

Sustainability Learning Guide: Small and/or Regionally Isolated Councils

About this guide

This guide has been developed to assist councils who are small and/or regionally isolated gain support and implement sustainability projects. However, this guide could also be relevant to other councils as many will face similar barriers. The information collected in this guide has come from practitioners who have shared their success factors with Local Government NSW (LGNSW). Special thanks to the members of CENTROC environment group who made significant contributions to this guide. For more information, visit lgnsw.org.au under “Ecologically Sustainable Development”.

Why produce a guide?

Research conducted on behalf of LGNSW by the Institute for Sustainable Futures at UTS in 2009 highlighted many barriers faced by smaller and/or regionally isolated councils in progressing their sustainability work. This research identified the following key challenges unique to these councils. For the full report on Barriers and Drivers to Sustainability in Local Government, go to lgnsw.org.au under “Ecologically Sustainable Development”.

Challenges to sustainability projects in small and regional councils:

1. Lack of funding sources
2. Lack of sustainability staff in council
3. Consultancies are too expensive
4. Skills and knowledge shortage regarding sustainability
5. Challenges of distance and cost to attend training and network meetings
6. Still dealing with climate sceptics in elected council
7. High staff turn over and difficulty attracting staff
8. Large areas to manage
9. High roads to people ratio means high internal budget allocation to road maintenance
10. High level of demands on existing staff and wide range of skills required

Barrier	How can it be overcome?	Examples:
Financial sustainability of projects (actual or perceived)	Projects must demonstrate payback for internal budget allocation. Use triple or quadruple bottom line to demonstrate sustainability. Embed sustainability into everyday practices rather than as an expensive add-on.	The City of Ryde's Project Sustainability Assessment Protocol (a case study of the protocol is provided in the Sustainability Tool Selector) Penrith's Sustainability Revolving Fund (video presentation)
Lack of sustainability staff in council	Combine with existing functions. Redesign existing roles. Apply for grants if available. Form a Sustainability Committee with existing staff. Utilise staff in different sections that may have linkages to sustainability projects.	Cowra Sustainability Officer position established with requirement for a Trade Waste Officer. Climate Change and Sustainability Officer (p/t) created at Clarence Valley Council. Cabonne Sustainability Committee, Yass Valley Regional Council, waste staff, water staff, parks staff.
Consultancies are too expensive	Enter alliances with other councils and seek grant funds. Employ consultants across councils. Share experiences across councils for similar projects.	CENTROC Water Security Study CENTROC – That's a Good Idea (TAGI) project . Wellington, Blayney & Cabonne Strategic Alliance Climate Change Action Planning Workshop 'Regenisis' project between Liverpool Plains Shire Council and Blacktown City Council.
Skills and knowledge shortage regarding sustainability	Undertake sustainability training including online training. Utilise collaboration networks across region.	Sustainability Training Workshop Package from LGNSW (online resource for in-house training). NRM, Sustainability, Climate Change and Sustainable Choice training from the LGNSW. Central NSW Councils Regional Organisation of Councils (CENTROC), Bathurst Orange Dubbo Alliance (BOD), sustainable.net.org.au
Distance and cost to attend training and network meetings	Arrange web & telephone conferencing. Keep travel to a minimum with online training. Allow travel time (late start and early finish). Rotate meetings around the region. Offer to host external training.	WebEx web conferencing webex.com.au Telstra telephone conferencing telstra.com.au/conferlink/ CENTROC meetings Clarence Valley Council uses web conference between council offices.

Barrier	How can it be overcome?	Examples:
Still dealing with climate sceptics in elected council	<p>Remain persistent and motivated, be realistic – this will always be a factor (acknowledge organisational change won't happen overnight)</p> <p>Create various opportunities for engagement and access to information.</p> <p>Improve understanding & foster sense of responsibility for developing solutions.</p> <p>Approach it as risk management, natural disaster management and as resource efficiency & demonstrated cost savings (change your language).</p> <p>Begin with lots of small projects to demonstrate achievements.</p>	<p>Focus on empowering the non-sceptics through staff and community behaviour change programs.</p> <p>Planning for Climate Change Workshop Package (LGNSW online resource) used by Bland Shire Council & Wellington, Blayney and Cabonne Strategic Alliance.</p> <p>The Weather Report (CENTROC)</p> <p>Payback periods with solar and energy efficiency improvements.</p>
High staff turnover and difficulty attracting staff	<p>Improve the employment conditions, offer incentives.</p> <p>Have more than one officer responsible for major sustainability projects.</p> <p>Train staff to multi-task.</p> <p>Participate in peer networks.</p> <p>Advertise overseas.</p>	<p>Pay university fees (Griffith City Council, Nambucca Shire Council).</p> <p>Sustainability Educators network, Waste Educators network, Local Government Managers Associations (LGMA), LGNSW's sustainablenet.org.au</p>
Large areas to manage	<p>Training to work smarter, not harder.</p> <p>Empower community to take ownership and action on private and public land.</p> <p>Partner city councils to share resources.</p>	<p>Landcare</p> <p>Regenesis Project partnership between Liverpool Plains Shire and Blacktown City Council.</p>
High roads to people ratio means high budget allocation to road maintenance	<p>Grant funding, projects across councils.</p> <p>Partner with local environment and community groups.</p>	<p>CENTROC – That's a Good Idea (TAGI) project.</p> <p>Catchment Management Authorities (CMA), Landcare</p>
High level of demands on existing staff and wide range of skills required	<p>Share information across region, form regional committees, share responsibilities (i.e. waste legislation updates, NRM Update).</p> <p>Form alliances and network for information.</p> <p>Provide training opportunities for staff to broaden their skills and knowledge.</p>	<p>Central NSW Councils Regional Organisation of Councils (CENTROC), Bathurst Orange Dubbo Alliance (BOD), Sustainability Educators network, Waste Educators network, Local Government Managers Associations (LGMA), LGNSW's sustainablenet.org.au</p>