

Integrating SoERs and Management Plans – Myth or Reality?

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Abstract

In recent years the term “integration” has gained prominence as a key concept for solving the challenges faced by Governments. Integration appears to capture many of the emerging trends in planning and management, such as a recognition of disparate parts, solutions based on holistic approaches and with solutions requiring more interactive and communicative processes. In 1997, the amendment to the Local Government Act 1993 aimed to create linkages throughout the Act in regard to Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD). Linkages for example between a council’s charter, its management planning process, its annual reporting process and its state of environment reports. These linkages were designed to create an integrated whole of council approach to ESD. But just how achievable is this approach? This paper explores some of the challenges to councils in addressing the integration of management plans and state of environment reports and the myths and realities for councils in attempting this process.

Keywords

State of Environment Reporting, Integration, Ecologically Sustainable Development

Introduction

The NSW Local Government Amendment (Ecologically Sustainable Development) Act 1997 aimed to enhance the sustainability role of councils and ensure that councils adopt an ESD focus in carrying out their functions. This increased role was to be achieved through incorporating the principles of ESD throughout all key aspects of the Local Government Act. For example, council’s charter was amended to read, “to properly manage, develop, protect, restore, enhance and conserve the environment of the area for which it is responsible *in a manner which is consistent with and promotes the principles of ecologically sustainable development*”. Other changes initiated by the Amendment included requiring councils’ Management Plan to report on activities in the amended charter and to report on council’s State of Environment Report (SoER), with reporting required to specifically address ESD. These linkages were in turn designed to create a ‘whole of council’ approach to addressing ESD.

In principle, a ‘whole of council’ approach is an effective method of addressing ESD, with opportunities for the concepts of sustainability to be understood and implemented across a range of work areas, from management, to policy preparation, to purchasing, contract management and infrastructure provision. As a starting point for this whole of council approach, the 1997 Amendment motivated a number of NSW Councils to attempt the integration of their Management Plans and SoERs. Attempts at integration have taken a variety of forms from document formatting through to electronic data base linkages. Despite some good examples, the challenge of achieving a true holistic approach to ESD remains a daunting task, with even the integration of Management Plans and State of Environment Reports providing real challenges and difficulties for many councils.

Discussion

Prior to examining some of these challenges, it is critically important to recognise the framework for councils operating in NSW, a framework which influences their ability to address these challenges. Firstly, councils are complex, multi-functional organisations without comparison at a State or Federal Government level or even in the private sector. Research has indicated that a medium sized rural council provides around eighty core services to its community, with this figure rising to upward of 150 core services for large,