

Increasing Resilience to Climate Change in the Western Sydney Region: An Analysis of Local Council Strategies for Climate, Health, and Wellbeing

Nicky Morrison (Western Sydney University), Erica McIntyre (Western Sydney University), Nathan Reynolds (Western Sydney University) and Patrick Harris (UNSW)

Background

Living with the impacts of climate change is one of the greatest challenges to public health. These impacts have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted the importance of urban design in promoting health and wellbeing and reducing inequities.

Climate change is considered a critical challenge for all levels of government. These challenges and impacts are experienced most acutely at the local level of government as they support their communities during and after natural disasters, and manage their assets and infrastructure, creating compounding associated costs.

The focus of this research is on Western Sydney region, one of the fastest growing areas in Australia, spanning eight Local Government Areas (Blue Mountains, Camden, Campbelltown, Fairfield, Hawkesbury, Liverpool, Penrith, Wollondilly). The region has also been hit by a succession of shocks and stresses including natural disasters and the global pandemic.

Given the scale and significance of climate change impacts in Western Sydney, a long-term approach to planning in this region is essential to ensure we plan healthy cities that prioritise climate change adaptation and mitigation. Our research aimed to identify how the eight councils have addressed climate risk and resilience, and to determine the barrier and enablers to planning, implementing, and evaluating related strategies across the Western Sydney region.

Method

We focused on understanding the professional and organisational processes that local councils use when planning, implementing, and evaluating climate and health resilience policy and strategies.

We audited 146 council documents and conducted online interview with 22 stakeholders from each of the eight councils. The council documents reviewed included core plans and strategies developed by Councils as part of the regulatory and legislative responsibilities (e.g., Local Strategic Planning Statements, Local Environmental Plans, Development Control Plans), and guidance documents that were informed by these.

The stakeholders we interviewed had key roles in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of community health and wellbeing and climate risk and resilience strategies within each council. The interviews were transcribed and thematically

analysed. Themes were identified a-priori to meet the objectives of the study with additional themes and links between concepts developed during analysis.

Key Findings

Our document analysis found that all eight councils were incorporating climate change risk and resilience policies and strategies within their planning documents to varying degrees. The stakeholders interviewed across all councils expressed an understanding of the need for climate change risk and resilience strategies and a desire to do more, however, identified several barriers to achieving this.

Working in silos was an important barrier to effective collaboration both within councils and externally with state government departments and other organisations such as local health districts. Duplication of work across councils was occurring due to lack of collaboration between councils, which was described as frustrating given scarce funding and other resources. Examples of successful collaborations were described within council, or with other councils with similar needs, that have led to successful strategies to address resilience to climate impacts.

Lack of collaboration and consultation with state government departments was considered a barrier to ensuring good state planning policy that considers the unique needs of local government. Councils can find it difficult to implement state planning policies and ensure they achieve their own sustainability or climate risk and resilience related strategic goals. A disconnect was described between NSW Government priorities and the budget and election cycles of councils that pull resources away from their core business and prevent them from implementing their own strategies. For example, the need to respond to NSW Government priorities has led to delays in updating outdated Development Control Plans.

It was perceived that NSW Government Departments were also working in silos when developing planning policy. Inconsistencies between the different NSW Government Department's strategies make it difficult for councils to implement their planning strategies focused on climate risk. Early collaboration with NSW Government and other stakeholders for infrastructure and development planning was described as an important solution to being able to take a more holistic approach to implementing initiatives with consideration of environmental and economic outcomes.

Overall, there was agreement for the need to clarify links between climate risk and impacts on health within local council strategies and plans, breakdown working in silos, strengthen and enable collaborations within councils and externally with state government and other organisations such as local health districts, and to share knowledge and resources. Alignment of NSW Government deadlines for responding to new strategies and policy developments with council election cycles and budgeting was suggested as a solution that would help councils implement climate risk and resilience related strategies.

Discussion

Our research shows that local councils are acting on climate change risk and resilience across the Western Sydney region. Despite this, there is a desire across the councils to do more and an urgent need to remove barriers within planning and political systems. Consistent with recent findings from the Climate Council of Australia (2021), these barriers are preventing local councils from implementing long-term strategic development needed to address climate change impacts on health and wellbeing in the Western Sydney Region.

An evidence-based approach to planning policy is needed at all levels of government. This will ensure a shared understanding of climate change risks and opportunities. Ensuring state priorities do not undermine local action, overcoming funding barriers and changing political mindsets remain the key challenges. Local governments need to advocate for State and Federal governments to implement strong environmental and emissions reduction policies and provide consistent guidance to protect the health and wellbeing of their communities.

The implementation of NSW planning policies and strategies aim to address climate risk and create healthy liveable cities. However, clearer coordination and leadership is needed, particularly from State Government whose growth priorities, for instance for more housing, can undermine the actions of local council's focussed on climate and health and their own climate risk policies, such as increasing green space.

Reactive service provision and disaster management are preventing local government from implementing long-term climate change risk and resilience strategies. Direction and support for strategic planning should be prioritised by State government. Resources need to be diverted to long term cross council planning, capacity building and collaboration with other sectors and agencies. This will enable councils to adopt climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies that promote the health and wellbeing of their communities and address inequity.

Project Partners

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Our full research report can be found at : <https://doi.org/10.26183/7fen-fy59>