

Trying something else: Local Government Climate Change Mentor Pilot in Victoria

N Martin, S Gladigau, K Gosden

Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) Victoria

KEYWORDS

Local government, climate change impacts, embedding change, language.

1 Introduction

Local governments are at the forefront of delivering services to their Victorian communities. Many of their services and facilities are affected by climate change (for example, roads, infrastructure, emergency management, health and planning).

In 2010, the Victorian Government funded the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) to review Victorian local government climate risk management activities and identify any barriers or issues in planning for change. The project's final report *Supporting Victorian Local Government Manage Climate Risks and Plan for Change* (2011) found *three main barriers* to councils undertaking climate adaptation:

- A lack of understanding of how to undertake adaptation planning risk management (i.e. of current information and potential impacts).
- A perceived lack of understanding of climate risks and how to priorities adaptation
- A lack of resources (especially limiting for small rural and some urban councils).

2 Methods

A response to the final report findings was to establish a pilot project, known as the 'Local Government Climate Change Mentor Initiative'. Three Mentors were appointed from July 2014. They tested and adjusted the proposed approaches. The mentors tested the findings of the final report with staff from 78 of Victoria's 79 councils, state government, researchers, consultants and Greenhouse Alliances. Discussions have also been held with councillors. The mentors where possible spoke to staff from a range of disciplines within Council, reflecting the impacts of climate change are across all services of council.

The Mentor Initiative was iterative, flexible and identified approaches that did not duplicate work by other players such as Greenhouse alliances, Local Government Victoria, Victorian Sustainability Partnership Program being delivered through DELWP.

3 Findings and Argument

Through this engagement, the barriers identified in the 2011 MAV report were confirmed, with additional issues identified including that councils need:

1. easily accessible information (46%),
2. a whole-of-council approach rather than via environment staff (44%); and
3. case studies and practical examples written in language that relates to council services (23%).

Additional information gathered during the consultation in 2014-5 that informed the delivery of the initiative include:

- 21% of councils are struggling substantially with addressing climate change adaptation
- Climate adaptation work is primarily being undertaken within council's environment or sustainability program areas
- Many of the local government environment and sustainability positions are part time and project funded positions
- The language used to discuss climate change is acting as a barrier
- Climate science needs to be simplified to focus on the impacts the increase in temperature and changes in rainfall and severe weather events will have on local government services.

The Mentor Initiative

The activity phase of the pilot is now completed (end of June 2016). Based on the identified need for the pilot and extensive consultation by the mentors, four key priority actions were implemented:

- Training and capacity building for senior executives of councils across disciplines.
- Information hub (refreshed www.climatechange.vic.gov.au website).
- Acting as a conduit into policy making.
- Communications and engagement strategies to underpin the above.

Formal external evaluation of the Pilot is being completed.

Key lessons have included:

- the need to change the perception that climate change is an environmental management issue only of relevance to people working in environmental disciplines through focusing on the impacts climate change will have on the activities and services of local government, and other players;
- the importance of translating "policy speak" and "academic speak" into practical, pragmatic language;
- provide pragmatic examples of impacts as a way of making it real for the executive of councils;
- identify ways of adding value to council activities;
- provide and emphasize peer to peer learning; and
- recognize the excellent work that has already been done but perhaps not recognized as adaptation.

The location of the Mentor Initiative within DELWP's Climate Policy Branch provided an excellent opportunity to provide feedback and act as a conduit between local government and state government.

4 Conclusions

Ideally decision making within council operations, as with state government, should consider the impacts of climate change on the range of business decisions. The challenge is to make it as easy as possible. The experience of the Mentor Initiative has been that language is one of the key components of expanding the discussion, understanding and action.