

CLIMATE CHANGE – WHAT DOES YOUR COMMUNITY REALLY THINK?

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Abstract

Ballina Shire Council, like many coastal councils, is grappling with the issues presented by climate change. One of these issues is the lack of known information about what our community/ies really consider to be the risks and impacts we need to plan for. To address this, Ballina Shire Council ran a deliberative democracy process in mid 2010 focussing on an inclusive discussion about how the community saw the risks and appropriate responses.

A more detailed and considered workshop was then run over 2 ½ days with speakers from varied fields such as climate science, legal and insurance, agriculture, health and flooding. This workshop considered the range of information presented in depth and came up with recommendations for the elected Council.

Whilst this DD process is not new, and neither is discussion about climate change, the convenors of this process found the community very willing to discuss climate change in more detail. There is a real thirst for detailed and properly balanced information about the issue and the potential risks. It appears this thirst is not being adequately met at present.

This paper reviews the deliberative democracy process including the surprises and pitfalls, and the key outcomes.

In this case, whilst the product is important, the process used to arrive at the product has been illuminating.

Introduction and Background

In late 2009, Ballina Shire Council was advised it had been successful in attracting funding from the NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Waters' Estuary Management Program to develop a Climate Action Strategy for the area. Climate change and its accompanying risks are, as for many coastal councils, a complex and problematic area for local government. There are many parties, both public and private, with an investment in the future of the shire and the issue of climate change is one that has social, environmental, economic and cultural implications to consider.

The draft Strategy itself is due to be submitted to the elected Council shortly. It is anticipated it will draw a fair degree of interest due partly to the range of comment attracted by the issue of climate change in general. The content of the draft Strategy is however firmly rooted in a comprehensive deliberative community process and it is hoped that this will provide a firm basis for debate and discussion in the broader community.

A bit about Ballina Shire

Ballina Shire Council area is on the Far North Coast of NSW, approximately 900km north of Sydney and 250km south of Ballina. It enjoys a sub-tropical climate, which in real terms means it has rained an awful lot the last few years! Ballina Shire is just under 500km² in area, with a mix of very productive hinterland area around Alstonville and Wollongbar, a spectacular escarpment are stretching from the Blackwall Range in the south and north to Newrybar. The Richmond River flows through Ballina, and the coastal and estuarine strip drains one of NSW's biggest rivers through one of its smallest floodplains.

Ballina Shire has approximately 32 km of coastline, much still well vegetated on the coastal dunes. The main urban areas on the coastal strip are Ballina, Lennox Head and Wardell with an emerging urban area at Cumbalum. Lennox Head has been identified as being at particular

risk from coastal erosion during extreme storm events and much of Ballina is likely to be vulnerable to sea level rise in the medium to long term due to its location at the mouth of the Richmond River.

Ballina Shire's population of approximately 40 000 has more older people than the NSW average, and fewer people aged 18 to 35 years resident. Its economy is largely service based, relying heavily on tourism and government services. In both these characteristics it is very similar to many smaller coastal regional centres.

Deliberative Democracy –what is it, why did we use it?

In early 2009, two of our staff attended a training course run by the convenors of the Nature Conservation Councils' Climate Consensus project which talked about using the concepts of deliberative democracy in developing approaches to complex issues. The key components of this approach, in summary, are:-

- attracting a representative sample of the community
- providing expert panels for information and questions
- time for discussion and deliberation
- an avenue for directly approaching the elected Council to make recommendations with respect to the issue at hand.

We had a reasonable budget for the development of a Climate Adaptation Strategy (project) and a Council with differing opinions and views on the validity of climate change as a concept and what to do about it.

One conventional method that is often used in developing policy and strategy is that of developing the policy in-house, providing it to the elected Council for comment and subsequent public exhibition, and then resubmitting it to Council incorporating the comments received. It was felt that climate change, being such a complex issue, would attract a fair degree of attention, and potentially unwanted and unhelpful criticism from a number of quarters. As readers would be aware, climate change attracts the full range of responses from outright disbelief to a passionate desire to see change in the shortest possible timeframe. Trying to provide a balanced response to this range of views without some form of context would be difficult in the extreme and would be unfair to the community as a whole. In trying to 'balance' the views expressed, we could end up pleasing nobody and without a Strategy to move forward with.

Using deliberative democracy principles on which to base the Strategy's development seemed to offer a more robust approach. Council engaged a facilitator who had worked on the NSW Climate Summit to assist with the formulation and delivery of this community engagement process.

Our process

Whilst Ballina Shire Council has, like many councils, been incorporating expected sea level rise and storm surge variables into various planning documents for a number of years (and updating these as new policies and guidelines are introduced), we wanted to achieve a number of outcomes with our consultation process. Whilst we wanted the outcomes that the deliberative democracy (DD) process would deliver, we also wanted to raise awareness about Council's consideration of climate change issues and increase our positive profile around dealing with complex issues. Therefore we took a multifaceted approach and used two connected DD processes with associated publicity. These being a conversation café (World Café) and citizen's forum (Citizens Jury).

We randomly recruited for participants, using a market research firm to ring 2000 homes across our shire (we have a population of just over 40 000). In the days leading up to this recruitment, we ran advertising in local papers and on local radio and did media releases as well.

Just over half the people contacted accepted the invitation to receive an information pack which provided some detail on the process we had decided on. About 15% of those people (150) said they would come to a World Café style event. Our aim was to gauge people's initial thoughts and concerns about climate change, its risks and potential impacts. We welcomed all

viewpoints, even those that were sceptical about climate change. A number of these sceptics rang to say they did not believe it was an issue and asked for our position on them attending these events. Our position was, and is, that we have been given information by both State and Federal Government on the changes we can expect to see over the next 50 to 100 years and that we needed a strategy for that. We would not be discussing whether or not climate change was real but how to move forward. Participants were free to say they thought we were moving too quickly or they were concerned there were issues with the science but we would not be having a debate on the science itself. Most people accepted this premise and came along.

The World Cafe

The World Café event was held and over 140 people actually attended on a wet and cold Ballina night. Some arrived up to an hour early, a bit difficult in terms of getting everything ready (although much of this was already done). But it showed that people were really keen to discuss the issue and indeed this was evident in the evaluations – they were grateful for a place to talk about their concerns, whatever those concerns might be. Over about two and a half hours, people ate, drank, talked and put their thoughts on paper. There was a high degree of respect for the opinions of others and this was a real focal point of the World Café.

Traditionally, this type of process is used to distill a range of ideas and thoughts. At this event we did not want to influence people's thoughts in any particular direction by providing formal presentations about the issue; rather we wanted to gain a snapshot of the current concerns and issues that the community had about climate change. The forum provided an insight into what climate change meant to the Ballina Shire community (not all of whom live on the floodplain and in coastal areas) and what they thought we, as their local government body, could do about it. This was our benchmarking exercise in a sense, the starting point in the climate change communication journey.

A notable feature of the World Café was the very few people under 35 years of age who attended. This is apparently a constant feature of many consultations. Whether people are too busy (20% of those receiving an information pack were under 35 years of age, but only 3 attending the World Café were under 35 years) or difficult to contact. We allowed people to register and attend as they were so inclined for the World Cafe, without attempting to recruit for any particular gender, age, ethnicity or location. However, many of the evaluation forms returned to us indicated that the limited number of young people in the forum was noted by participants.

Another issue we found was that a number of people rsvp'd (or not) who had not had a specific invitation. They responded to media around the event and came along. Although unable to substantiate this, it occurred to us that some of these may have been the more dominant participants who worked on focusing the small table discussion on the evidence for human induced climate change and whether there was a need to act at all

Results from the World Café were nonetheless varied and many focussed on the solutions. Some of the areas for action focussed on mitigation type activities like solar panels, encouraging alternative transport, better building standards, local food production etc. However, there was a real focus on adaptation type themes also. Obviously there is a degree of community consciousness about the vulnerability of a place such as Ballina Shire and its coastal and floodplain communities to significant sea level rise and storm surge.

Thoughts were expressed about controlling or stopping development on floodplains, protecting existing areas or having buyback schemes for potentially affected areas, the public cost of saving private areas at risk. Many other ideas showing a sophisticated consideration of some of the more complex issues facing our community as a result of climate change risks were also expressed. Considering the World Café event had no formal presentations to guide discussion or provide a context, it was very interesting that many of the responses had similar themes.

The Citizen's Forum

The Climate Ballina Citizens Forum took place approximately 7 weeks after the WC, giving us time to get the recruitment underway. Organisation of the details was as for any event, but given the difficulty in recruitment of those under 35 years of age, significant time and energy was given attracting people from this demographic.

This was ultimately successful through personal contacts but was extremely challenging. We still had no representatives between the ages of 25 and 35 years of age, but four between 17 and 25 years of age. All other demographics were represented and the spread of localities within the Shire was also relatively even between coastal and hinterland, urban and rural, floodplain and non-floodplain. We didn't knowingly have any Aboriginal persons in our group, and this absence was noted by the other participants. This was one of the lessons we learned actually, that groups do notice the absence of particular parts of the community as noted above with regard to the World Café as well as the Citizen's Forum.

We used a traditional deliberative democracy approach, known as the Citizen's Jury, structured into three separate components. These included using an introductory evening to introduce the concept and provide some exposure to other participants and Councillors; a full day using expert speakers to provide background, information and stimulate thought; and a final day of deliberation. Two and a half days is a significant time commitment to ask for on a voluntary basis from community members, however we found that, in reality, it is not a very long time. Depending on the quality of the speakers, many questions are generated. Also, there are many topics to be covered in complex issues (such as climate change) and there may not be enough time in a few hours to cover these in sufficient detail as to provide a rounded picture of issues to be considered. This was certainly our experience. Also pertinent to the issue of speakers is the consideration of topics to be covered. In the event, we did not manage to obtain a speaker on ecology and the environment with regard to the likely effects of climate change. Personal contacts and "google" were valuable sources of contacts for speakers in the main, but this did not serve us so well for the ecology and environment sector. A number of contacts were made but they did not come through. Placing emphasis on sourcing speakers upfront worked very well for us in the other areas, and in hindsight we should have done the same for this area.

Participants made reference to the 'lack of time' issue also in the evaluation forms. Some of the more drastic recommendations made would, in the words of one participant, have 'fallen off' if there had been more time to consider these.

Feedback from facilitators has also provided some insight into this issue. Council's timetable is provided in Appendix A for information purposes. Careful management of time is needed both to provide the requisite opportunities for deliberation but also to manage participant fatigue. However, it appears that an extra hour or so was needed for larger group deliberation over the thoughts of the smaller groups in order for the recommendations to be truly reflective of the group as a whole.

What (if anything) has this process added to the development of the Strategy?

At the time of writing, the elected Council has yet to consider the findings in full, in the context of the Climate Action Strategy, although they are due to be reported to Council's October monthly meeting. However, for staff, the process has provided a strong degree of transparency and probity to a process that must often seem quite arbitrary to those outside of the Council's own staff involved in writing strategies and policy. Involving a reasonably large section of the community by contacting them in the first place will hopefully provide some degree of confidence in the outcomes that are reached. The process itself provides 'pre-feedback' in a sense about what is important to the community as a whole in addressing climate change. This, combined with the professional knowledge of Council staff, should give a broadly acceptable approach to a complex issue. It also gives Councillors a degree of certainty that, given the same information they have access to, the community would come to a similar set of conclusions (or not, sometimes). This provides a level of comfort, so to speak, about putting such draft policies on exhibition for public comment.

We expect that there will be a level of debate about the realities or otherwise of climate change, the climate change science and the individual aspects of the policy when it finally goes on exhibition. However, the process to date has provided a degree of groundtruthing to the contents of the draft Climate Action Strategy (the Strategy).

The theory of deliberative democracy (NCC Website, downloaded 8/9/10) states that the benefits of using these techniques are numerous, namely:-

- Best practice in governance and increased public trust
- Strengthening planning and decision making with community input

- Robust mechanism to bridge the gap between citizens, experts and decision makers
- Increased potential for conflict resolution
- Increased potential for critical thinking and innovation
- Increased capacity for problem solving
- Opportunity for a diversity of voices to be heard on important issues
- More community ownership of solutions to problems or issues
- Empowerment by participants to become more engaged on issues that affect them.

We expect that some of these benefits will definitely be realised. However, some of them are dependent on a fully engaged community and it is unclear whether or not this is the case at this time for Ballina Shire. Climate change as an issue is complex, emotive, fraught with misinformation (including a lack of media integrity in reporting - for example, 'balancing' accredited and recognised climate scientist information with opinions from professional sceptics or scientists who are from different disciplines). These parameters make it difficult for regular members of the community to make an appropriately informed decision about their own thoughts concerning climate change. Whilst this has attempted to be addressed through the DD process with the use of expert speakers, the broader community has not had the luxury of these presentations or the deliberative process itself. The results are still to be determined – whether or not Council is able to 'pitch' the process adequately to give the Ballina Shire community confidence in the twenty people randomly selected to represent them on the Citizen's Forum remains to be seen.

Clearly, the participants appreciated the event for itself and could see the benefits. This was borne out by the comments on the evaluation forms as well as the calibre of the participation. Members of staff could definitely see the benefits. An additional benefit of the process was that it also provided the community members involved with an insight into the difficulties Council faces in dealing with complexities of this issue. The elected Councillors who attended the 'handover' of recommendations clearly appreciated the efforts of the community members who attended.

Definitely, there was a respect for each other's views both in the World Café and the Citizen's Forum which is not always a feature of more traditional community consultations. Feedback from one of the facilitators (a first time facilitator at this style of event) was that the structure of the deliberations, including the way in which questions were framed to the expert presenters, meant that the strongest and most dominant personalities were calmer in their approach and the quiet personalities also got to have their say. In the presence of a skilled facilitator, this technique avoided the adversarial approach that can sometimes occur when people want to make a point and use their question time to make it.

The approach also tempered the potentially more 'out there' suggestions that can sometimes be made (although at least one quite drastic proposal was made!). The moderating influence of small group discussion and then large group discussion allowed most of the recommendations to be thoughtful and considered in their approach.

In the opinion of the authors, all of the above benefits could potentially accrue to this process where there is adequate trust in the broader community. This will probably only occur after the process is tried and true to a degree. The trick is, as mentioned above, in putting together a reasonable 'marketing' package before the results are given so that community members have at least some idea of the process that was implemented before the results are articulated.

If we were to do it again...

If we were to undertake this process again, we would more carefully consider what we needed from the consultation process. We had a budget for this process and we certainly used it. It was an expensive and time intensive process and so we would be looking to use the same (larger) pool of people again for a Citizen's Jury style process. However, given that a lot of the feedback we received from the World Café was along similar lines to the recommendations made by the Citizen's Forum, where the issue was a less complex one than climate change, it might be worth utilising the World Café style event once again. This was less expensive to conduct and allowed over 140 people to come together to talk. However, having said this, much of the costs we incurred were during recruitment of our random pool of community members.

Recruitment was the most expensive part of the process, and other methods of doing this might be found although it is important to ensure the selection of participants is as random and reflective of the local demographic as possible. It is worth spending the money here to ensure that.

As much time as we spent on this aspect of the process, it was very difficult to ensure we had people under 35 years of age attending. Perhaps we needed to try other media. We also had no-one that we know of who identified as Aboriginal. There were a couple of people attending who had had a non-English speaking background.

Facilitation was another large component of our expenditure. We needed guidance with this aspect of the project, as it was our first venture into deliberative democracy. However, we now feel more confident that we could utilise similar methods with our own staff who had been trained in facilitation and this might substantially reduce costs.

Teamwork is the key, however, in running any large and complex event. Whilst most of the work is inevitably done by a couple of key individuals, a collaborative group approach to planning worked very well.

Conclusions

Deliberative democracy processes did not, in this case, provide recommendations that we would see as being substantially different from that which we, as staff, might come up with within Council itself. Its strength is in providing community, in its broadest sense, with a sense of involvement and trust in the final strategy. This trust will only fully develop over time as the Council progresses with its Climate Action Strategy and then begins its implementation. As one participant put it in their evaluation 'you've made a good start, now don't waste our time and yours by not using it (check this)'.

It is suggested that the benefits of this process are probably yet to be fully realised.