

Climate Ready Councils in the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance: A new journey begins

Author: Silvana Predebon
on behalf of the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance

Funded by ADAPT Loddon Mallee

December 2021

Contents

Climate Ready Councils in the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance: A new journey begins..	1
.....	1
Introduction.....	3
Method	4
Overview	4
Discussion	5
Representation of Information	5
Engaging the community	5
Findings: factors influencing approaches to community engagement.....	5
Findings: a spectrum of approaches.....	6
Findings: barriers or challenges to meaningful community engagement	7
Recommendations	8
Addressing climate change	9
Findings: Drivers for addressing climate change.....	9
Findings: Barriers / challenges for addressing climate change	9
Findings: Framing climate change.....	10
Findings: Resources on climate change.....	10
“Preparedness” for our changing climate	11
Recommendations	12
Conclusion.....	14

Introduction

All local government councils in Victoria are required to develop a Council Plan after a general election, to be valid for four years. The Council Plan must include the strategic direction of Council, strategic objectives, strategic actions, and strategic indicators, to guide the work of council and ensure it is undertaken in a cohesive manner.

The Victorian *Local Government Act 2020* introduced several “first time” reforms to the operations of local government, including a statutory obligation for councils to address climate change as a key governance principle in their Council Plans, and to involve their community in corporate planning processes. Councils are now required to work with the community through deliberative engagement activities to develop a ten year Community Vision, and to inform the content of the corresponding four year Council Plan, as a guide for council’s work with and for the community working towards the vision. The Community Vision can be reviewed every four years upon development of a new Council Plan, after each general election.

For several councils in the region of the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance (CVGA), the new requirements triggered a significant shift from earlier approaches to developing council plans, while for other councils it fast-tracked the next step in a journey that had already begun to meaningfully address climate change in partnership with their community.

For many residents the new legislation enabled them to participate in a democratic process at the local level. As noted by one participant in this project, it represented a formal shift from “expecting councils to do the work” to “influencing the work that councils do”

The Climate Ready Councils research project was undertaken through the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance (CVGA) with funding support from DELWP’s (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning) ADAPT Loddon Mallee Program to explore how councils in the region addressed climate change in development of their new Council Plans. In particular it sought to answer the question:

How (well) are councils addressing climate change in their council planning process to prepare for changed climate futures?

The word “well” is bracketed, as it was not the intention of the project to judge or score or rank councils on their adopted council plans or the process undertaken to develop them. Instead the project aims to assist councils in the ongoing process of improving the integration of climate change into council decision making across all functions of council.

Climate Ready Councils is a very timely and important project, as its findings will serve as a baseline in regards to the first suite of Council Plans to be developed under the new requirements of the Local Government Act 2020.

This report outlines the project and documents its outcomes.

Method

Overview

The project was conducted in two stages, to focus on two different perspectives regarding the development of Council Plans:

- the procedural aspects of developing a Council Plan, particularly the incorporation of climate change considerations into the planning process and the plan itself (with council officers as research participants), and
- the political aspects of addressing climate change in decision making more broadly (with councillors as research participants)

Both stages involved interviews with research participants and desk top research.

The 13 council areas in the CVGA region vary widely in terms of size and geography, population, demographics, local economy, and their vulnerability to impacts of climate change. Similarly, councils vary widely in terms of resources, capacity, governance, history of action on climate change and sustainability, and history of community engagement in corporate planning. Consequently, the contexts for conversations varied, and it was not possible to explore the work of each council from the same perspective. For this reason, and to protect the anonymity of staff and councillors involved in interviews, councils are identified by randomly allocated numbers rather than by name¹.

Part A: procedural

Council officers on the CVGA working group (mostly sustainability officers) provided names of colleagues leading the development of Council Plans in each council. Interviews were then undertaken across roles such as governance officers, communications officers, community engagement officers, and strategic planners.

Interviews with officers were conducted via zoom or phone calls with officers at nine councils, and via email correspondence with officers at three councils. No response was received from the contact officer at one council.

Appendix A shows the questions that guided interviews. The interviews were conducted in a semi structured manner, in that the framing or wording of questions was modified according to the role of the officer being interviewed, the information available on a council's website, and to account for information provided by officers as the discussion progressed.

Part B: political

During November 2021, after council plans had been adopted by councils, councillors from seven councils in the region were informally interviewed to gain an understanding of their experience in developing the new council plans, particularly in regards to addressing climate change.

¹ Councils are able to request their own data upon request.

Discussion

Representation of Information

The information presented in this section of the report is aggregated, and as noted above, councils are identified by a randomly assigned number rather than by name.

The findings of discussions are presented in two parts to reflect the new legislative requirements, for engaging the community in developing a new Council Plan, and for addressing climate change and sustainability as a key governance principle

Engaging the community

Findings: factors influencing approaches to community engagement

The approach taken to engage communities in the development of Council Plans (and other plans nominated in the *Local Government Act 2020*, namely the Community Vision, the Community Engagement Policy, the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan, the financial plan and the assets plan) varied widely amongst councils in the region.

The legislative requirements apply to all councils, but the interpretation of requirements, and how they were enacted, was determined by individual councils - as organisations, and as different groupings of elected representatives.

“As councils, we’re required to do the same things, but we do them different ways”
(councillor)

Factors influencing the approach undertaken by any one council to engage the community in the development of the council plan included:

- The understanding of the requirements amongst councillors and executive leadership teams, and their commitment to addressing the intention of the requirements
- Past experience of councillors and executive leadership teams in developing Council Plans, and in involving the community in corporate or strategic planning
- The level of staff resources within a council, in terms of both staff time allocated to developing Council Plans, and staff experience in community engagement and collaborative planning processes
- The resources available to ensure all sectors of the community can be involved in community consultation processes (through providing relevant information, facilitating workshops, translating information to different forms of media and in different languages, etc.)
- The time available - and the timeframe allocated - to the plan development process, for both the planning and implementation of community engagement processes

- The level of community involvement in council matters more generally, and how effective or influential a community (or sector(s) of the community) may be in regards to decision making by councils

Findings: a spectrum of approaches

While no formal assessment was undertaken to categorise councils according to their approach to community engagement, conversations indicated that councils could be broadly placed into three groupings in regards to the breadth and depth of community engagement undertaken in developing the Council Plan:

1. Forming a council-community collaboration. Several officers interviewed recognised the intent of the new legislative requirement for council to engage more meaningfully with the community, and viewed the requirements for community engagement as an opportunity to commence a long-term collaborative council-community partnership in planning for the future of the municipality. They recognised the development of the new Council Plan as an opportunity for genuine co-design or deliberative democracy, and ensured that as many avenues as possible were made available to encourage as many sectors of the community as possible to be involved in the process of developing the Council Plan.

The councils in this group provided a high level of transparency about the community engagement process, making a range of resources available to the wider community (mostly online). Resources included fact sheets and references about the council's program and services, reports on outcomes from consultations, survey findings, and videos to encourage involvement, explain the planning process or show highlights from community engagement activities like workshops.

2. Building relationships. Most councils invested as much as resources allowed in community engagement, in an aim to move towards a more collaborative approach to long-term planning than had previously been experienced by either the council or the community. However, while being committed to the intent of the legislative requirements for community engagement and aiming to provide several avenues for engagement, some councils experienced a lower level of staff time and / or capacity, so may not have been able to engage as deeply with the community as they wished to. Nonetheless, efforts were made to meaningfully engage with the community not only for purposes of developing the Council Plan, but more broadly to build trust in council amongst the community
3. Meeting the requirements. The approach undertaken by the very few councils in this grouping was more limited, usually due to limited resources and capacity within the council, both in terms of council staff, and in funds to employ external expertise to assist in the engagement process. A narrower view about the purpose of community engagement was also common amongst this minority group of councils. Nonetheless, with the exception of one council, several means of engagement were employed, and the community had opportunity to provide input to the Council Plan.

Several councils employed engaging marketing-type communications or brandings for the development of their council plans to encourage community involvement. In comparison to the standard “Have Your Say” banner commonly used by councils, creative project titles were used by some councils (for example, “Growing Gannawarra”, “Shaping the Pyrenees”, “Imagine Greater Bendigo”) with a logo or icon, and would have likely attracted more interest amongst residents in planning for the future of their municipality.

Findings: barriers or challenges to meaningful community engagement

Several officers commented that while the requirement for community engagement was imposed by the state government, it was councils who had to inform their community about the legislative requirement as a driver for engaging them in the development of the Council Plan.

Two key challenges are noted in relation to this point:

- **Short timeframes** provided little opportunity to build an understanding about deliberative democracy across the community, or to build a common understanding of sustainability and what it might look like for the particular council area. The short timeframes also restricted the amount of detailed information that could be provided to the community about overarching matters like climate change, and limited time for the community to understand the information. As noted by several officers, the community needs to have the information made available to them to be able to provide meaningful input at a deeper level of the engagement process
- **Limited resources and capacity** within councils meant taking “short cuts”, or not being able to bring external expertise to assist in the design and / or delivery of the engagement process. Two officers mentioned that the state government should ensure adequate resources are available to councils, in the form of staff or funds to enable consultants to be commissioned. An additional officer also mentioned that funds to allocate to costs of media (print, social media, ads on local TV, podcasts on local radio, etc) would have been helpful

A challenge faced by many councils related to the aim of ensuring that all viewpoints of the community are presented and addressed. Many residents in many sectors of the community are focussed on day-to-day matters and have limited understanding or experience about the potential to influence long term planning for their local council area. Again, the limited availability of time and resources to engage these residents in conversations proved to be a challenge for several councils in the region. As a post-script to the research project, information supporting this concern is noted in the text box below:

Sustainability Victoria's 2017 Local Government Energy Saver program targeted 22 councils that were identified as "resource constrained". Seven of these councils are in the CVGA region (councils 1,2,3,7,8,9, and 11).

From a community perspective, 12 of the 13 councils in the region rated below the socio-economic index for areas (SEIFA) in 2016. As disadvantaged sectors of the community may be less likely than others to participate in community engagement or strategic planning processes, a good council and cross community understanding of the causes and impacts of the low ratings is essential to enable planning for the future of a local government area and its people in an inclusive manner.

A final challenge noted by one officer and one councillor (at two different councils) is the responsibility placed on the community to define a ten year vision for their municipality, while informing the work of current elected representatives.

"It's a big ask for the community panel to set a ten year vision, they're committing future leaders to our current thinking" (council officer)

Recommendations

Officers were asked about additional resources and support that would have helped them in the development of the Council Plan in regards to community engagement. Suggestions included:

- **Build democracy.** One officer suggested a statewide campaign to raise awareness in the wider community about the new Local Government Act as promoting democracy would have been a good way to encourage the broader public to become more engaged with their local councillors and council staff, and to influence the future of their municipality.
- The state government to proactively **provide training and support for deliberative engagement**, including its purpose, and ways to conduct effective deliberative engagement to account for low or dispersed populations, geographical and socio-economic and cultural diversity, and limited exposure or involvement in public decision making. A few councils provided "explainers" on their websites, or videos of mayors encouraging community involvement in the planning process, however, similar to the first recommendation, it was also noted that the state legislative requirement for deliberative engagement could have been better promoted by the state government.
- One officer suggested that **establishing a peer support group** would have been useful, especially in regional areas where some small rural shires have few staff and limited access to peers who can be "sounding boards" for sharing experiences and resources relevant to community engagement in corporate planning processes. A regional forum may best be facilitated by staff in a state government regional office, or a peak body like the Municipal Association of Victoria.
- **Build a common understanding of sustainability** and inform the community about the causes and impacts of climate change and forecasts for the region, to facilitate meaningful discussions about planning for the future

- The resource constrained councils could **jointly advocate for more resources** to assist in future community engagement programs.

Addressing climate change

Findings: Drivers for addressing climate change

Discussions indicated a general acceptance that acting on climate change is a valid role for local councils, both in terms of reducing emissions, and in adapting processes and programs to account for future climate scenarios. However, the degree to which different drivers influenced how councils approached this role, and to what degree the role was embraced, varied widely.

“Councils have an obligation to the community and to the future to do everything they can to address climate change” (councillor)

The key drivers for addressing climate change in council plans included:

- legislative requirements
- corporate risk management
- extreme weather events, and fluctuations in water supply
- councillor(s) interest in climate change action
- community interest(s) in climate change action
- community expectations for councils to take a leading role in climate change action

A shift over time in the relative impact of drivers on influencing the incorporation of climate change in council planning was noted by several councils. The only common theme in this regard was the significance of the new legislative requirements as a driver.

Another driver for action on climate change was the CVGA, with several councillors and officers noting that they would not have been able to achieve what they have achieved without the collaborative approach to action by the CVGA - for infrastructure (investigations through to installations), renewable energy procurement and advocacy.

Findings: Barriers / challenges for addressing climate change

Some common themes emerged in conversations in regards to the challenges faced by councils in addressing climate change:

- awareness, understanding, and time to discuss and **utilise the information and resources related to climate change** (forecasts, guidelines on addressing climate risk, guidelines on addressing impacts of climate change on public health, etc, etc)
- **“non acceptance” of human-induced climate change**, and our responsibility in addressing climate change, both in some sectors in rural and regional communities and some sectors of larger regional towns

- **a short term focus or limited capacity** - many people are focussed on matters in their own day-to-day lives, and unable to contribute to planning for the future of their community
- **constraints in the planning scheme**, in regards to land use, land development and the built form
- **funds and resources**: Two councillors noted that while limited funds and resources are a barrier to taking action, they can also serve to be a driver for “silent action”, for example, advocating for change at a higher level (like upgrades to the distribution network, amendments to the planning scheme or building code, and incentives for transitioning away from fossil fuels) or “behind the scenes” action like divesting funds or requiring providers of services or goods to meet sustainability criteria.
- **capacity or willingness in council** (as a whole organisation) to shift budget priorities and make preparedness for climate change a key priority, for example, to help buffer the impacts and recovery costs of extreme weather events

Findings: Framing climate change

Council officers also acknowledged that the framing of climate change in discussions amongst members of Executive or Senior Leadership Teams may vary and change over time, often in response to concerns expressed by councillors and / or members of the community.

The relative impact of changed climatic conditions on different sectors of the community also influence how climate change is framed by councils. For example, a lake in one municipal area provides several benefits, including recreational opportunities for residents and visitors and the associated physical and mental wellbeing of local residents, wildlife habitat, and a reserve water supply for parklands and landscaping. While the projected reduced rainfall for that area will impact agricultural activity in the shire, there appears to be a greater community interest in retaining water in the lake rather than making water available for agriculture and towns in the shire. In this instance, conversations around the relative importance of community values and action required to retain those values may be easier for residents to connect to and engage with than broader conversations about climate change.

In councils that had experienced floods or fires or severe storms in recent years, climate change could be viewed in the context of community preparedness for or resilience to extreme weather events. The focus was more on providing information about what to do in the event of an emergency rather than about the increasing likelihood of events occurring, or the need for action to address climate change as a causal factor.

Findings: Resources on climate change

Officers were asked about the use of published information on addressing climate change in developing council plans, specifically:

- The *Victorian Climate Projections (VCP) 2019 (Loddon Campaspe and Mallee)*
- Tackling Climate Change and its impacts on health through municipal public health and wellbeing planning: guidance for local government 2020

- *Local Government Roles and Responsibilities for Adaptation under Victorian Legislation: Guidance for decision-makers*
- Embedding action on climate change in your Council Plan

Awareness about and use of the resources in developing council plans varied amongst councils. Of the resources listed above, the guidance on *Tackling Climate Change and its impacts on health through municipal public health and wellbeing planning* was the most utilised reference document. Several people noted that although resources are there, the organisational capacity to utilise them and apply the content in the planning process may be limited, or key decision makers may not recognise the value of the resources. The tight timeframe for developing council plans was also noted as a challenge in this regard.

Officers at two councils noted that resources provided through the ADAPT Loddon Mallee program were useful, especially the climate conversation cards.

“Preparedness” for our changing climate

A key aim of this project was to identify the level of preparedness amongst councils in the region for our changed climate scenarios, based on the adopted council plans. Due to many differences in the local government areas and their councils across the region, and in the presentation of adopted plans, it was difficult to define criteria that could be equally applied to all councils.

The How Well Are We Adapting (HWAWA) framework aims to measure preparedness across a council, via a comprehensive checklist for seven domains within councils:

- Leadership engagement
- Adaptation knowledge
- Strategic response
- Organisational culture
- Adaptation governance
- Collaboration
- Integration

The scope of the CVGA study did not allow for the HWAWA framework and criteria to be interpreted to the context of council plans, or for the seven domains to be explored with a wider range of officers and decision makers.

Instead, for the purposes of this project, criteria to assess “preparedness” were defined based on the project officer’s experience, and to try to reflect the different ways that climate change may be addressed in the Council Plan.

Table 1 below provides an indication of preparedness, based on a simple Y or N response to “criteria”. It should be noted however, that this is indicative, with many explanations behind a Y or N that could not be documented in this report. For example, not all council plans listed actions or included first year action plans (hence a response of N / A), and while a council plan may not have referenced climate forecasts, it may have referred to the impacts or challenges of climate change from another perspective, like a shift in agricultural production.

Table 1 aims to serve as a baseline or reference point, listing criteria that can serve as prompts in the development of future Council Plans and related work of councils as they become increasingly climate ready. No one criteria is any more important than others, although the second criteria (noting climate change as a key priority in the council plan) serves as both a trigger and rationale for addressing climate change in other plans and works of council.

As noted by both officers and councillors, a key challenge to councils is to match the intent for addressing climate change as a key priority with resources and action in all functions of council, requiring a big shift in making decisions and developing and implementing plans.

Recommendations

The discussion and desktop assessment undertaken in this project indicate that some council plans in the region provide a good foundation for ensuring their councils become increasingly climate ready, while other plans have scope to more comprehensively address climate to provide stronger direction for incorporating and embedding climate change into the work of council.

From the Council Plan, the challenge to councils is two-fold:

- To ensure that plans and operations of council are integrated so that climate change can be consistently addressed as a key governance principle across all work of council
- To embed climate change considerations into procedures and processes, thereby creating a culture of climate readiness across the organisation

Supporting this work through the allocation of resources will then enable councils to lead their community in becoming climate ready.

From perspective of this baseline study, three recommendations are proposed to the CVGA:

- Promote the findings and outcomes of this work to councils, to state government, and to local government peak organisations
- Conduct a mid term review, with a broader scope that includes investigation of key corporate plans (like financial plans, assets plans, strategic resource plans, procurement policies and reporting frameworks). The review should seek to evaluate how different elements identified in Table 1 did or didn't improve climate change considerations across council decision making.
- Promote the findings of the review and any related work undertaken during the current council term to staff and councillors in 2024, to inform the preparation of the next suite of council plans.

Lastly, in keeping with the intent of the Local Government Act for councils to work in collaboration with the community, there is an implication that councils will continue to provide relevant information in a transparent manner to enable meaningful community discussions and input to the work of council on an ongoing basis.

Table 1: OVERVIEW OF COUNCIL PLANS: level of preparedness

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
climate change and / or sustainability is acknowledged in the community vision	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y
climate change noted as a key priority in the Council Plan	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
climate change is referenced in a general priority for environment or sustainability	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Council Plan includes actions for climate mitigation / emissions reduction	Y	Y	N /A	Y	Y	Y	N	N /A	N	Y	N	N /A	Y
Council Plan has actions for climate adaptation / community resilience	Y	Y	N /A	Y	Y	N	Y	N /A	N	Y	N	N /A	Y
Council Plan has actions that help address climate change from another perspective (EG risk management)	Y	Y	N /A	Y	Y	N	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y	N /A	Y
Council Plan demonstrates sustainability and / or climate change has been considered as a key governance principle	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Council Plan demonstrates that climate change action is being integrated across functions of Council	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y
climate change is addressed in MPHWP (within or separate to council plan)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y
Climate forecasts or scenarios are noted or referenced in the Council Plan	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y

NOTE: Three councils in the region adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and demonstrated the links between strategic actions in their council Plans and the 17 SDGs. The adoption of this universal framework can be interpreted as a commitment by those councils to address sustainability as a key governance principle in their work

Conclusion

The Victorian *Local Government Act 2020* marked the first time that councils were required to both address climate change as a key governance principle and to involve the community in the development of the key strategic document, the Council Plan. Together the requirements represent the first step in a new direction for local government as the level of governance closest to the community. The elected representatives, the council as an administrative organisation, and the community have a shared mandate to shape the future of the municipality in a collaborative manner.

The challenge presented to newly elected councils to meet the new statutory requirements, in amongst the many challenges posed by the global pandemic and extreme weather events like the storms in central Victoria in June 2021, inevitably means that the process of developing the new Council Plan, and the document itself, was unlikely to be the best it could be. Regardless, the resulting plans provide a great foundation for councils and the community to take the next steps together in their journeys towards realising their ten year visions and increasing the sustainability of the region.

“There is no down side to taking whatever action we can on climate change”
(councillor)

APPENDIX 1: Questions for discussions / interviews with officers in CVGA councils

Q1. Please outline the approach your council is taking to develop its new Council Plan, noting key project stages and timelines.

Q2a. How many staff in your council are involved in developing the new Council Plan, and from what areas of council are they?

Q2b. Are consultants being employed to assist in the development of your new council plan? IF YES - please state which component(s) of the council planning process will be led or supported by consultants

Q3a. To what degree do you think has Exec / Council considered climate change in development of the new Council Plan. Please rank from 1 to 5 (not at all to completely)

Q3b. How important do you think it is for climate change to be embedded into the Council Plan? Please outline why.

Q3c. Have you been involved in the development of earlier council plans at Council? IF YES:-

How has Council's position on climate change shifted in that time?

What do you see as the key drivers for including climate change now compared to four years ago?

Q4a. Please outline how community engagement is being undertaken to inform the development of new council plans (EG focus groups, citizen's assembly, shire-wide survey, etc)

Q4b. What information / materials are being provided to the community to facilitate meaningful community engagement and input into the new Council Plan, particularly in regards to climate change?

Q5. How has the recently produced guide *Embedding action on climate change in your Council Plan* <https://www.naga.org.au/council-plans.html> been employed in the development of your new council plan?

Q6. Please indicate if state government guidance notes and climate forecast data been used to inform the content of your new Council Plan:

	YES	NO
<i>Victorian Climate Projections (VCP) 2019 (Loddon Campaspe and Mallee)</i> https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/adapting-to-climate-change-impacts/victorian-climate-projections-2019		

Local Government Roles and Responsibilities for Adaptation under Victorian Legislation: Guidance for decision-makers https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/information-and-resources/climate-change-adaptation-resources		
Tackling Climate Change and its impacts on public health through municipal public health and wellbeing planning: guidance for local government 2020 https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/policiesandguidelines/tackling-climate-change-mphwp-guidance-local-gov-pdf		
OTHER – please specify:		

Q7. What additional information or resources would have assisted you to address climate change considerations in developing the new Council Plan?

Q8. Please add any final comments about your experience in developing a Council Plan in accordance with requirements under the new Local Government Act