

CACE Council Fact Sheet #1

How councils can lead in the climate emergency

Community Action in the Climate Emergency V1.4 Last edited 2 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 from stationary energy alone 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 **37 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 federal governments failing to stop let alone reverse global warming, we need to make progress where it can be made – at the 3rd level of government. Ultimately, state/federal and central 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.

If we go back to the basic 3Rs of local government (rates, roads, rubbish) each R is a big lever for reducing or drawing down emissions. For example,

- **Roads** – cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, free parking and chargers for low or zero emissions vehicles, electric charge stations, electric car fleets;
- **Rates** – divestment of investments, implement a Solar Savers program through rates;
- **Rubbish** – turn all organic council waste into biochar (which sequesters carbon for 100s-1000s of years and stops methane emissions), recycling and reduction strategies.

There's also R for resilience, for which local governments will also bear the cost as climate impacts intensify. Many other council activities are also potential climate levers. The idea is to 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](#)'.

Direct advocacy, raising public awareness, and positive action in the climate emergency at council level will educate other councils and ultimately pressure higher levels of government into meaningful action to reverse global warming (sideways, downwards and upwards).

This advocacy and education role is key, for without acting loudly the actions will only count towards the emissions negotiation that an individual council can reach, which is not enough.

What can motivate reluctant 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. The example often used is the Piper Alpha Disaster. An oil rig burned but the crew on board did not jump to a rescue boat until flames forced them into the cold water. Other examples include UK MPs in 1938 that declined to vote to go to war against Germany despite imminent invasion. Often it just takes the first to break the status quo for others to follow.
- Council actions to date is already changing how state/federal/central governments perceive and respond to the climate emergency.
- It is useful for councillors deciding whether to support the declaration of a climate emergency 'What other campaigns that are currently available to me seem likely to change our current trajectory?'

How can councils implement a climate emergency response?

At a minimum, the Council should:

1. Pass a motion that acknowledges a) the 'climate emergency', b) that all levels of government need to act, and c) that "business as usual" transition is not fast enough.
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/negative 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](#).