

Engaging Communities of Practice for Sustainability: The Case of Sutherland Council, New South Wales

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Abstract

A strategic approach to local sustainability requires that the sustainability implications of proposed policies, plans and programs are assessed. This often requires organisational change. The establishment of communities of practice, groups or networks of practitioners with shared interests has been a helpful mechanism for change in a wide range of organisations. This paper analyses the potential for communities of practice to contribute to the implementation of sustainability assessments by local government. Focussing on Sutherland council in Sydney, Australia, this paper presents the findings of a collaborative project that engaged communities of practice to design a sustainability assessment system and sustainability training program that is integrated into the daily activities of local council. The training program required awareness by senior managers of the need for all council staff to be able to apply sustainability concepts to their work. Essentially, the sustainability training program also needed to be part of an organisational change program. We argue that communities of practice offer great potential in breaking down the 'silos' created by professional backgrounds and roles within local government, and also face significant challenges in maintaining momentum and overcoming political agendas.

Introduction

It has been widely recognised that local governments are of central importance to the achievement of global sustainability. Of the 2509 actions towards greater sustainability identified in Agenda 21, around two-thirds require the active involvement of local government (Neil et al. 2002). In Australia, local councils have been at the forefront of efforts to implement sustainability through a diverse array of initiatives including, among other things, Natural Heritage Trust projects, landcare projects, Total Catchment Management projects, Cities for Climate Change

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¹ The staff diaries were kept for three weeks. The ANU facilitators asked all community of practice participants to record actions undertaken by themselves or their unit of significance to local sustainability. These were used to help participants determine key decision-making points and key topics that should be covered by the sustainability guidelines.

programs, biodiversity conservation programs, state of the environment reporting and triple bottom line reporting. Reflecting this key role of local government, the Australian Government, as part of its national sustainable development policy, requires that all local government authorities incorporate sustainable development strategies in their forward plans.

Despite all the worthy local initiatives that are being implemented, a core challenge to the achievement of greater local sustainability remains the fragmentation of policy making and implementation (Sauvage 2004; Morrison et al. 2004). Procedures need to be in place to integrate sustainability principles and community commitments into council policy formation, planning and actions. This requires that units within local councils work together to develop and implement sustainability assessment frameworks that promote coordinated action across local council departments and between levels of decision-making within council. The new generation of sustainability assessment tools tends to be 'objectives led' in that the tools are aimed at achieving particular sustainability outcomes, based on practices borrowed from policy analysis/appraisal (Pope et al. 2004) and environmental reporting. This is in contrast to more conventional environmental assessments that focus on impact analysis.

The focus on a 'whole-of-council' approach to achieve sustainability has been given some attention in Australia (Brown 1997), but much work remains to be done on models that draw together council workers across departmental and professional divides. A useful approach may be the engagement of 'communities of practice', that is, groups of committed people within councils who can work together to develop and implement cohesive sustainability assessment frameworks that affect the policies and actions of councils, and are compatible with the local and institutional contexts. Considerable work has been done on the value of communities of practice for the effective and efficient functioning of private firms committed to learning and continuous improvement (Wenger 1998, 2002). Many of these concepts and ideas have direct relevance to achieving local sustainability as implemented by local councils (for more elaboration see the section on 'Communities of practice and organisational change').

Behavioural change theory is not new in the field of environmental education and its application to sustainability is a natural progression. What is different in this case is the application of the behavioural change approach to complement the organisational change process. Using the principles of behavioural change, the training program focussed on the following elements:

- Identifying existing and potential barriers to achieving the desired behavioural change

- Involvement of participating staff at an early stage of the training program development, and maintain this involvement beyond the end of the final training session (feedback and evaluation)
- Training is tailored and relevant to the daily work undertaken by participating staff
- Involve external expertise to give the training a broader focus and additional credibility
- Training to give participants the opportunity to practice appropriate behaviours that will lead to better sustainability outcomes.

Engaging a diverse and committed group of people drawn from across a council to work on developing a sustainability assessment framework has a number of advantages. The resulting framework is more likely to be 'owned' and used by council staff, can be tailored to the diverse needs of the council and have broad applicability to a range of units. It can also incorporate processes based on different types of knowledge (scientific, administrative, experiential and community derived). This strategic approach to sustainability assessment contributes to achieving the goal of providing "a tool that can help decision-makers and policy-makers decide what actions they should take and should not take in an attempt to make society more sustainable" (Devuyst 2001, p. 9).

Of course, translating such lofty goals into action raises many challenges. At Sutherland Shire Council, this challenge to collaboratively develop sustainability assessment guidelines through the establishment of an inter-unit 'community of practice' was taken up. The overall aim of the Sutherland initiative is to collaboratively develop sustainability assessment processes with a range of senior and middle management officers to:

- complement established corporate goals derived from an extensive community visioning process
- incorporate the expertise and experiences of council officers who will be implementing the system
- identify key decision points in local council planning and policy cycles when sustainability assessments can be most effectively applied
- tailor assessment processes to the business of the individual departments while remaining consistent across council
- integrate the assessment process with other related activities such as triple bottom line (TBL) reporting.

The collaborative approach to develop the sustainability assessment guidelines is resulting in high levels of ownership of the procedures among participants and a system that can easily be integrated into the work of the council staff. The involvement of officers from across council has

contributed to a greater interchange of ideas between units, and has laid the seeds for wider learning within the organisation. However, as the community of practice is voluntary, the participants are from key areas that are strongly affected by sustainability risk concerns (environmental science, planning and engineering units), and the pace of the work and the quality can be variable. Coupling these 'communities' with academics from outside council can be a useful catalyst to ensure the group achieves its goals and is supported in its work. In the sections below, we provide a brief overview of the core concepts behind communities of practice and 'organisational learning', outline the methods used to develop the sustainability assessment processes in Sutherland and provide some preliminary results of the work to date with respect to the sustainability guidelines and procedures that are being developed.

Communities of practice and organisational change

Knowledge within any organisation is diverse, and this diversity can be the source of innovation and change to address new and complex challenges such as those posed by local sustainability. For example, while specific areas within local government often have formal responsibility for promoting sustainability objectives, a wide range of professionals within the organisation may have relevant knowledge and manage the day-to-day implementation of actions that shape local sustainability outcomes. Communities of practice allow people committed to addressing a particular issue or challenge to come together, regardless of their organisational affiliation, to collectively learn and progress organisational goals (Wenger 1998). These communities are based on commitment rather than organisational units. Because they grow out of commitment to an issue, they respond to challenges in a manner that is their own, and thus tend to produce context specific responses tailored to the organisation (Wenger 1998).

Communities of practice facilitate the building of a 'learning organisation' that encourages dialogues between members to discover insights not attainable individually (Senge 1990, p. 11). These dialogues are often most successful when there is a facilitator, at least in the beginning phases, who maintains a commitment to the process, rather than to a particular cause or interest (Bohm 1996, p. 11). The facilitator can help the group to mediate interests, clarify assumptions and develop options, but ultimately their core task is to 'work themselves out of a job' and create a community that is self-organising. One of the primary objectives of communities of practice is to reflect on the goals of their organisation and the attendant social relations. This can lead to either the reinforcement of these goals, or to their critical review and eventual adaptation.

For local councils, this attention to organisational goals, social relations and the wider context is an advantage of this form of loose and diverse collaboration given their need to address internal organisational and external community interests. While all council officers are required to serve

the interests of the council, they are connected to the different communities associated with the council in different ways, for example some may deal with enterprise groups and developers, others primarily with service providers, individual residents and interest groups. The varied experiences and knowledge of council officers who may choose to participate in communities of practice helps to ensure that the ideas and practices emanating from them reflect a wide range of social relationships and needs within the community.

In our experience, the informality of communities of practice means that they tend to have layers and overlapping communities (Figure 1). At the core are those that are actively and regularly involved, the community of practice. Then there are those that are giving input from the 'fringes' either through occasional participation in the group, or through input to the active members (interacting groups and individuals). In time the increased knowledge of those directly involved in the community of practice spreads out to the wider organisation through these loose connections or layers, or through the tools and the processes they develop, shown by the permeable boundaries between groups. As these practitioners gain a greater understanding of sustainability from engaging in dialogues and activities with a new set of people within the organisation, they are able to share and promote these new understandings with colleagues. Some of this spread of knowledge occurs informally through the networks of the individuals. But some of the knowledge dispersion is more formalised, through professional associations or gatherings of colleagues. There is also an ongoing inflow of information and ideas about organisational direction and goals, represented by the overlapping circles.

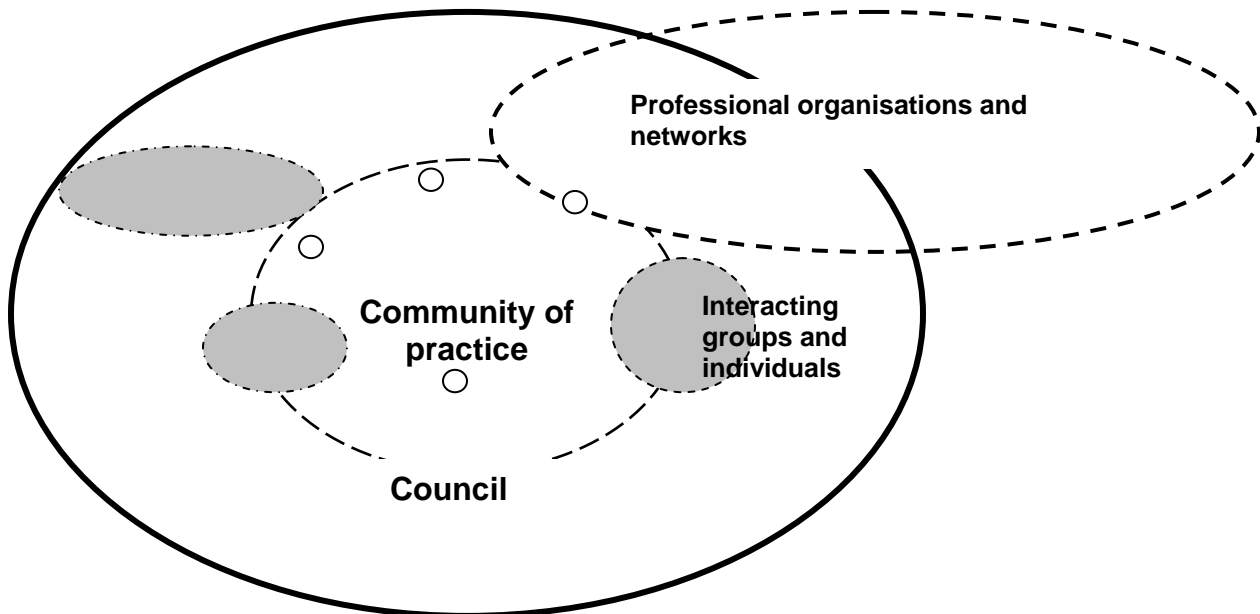


Figure 1. Extent of council, organisational and community involvement

Ultimately, communities of practice and their dialogues are aimed at critically assessing practice and bringing about organisational change, in this case change that will support local sustainability. In her article on 'Designing Learning Organizations', Constance James highlights a few core characteristics of learning organisations. These types of organisations are places where communities of practices may function most comfortably, and contribute to the achievement of greater local sustainability. The core characteristics of learning organisations are:

- strategic — focus on changing systems and policies that spread learning and knowledge throughout the organisation
- integrative — use integrating mechanisms to link the organisation horizontally (between departments) and vertically (across organisational hierarchies)
- learning-oriented — enable learning across organisational boundaries
- systemic — encourage systems thinking to develop an understanding of the relationships and structures that affect decision making; corporate values, and adaptation to internal and external pressures
- networked — open learning within organisation and beyond its boundaries (adapted from James 2002).

In the sections below we explore how Sutherland Shire Council used these core characteristics of a learning organisation and the concept of 'communities of practice' to advance the local sustainability agenda.

Enhancing local sustainability: Case study of Sutherland Shire Council

Sutherland Shire Council is located in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) on the southern shores of Australia's largest urban city, Sydney (Figure 2). The 335 square kilometre area that the council covers is very diverse, including four national parks, extensive residential areas and some commercial and industrial areas. It is a large council with over 1100 staff serving a population of approximately 202,000 people. This presents some interesting challenges when trying to improve sustainability outcomes through organisational learning and change given the large number of work areas (units) within council and the wide range of services and activities in which they are involved.

Because of this diversity, Sutherland Shire Council has a history of developing and implementing a wide range of successful environmental policy, awareness and education initiatives. It is involved in programs such as Greenweb (urban biodiversity conservation), Cities for Climate Protection (greenhouse emissions control), a water conservation campaign and various initiatives promoting alternative transport. All of these successful programs target specific environmental

and/or social issues and sit under the council's Agenda 21 policies. However, there are few linkages between them and the people who implement them.

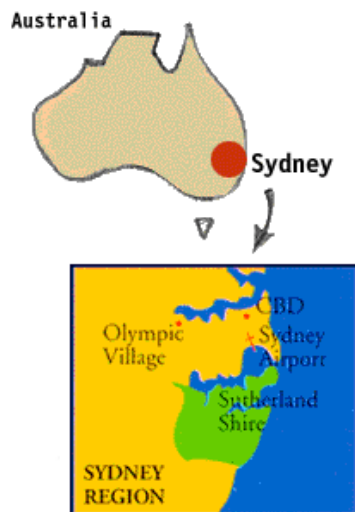


Figure 2. Location of Sutherland Shire Council

Although sustainability is frequently mentioned in policy documents, directives and professional standards that affect the business of Sutherland Shire Council, for the uninitiated staff member the requirements can be like finding your way through a maze, with no one clear framework or approach clearly emerging. The state ecological sustainable development amendments to the *Local Government Act 1997* (NSW), section 7a, require all local councils to “provide the legal framework for an effective, efficient, environmentally responsible open system of local government in NSW” — but how this is to be done is not clearly stated.

In partial response to this directive, Sutherland's own Triple Bottom Line (TBL) Management Plan explicitly outlines the requirement for the business of council to be sustainable, but in practice the process is little more than environmental reporting — a good exercise for benchmarking performance but not for affecting planning and decision-making processes. Other initiatives do affect planning and decision-making directly, such as the Building Sustainability Index (BASIX) housing codes, which are now required to ensure water and energy efficiency in new housing developments and eventually housing alterations, and the Sutherland Green Purchasing policy, which outlines environmental considerations that should be taken into account when comparing like goods and services, but both these and others remain the primary concern of a few units and do not provide an overarching sustainability framework.

Despite Sutherland's engagement in this notable array of sustainability initiatives, their potential effectiveness and impact has been hampered by uncoordinated implementation of projects in 'silo'-type organisational structures that often work in isolation to the other activities of council. In 2004, the Environmental Science and Policy Unit (ESPU) of Sutherland initiated a sustainability training program in response to a growing awareness by senior managers and directors of the need for all council staff to be able to apply sustainability concepts to their work. However, ESPU recognised that a program of voluntary training alone was not sufficient to bring about the desired outcomes. There needed to be a process that identified and addressed barriers preventing staff from implementing local sustainability assessments and initiatives, and helped to coordinate sustainability efforts and to share experiences. Ultimately, the goal was to create an environment where organisational change and development supported the achievement of local sustainability goals. Essentially, the sustainability training program needed to expand to become an organisational learning and change program.

The expanded training program used structured workshops to focus on the following elements:

- Identifying existing and potential barriers to achieving local sustainability
- Maintaining staff involvement beyond the end of the final training sessions
- Tailoring training to the daily work undertaken by participating staff through case studies based on actual developments and decision making processes
- Involving external expertise to give the training a broader focus and additional credibility
- Using the training as a starting point for wider organisational learning and action on sustainability issues.

The findings from the training programs indicate that managers and decision-makers are generally supportive of positive sustainability and TBL concepts but struggle to implement this in their daily work. The complexity and tendency to work in a silo environment presented a significant barrier, as did a lack of clear sustainability guidelines.

The formal training assisted in raising awareness of barriers to local sustainability, and policy initiatives that supported local sustainability, but it did not significantly affect the planning and policy-making processes.

The sustainability training program also needed to clearly identify and address barriers preventing staff from being more sustainable. Essentially the sustainability training program was part of an organisational change program.

Many officers felt that explicit guidance was needed to help staff implement sustainability assessment of their day to day activities related to planning, policy and infrastructure and service provision. A group of committed individuals from engineering and planning units were invited to come together to develop sustainability guidelines and a more systemic approach to sustainability assessment across council departments. In essence, they became a sustainability 'community of practice' critically examining and thinking about ways in which the council could improve its sustainability performance. External facilitators from the Australian National University were asked to facilitate the initial sessions to help the officers think about the challenges ahead and options for approaches given the experiences of other councils.

The local sustainability assessment system developed at Sutherland is described in the sections below with reference to the international literature and the experiences of other Australian councils. Unlike conventional research, we are not reporting on a finished research project; the initiative at Sutherland is ongoing and evolving — what we are sharing is a snapshot of progress to date. Ideally the learning and actions will continue into the future now.

Taking a strategic approach to sustainability assessment

There is a growing recognition internationally and within Sutherland Council that a more strategic approach is needed that puts in place an organisation wide approach to sustainability assessment (Pope et al. 2004). In contrast to the many initiatives described previously, the new framework needs to critically assess the sustainability implications of policies, plans and programs, as is consistent with strategic environmental assessments (Partidaro 2000; von Seht 1999). Rather than focussing on the avoidance of negative environmental impacts (what can go wrong), this new generation of assessment tools can be objectives-led (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler 2003) and used to integrate the achievement of sustainability objectives with decision-making processes, policies, plans and actions.

A systemic approach is being taken to ensure that sustainability assessment is integrated into planning and decision-making cycles (Figure 3). It commences by increasing staff understanding of legislative and policy frameworks relevant to local sustainability, which should affect council activities. This is documented and being linked to other decision-making support materials, such as sustainability assessment guidelines, TBL reporting forms and planning guidelines. Sutherland has already used a systemic and strategic approach to link corporate goals (derived from a community visioning process) with sustainability objectives and ultimately TBL and SOE reporting frameworks. The corporate goals and sustainability objectives are common across council. However, the way in which they are achieved varies between units and points in the decision making cycle (discussed further on).

It is intended that the system as a whole will be evaluated at regular intervals to contribute to continuous improvement and organisational learning and behaviour change. The proposal is for units to self-assess the implementation of the guidelines each year in partnership with the ESPU, and that the council will assess the sustainability assessment system approximately every three years. It has yet to be determined whether the latter assessment would be internally or externally conducted — either way it will need to be independent of those conducting the assessments.

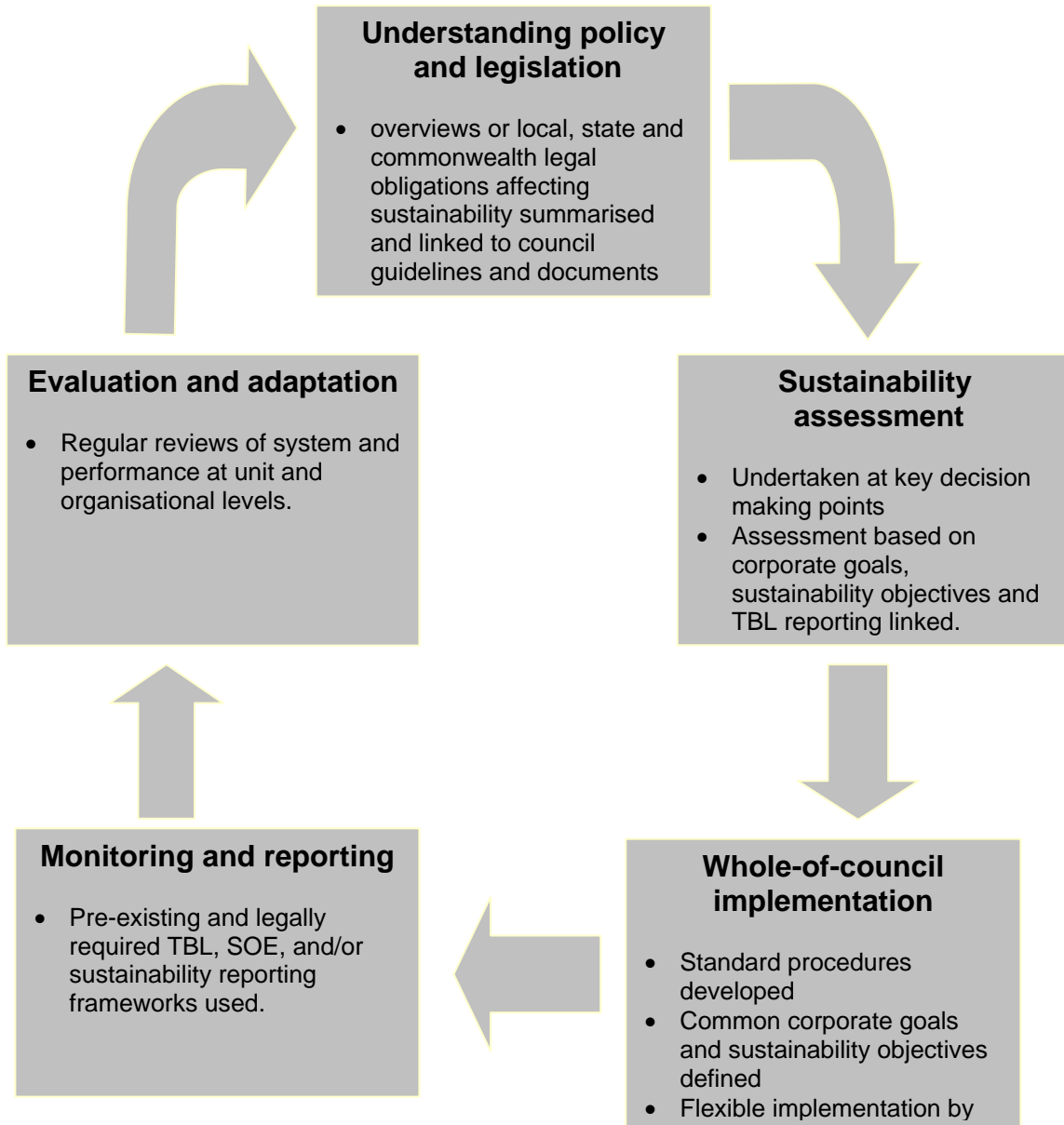


Figure 3. A systems approach to sustainability assessment

One of the greatest challenges for sustainability assessments is to devise systems that are integrated vertically (across organisational hierarchies) and horizontally (across organisational units). Because decisions affecting sustainability are taken during policy, planning and programming activities, sustainability assessments need to be appropriately timed and vertically integrated to ensure that they are not left too late in the decision-making process. The assessments need to evaluate the sustainability implications of policy or strategic decision-making, which can be advanced in subsequent sustainability evaluations of the plans and programs which flow from these policies. Thus the assessment process needs to be iterative and cumulative, building on work done earlier in the decision-making cycle, but also ensuring that sustainability is not sidelined at crucial decision-making points, or by particular units or work programs.

Collaboratively determining key decision points for local sustainability

Workplace cultures in large organisations such as Sutherland can have restricted internal communication processes. Communication on work issues is often limited to immediate co-workers, making it very difficult for the sharing of skills and knowledge to take place. This also restricts innovation in the workplace. Since its inception, the concept of sustainability has been about strong integration across disciplinary divides, sectors and levels of government. While theoretically desirable, such integration has not been easy to achieve on a practical level. The challenge was recognised early on. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development referred to the 'interlocking crisis' arising from fragmentation of management between nations, sectors, and interests (WCED 1987, p. 9). The report acknowledged that the "great institutional flaw in coping with environment and development challenges is governments' failure to make the bodies whose policy actions degrade the environment responsible for ensuring that their policies prevent that degradation" (p. 9). Almost two decades later, sustainability initiatives are still struggling with the challenge of integration in Australia (Morrison et al. 2004).

Addressing sustainability issues can be a complex business. Large organisations like the Sutherland Shire Council have a significant knowledge and skills base in their staff. However, staff with the appropriate skills are not always consulted when sustainability issues are at stake, nor do they necessarily have the opportunities to work together across organisational divides. The Sutherland training program and the sustainability assessment process emphasises the importance of consulting with others. The assessment process was developed through a community of practice group of individuals who are committed to enhancing local sustainability, but do not usually interact on a regular basis. Over time the value of exchanging ideas, critiquing each others' work, and reviewing whole-of-council processes became apparent. In particular, the

unit-based sustainability guidelines were improved considerably by peer review and the sharing of each unit's drafts with each other.

The group as a whole worked together to determine key decision making points when decisions affecting sustainability are taken. This approach to assessment was initially developed at the City of Melbourne in partnership with the International Council for Local Environment Initiatives (ICLEI) (pers. comm. K Bailey, Senior TBL officer, ICLEI, 7 June 2004; also see <<http://www.iclei.org/anz/tbl/index.htm>>). It became apparent that a wide range of experience and knowledge of council business was crucial to defining these points. Table 1 shows the decision-making points that Sutherland determined.

Table 1. Comparison of local council sustainability decision-making points

Sutherland Shire Council	Melbourne City Council	Baton Forum Retreat
<i>Strategic policy adoption</i> Decisions that determine what areas should receive priority attention/funding	<i>Formal council reports</i>	<i>Policy/plan development</i> Processes that set frameworks on which other programs and activities occur
<i>Project selection</i> Decisions concerning which project will proceed	<i>Procurement</i> Purchasing and investment decisions.	<i>Procurements</i> Decisions about significant council investments
<i>Project brief approval/design</i> Unit-based processes which determine specifications of projects	<i>Capital works</i> Works undertaken and contracted by council	<i>Approvals</i> Processes for final approvals
<i>Project adoption</i> Processes that give final approval to plans, such as council and executive meetings	<i>Human resourcing</i> Recruitment and appraisal processes	<i>Human resource decisions</i> Selection, performance and/or promotion criteria, as well as training programs
<i>Implementation</i> Purchasing/contracting/works that determine infrastructure, equipment and council activities	<i>Planning</i> Development applications, policy and strategy, and corporate planning	<i>Capital works specifications</i> Contracting and other processes affecting development specifications

Sources: Sutherland Council Workshop, 23 August 2004; Kirsty Bailey (ICLEI), 7 June 2004

To demonstrate the potential diversity between councils, decision points arising from Melbourne City Council deliberations are also shown, as well as decision-making points viewed as important by nine different councils represented by their sustainability officers who participated in a recent retreat on local sustainability (Keen and Sauvage 2005). Key differences include the inclusion of human resource management in City of Melbourne, which is missing from Sutherland although activities such as staff performance appraisal processes emerged regularly in staff diaries.¹ The reference to strategy policy adoption in Sutherland highlights a desire by the staff concerned about local sustainability to better integrate sustainability at higher levels of the council's work. These decision points become the 'triggers' for sustainability assessments. At these points the lead units are responsible for conducting the assessment. Thus the trigger is not some arbitrary size of development or type of development (as is mostly the case with EIAs), but rather is stimulated by a crucial point in the decision-making process.

For each decision point, a 'lead' unit within council was determined, as well as the other units that should be consulted in the assessment process. This set up a referral process that would help to ensure that a wide range of expertise and experience were included in the assessment, and that the assessment process would support and extend improved organisational communications.

Building sustainability assessment guidelines

While integrating frameworks for sustainability assessment are important to ensure consistency across the council, the actual work of individual units, for example engineers and planners, is quite different. For sustainability assessments to be meaningful, and for practitioners to engage fully with the assessment process, some tailoring of the process is needed. At Sutherland, some basic concepts from organisational learning were used to enhance the assessment process. At the unit level, the relevance of the process to unit-based work was increased by having senior and respected officers develop assessment questions which were tailored to their unit's work but were directly relevant to the corporate goals and sustainability objectives defined for the whole council.

This simple tailoring process, shown in Table 2, helped to increase the unit's commitment to the sustainability assessment process by increasing the relevance, richness, reliability and relationships underpinning the assessment process as follows:

- Relevance — assessment process is directly related to the unit work
- Richness — assessment is contextually relevant and detailed enough to enable action by the officers
- Reliability — assessment process is trusted by the practitioner group as it has been devised by respected professionals who are their colleagues

- Relationships — the tailored questions of each unit are available to all, this helps others outside of the unit understand the nature of the assessments which are occurring. It also provides a better basis for negotiating differences, as the assessment processes are explicit and available to all (concepts adapted from Foote et al. 2002).

Table 2. Linking corporate goals, sustainability objectives and unit concerns at Sutherland Shire Council

Corporate Goals	Selected sustainability objective examples	Example of assessment questions — planning unit	Example of assessment questions — engineering department
Nurture our environment	Enhance health and beauty of bushland, waterways, beaches and wetlands	Does the project enhance the health and beauty of bushland, waterways, beaches and wetlands?	How does the project have regard to water-sensitive urban design principles?

There are significant areas of overlap in terms of the requirement to consider key issues related to water, nature conservation and energy efficiency. One important difference between the groups was a stronger focus by engineering on ‘hard’ design issues such as the use of infrastructure design and materials, while planning dealt to some extent with these but also with ‘softer’ design issues such as the availability of diverse housing types. In general, the engineers were more able to articulate specific questions that would yield tangible answers while the planners kept their questions at a more general level, perhaps because their work is more conceptual. The voluntary nature of the community of practice meant that progress was often slow because meetings had to be fit in with other work obligations. The quality of the assessment guidelines benefited greatly from the practical insights of the practitioners. However, at times, questions lacked strong linkages to broad sustainability objectives and workshopping was needed to either tighten the focus, or broaden the coverage.

Table 2 illustrates the complementarities that can be established by integrating sustainability assessments into local council decision-making frameworks. Equally important are the processes that were used to develop such complementarities and the associated building of cross-unit sustainability communities of practice, some of which is covered above. In an effort to increase

reflection on current practice and its implications for sustainability assessment, each participant was asked to keep a daily diary for three weeks on the key issues and activities they dealt with each day, highlighting those of direct relevance to achieving local sustainability. The diaries were analysed to check their relationship to council goals and also to the key decision points identified in workshops. Regarding council goals, the findings showed that the activities of staff in both planning and engineering spanned all of the Sutherland goals and objectives, though different ones were of lesser or greater importance depending on the unit.

For decision points, the diaries showed that the decision points developed in workshops actually had meaning in terms of the activities staff performed in their day-to-day work. However, we also found that staffing and human resource management activities, which featured in diaries, were not covered in the decision points developed. This was reflected back to participants, but they felt that the decision points selected were most important and that human resource issues could be dealt with indirectly through these. Following discussion on these and other issues, a final decision was always made by the practitioners themselves.

Reflecting on practice

Reflection and organisational learning can occur at many different levels. As outlined above, an important starting point is to establish communities of practices that provide an opportunity for committed individuals to work together to build systems that will support organisational change and learning. In building a fresh approach to local sustainability assessment at the council level, piloting the system on a small scale within a few select units was necessary to ensure the system was robust enough to roll out to the rest of the council. This is presently occurring.

The initial stages of the Sutherland process involved active facilitation of the community of practice by external facilitators from the ANU. At this stage, there were high levels of enthusiasm and commitment to the process. However, completing the process of developing assessment questions relevant to work areas and a model set of guidelines rests more strongly in the hands of the Engineering and Planning units and the ESPU within Sutherland council. The transition from externally facilitated to self-driven is not an easy process, and it has been challenging to maintain the initial levels of energy and commitment. This highlights that external facilitators have an important role to play, and that the transition to self management needs to be explicitly addressed as part of the process of engaging a community of practice.

A key issue that has affected the level of motivation and enthusiasm for the agenda of the community of practice is the political context for decision-making. As one participant in a workshop expressed:

“The case study [we used to trial an assessment system] highlighted the poor relationship between Council’s five strategic goals, triple bottom line, and ecologically sustainable development. This relationship impacts upon the sustainability guidelines and assessment process and may continue to present many ongoing problems”. (Workshop participant, 23 August 2004)

This point was reiterated in other discussions, which flagged that while sustainability guidelines were being tailored to council goals, there were many occasions where political imperatives drove decision-making rather than these articulated organisational goals and objectives. This is a critical issue for local government in Australia and highlights that change in sustainability outcomes will not be achieved solely by communities of practice within local government organisations, but will also need some attention to the wider political and social context in which the organisations operate. In particular, there is clear evidence from local government sustainability practitioners that the explicit support of the organisational executive is required as a starting point for change. In the case of Sutherland Shire Council, detailed above, before development of the training program took place, council directors were briefed on the program concept with a view to incorporating their recommendations. This process ensured that the training program had the support of senior management from its initiation. This consultation with managers and directors continued throughout the development and delivery of the training program.

Getting professional reflection on sustainability and how it can be implemented in the local council context can be achieved partially through the design of the assessment system. Most systemic and strategic approaches engage practitioners in reflecting on the *system functions and processes* through monitoring and evaluation processes. Reporting systems such as TBL reporting and SOE reporting tend to focus only on assessing outcomes, for example whether water quality has improved. Sustainable development, and the new generation of monitoring and evaluation tools, are extending monitoring and evaluation to also include consideration of process and environmental stress indicators (Duda 2002). Process indicators assess the status of organisational and stakeholder processes, and lead to such questions as: “have communities been consulted?” (process indicator relevant to equity and participatory goals of sustainability). Environmental stress reduction indicators assess changes to activities and behaviour which lead to the degradation of the environment and may include such questions as: “Were environmental criteria outlined in the Green Purchasing policy applied before making this purchase?” These are in addition to the traditional focus on environmental status indicators that assess changes in the biophysical and social environment. All are needed in sustainability assessments.

When conducting evaluations of the overall effectiveness of sustainability assessment systems (or any other types of systems), there is the question of who should conduct the evaluations. In Environmental Management Systems (EMS) seeking ISO 14000 accreditation, the evaluation must be undertaken by both internal procedures and external auditors (Hortensius and Barthel 1997). This has the benefit of ensuring that the assessments are thorough and do not protect any interests or sensitivities within the organisation which could weaken the progress toward sustainability. However, such external audits can be costly for a council with limited resources, and may be able to be conducted with equal independence by a unit not directly involved in the development of the system, and which has a vested interest in the system working to the best of its capacity. In another large urban council, the internal assessing unit is the Environmental Health Unit. Other possible units are: corporate services, environmental science and policy, and human resources.

The results of evaluations are valuable for improving organisational performance, as well as important for the learning of professionals committed to sustainability outside of the council itself. During the development of the Sutherland sustainability training and assessment system, the staff and ANU facilitators have shared their experiences with the wider community, as well as run interactive workshops to brainstorm some of the more complex issues facing local sustainability assessment. The networks of the Sutherland sustainability community of practice have included the Baton Forum (local council activist group committed to promoting local sustainability) and the wider council community of sustainability practitioners and officers who participate in conferences addressing local sustainability. Other avenues for information sharing include the electronic networks supported by ICLEI (International Council for Local Environment Initiatives), Australian Department of Environment and Heritage and the Australian Environs group (local government association committed to improving environmental management).

Conclusion: Reflecting on communities of practice and sustainability

Our experience with Sutherland supports the use of communities of practice as a way of promoting change towards the integration of sustainability goals into the daily activities of local government. However, engaging communities of practice presents some significant challenges.

The very voluntary nature of the communities of practice means that they progress ideas at their own pace, the ideas developed are a function of those who participate, and in many cases the initial enthusiasm of the group may fade with no real benefit accruing to the organisation or the individuals. Within communities of practices conflicts will inevitably arise. Again, their voluntary nature means that no individual needs to commit to working out the issue; instead, they can vote with their feet and simply not return to the group. Brown and colleagues suggest that establishing

rules of engagement or social contracts early on can help to develop a common understanding of the group and the processes by which tensions will be addressed (Brown et al. 2005). Fortunately, these problems have not yet occurred at Sutherland, but they certainly could arise in groups with individuals holding strongly opposing views of a common concern.

The role of external facilitators and the transition to self-managed communities of practice can be challenging as expectations may vary. Early discussions on the role of the facilitator and how to manage the transition process should be an integral part of setting up communities of practice when facilitators are involved. In the Sutherland case the facilitators helped to structure discussions and bring new resources to the group in the initial phases. They made clear from the beginning that the development of the guidelines and the implementation of the system was entirely up to the group. After the initial three meetings the group, with the assistance of the ESPU, decided that they could take over the process and the development of the guidelines. The ANU facilitators remain supportive of the project, but mainly in a distant and informal advisory role when contacted.

Finally, as with all groups the world over, power relations can permeate communities of practices. In the Sutherland case, as with local government in other areas of Australia, translating sustainability goals into action depends not just on having good assessment processes; at the end of the day political decisions come into play. Communities of practice may feel the pressure of the organisation's decision-making hierarchy, and external political pressures. Their informal structure built on interests, not workplace structures, can result in new ideas emerging that do not 'fit' with existing organisational thinking. This is both their strength and their weakness — innovation and change often don't come easily. Sustainability often requires organisational change and an evolution in our thinking.

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