



# Climate change adaptation and your council: where to start

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## Summary

The reality of climate change is indisputable and so it is essential to facilitate an understanding within your council that inaction is not an option and that the potential impacts can be influenced by how and when local government responds.

This paper has been developed to assist those in local government who have an understanding that their council must consider the effects of climate change but who need basic guidance on a meaningful way forward.

Factors to consider include:

- ***Is climate change really a problem in my council area?***  
Here we provide some guidance on how to research and understand what the basic risks and vulnerabilities may be.
- ***Has climate change been considered at all?***  
We show how to ascertain whether your council currently has systems in place to respond to climate change.
- ***How do I start the adaptation conversation?***  
Regardless of your position within the organisation, we explain how to get climate change considered by council staff, elected members and the community.
- ***You are not alone!***  
Other local councils have been in your position. This paper will help you to find information about their journey and identify your best way forward.
- ***What is the least I should be aiming to achieve?***  
Some ideas about what are the absolutely essential outcomes you need, in order to be confident about climate change adaptation at your council.

- ***Moving through the adaptation pathway?***

Some guidance on long term climate change adaptation options.

## **Is climate change really a problem in my council area?**

- It can seem daunting when you first try to understand and communicate climate change science and climate change risks. Your main focus should be on communicating information in a way that can be easily understood by non-technical fellow staff, elected representatives and the community. Therefore it is important to consider whether a modest amount of funding could be allocated for you to commission a basic, first pass climate change risk assessment (which might be undertaken by a suitably qualified consultant if human resources are a constraint and finances are available) for your council. This is usually a relatively cheap process that can cost between \$10,000 and \$20,000. The benefit of bringing in a consultant at the first stage is that they are experts in their field, provide an independent assessment and are more likely to be listened to by executive officers and elected members. If the initial scoping risk assessment is undertaken by a council staff member (usually from the environment or natural resource department) they have to overcome the traditional barriers of 'environmental issues' not being given adequate weight in decision-making. A climate change consultant will treat climate change risk as a 'risk issue' not just an environmental one.
- For all local areas in Australia, there exist great resources and information (climate change projections, modelling / maps, state / local government reports, case studies) that can assist you to understand, and then communicate, the broader climate change risk for your area and also the potential high-level implications for your council and community. CoastAdapt provides basic information to [Understand climate change projections](#) and how to [Access national and regional projections](#).
- For many coastal council areas, the critical climate change risks to infrastructure and communities relate to future storm surge, inundation and coastal erosion. CoastAdapt provides [maps](#) for each coastal council showing possible inundation of coastal areas under one high greenhouse gas emission scenario at mid-century (2050) and two different greenhouse gas emission scenarios at the end of the century (2100).
- To assist with understanding erosion sensitivity of your coastal area, CoastAdapt provides information, maps and guidance on understanding coastal erosion sensitivity (maps of coastal compartments around Australia and information on [erosion sensitivity of each compartment](#)). It is important to use these to gain an insight into the risk that increased rates of erosion may pose to critical infrastructure and assets.
- For more information on datasets and visualisation resources see [National mapping and coastal risks](#).

- Using key components of these information sources along with any existing local data and information about past events, a high-level risk screening can be done to understand broader climate change risk of your areas. CoastAdapt provides a [Guidance on risk assessment](#) and an easy to use [Risk assessment templates](#) that can be used for this purpose.

## Has climate change been considered at all?

- Regardless of your position within the organisation, it is essential that you understand your council's climate change adaptation status and capabilities. The best way to do this is through a review of your council's organisational structures as well as its strategic and risk management plans and policies (this is often referred to as an adaptation governance review).
- If there is no reference to climate change in your council's strategic documents—such as a strategic plan, risk register and long term financial plan—then this is an initial indication that there is little understanding of the critical implications to council functions and a lack of commitment to long term action. This needs to be identified and included in an initial risk assessment.
- A basic review of a number of climate change adaptation governance indicators (i.e. measurement factors) for your council should be undertaken. This should include thinking about important fundamentals relating to council's business structure and service provision. A free and easy to use climate change adaptation governance self-assessment tool can be downloaded from Climate Planning for this purpose (<http://www.climateplanning.com.au/governance>).
- For the governance review, questions could be posed to key staff via personal interviews or even using a survey to gain a better understanding of the climate checks and balances currently in place.
- Once again it may be desirable to commission a suitably qualified consultant to facilitate asking the questions and reporting back on the climate change strategic and governance status of council. This may be perceived as less invasive and / or threatening to council staff and the final report would have more chance of being considered impartial.
- The beauty of this approach can be that it allows you to present a graphic benchmarking outcome so that you can understand and communicate your council's climate status compared to other similar councils.

## How do I start the adaptation conversation?

- As a minimum, the leaders of your council (both political and management) should understand the implications of not doing anything about identified climate change related risks (e.g. financial losses, damages to the natural environment, risks of litigation, inability to insure assets, loss of opportunities, community risk and dislocation etc.). See also [Implications of taking no action](#).

- Consider creating an internal working group on climate change adaptation. In particular, focus on getting support from someone in a department that is not traditionally involved in environmental matters. For example financial officers have a great grasp of council risk and are often the conduit to council's general and negligence insurance contractors. See also [Getting organisational buy-in](#).

Communication of climate change risks and planning for adaptation are of critical importance to local government's response. Communicating risks in an appropriate manner is also crucial for getting leadership and stakeholder support towards any adaptation action. CoastAdapt provides the following content that can help you to communicate different issues around climate change effectively to your stakeholders.

- [How to communicate about global climate change scenarios](#)
  - [How to communicate about local scenarios of climate change](#)
- The presentation to management and elected representatives about the basic risks posed by climate change in the council area, accompanied by a basic evaluation of council's existing climate change adaptation governance status, should act as a catalyst for a structured response.
  - CoastAdapt contents provide useful information including case studies to understand legal and insurance risks that may arise from climate change related issues.
    - [Information Manual 6: Legal Risk](#)
    - [Reducing legal risk](#)
    - [Role of insurance](#)

## You are not alone!

- It is beneficial to avail yourself of the opportunity to compare your council's adaptation status and circumstances with other councils. CoastAdapt and related tools provide great opportunities to evaluate and understand the journey of similar local councils and their communities.
- Also consider evaluating and presenting case studies on climate change adaptation planning in other local governments. One examples is Kingborough Council in Tasmania where Kingston Beach has been used as a case study for climate risk modelling and adaptation planning. (see the video case study of [Kingston Beach](#)).
- An alternative approach may be to source input, or even a presentation, from another council, that has undertaken a comparative process. It is also useful to participate in a regional local government alliance to facilitate greater resource and information sharing. Don't be afraid to reach outside your regional / state boundaries. Some councils, such as Kingborough, have formal and informal relationships throughout Australia and overseas, using Skype for ongoing engagement.

## What is the least I should aim to achieve?

- To start with, make sure you understand the direct and indirect impacts of climate change. Most people understand the direct effects (as they are connected to existing extreme weather events). The indirect issues (transition / emerging risks) are less well known but present a material risk to your council (think availability of insurance, negligence cases, impacts on ability to generate rateable income, impacts on capital investments).
- The most realistic outcome initially is to present the findings of a basic climate change risk (and potential opportunities) evaluation to council's staff, management team and elected representatives. The aim would be to precipitate an understanding of the need for an ongoing commitment to an adaptation planning and governance process.
- Aim towards a longer term goal to create a culture of informed decision making. This would be through the good governance practice of routinely considering climate change and related impacts in core business decision-making. Adaptation planning would become routine to council's business with emerging risks regularly factored in.
- A key component of a potential response is the drafting and adoption of a climate change adaptation policy. The adoption and implementation of such a policy by your council demonstrates that there is consideration of the risks posed by climate change and makes a decisive political commitment to a meaningful response.
- Ultimately, however, the degree to which your council needs to take action on addressing climate change risk depends on its exposure to current and future climate risks, and on the amount of risk the organisation, stakeholders and community are willing to accept. The response options can include 'doing nothing right now' and letting nature take its course. This is an action (of sorts) and if it is considered and adopted by council, it should be well documented. There should be documentation of the process to arrive at the decision to 'not act now', including the rationale for the decision. This document should also outline a process indicating what will be required to stimulate action in the future (e.g. trigger events, new information), and how these will be determined and measured.
- For more information about understanding the implications of not taking any adaptation action see [The implications of taking no action](#).

## Moving through the adaptation pathway?

- This document presents a series of actions that, regardless of the current resources and leadership available at an organisation, could create a meaningful way forward for the consideration of climate change by your council. However the creation and implementation of a council specific climate change adaptation plan should be the ultimate goal.
- Think about key performance indicators (KPIs) that could relate to climate action. What does success look like? Where possible, position KPIs within existing governance arrangements (such

as council's strategic delivery plan). The focus should be on measurable outcomes that highlight reduced exposure to hazards, increased capacity to respond and the extent of your organisational and community vulnerability.

- Once you have created KPIs, then agree to monitor and report on these. At a minimum this should be done on an annual basis (possibly in council's annual report).
- Preparation of a detailed adaptation plan can be expensive in terms of data, time and resources, depending on the complexity of the challenge, levels of risk that needs to be addressed and, foremost, the risk appetite of your organisation. However, it is possible to create a high-level and preliminary adaptation plan with limited resources and time. CoastAdapt provides a decision support system named as Coastal Climate Adaptation Decision Support ([C-CADS](#)). It is an iterative decision support process designed to facilitate adaptation planning and decision-making for the Australian coast.
- There is no doubt that free flowing communication about climate change and its potential risks to your council's business and community is essential to achieve meaningful progress on adaptation. A climate change communications plan / strategy is a key component of a local government climate change response. CoastAdapt provides the following content that can help you to communicate different issues around climate change effectively to your stakeholders.
  - [Communicating global climate change scenarios](#)
  - [Communicating local scenarios of climate change](#)
  - [Building community support](#)
  - [Engaging the community](#)
  - [Information Manual: Community Engagement](#)

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