

Friday 15 June 2012

Low carbon futures: Opportunities for local government

A discussion paper by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) has revealed that the federal government's Clean Energy Plan can reach further into residential and business communities by working with the local government's key strengths.

The paper, *Local Action for a Low Carbon Future* (June 2012), was prepared by the ACELG and the Council of Capital Cities Lord Mayors (CCCLM) to identify ways for the Federal Government to work more closely with local government in bringing about Australia's move to a low carbon future.

The paper sets out a policy position on the role local government can play in this, and the findings reflect a consensus view developed across a range of local government organisations.

Graham Sansom, Director of ACELG said: "There is an emerging view that local government's involvement in climate change policy and programs needs to be re-positioned. The recent heavy focus on adaptation, whilst justified, tends to be associated with negative messages around risks, planning restrictions and additional costs."

Lisa Scaffidi, Lord Mayor of Perth and CCCLM Chair added: "Cities have the opportunity and responsibility to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Tackling emissions in our cities can help meet Australia's national greenhouse targets through programs like City Switch, led by CCCLM."

Initiatives of rural and regional councils are also highlighted in the report, such as Parkes and Cowra (central NSW) and La Trobe Valley (Vic).

The research is a first step towards a national framework to promote ongoing consistent and concerted efforts by local councils, including provision of required information and guidance, and dissemination of best practice.

The findings also reveal that local government has had two decades of experience in responding to the challenges of moving to a low carbon future. In doing so, the sector has demonstrated four key strengths:

- **collaboration** (effectiveness in building partnerships and working collaboratively at multiple levels);
- **proximity** (councils connect frequently and directly with citizens, local businesses and a range of community stakeholders);
- **unlocking investment capital** (and embarking on innovative and transformative practices and projects); and
- **knowledge using local data** (councils have unique access to increasingly fine-grained land use and employment data to assist in carbon emission reductions).

One of the key messages from the paper is that local government can complement, supplement and amplify the actions of other levels of government in Australia's transition to a low carbon future. In this way, the role and activities of local government should be seen as part of a systemic community- and economy-wide approach towards low carbon futures.

Local councils can and do generate emissions reductions through more far-reaching actions such as working with private sector partners; community awareness and education, and, innovative urban planning and environmental design.

The discussion paper is the first significant output following an ACELG co-convened National Local Government Roundtable on Climate Change in May 2011. This event highlighted three immediate priorities:

- Develop nationally consistent frameworks and methods for use by local government in contributing to a low carbon future
- Provide a platform for sharing innovation and new ideas and creating collaboration between researchers, policy makers and practitioners
- Review how local government research-focused resources can be used to meet identified needs.

Since the Roundtable, ACELG has had further discussions with a number of key local government organisations (CCCLM, LGMA, ALGA) on how best to move forward and achieve the greatest impact. The ideas were also discussed at the recent ANZSOG-ACELG Excellence in Leadership program.

The discussion paper will be launched on Thursday 14 June at a seminar at the University of Technology, Sydney featuring Cheryl Thomas (Executive Director, the Council of Capital Cities Lord Mayors); Professor Tony Jackson (University of Dundee); and Chris Dunstan (Institute for Sustainable Futures). Event details: http://www.clg.uts.edu.au/newsandevents/events_2012.html#LOWCARBON

The paper is available for download from: www.acelg.org.au

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Attachment: 2 page summary of discussion paper.

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The discussion paper *Local Action for a Low Carbon Future* (June 2012) has been prepared by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) and the Council of Capital Cities Lord Mayors (CCCLM) to identify ways for the Federal Government to work more closely with local government in bringing about Australia's move to a low carbon future.¹

The paper reveals that by working with local government strengths, the Clean Energy Plan can reach further into residential and business communities, and the various streams can be supported more effectively and strategically within communities.

The four primary strengths of local government identified through the research are:

- effectiveness in building partnerships and working collaboratively at multiple levels
- proximity – this enables councils to connect frequently and directly with citizens, local businesses and a range of community stakeholders
- unlocking investment capital and embarking on innovative and transformative practices and projects
- unique access to increasingly fine-grained land use and employment data to assist in carbon emission reductions.

Case studies are drawn from urban and regional councils across the country to illuminate these strengths.

The paper is intended to generate further discussion across local government and initiate a dialogue between the federal government and local government about how, by working more collaboratively, the two sectors can help deliver a clean energy future for Australia. Through collaboration, greater low carbon gains could be made Australia-wide, thereby contributing to Australia's international commitments.

Creating a low carbon future with local government

The research uses both primary and secondary data from all levels of government to identify the capacity of local government in this field. It provides evidence of the common policy frameworks and motivations of local government for reducing carbon emissions and its strengths for helping to create a low carbon, clean energy future.

Australia's Clean Energy Plan intends to cut 159 million tonnes of carbon pollution between 2001 and 2020. The level of abatement achieved by the Local Government sector in 2008 alone indicates that up to 20% of this goal could be achieved by the federal and local government sectors working systematically on local infrastructure and within local communities.

Local government is already shouldering a contribution to reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions and will continue to do so. In the past, the sector has demonstrated its ability deliver substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, saving 18 million tonnes of CO₂-e in the decade to 2007/08. Moving forward, the local government sector has the potential to make a very significant contribution to achieving the Federal Government's reduction goal of 159 million tonnes of CO₂ by 2020.

Local government's contribution goes far beyond achieving emissions reductions from its own buildings, facilities and operations, and should not be cast solely or even primarily in terms of

¹ The paper was prepared by Hazel Storey, Associate of the UTS Centre of Local Government with Martin Brennan, CEO and Regional Director, ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability Oceania, Cheryl Thomas, Executive Director of the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors (CCCLM) and Stefanie Pillora, Program Manager Research at the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG).

'projects'. Rather, its role and activities should be seen as part of a *systemic* community- and economy-wide approach towards low carbon futures. As this paper has shown, local councils can and do generate emissions reductions through more far-reaching actions such as:

- working with private sector partners
- community awareness and education
- innovative urban planning and environmental design.

Maximising the benefits

Clearly, there is a huge opportunity for the Federal Government to work more closely with local government to encourage, facilitate and assist councils optimise their role in transitioning local communities to a low carbon future. However, the full benefits of Federal-local collaboration will only be achieved if mechanisms are put in place that foster ongoing and concerted joint action across all the key areas in which local government can make a substantial contribution.

Programs such as Community Energy Efficiency Program are welcome and can achieve some significant gains. However a project-based funding model has limitations: it is inherently selective rather than inclusive; it may not provide demonstrations of the full gamut of ways in which councils can act; smaller councils and lower profile projects may miss out; and widespread dissemination of the lessons learned is not automatic.

As shown in the case studies, relatively small investments by the Federal Government can unlock substantially more local government activity and could enable communities to have a bigger voice, through local government, in shaping the transition to a low carbon future. This requires a stronger focus on networking and shared learning.

As one approach, the potential of Low Carbon Australia Limited (LCAL) to have a stronger partnership with local government needs to be explored. Over the past few years LCAL has developed close ties with a number of leading edge councils – large and small – and has established a substantial body of knowledge and expertise in working with local government. Specific dissemination, networking and shared learning strategies could be added to existing federal programs. Another valuable initiative to underpin long term gains would be a nationally agreed methodology for measuring abatement.

Unlocking the local government strengths to advance the transformation to a clean energy future requires commitment from both the Federal and local government. Combining the current level of leadership for a clean energy future being demonstrated by the Federal Government with a collaborative approach to working with Local Government could further leverage a tangible clean energy future nationally and with its communities.