
How to mobilise for the climate emergency

Working with local government for climate emergency action

Guide to local climate emergency mobilisation

Why

Our climate is already too hot, with increasingly dangerous heatwaves and bushfires, droughts and crop failures, and coastal flooding. Even the current warming of just over 1°C is proving to be very unsafe around the world.

On current trends, under the Paris Agreement, we face catastrophic warming of 3–5°C within a lifetime, threatening to make large parts of the world uninhabitable and destroy major food growing regions with droughts or rising seas. Even the Paris Agreement “preferred” warming limit of 1.5°C is hotter than now and very dangerous.

We are greatly exceeding Earth’s limits, and accelerating climate warming could bring on social breakdown and global economic crisis, becoming an existential risk to human civilisation.

Our responsibility is to match actions to the size of the problem, in order to protect who and what we care about. This requires courageous leadership and a coordinated society-wide response of a scale and speed never before seen in peacetime.

In times of crisis such as big bushfires, floods or cyclones, we move into emergency mode and throw everything we’ve got at the problem - everyone chips in, with all hands on deck.

The use of the term “emergency” is a way of signalling the need to go beyond reform-as-usual.

Where

The climate crisis is global: that’s all Earth’s inhabitants, and all its ecosystems. So the response is global, national and local.

In an emergency, society devotes all the resources needed to solve the problem. In Australia’s case, that means a leading role for the national government, which has the greatest capacity to plan, invest taxes, direct resources, coordinate and set a regulatory framework for effective emergency action.

But it requires all of us, at each level of government, and the community, working together.

Local government is generally more open, democratic and flexible, and less controlled by big money and big party politics, than state and federal politics. Community activism can build change more quickly at the local level. With 537 local Councils around Australia, we have great odds of early commitment.

In a number of countries, local governments have adopted climate emergency plans, whilst higher levels of government lag behind.

In a nutshell, start where the community support can be most effectively be built, whilst recognising that local climate emergency action is both a building block to a wider and national effort, but also an indispensable, continuing element of the change in its own right.

Getting there

The trajectory and impacts of climate warming are more severe than policymakers have been willing to accept so far. Most people in professional politics are less informed on this topic that they imagine.

A significant engagement effort is required, through community campaigns, workshops and forums, and petitions to build awareness of the need for a climate emergency plan. Locals going door-to-door, talking to neighbours about a personally relevant threat and a clear path to action, builds the power to change. Meeting with councillors, publicising their voting patterns, and making climate a key issue in local governments elections have been successful tactics.

Campaigns in Australia and the United States show that rapid progress can be made at the local level. Darebin Council has adopted a climate emergency plan. Climate emergency motions have been passed by the neighbouring municipalities. The Victorian Local Government Association recognises that we face a climate emergency, with 77% of delegates in support, and the Western Australian LGA has rewritten their climate policy recognising the emergency.

As local leaders step up and show the way, a platform is built to transmit the climate emergency message both deeper into the local community, wider into the local political networks, and upwards to state and territory governments and to the national government.

How

So what does a Council-level climate emergency plan feel and look like in practice? In short, a community mobilisation effort to end greenhouse gas emissions and draw down excess carbon dioxide in the local area, raising awareness amongst residents about climate change, and influencing other councils and state and federal governments to act.

Community mobilisation

Local councils and communities have insight, drive, capacity and capital to work for a safe future, and by working together across social and city borders they can build transformative networks to combat climate change. Deep community mobilisation is a core element in getting a local councils to emergency mode and keeping them on track. Councils can engage with the community about the climate emergency, how to provide maximum protection globally and locally, and how a safe climate can be restored, by knowledge sharing and training, capacity building, and facilitating community contributions to action.

Physical rebuild

A national and global emergency response is a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated package of measures delivered at a very large scale and very fast speed, driven by all levels of government. Councils can start building the change locally to deliver solutions for achieving zero emissions, drawdown of atmospheric carbon, and adaptation to changing conditions, covering council facilities and services, residential housing, community facilities, transport, land use and businesses.

Reaching out

A key part of the plan is to engage all levels of government, to take actions to accelerate other local governments, as well as state and federal counterparts, declaring a Climate Emergency and committing to programs of the necessary scope, scale and speed. Councils can share work on research, policy and program development. Another path is to develop cross-council community networks (such as social/ethnic, professional, activist, business and so on) with a climate emergency focus.

Building knowledge

The issues of climate change are broad and complex: basic science, projected impacts, risks frameworks, solutions, strategies and paths. Systematic ongoing work to build understanding both within the local Council and in the community, and ensuring that emergency climate action is an overarching consideration in council strategic planning, is fundamentally important. This is particularly the case where new thinking and research on solutions development and policy paths is required, and because much of the current climate policymaking paradigm downplays the more extreme.

Purpose

The purpose of local climate emergency campaigning is to accelerate sustained and meaningful action by all levels of government and people globally to engage with the challenge of avoiding catastrophic climate change and restoring a safe climate. The goal is to provide maximum protection for the local community and for people, civilisation and species globally, especially the most vulnerable, and to enable local communities to be strong in the face of any unavoidable dangerous climate impacts.

Humanity can no longer safely emit any greenhouse gases and must demand an emergency mobilisation effort to reach zero emissions across all sectors, to rapidly and safely remove excess carbon from the atmosphere, to preserve and restore the Earth's biodiversity, to implement safety measures to protect all people and species from the consequences of abrupt warming in the near-term, and to cultivate a shift toward climate-resiliency, prioritizing conservation, community, and independence from fossil fuels.

Whilst the first steps may be local, the aim is global. Local councils and communities have an indispensable role in helping to build a national and global response, because this is about the future of all of us. Efforts at the local level can be a part of building the groundswell that will ensure our success and provide a safe climate future.

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