



SURVEY

Written by:

Alia Armistead

David Spratt

Stefaan White &

Harry Goodman

Australian local government climate emergency declarations:

A preliminary survey

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INTRODUCTION

On 5 December 2016, the City of Darebin in Melbourne became the first local government authority in the world to declare a climate emergency. By January 2020, 86 local councils in Australia and the ACT government had declared or recognised the climate emergency. A motion declaring a climate emergency in South Australia passed the Legislative Council (upper house). The purpose of this survey carried out by Breakthrough from November 2019 to January 2020 was to understand what impact the declarations are having on council policies, programmes, advocacy and budgets.

METHOD

The survey was online and largely comprised multi-choice and yes/no questions. 86 councils and two State governments were invited to participate, with respondents in most cases being council staff. By 5 February, 64 councils had responded, and the data analysis is shown in Table 1. Answers in the "other" category or which provided non-quantitative data will be published in a subsequent report.

Councils were asked: "Has the Council approved, or drafted, or is developing, a climate action plan or report subsequent to the passing of the climate emergency resolution, to embody its commitment to climate emergency action?" Options were: yes; no; and "Plan precedes declaration". The purpose was to identify which councils had reviewed or adopted a climate policy or report as a consequence of their declaration. These results are shown as Category A. Data from those who had not, whether or not they had a pre-existing climate policy, is shown in Category B. A significant number of councils may be in Category B because they have only recently passed a declaration, and have not had the time to review/adopt new climate policy.

RESULTS

Post-declaration climate plans

More than half of the respondents (63%) have approved, drafted or are developing a climate action plan subsequent to their climate emergency declaration (CED). One-quarter of respondents have climate action plans that precede the declaration and are not in the process of being updated. 11% of respondents do not have a climate action plan. This may indicate that the CEDs have motivated councils to implement new climate policies or increase the ambition of existing climate policies. Of those councils that have not developed new climate policies, most had existing climate policies.

Declaration drivers

The drivers for declaring a climate emergency are predominantly councillors and advocacy from the local community (67% and 61% respectively). 14% of declarations make reference to a biodiversity or extinction crisis.

Advocacy

57% of councils have called on State governments and 48% have called on federal governments to declare a climate

emergency and commit to a climate emergency action program.

One-third of councils have also called on State and federal governments for increased support such as resources or additional powers for local council climate action (34%). Half of the declarations/plans committed councils to mobilise local people, organisations and businesses to participate in council and independent climate emergency initiatives. The proportion of councils that have advocated to State and federal governments to declare a climate emergency and provide support, and have committed the Council to mobilise local people, organisations and businesses, is significantly greater amongst those councils that have approved, drafted or have in development a climate action plan subsequent to their CED (Category A).

Emissions elimination targets & timelines

58% of the councils surveyed have implemented a zero emissions target, including 60% of councils that have approved, drafted or have in development a climate action plan subsequent to their CED, and 54% of councils that had no climate action plan or one predating their CED. 23% of the councils surveyed had no emissions elimination target.

41% of Category A councils have a zero emissions target before or by 2030, compared to 4% for Category B. 62% of Category A councils have a target on or before 2050, compared to 37% for Category B councils. This suggests that the declarations and subsequent reviews have resulted in more stringent targets being adopted.

Scope

41% of the councils' emissions elimination targets apply to the whole municipality, while 38% of targets are relevant for council operations only. For those councils that have climate action plans approved, drafted or in development, there was an even split between those whose emissions targets applied to council operations and to the whole municipality.

The highest rating focus of CEDs and climate action plans was "Adaptation in the face of a warming climate", with 73% and 71% respectively for councils with new climate action plans and those without. A follow-up survey could seek to understand whether councils identify a tension between adaptation and mitigation priorities.

Almost half respondents with new climate action plans (48%) acknowledge the need to create global cooling by drawing down past emissions. 31% of all respondents' CEDs or plans included delivering climate emergency actions at an emergency pace, significantly lower in number than those committed to adaptation policies.

Priority & budget

Since declaring, 20% of councils have "lifted the relative priority" of climate emergency action to the top rank. One-third of councils have either not changed the relative importance of climate action within the council and 41% have recognised a climate emergency but not specified the relative priority of climate change within Council operations.

Table 1: Survey results

	Category A Councils which have developed /reviewed their climate plan subsequent to their climate emergency declaration N = 40	Category B Councils which have not yet reviewed their climate plan (if any) subsequent to their climate emergency declaration N = 24	Total N = 64
Did the council declaration/resolution also make reference to a biodiversity/extinction crisis? Yes.	4 (10%)	5 (21%)	9 (14%)
Did the initial impetus for the Council's climate emergency stance come from:			
- Advocacy by local community	26 (65%)	13 (54%)	39 (61%)
- Council staff	6 (15%)	3 (13%)	9 (14%)
- Councillors	26 (65%)	17 (71%)	43 (67%)
Has the declaration or climate plan:			
- Committed the Council to mobilise local people, organisations and businesses to participate in the Council's climate emergency program and in independent climate emergency initiatives?	24 (60%)	8 (33%)	32 (50%)
- Called on state government to also declare a climate emergency and commit to a climate emergency action program?	25 (63%)	12 (50%)	37 (57%)
- Called on federal government to also declare a climate emergency and commit to a climate emergency action program?	21 (53%)	10 (42%)	31 (48%)
- Called on state and/or federal government to provide support, such as resources or the granting of additional powers?	14 (35%)	8 (33%)	22 (34%)
Has the declaration or climate plan set an emissions elimination target for:			
- Council's own operations	17 (43%)	7 (29%)	24 (38%)
- The whole municipality	17 (43%)	9 (38%)	26 (41%)
Has the declaration and/or climate plan established an emissions elimination target?			
- No	9 (23%)	6 (25%)	15 (23%)
- Zero emissions	24 (60%)	13 (54%)	37 (58%)
- Other*	6 (15%)	5 (21%)	11 (17%)

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77% of councils surveyed have not changed the budget allocated for climate-related projects, and 78% have not tightened the regulatory framework for delivering climate emergency actions.

Limitations

- The results of this survey do not give any indication of the breadth and strength of any climate policies that the surveyed councils may have had prior to declaring a climate emergency. Many respondents said their councils already had significant budget allocations for climate policies and new climate policies currently sit within this budget; however this may be revised in the future.

- Most Australian councils have declared a climate emergency within the last six months, many in the last three. 41 councils out of the 64 respondents have declared a climate emergency since 1 August 2019, 12 of those since 1 November 2019. This time frame may be insufficient for councils to have amended budgets, drafted new policies, strengthened targets or altered the relative importance of climate policy within council operations. Qualitative responses in the survey indicate that many of these activities are underway but have not been completed and so cannot be included as such in the survey data.

Table 1: Survey results (continued)

	Category A Councils which have developed /reviewed their climate plan subsequent to their climate emergency declaration N = 40	Category B Councils which have not yet reviewed their climate plan (if any) subsequent to their climate emergency declaration N = 24	Total N = 64
Has the declaration and/or climate plan set a timeline for the emissions elimination target to be achieved:			
- Before 2030	9 (23%)	1 (4%)	10 (16%)
- 2030	7 (18%)	0	7 (11%)
- 2031-2040	5 (13%)	2 (8%)	7 (11%)
- 2041-2050	3 (8%)	6 (25%)	9 (14%)
- Other *	14	5	19
Has the declaration and/or climate plan included commitments concerning:			
- The need to create global cooling by draw down of past emissions	19 (48%)	2 (8%)	21 (33%)
- A just transition for businesses and employees in high-emissions sectors	13 (33%)	3 (13%)	16 (25%)
- Adaptation in the face of a warming climate	29 (73%)	17 (71%)	46 (72%)
- Delivering climate emergency actions at an emergency pace	14 (35%)	6 (25%)	20 (31%)
Since adopting the declaration has the council's revised its system for setting and administering its strategic priorities:			
- Not changed	12 (30%)	9 (38%)	21 (33%)
- Recognised the importance of climate emergency action but not specified the relative priority within the Council's operations	17 (43%)	9 (38%)	26 (41%)
- Lifted the relative priority of climate emergency action within the Council's operations to the top rank	8 (20%)	5 (13%)	13 (20%)
Since adopting the declaration, has the council lifted its budget for climate-related projects:			
- Not changed	28 (70%)	21 (88%)	49 (77%)
- Increased budget to the vicinity of 1% of operational and capital budgets;	5 (13%)	1 (4%)	6 (9%)
- Increased budget to range of 2 to 5% of operational and capital budgets	1 (3%)	0	1 (2%)
- Increased budget to 5% or more of the operational and capital budgets	0	1 (4%)	1 (2%)
Since adopting the declaration, has the council tightened its regulatory framework to deliver its climate emergency action commitments:			
- Not changed	30 (75%)	20 (83%)	50 (78%)
- Tightened the regulatory framework in some specific ways	4 (10%)	1 (4%)	5 (8%)
- Within the Council's powers, banned all new developments/actions that would result in the production of greenhouse gas emissions	2 (5%)	0 (23%)	2 (3%)

* Answers in the "other" category or which provided non-quantitative data will be published in a subsequent report

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

- The survey asked whether the council "had formally acknowledged or declared a 'climate emergency' using those specific words?" Only councils responding in the affirmative are included in these results. In the Table, for the sake of brevity, the term "declaration" covers language in the questionnaire of declaration, resolution and/or acknowledgement of a climate emergency.
- The survey asked whether the council had "approved, or drafted, or is developing, a climate action plan" or report subsequent to the passing of the climate emergency resolution. In the Table, for sake of brevity, this has been abbreviated to "climate action plan". As noted above, many councils in Category B had a pre-declaration climate plan.