

NCCARF Conference - Panel session 5

Gold Coast Convention Centre

Tuesday - 30 September 2014

1:30pm - 3:00pm

Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to attend this very important event.

I am here in my capacity as President of the Australian Local Government Association or ALGA. ALGA represents the interests of local government at a national level. It is a federated body of state and territory local government associations. Through that membership ALGA represents the interests of around 560 local government authorities across Australia.

I am also here however, as Mayor of the City of Marion in Adelaide, and in that role, I have a strong appreciation of the needs of local communities when it comes to dealing with crucial matters of infrastructure, environmental and resource management.

ALGA, as the national peak body for local government also engages in inter-governmental discussions through formal channels such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as well informal ones across a wide range of issues of national interest. Many of those issues are of concern to those of us in the room today.

The title of this session is "Delivering on the Ground Actions: Moving out of the Planning Phase" but let me pose this question, at what point does the planning phase end? Some have the view that local government planning is just a tick, flick and that's it. Personally, I believe that the planning work that councils undertake is much more of a dynamic process than the title might suggest. Councils

need to be able to respond to new information and evidence, so in many ways, the significant planning responsibilities that councils possess remain ongoing. So I would argue we actually need to remain incredibly vigilant about planning, it is as necessary as any other tangible products output that is required to address adaptation. But I am the first to acknowledge that planning without action will not get us anywhere.

I believe that unless we ensure a high-quality evidence base to assist in making decisions and a concerted effort in developing local and regional adaptation and implementation plans, then we will not have done the job we need to, to protect people, property and infrastructure from the effects of our changing climate.

But to do this local government and other actors need support. Importantly, councils need consistent and coherent state and national frameworks to work within. Local decision making, based on local needs does need to align with broader policy directions.

Another area of support is access to quality information and good advice. One of the more important issues for councils, when they are deliberating on current development decisions is to consider the risks and future impacts of climate change. As all of us in this room know, climate science is constantly being refined as we learn more about its true impacts. This has knock-on effects for those who are responsible for making the decisions when it comes to what is built where. As the climate threat has become more apparent over recent years, the responsibility to make decisions related to property rights - e.g. whether a person can or cannot build in a particular spot on their land - has become increasingly complex.

One of the concerns raised by many councils is about the risk of legal action against them for building and development decisions made (sometimes many years ago), at a time when the collective knowledge on climate risk was limited at best.

In 2011, ALGA commissioned Baker and MacKenzie to undertake a thorough analysis of existing planning laws in each state, when it comes to the liability of councils, after having made good-faith planning decisions.

The key message from the Baker and Mackenzie report is that as long as councils have utilised the best available evidence and acted in good-faith, then they have fulfilled their responsibility. While that appears a simple solution to the concerns councils have, it brings into stark focus, the need to ensure councils are indeed using the best available evidence.

The experience, particularly here in Queensland has taught us that we cannot rest and assume that the information we have from five or ten years ago is still valid. Many places we expected to be impacted by a once in a 100-year flood, are now vulnerable to one every 20 years. While it is unfortunate that it took events like the flooding in Queensland in 2011 and 2012, or the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria to turn the spotlight on this issue. It is, however, good to see all levels of government putting more focus and resourcing into risk mitigation.

As I mentioned, climate change science is continually developing and our information base is growing. The data councils have over decades is a valuable resource, but many are without the ability to analyse that information and synthesize it into tangible products. This is the value of research consortiums like NCCARF and others and why we need to support them.

So how does this all come together? In this short time available the word I want to concentrate on is collaboration. Those who come from different fields might find what I'm about to say perhaps, perplexing, but it is what I believe. The challenge of adaptation is not just the physical and environmental, it can have long-term social and economic impacts. It can affect every facet of community life.

The tangible work of best-evidence, applied in good-faith, might well be a better protected coastal-road, it might be re-enforcing sea-walls and beachfronts, but it might be also putting in place the strategies to deal with those economic and social pressures. What happens to agricultural areas during period of prolonged drought? It impacts everyone and everything.

An example of this increased collaboration is one from my home state of South Australia. Some of you may have heard of the 'Resilient South' initiative. This is a collection of four connected coastal councils, Onkaparinga, Holdfast Bay, Mitcham and my own council of Marion. This program recognises the realities of the consequences of climate change. Climate change does not respect borders and so the more we do to address those mutual challenges, the better placed we all will be.

This initiative started last year and saw a number of events as well as councils sharing knowledge and resources, with the intention of delivering a comprehensive plan to deal with adaptation needs across the region. I was very pleased to see this adaptation plan released in July this year. It does deal with many elements you would expect in a plan of this kind such as mapping, biodiversity and water management. However, it also dealt with issues that address the impacts on the people who live in our communities, such as emergency management, assisting vulnerable people and how to assist local businesses. The plan is this comprehensive because the impacts of climate change are wide-spread and will affect every part of our communities.

The impacts of climate change are not limited to the boundaries of councils and the effects cannot be addressed by any one single council. A broader approach involving state and national governments is needed.

From an ALGA perspective it is regrettable that there is no longer an effective ministerial forum, involving with all levels of government including local government, to deal specifically with environment policy matters. For several decades the COAG Standing Council for Environment and Water, and before it, the Australian and New Zealand Environment Council and predecessor council was an effective forum for Ministers and the President of ALGA to consider matters of national importance and work collaboratively on policy alignment and sometime joint funding initiatives that were beyond the financial capacity of an individual jurisdiction.

But I make the point, intergovernmental collaboration - particularly policy alignment (at a landscape scale) and funding are absolutely critical to successful environmental outcomes.

So I say this. It is, from my point of view, important that governments at all levels innovate and think about new ways of collaborating on environmental issues. I have said we no longer have a specific Ministerial Council on Environment, but I have also said that intergovernmental collaboration is critical. So my challenge to governments at all levels is to develop new ways - effective ways to work together to align policy and funding for the benefit of the environment and local communities. It might be through multi-lateral agreements including local government. It might be better and clearer delegations and financial transfers. But I suspect that it will always require dialogue between Ministers and between officials.

I will sound this note of caution. With each debate over climate change, whether over the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, the Carbon Price or now, over Direct Action, the focus is on emissions reduction. This is obviously a primary driver to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, but mitigation remains only one facet of addressing climate change. The discussion about adaptation is

continually drowned out by that focus on mitigation. Now, some might say that's a good thing. The issue is less politically volatile. But the climate debate needs to be able to chew gum and walk at the same time. I urge those who are concerned about adaptation to continue the argument and to keep it squarely in the political and public consciousness.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by noting that while the challenges we face are wide-ranging and significant, so are the opportunities. Adaptation is indeed a complex issue, especially for local government.

I believe that the planning process is actually an ongoing one. It demands that local government is able to access new information and respond accordingly.

It is that need for accurate information that often poses the greatest challenge to councils, not only in making one-off decisions, but in developing long-term strategies that reflect the nature and scope of the climate challenge.

We know that local government's experience is valuable and expansive. We are, however, always mindful of issues that remain unsolved, these are often the most challenging. I believe that the way to address the challenges of climate change, but adaptation in particular is to increase our collaboration, share knowledge and experience, resources and work together. This is a challenge for all levels of government but it requires the continued work of bodies like NCCARF to bring new information to light and I look forward to your future achievements.

Thank you very much.