

CACE Council Fact Sheet #1

How councils can lead in the climate emergency

Community Action in the Climate Emergency V1.5 Last edited 19 February 2019

Why climate emergency?

Using the term climate emergency recognises that the Earth has reached key climate tipping points and that incremental action, i.e. gradual reduction of emissions over several decades, is no longer a reasonable course of action if we want a future for ourselves and our children. For a viable future the world needs to go to net negative emissions as soon as possible. This will require:

- Zero emissions across all sectors as soon as possible ([Beyond Zero Emissions](#) and others¹ have developed the transition plans mapping how this can occur).
- Drawing down excess greenhouse gases on an 'industrial' scale using various strategies²
- Whatever else it takes to create cooling fast.

The degree of investment required for this to occur at the required scale and speed doesn't work with a business-as-usual or market-signals approach. We need to legislate and mobilise resources similar to the level of directed investment that occurred during WWII.

What has happened to date?

In November 2016, a suburban Melbourne council, Darebin Council, Victoria, unanimously passed a motion to declare a climate emergency. Since then over **350 councils** across four countries have joined Darebin, including Los Angeles, Vancouver, and Bristol City Councils. A current list of councils is [here](#). Most of these councils have committed to net zero emissions community wide in around 10 years. They are developing plans and linking with other climate emergency councils, universities and their communities to innovate and build economies of scale for emissions reduction and drawdown.

Why local government?

With both state and national governments failing to stop let alone reverse global warming, we need to make progress where it can be made – at the third level of government. Ultimately, state and national governments will have to pick up the baton and pull their regulatory and economic levers to help reverse global warming. Councils cannot reverse global warming by themselves but they can get the ball rolling.

Hence **the most important action of councils** is to build pressure on higher levels of government for emergency action through making a climate emergency declaration, direct advocacy and building community pressure through education about the emergency and its solutions.

This advocacy must be backed up by meaningful emergency action on the council's community-wide emissions. For example,

- **Roads** – cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, free parking and charging for zero emissions vehicles,
- **Rates** – divest investments, implement a Solar Savers or retrofit programs;
- **Rubbish** – turn organic council waste into biochar (sequestering carbon for 100s-1000s of years, prevent methane emissions).

There's also greenspace and planning, and resilience for which local governments bear the cost as climate impacts intensify. Councils can work with other councils to innovate, build economies of scale and help develop strategies which can then be used across society.

¹ UK: [Centre for Alternative Technology](#) (Zero Carbon Britain), US: [The Solutions Project](#)

² See Tim Flannery's 'Atmosphere of Hope' and Paul Hawken's '[Drawdown](#)'.

Council actions focused toward mitigation and resilience ultimately support the key goals of pressuring higher levels of government to take meaningful action (upwards) through supporting community engagement (downwards) and inspiring other councils to act (sideways).

Without advocacy and education, mitigation actions will only count towards the emissions reduction that an individual council can reach, which is not enough.

What can motivate councillors to implement a climate emergency response?

The school of 'change management' tells us that it is normal for people, including people in leadership positions, to hold on to the status quo even when it has become categorically untenable. It can be helpful to:

- Point out the number and nature of councils declaring to date.
- Highlight that council actions to date are already changing how state and national governments perceive and respond to the climate emergency.
- Ask the councillor/s, 'What other campaigns currently underway could create the necessary momentum to save the planet?'

How can councils implement a climate emergency response?

The Council should:

1. Pass a motion that acknowledges a) the 'climate emergency', b) that all levels of government need to act, c) that "business as usual" transition is not fast enough, d) can call for fast action (10 years or less) to reach net negative emissions.
2. Develop a Climate Emergency Plan (CEP). The Plan should:
 - a. set a target of net negative emissions in an emergency timeframe (10 years)
 - b. quantify what council can do towards reaching the target
 - c. identify what the community can do toward reaching the target
 - d. identify what state/federal/central governments will need to do for the target to be achieved.
3. Ensure governance prioritises the response, eg prioritise the CEP in the Council's Strategic Plan.
4. Build the capacity of staff around climate emergency and help them understand the why and how.
5. Continue to communicate the climate emergency and engage the community so the community can support your eventual climate emergency declaration and entry into an emergency mode.

Can councils afford to declare a climate emergency?

Local governments can use their limited budgets or cost neutral/positive programs and strategies across their portfolios to implement a range of climate emergency programs and initiatives.

For councils with very limited budgets, reframing of existing budgets, a budget prioritisation exercise and community mobilisation around the climate emergency using existing resources and channels can be an effective response or selecting strategies that are cost neutral or cost negative.

Where can I find out more?

A step by step [guide for a council](#) to undertake a climate emergency declaration; RSTI's Phillip Sutton's initial [strategic document](#) on Local Councils and Climate Emergency Action; The climate emergency and climate emergency response; [The Club of Rome Climate Emergency Plan](#): What does "climate emergency" mean? by David Spratt and Ian Dunlop; and [The Vision](#) by [CEDAMIA](#).