

**INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES
UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY**

**ESD INITIATIVES IN
NSW LOCAL COUNCILS**

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ISF's Local Government Team

The Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) was established by the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) in 1997 at the Australian Technology Park at Redfern. Its mission is to work with government, industry and the community to develop solutions leading to sustainable futures through multi-disciplinary programs of research, teaching and consultancy. ISF's Local Government Team has been involved in a range of projects designed to assist local councils to act on Local Agenda 21 (LA21) by integrating Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) principles into their policy and practice. The main projects are described below.

Action Research Project

A core project of the Local Government Team has been the 1998/99 LA21 Action Research Project. The project represents a unique collaboration between ISF and several NSW councils, local government associations and State agencies. The project focuses on the operationalisation of the new requirements of the 1997 amendments to the *NSW Local Government Act 1993* which requires councils to integrate ESD into their management plans, activities and decision-making processes. Project participants have provided case studies of how this can be done and these are being included in a set of guidelines planned for release in 1999.

State of the Environment Reporting

In its work in preparing State of the Environment Reports (SoERs) for councils, ISF has developed a reporting process that includes sustainability indicator profiles covering a range of social, economic and environmental issues. These indicators can also be used in council's corporate and environmental management plans. Included in the SoERs are indicators dealing with the council's internal operations. This is an important addition as councils find they make faster progress in implementing LA21 in the wider community if they have first improved their own operations.

Environmental management reviews

ISF has been employed to review council environmental management systems and performance. Through a series of workshops, interviews, meetings and walk-through audits, areas of good practice and areas where there is opportunity for improvement are identified. Such reviews can culminate in a costed and prioritised program of further actions design to bring about the greatest immediate and long-term improvement at least cost to the council. In some cases, these actions can result in cost savings, e.g. reduced electricity bills.

Forecasting and visioning

ISF's visioning work with some of the participating councils has included development of forecasts or scenarios for a range of futures to assist workshop participants to think about the kinds of futures they would like to see for their local areas. At a recent visioning workshops, ISF presented a set of forecasts supported by indicators covering the main local issues of community, transport, employment, bushland protection and water management. Extrapolation of trend data was used to assist this process. One of the councils is very advanced in its use of scenarios and has included in its SoER a set of high, medium and low sustainability scenarios, each with its own discrete target or benchmark.

Vision statements

Many of the participating councils have adopted visions that include reference to sustainable futures. For example, one council's vision is for a "... a viable and sustainable future, in partnership with our community", while another's is "... a well informed and responsible, diverse community living in a healthy and sustainable environment with access to affordable services". Some of these statements have been developed via community visioning workshops.

City-wide indicators

Although some of the participating councils already have a set of ESD initiatives and policies, few have developed a supporting set of sustainability indicators. These indicators are a vital component of an LA21 strategy in that they provide for monitoring of progress toward ESD goals. Throughout 1998, ISF has facilitated staff and community workshops to assist in the development and subsequent 'testing' of these indicators. This has involved integrating similar work being carried out by the councils' social planners in developing social capital indicators, while in other cases it has involved integration with regional indicators. It is also intended that the indicators facilitate the linking of SoERs, corporate plans and environmental management plans.

Neighbourhood indicators

ISF has been working with one of the participating councils in the development of sustainability indicators for two inner-city neighbourhoods. The indicators deal predominantly with natural environment, livability, built environment, pedestrian safety, energy efficiency, waste management and community cohesion. The indicators can assist in determining whether council's actions are contributing to or detracting from these valued neighbourhood characteristics.

Community consultation protocols

This project involves a set of staff and councillor briefing sessions and community workshops from which a system (protocol) of ongoing community consultation on ESD issues can be developed. The desire to develop such a protocol has been identified as a strategic action in the management plans of some councils. This process has included community visioning workshops, which have enabled councils to begin developing a prioritised list of sustainability issues and actions. An interesting outcome of these

workshops is the high priority given to community-related ESD issues as opposed to the 'traditional' natural environment issues.

ESD checklists

One participating council has already developed a checklist to ensure that ESD principles are considered during the assessment of development applications. Another council is currently developing a checklist to ensure that ESD principles are considered for a range of internal council activities. The latter process involves a set of staff and community workshops that aim to raise awareness of the process of implementing ESD principles.

ESD and contracts

This is an important issue for all councils due to the increasing incidence of 'contracting out' of council work. Insertion of ESD-related conditions in contracts represents a major opportunity for action on LA21. Whilst the conditions themselves can assist in bringing about an attitudinal and behavioural change by contractors, staff and contractor training to support this process is necessary. Some councils are planning to produce manuals on ESD principles for contract specification in addition to a template for ongoing staff training in this area.

Lessons learned

Common lessons learned by the councils include:

- appropriate language is important so that ESD concepts can be understood by the community and senior management
- good and bad practice case studies are useful in ESD awareness raising
- enlisting the help of others within council to pursue an ever widening LA21 agenda is essential to avoiding burn-out
- exercise caution about unduly raising community expectations whilst raising the profile of ESD issues
- benchmarking and cataloguing ESD-related council policies and projects helps to demonstrate the range and interrelated nature of ESD issues
- structured staff training and information systems to raise awareness is essential
- integration of ESD principles into development control is particularly difficult
- State Government ESD policy support is often lacking