

Councils Influencing Coastal Planning and Management

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ABSTRACT

Local councils in Queensland have a range of roles and responsibilities which enable them to influence coastal planning and management in their respective jurisdictions. These roles and responsibilities include: strategic planning, development control, enforcement powers, administrative responsibility, water management, risk control measures, incentive programs, open space management and supporting local community groups.

The capacity of councils to actively manage the coastal zone varies with individual council's resources and technical skills. The Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) through its NRM Capacity Building Project funded under the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) has been supporting councils through the provision of training and products to assist them in coastal planning and management.

Councils are confronted with many issues around coastal planning and management ranging from beach erosion, tourism, recreation, water quality, development pressure and adapting to climate change.

With an emerging focus on coastal and peri-urban areas and climate change under the NHT3 framework, there are opportunities for councils to position themselves such that they can act on these opportunities.

This paper will outline in more detail the significant role council's play in coastal planning and management, the current and emerging issues and opportunities facing councils and how the LGAQ is supporting councils in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Councils have been involved in coastal planning and management for decades. In Queensland, councils have a number of legislative responsibilities relating to coasts, primarily under the *Coastal Protection and Management Act 1995*, with respect to abiding by requirements set out in State and regional coastal management plans, and under the *Integrated Planning Act 1997* when making planning and management decisions relating to development or resource allocation in the coastal zone.

Local government is committed to protecting and managing the coast for the community but their capacity to do so, varies across councils. Many of the smaller councils are constrained by their rate base and technical skills which impacts on their capacity to respond to coastal management issues. Low Choy and Maccheroni (2006) identified the most significant barrier to local government NRM uptake was council's internal structure and limited dedicated NRM human resources. A significant challenge for councils is the ever-increasing responsibilities placed upon them with limited support and the emergence of issues at a rate faster than councils can respond. Coupled with more of the population moving to the coast, these demands are only going to increase.

In recent years there has been a considerable reduction in the level of support and guidance to councils on coastal management through the demise of the Coast and Clean Seas Initiative and the Coastal CRC, and the removal of the Beach Protection Authority (QCCG, unpublished).

The timing is such that with increasing pressures on the coastal zone in Queensland, councils are requiring support and guidance more than previously in the area of coastal planning and management to fully realise their responsibilities and aspirations in this area. This support can be provided by a number of stakeholders.

ROLE OF COUNCILS IN COASTAL PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

Councils have a significant role in coastal planning and management at both a local and regional scale. In terms of coastal management councils deal with activities relating to coastal erosion and deposition, water quality in marine areas, maintenance and dredging, recreation, tourism and access and development in coastal catchments.

The range of mechanisms available to councils to protect and manage coastal environments include: landuse planning, development control, incentives, acquisition, community partnerships, information, and on-ground works.

The key documents underpinning councils' activities and policy development are the corporate plan and the planning scheme. The corporate plan provides a key tool through which strategies for coastal protection and management can be identified and outlines the community's vision for natural resources in the shire/city. A council's corporate plan is reviewed approximately every four years. Strategies included in the corporate plan are implemented through the council's operational plan. Planning schemes are another key tool for influencing coastal protection and management. They enable regulation of development through the Integrated Development Assessment Scheme. Whilst they can control development, they cannot make activities happen and only apply to new developments. Whilst most "first generation" planning schemes prepared under the *Integrated Planning Act 1997* are now in place, there is still an opportunity to review their performance and where necessary, make amendments to improve approaches. Ensuring that coastal issues are incorporated into both a council's corporate and operational plans and planning scheme will ensure that these issues are not overlooked.

Councils also need to ensure that where different sections within a council are responsible for dealing with coastal issues that these sections collaborate and jointly commit to outcomes to ensure a coordinated approach to coastal management.

The LGAQ has developed a guideline to assist councils integrate a range of NRM issues into council corporate plans, including coastal and marine issues. A guideline for integrating NRM into local government planning schemes has also been recently completed. Workshops have been conducted with over 50 councils in Queensland on the corporate planning guide. Workshops on the planning scheme guideline will be offered to councils in the near future.

Councils through their corporate plan and planning schemes also have the ability to incorporate regional aspirations for coastal protection and management into their planning documents. Assistance by regional NRM bodies through data provision and translation of regional NRM targets to a local scale would be beneficial in maximising the opportunity for councils to assist in delivering regional outcomes. Both the above mentioned guidelines refer to the regional NRM plans and opportunities to link local and regional planning.

LGAQ CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

Local governments have consistently advised the LGAQ that they have neither the understanding nor capacity to be as involved as they should be in NRM issues and expressed support for the LGAQ to take a lead role in assisting councils to become more engaged.

In 2003, the LGAQ sought funding to deliver a capacity building program that supported local government participation towards sustainable land-use and natural resource planning and management under the NAP and NHT programs.

In the development of the proposal, the LGAQ undertook a series of regional visits which included meetings with 79 Local Governments, 2 Aboriginal Community Councils and Regional NRM Boards. A qualitative assessment criteria was used to identify the current Local Government NRM capacity and was focused around the following four broad categories:

- Capacity is well developed – demonstrating a clear understanding of and participation in regional NRM planning and management;
- Capacity is partially developed – demonstrating an understanding of and selective participation in regional NRM planning and management;
- Capacity under developed – demonstrating a limited understanding of regional NRM planning and management issues with minimal participation in a regional context, however demonstrated an understanding of and participation in local NRM planning and management issues;
- Capacity not developed - demonstrating no understanding of and participation in regional NRM planning and management and minimal understanding of local NRM planning and management issues.

The results from the regional visits indicated:

- 35% of councils interviewed were rated as not developed and a further 34% under developed in demonstrating a clear understanding of natural resource management issues in a local and regional context.
- 63% of councils interviewed were rated as not developed in demonstrating linkages between local and/or regional natural resource management goals and Council's corporate and planning scheme.
- 57% of councils interviewed were rated as not developed in relation to access and utilisation of knowledge to develop local and regional natural resource management standards and targets.
- 55% of councils interviewed were rated as not developed in relation to participating in the development of an integrated regional natural resource management plan.
- 97% of councils interviewed expressed support for Local Government training, awareness building and network development programs.

The feedback received from the councils provided the LGAQ with an accurate response to develop a training, awareness and education and network development project plan. The LGAQ received funding under the NHT and NAP to run a three year capacity building project.

The aim of the project is to develop a range of products and deliver training to council staff and elected members on a range of NRM issues including coastal planning and management. Over the past three years a number of documents have been developed to assist councils integrate NRM including coastal planning and management into their planning processes. Training has also been offered to councils in this area.

Whilst councils have the mechanisms to influence coastal planning and management, not all councils have the necessary support to fully utilise these mechanisms. Ongoing support and

training will therefore be necessary. To this end, the LGAQ is developing a proposal to continue the NRM Capacity Building Project, which is currently funded through to June 2008.

EMERGING ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are a number of emerging issues and opportunities for local government relating to coastal planning and management.

Framework For Future NRM Programmes

The NHT2 and NAP programs are due to finish in June 2008. In November 2006, the Australian Government released a framework for future NRM programmes. This Framework will guide the development of the next iteration of the NHT program. One of the key themes in the Framework providing a focus for investment is coastal and peri-urban areas. Adaptation to climate change has also been identified as a major cross-cutting component across the themes of the Framework. The Framework refers to assisting local governments and regional NRM bodies to develop better linkages in local and regional planning in coastal areas and to jointly address threats to coastal and peri-urban assets (Australian Government, 2006).

This focus may bring about greater opportunities for councils to engage in new projects with regional NRM bodies to address threats to coastal assets, and to better align local and regional planning. Councils should therefore position themselves ready to negotiate with regional NRM bodies about the priority NRM issues in their jurisdiction, what strategies and activities they wish to implement and what resources they can contribute, so that when the opportunities arises, they are on the front foot.

The Framework also refers to the need to have greater participation by local government. The Framework mentions that future programs will include initiatives to develop better partnerships between local government and regional NRM bodies with the aim of achieving better NRM outcomes (Australian Government, 2006). One such mechanism to achieve greater partnerships between the parties may be through a partnership agreement. Low Choy and Maccheroni (2006) indicate that stronger partnerships can be built between regional NRM bodies and local government through the development of individual agreements between regional NRM bodies and each local government in their region. This agreement would outline the responsibilities of the respective parties, sources of funding including the contribution of councils to NRM plan implementation and a process through which local government can incorporate NRM matters into local government planning and policy development.

The Local Government Reform Process

The local government reform process currently underway in Queensland will bring with it, a number of challenges and opportunities for councils. One likely opportunity will be the review of corporate plans and planning schemes. If this eventuates, councils should consider how effectively coastal and marine issues are addressed in their corporate plans and planning schemes and how they could align with targets in regional NRM plans. Although, regional NRM plans and local government planning processes are being undertaken in different statutory and political contexts, benefits can flow to both the regional NRM body and local government if they work together and align planning.

Regional NRM bodies will also be reviewing their respective NRM plans over the next 12 months, it will therefore be in councils' interest to identify what activities they would like to undertake and present these to their respective regional NRM body. In the event that councils are amalgamated and undergoing considerable transition, regional bodies should position themselves such that they can engage with newly formed councils to promote their respective regional plans and encourage local government participation in the review of these plans.

CONCLUSION

Councils in Queensland have an important role in protecting and managing coastal environments at a local level. They also have the ability to assist in the delivery of NRM plans. Whilst they are committed to managing the natural resources within their council, they may be limited in the extent to which they can fully embrace this role. They have the mechanisms in place to influence coastal planning and management but the efficacy of this is dependent upon the additional support they can receive. There is a considerable disparity between small and large councils and what actions they can undertake to influence coastal protection and management. Councils will therefore require ongoing support and guidance in the area of coastal planning and management.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

- Engage councils and identify opportunities to collaborate on initiatives
- Ensure councils corporate plans and planning schemes adequately address coastal issues
- Better align regional NRM plans and council corporate plans and planning schemes
- Support councils to enhance their capacity to address coastal issues.

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