framework for local government.

Engaging all staff in issues of sustainability can be challenging. Sustainability can be conceptually difficult for people to grasp, and its relevance to roles across council – from planners to parks and maintenance staff – is not always understood. Further, not all staff are equally equipped to participate in strategic discussions of this kind. Some are not interested, or do not see what it could achieve, and others do not feel it is their responsibility to be involved in this way. The all-staff workshops ISF developed in collaboration with Hunters Hill Council perhaps highlighted these barriers as much as overcame them. Many staff did appreciate the inclusive approach, and the workshops did generate a range of ideas for strategic planning staff to consider as they plan the next steps of the process. However, it remains a significant challenge for the council to develop a sustainability plan that reflects this input, provides opportunities for innovation and implementation in all areas of the council's operations, and enables all staff to engage with it.

Gosford

Gosford is a large city of over 150,000 people. In 2007 the council worked with ISF to develop a suite of sustainability indicators to enable it to better track progress towards meeting the community's vision of what the area should be like in 2025.

Gosford is one of an increasing number of councils in Australia which have been adopting a 'triple bottom line' approach to their planning. This approach recognises the interconnectedness of economic, social and environmental objectives, and that achievements on one of these dimensions can impact on the others, either positively or negatively. Councils have also been acknowledging the difference between planning for the development of the local community and area, and planning and managing the operations of the council itself. In the wider community, the council is just one of a number of stakeholders, service providers and agencies. When councils begin to adopt sustainability or triple bottom line planning, they also need to adjust their approach to reporting. In particular they need to consider how best to communicate how well the area is performing to their local communities.

The objective of this project was to prepare high level, strategic, community indicators for the whole of the Gosford City area, which collectively would measure the progress of the area towards its vision for sustainability. The project drew on examples from the available literature of best practice approaches to indicator development and use in other organisations. Existing council indicators were also reviewed, in order that the information already held by the council and other local agencies, as well as the knowledge of council staff, could be put to best use.

The approach to sustainability taken in this project was framed by two overarching considerations. First, the definition of sustainability developed by Gosford City Council itself, which is that it involves "*meeting the needs of current and future generations through simultaneous environmental, social and economic improvement*" (Gosford City Council, *Sustainability Report 2005*). Second, the *Gosford Vision 2025* – a document developed by the council through extensive community consultation that expresses the Gosford community's aspirations for the future. The eight key focus areas (KFAs) in the vision provided a framework for the sustainability indicators. These are:

- Creating economic opportunity and employment
- Improving transportation and infrastructure
- Protecting the environment
- Strengthening local and regional identity
- Enhancing arts and culture
- Promoting health and safety
- Supporting families, youth and the elderly

- Expanding education and skills development.

In moving from these general statements of the preferred vision for the city to a suite of specific indicators that might track progress towards that vision, the project used a three-stage process (indicated in the diagram that follows).



Vision 2025 asks the very broad question ‘what do we want for the future?’ and provides an answer by grouping a wide range of issues under the KFAs. The first step was to adopt these KFAs as the structure for the indicator suite. The second step, before considering what indicators might align with each KFA, was to define the specific *outcomes* desired for each. This was done by collating the range of outcome statements found throughout *Vision 2025* and validating them with key council staff. If the vision statement provides a high level picture of ‘what would we like to see?’ the outcome statements provide the detail of what this will involve – which pathways will lead towards the vision. For example, the broad key focus area of ‘protecting the environment’ was translated into nine desired outcomes. These included ‘agricultural land is protected from development’; ‘Aboriginal cultural heritage sites are protected and managed’; and ‘air and water resources are protected’. Once these specific outcomes were established, it was possible to move to the third step – developing indicators that would track progress towards the outcomes.

A list of potential indicators was compiled from a mapping of the council's existing indicators across the range of its plans and reports, and this was augmented with other possible indicators either adapted from the relevant literature, inspired by examples of current practice in other organisations, or devised specifically by ISF.

The indicators were reviewed against a set of criteria developed for the project, and known by the first letters of each word as 'RMSIC'. Indicators were thus intended to be:

- **Relevant** – they tell a clear 'sustainability story', and address issues that are important to decision making
- **Measurable** – they use data that is readily available, accurate, and enables comparisons over time
- **Significant** – they contain information that penetrates to the 'heart of the matter'
- **Intelligible** – they can be easily comprehended by the general community, *and preferably*
- **Cross-cutting** – one indicator can provide information on multiple related concerns.

Using these criteria, the list of potential indicators was refined and the selected indicators were then validated and data sources checked at a series of workshops with the relevant council staff. The final report of the project describes a suite of sustainability indicators (below). For each recommended indicator a suitable measure or measures was suggested, as well as some alternative indicators that might be used if accessing or using the required data for the preferred indicator is too difficult. Many of the chosen indicators are 'cross cutting' which means that they reveal information about the movement towards or away from several of the *Vision 2025* KFAs, rather than just one.

Key Focus Area	Relevant indicators
Creating economic opportunity and employment	Education enrolment levels Volunteering levels Employment rate Local employment rate Growth in number of jobs Employment by industry Level of relative socio-economic disadvantage Method of travel to work
Improving transportation and infrastructure	Method of travel to work Water consumption Use of recycled water
Protecting the environment	Volunteering levels Employment rate (local) Method of travel to work Water consumption Use of recycled water Water quality Amount of bushland (remnant vegetation) Population and abundance of indicator species Waste to landfill Greenhouse gas emissions
Strengthening local and regional identity	Attendance / participation at arts/cultural events Population and abundance of indicator species Use of land for agricultural and horticultural production
Enhancing arts and culture strategies	Attendance / participation at arts/cultural events Aboriginal cultural heritage protection
Promoting health and safety strategies	Volunteering levels Method of travel to work Health of community Use of and satisfaction with human/community services
Supporting families, youth and the elderly	Education enrolment levels Volunteering levels Use of and satisfaction with human/community services Level of relative socio-economic disadvantage
Expanding education and skills development	Education enrolment levels Volunteering levels

For organisations of all kinds, sustainability indicators are both a practical monitoring tool and a valuable means of communicating progress to others. For local councils, if sustainability indicators are developed to clearly align with a community's vision and a set of agreed goals, they can be a highly effective way of not only informing the community about progress towards or away from those goals, but *engaging* them in the process of developing strategies and actions in response.

Sustainability planning: Some considerations

Based on our experience working with the councils described here, as well as on the wide range of other sustainability planning and organisational change work we have conducted, ISF suggests the following questions might be a useful starting point for councils embarking on sustainability planning:

Things to consider when embarking on sustainability planning in your organization

- Do people understand the key concepts? Will you need to first build staff capacity – either about sustainability in general, or about the state of issues in your local government area, or different ways to do sustainability planning?
- Do you have a shared understanding of what sustainability means for your organisation? Will you need to do some visioning about your preferred future? Can you agree on a set of sustainability principles? Who will be involved in developing these?
- How will you know which areas are most 'in need' of improvement? Will you base your decisions on an assessment of the social, environmental and economic status of your community and local government area? On some kind of industry benchmarking? On staff concerns? On community concerns? Or all of these? What information will you need?
- Are you looking at planning changes to the council's operations (how it does what it does) or also at its programs and deliverables to the community (what it does)?
- What will you do with the results of the planning that you do? Will there be a new or updated 'sustainability plan' document? Or will this thinking feed sustainability considerations and actions into other, existing plans (such as land use plans, strategic or corporate plans, an environmental management plan, an infrastructure plan)?
- How will the work you do on sustainability feed into the council's strategic and/or corporate plans – and is there a way to actually transform these plans into a sustainability plan (because good management is about delivering sustainability)?
- How will these strategic and corporate level plans for sustainability feed into the operational plans that departments, units and teams of council use to guide their daily and weekly activities?
- How will you assess whether the council is being successful in meeting its plans for moving towards sustainability? How will you report the council's progress to the community? What sorts of reporting will make most sense to and be of most interest to the community?