Sustainability is Core Business in Lake Macquarie

Overview

Council has been responsible for implementing a highly effective sustainability program for the Lake Macquarie area. This program has successfully embedded sustainability principles across all aspects of Council’s operations, with sustainability now a core part of Council’s business.

Council has achieved a considerable reduction in the City’s ecological footprint, through the successful implementation of a number of sustainability projects. These achievements include ecosystem enhancement projects, energy and water savings projects, waste management and minimisation projects, environmental health, climate change adaptation, natural disaster preparedness, and sustainability engagement.

Background

The move towards environmental sustainability in Lake Macquarie City is based on eight principal drivers, each of which exists in response to observed or predicted changes in our environment (such as loss of biodiversity, and climate change), being:

- International agreements, legislation and reporting requirements
- Government incentives that support environmental sustainability initiatives
- A quadruple bottom line approach
- Service delivery that manages risks and recognises the contribution of effective environmental management to ensure the ongoing provision of service
- Community expectation that local government will be a leader in sustainability
- Consumer demand for sustainable products and services
- Financial incentives to reduce future costs to Council and the community; and
- Environmental and ethical responsibility to protect and enhance our local environment.

Council’s Community Strategic Plan 2013-2023 identifies four key environmental sustainability objectives:

- A community that works in partnership with Council to create a sustainable city
- A community that minimises impacts of resource consumption and waste generation
- A community that protects and enhances its natural environment
- A community that is resilient and prepared for threats from the environment

Implementation

Council’s Sustainability Department is responsible for coordinating and delivering a large number of sustainability-related projects for the City. This department is structured with four specialist teams (Sustainable Living, Ecosystem Enhancement, Environmental Security and Sustainability Engagement), as well as resources to audit and report on sustainability.
Council has worked hard to ensure that sustainability-related activities are delivered across all sections of Council, not just by the Sustainability Department. Sustainability actions are embedded in the business plans of all Council departments and at all levels of Council’s corporate planning framework. Responsibility for environmental sustainability is a key element in our ‘staff capability framework’ and is included as a consideration in all Council projects.

A key element of successful implementation is the establishment of effective partnerships for delivery. As an example of this, the Lake Macquarie Sustainable Neighbourhoods program is a case study in local scale community involvement in delivering environmental improvements. Strong partnerships also exist with State and Federal Government agencies, cultural groups, Landcare, and business.

Council has been successful in securing on-going funding for the delivery of sustainability programs, with this core funding being regularly supplemented by grant income. Council’s previous ‘Environment and Sustainability Levy’ (which was a fixed-term rate levy) has now been superseded, as adequate sustainability funding is now part of Council’s approved long-term financial planning, with strong support from the local community.

Outcomes

A summary of some of the key sustainability achievements extracted from the 2012-13 State of the Environment Report are listed below:

- 3.3% decrease in residential electricity usage
- 2,764 tonnes CO₂ equivalent/year reduction in Council’s greenhouse gas emissions
- A decrease of 149.42 kg per capita in 2012/2013 of waste landfilled (compared to baseline)
- $164,000 in costs savings and around 34,300 kilolitres saved from water efficiency programs at Council facilities
- 43 on-ground environmental restoration projects (943,267m² of land rehabilitated and 1075m of foreshore stabilised).
- Improvement in both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem health indicators

Key Learnings

In its initial phases, there was some reluctance of Council staff to change, and some internal sustainability programs faced resistance. However, this resistance has largely been overcome, and sustainability principles are now embedded across all sections of Council.

Some sections of the local media have been unsupportive of sustainability programs, portraying an alarmist view of Council’s response to climate change adaptation, sea level rise policy and other sustainability issues. This has been an ongoing challenge, however Council continues to implement an evidence-based risk management approach to these issues.

The important next step for Council is to implement measures that maintain the positive momentum that has been achieved over recent years, to ensure that sustainability improvement continues to occur. Council is also reviewing its sustainability program with a continual improvement approach, to ensure it is efficient, effective and contemporary.
Another important future step is to continue to communicate the successes of Council's sustainability programs to the local community, to ensure that the high level of community support can be maintained into the future.

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Lake Macquarie City Council was the 2014 winner of the Local Sustainability Award at the LGNSW Excellence in the Environment Awards.