

## INVESTING IN COMMUNITY FUTURES

### ***ENHANCED STORMWATER QUALITY MANAGEMENT – COMMUNITY INTERACTION, INTEGRATION AND COORDINATION***

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## **1. Introduction**

Stormwater management planning is an activity for local government which has undergone considerable changes over the last few years as a result of the Section 12 Directive by the Environment Protection Authority (EPA). This legal directive listed specific requirements relating to the planning process as well as to the content of the plans (Barter, Brown and Ryan, 2001<sup>2</sup>). This paper explores the context of local government pertinent to stormwater activities, their relationship with the community and the value of source control activities to deliver measurable improvements in water quality outcomes.

Extensive analysis across community and organisational frameworks has identified the importance of systemic values, understanding, integration and coordination. When issues are generally expressed and understood in isolated contexts, often characterised by polarised relationships and consequently limited understanding, management and planning approaches are undermined. When stakeholder status is located around individuals, particular disciplinary backgrounds, and perceived 'expert' status, opportunities for improving stormwater quality are limited. These are classic features of predominant stormwater management and planning approaches.

This paper argues for sustainable solutions to stormwater pollution through increased community participation (individual activity, community stewardship, and deliberative decision-making); an improved evidence base to challenge and stimulate community and organisational perspectives; extensive engagement, development and capacity-building activities; and systematic analysis of institutional arrangements. Such an approach enhances institutional values, abilities, activities, and therefore the quality of management and planning outcomes. It results in a truly 'structured' approach.

The descriptions of the projects, which form the basis for this paper, can be found on our web site, using the link to 'projects'. The web address is [www.elton.com.au](http://www.elton.com.au). The overheads used in the presentation are also available on this site. The three relevant projects are *Community Indicators and Local Democracy*, *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Community Education and Source Control*, and the *Bronte Catchment Project*.

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<sup>2</sup> Stormwater Planning and Regulation: An Overview, by Rebekah Brown, Shane Barter and Roberta Ryan, GRABB Symposium 2001, SSROC.

## **2. Context of Local Government**

The role of local government is going through dramatic change, requiring leadership in a vast array of areas including information technology, health and community services, risk and liability, the pressure of ageing infrastructure and a growing number of issues concerning land management. A restructure of local government funding and organisational arrangements is needed to assist them to rebuild and embrace change. Local governments may be perceived as ‘closest to the people’ and the ‘nurse of local democracy’, but they are often treated as merely an arm of state government, subject to state legislative authority in a number of ways (and indeed for their existence). Local councils often find themselves caught between the expectations of local communities and the directives of state governments who are often accused of a lack of understanding of how they work.

Local government is under pressure in a number of areas to work in a more integrated way, with an increased understanding of locality specific concerns and to have improved planning processes that more directly reflect community priorities and concerns. Stormwater management is typical of just one of the many areas which requires this increased capacity in local government.

We argue here that if stormwater management is to have a prevention and source control outcome, then community engagement is the core activity. Community engagement must also be underpinned by organisational capacity to deliver on the outcomes of this engagement.

This is required at a time when the fundamental imperative is to maintain a society capable of adapting to the substantial pressures of change related to achieving sustainable environmental outcomes.

## **3. Articulating Community**

Stormwater management planning fundamentally involves the ‘community’, and yet much of it occurs without reference to it. There is increasing recognition of the role of the community and the necessity for routine community engagement and consultation integrated across stormwater management planning and implementation. At the same time, traditional approaches prevail, encouraged by a lack of clarity and knowledge about community views, and a consequent reliance on limited disciplinary and professional perspectives. This undermines the sustainability of management outcomes.

But what do we mean by ‘community’? And what does that tell us about community concerns, about how people participate and engage with one another and with local government, and the implications for stormwater management?

The search for how people in a local government area conceptualise a sense of community, of their local area and local government, begins by asking questions and not assuming any special knowledge, as outsiders. People’s understandings of their community, their locality and their relation to local government, are not identical. These understandings are often ‘fuzzy’ and changeable, while ‘Community’ is largely an imagined entity, an ideal of common interests attached to certain recognised values. The projects we are reporting here all began by investigating the meaning of

community, more specifically how environmental issues were understood and valued. This information was used to establish ways of communicating, the best means for engagement, the focus of activities and the stormwater issues to be addressed.

#### **4. Community Consultation – improving stormwater outcomes while strengthening democratic capacity**

The stormwater projects reported here were based on a series of social surveys, linked to pre and post test measures of community concerns, participation preferences, and environmental values, knowledge and behaviours. Together, they established an evidence-base which underpinned and defined innovative initiatives to engage local community with local government in developing new approaches to stormwater management.

The three specific stormwater projects were fundamentally concerned with community consultation. We define community to include all stakeholders who live in, work in, and/or visit a catchment area. This includes tenants as well as property owners, local businesses and shops as well as sporting or social clubs, Council staff and Councillors as well as community groups, and visitors (or non-resident catchment users). Consultation with all these groups has defined project activities.

Community consultation has been understood as a conceptual framework, a methodology, a strategy, an activity, and an outcome. It has been a project aim, formed the basis of a series of objectives, defined and informed activities, developed project strategies, assessed project learning and underpinned outcomes.

Essentially, community consultation is about engagement, development and building capacity. This notion reflects the growing recognition across a range of institutional players (including all levels of government, and organisational and community stakeholders), that community consultation is an integral component of all management planning and policy processes. One ‘consults’ to inform, invite, engage, share ideas, learn, reflect and develop. One also ‘consults’ to ensure ongoing support and commitment, risk management, strategic planning, implementation, and sustainability.

Hence, community consultation is not simply a separate component, a preamble to the real work, an introductory activity, a forum for information-giving, or an additional demand. In the current framework of integrated stormwater management approaches, effective pollution prevention, and coordinated institutional relationships, it is an essential requirement.

The Bronte Catchment Project initially demonstrated the crucial role of community consultation in the engagement, development and analysis phases of activity – identifying the key issues, patterns of activity and participation, the impact of sectional interests and possibilities for change. The project drew on a range of ‘brains trusts’ at different stages in a variety of ways, informally and formally, to test project assumptions, directions and strategies.

Community consultation continued to be a crucial driver in the development of the specific participatory processes. This project phase, where participatory processes were developed, planned, conducted and evaluated, fundamentally relied on strategic,

creative, and focussed consultation across all institutions and stakeholders. The extent to which this was achieved and resulted in enhanced institutional capacity and stormwater management outcomes, is clearly evident in the trial of participatory and deliberative processes.

In setting these up, we extensively researched different models of deliberation. These are predominantly untried and untested, particularly at this level (locality-specific) and around these issues (environmental management initiatives).

The work developed iteratively, based on extensive investigations across the community and council, guided by the experiences of other examples, and informed by interactive conceptualisations of participation and deliberation. On that basis, and informed by a number of key stakeholders and advisers across local governance, environmental and participatory fields, we conducted a Citizens Tele-poll and Citizens Jury.

The project assumed that meaningful democratic participation entails a deliberative process in which citizens can collectively assess arguments and form judgements around the common good. It requires a transition from sectional interests to collective interests. Deliberation aims to create workable relationships and a degree of consensus (but not necessarily total agreement) that should enable better ongoing decision making processes.

Improving stormwater management by changing ordinary practices at 'source' is a new approach to stormwater management. It involves complex technical and scientific questions rather than a straightforward public education process. A participatory approach to this issue must be 'deep' in the sense of involving sustained public discussion and deliberation on issues. This was explored through the use of the Citizens Jury in the Bronte Catchment Project.

In order for these 'deep' mechanisms to themselves be accountable to a wider community and constituency, there has to be a process where the wider community is kept informed of the process and findings, and is able to make informed responses to the proposals developed out of that process. This was tested by the Tele-poll.

358 residents participated in the Tele-poll. A range of education strategies, to inform the deliberation of participants preceded this. They were then asked a series of questions, mirroring those addressed by the Citizens Jury. The Tele-poll demonstrated high levels of knowledge and understanding of the issues, an emphasis on integrated and sustainable approaches to stormwater management, and established the importance of urban planning and design issues, as well as the impact of non-visible pollutants, as key issues of concern. These issues were highlighted in the education campaign.

The Citizens Jury involved 15 randomly recruited residents selected to come together for three days to consider specialist briefing material, to hear and question expert witnesses, and to produce a series of recommendations around key questions. The aim was to contribute to the quality of local decision-making regarding approaches to stormwater management, and thereby enhance sustainable solutions to stormwater issues in the Bronte Catchment.

The extent to which this was achieved is clear in widespread institutional acceptance and support for the recommendations, across all community stakeholders, including Council and Councillors. Community consultation has been a continuing process, to facilitate the response, encourage support and commitment, and assess the relevance and achievability of these outcomes.

Community consultation has therefore continued to underpin the closing stages of the project, in the implementation, integration and evaluation phases. Throughout, it has identified, developed, and built capacity across the project and institutional partners. In doing so, it has strengthened democratic capacity while enhancing stormwater outcomes.

## **5. Conclusion**

Community engagement must tackle issues of control over decision outcomes and agenda setting. It is a common complaint from those charged with the task of conducting community engagement that citizens are increasingly sceptical and unwilling to constructively participate. One reason (among others) is that people are increasingly unwilling to be token participants in the decision-making processes. There has to be a real institutional commitment to having citizen input taken seriously.

To make sure that citizen input can be taken seriously (for example that the results of the Citizens Jury will be adopted by Council) the question of organisational commitment to democratising their internal structures needs to be addressed. Local governments often need to tackle organisational structures (enabling responsiveness and a capacity to respond to issues presented to them in an integrated way). This may require some organisational development before work with citizens is undertaken. If there is not organisational (political and decision-making capacity) support for the value of community engagement and its outcomes, it is difficult to translate that successfully for the community participants.

Issues are often defined in advance of the process of community engagement. These reflect technocratic and often arbitrary policy and jurisdictional divisions that have little resonance with citizen experience of issues. Traditional government agency 'silos', arbitrary divides between levels of government, geographical boundaries and the so called 'sacred' but often untested beliefs which inform (misguide) decision makers prevail in the construction of issues set before the citizens. Issues need to reflect citizen perceptions rather than existing governance arrangements.

The use of citizens juries is only one strategy to deal with the view that ordinary citizens, not involved with the complexities of governance as part of their every day lives, neither have the skills nor access to the information to secure their meaningful participation. Using mechanisms of community engagement seek to overcome these concerns, involving citizens in tasks that define the issues to be explored and by taking control of the values that are reflected in their governance potential for success increase. Ultimately, this serves to build capacity across the community and local government, enhance the quality of outcomes, encourage sustainability and ensure integrated approaches to stormwater management.