Climate-Ready Councils:
Assessing adaptive capacity and council governance
Coordinated by the Western Alliance for Greenhouse Action

Work Package 2:
A Climate-Ready Council Plan Process
Undertaken by the Northern Alliance for Greenhouse Action

Research Report

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Executive Summary

Background

Council Plans are Victorian councils' most important strategic planning documents. A new Local Government Act (2020) set the context for the development of new Council Plans for 2021-2025 from late 2020 to October 2021. This new Act is one of several significant developments in the policy context in Victoria that have worked to clarify and highlight local government's opportunities, responsibilities, and duty of care in preparing their communities for climate change. This includes considering and addressing climate change in decision-making and at the highest level of planning, and considering and addressing the local community's aspirations for their future.

This research set out to investigate whether and how climate change has been included, addressed, embedded and integrated in the new Council Plans and to identify what factors enable councils to do this well, what factors are barriers, and how these might be addressed. In particular the project explored the relationships between the Council Plan and the way climate action takes place in councils, including:

- **Embedding:** the inclusion of climate actions and objectives across multiple themes or strategic objectives (in a Council Plan) or in multiple teams (across an organisation).
- **Integration:** logical, strategic and practical linking and coherence of climate action (in a Council Plan or across an organisation).
- **Climate change as a cross-cutting theme:** the inclusion of climate change in some form across multiple areas of a Council Plan (a type of embedding).

This report explores *whether and how* these factors are perceived within councils to enable strong and coordinated climate action.

This project is part of an overarching project, *Climate Ready Councils*, which aimed to improve how climate change adaptation is embedded across councils at the governance level.

Councils from across Greater Melbourne were invited to take part in this project through an online discussion forum and workshop, and through interviews and surveys. The interviews and surveys took place during first half of 2021 (Stage 1) and in late 2021 (Stage 2). These two stages were designed to provide snapshots of councils 'before and after' completing their Council Plan development process. The previous (2017-2021) and new (2021-2024) Council Plans of participating councils were also reviewed.

Findings

Stage 1

- A review of the 2017-2021 Council Plans found that climate change was not included prominently and was rarely embedded widely or integrated strongly. In general, content on climate change was at a high level, with little operational detail included. Officers assessed the level of integration of climate action in these plans as low to moderate, and the level of influence of the plans over their work as moderate.
- Officers saw the new Council Plan as a potentially important enabler of embedding climate change action across their organisation.
- There was little consistency found in terms of frameworks being used to assist with the development of the new Council Plans, particularly in relation to including climate change.
- More than half of councils interviewed anticipated that climate change would be a cross-cutting theme of their next Council Plan, but less than half felt that their Council was taking a leadership role in embedding climate action in their Council Plan.
- Officers reported that there were substantial knowledge gaps that needed to be addressed in order for councils to integrate climate change into their Council Plans, organisation and work effectively. They said they needed more support from the Victorian Government.

Stage 2

- A review of the new Council Plans found that, in general, content on climate change in these plans is stronger, more prominent, more substantial, more detailed, and more embedded than those reviewed in Stage 1, but embedding is still only partial.
- Councils' assessment of whether they had played a leadership role in embedding climate change were very similar the responses of councils interviewed in Round 1 (see also Appendices 1 and 2) – most felt their level of leadership was moderate.
- Councils again predicted that the influence of the new Council Plans on their climate-related work would only be moderate, as would be the level of understanding of teams across their organisations in terms of their roles in climate action.
- When rating the level of support of different stakeholder groups for embedding climate change in the Council Plan, respondents gave similar responses to the results found in the Stage 1 interviews, and support levels were generally believed to be moderately high.
- Respondents generally felt that there was a stronger focus on community engagement than in previous years and estimated that the community would be "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with how climate change had been embedded in their new Council Plan.
- Climate commitments in the Council Plan mean that climate action gains traction within the organisation. New initiatives are enabled and existing programs are strengthened, especially in terms of reporting. The public nature of the Council Plan also strengthens accountability.
- Embedding and integration of climate action in the Council plan (including making climate change a cross-cutting theme) is important because it means that more than one director is responsible for climate action, climate action becomes more visible, and multiple outcomes from and contributions to climate action are recognised.
- Some officers described advantages of concentrating climate action in one area of the Council Plan such as, maintaining focus and prominence, and avoiding repetition. Others felt this 'siloed' approach inhibited innovation and ownership across the organisation.

- A Council Plan with very strong climate action doesn't necessarily display strong integration and embedding, and a plan with strong integration and embedding doesn't necessarily entail very strong climate action. Some councils identified embedding as inhibiting very strongly worded actions, with 'softer' actions being more readily accepted at the Council Plan level.
- Councils pointed to a more integrated planning process, which has brought together the Council Plan with long-term financial planning, and asset planning, and municipal health and wellbeing planning, as enabling better-integrated climate action.
- Many councils acknowledged that the collaboration between teams throughout the Council Plan process, and the organisational conversations that took place, were very important.
- Some Council Plans include a host of specific actions relating to climate change, while other plans refer to other documents with more operational detail.
- Staff working with the former (specific) approach tend to view this detail approach as positive, and as exemplifying embedding and integration.
- Some staff working with the latter (aggregated)approach believed this approach would reinforce a culture of "ticking boxes" rather than driving cultural change. Others felt this was practical and appropriate. Generally staff agreed that the aggregated approach was not strong on engaging teams across council in the work of climate action.
- Staff feel there is a need for strong, clear actions and specific, measurable targets in order to maintain accountability within the organisation and to the community, and to make sure their delivery stays on track.
- All staff see strong leadership from councillors and executive teams as a key enabling factor
- for climate change in their Council Plan.
- A number of councils identified the increased focus on community engagement, and particularly the deliberative engagement processes, as being a strong and positive influence on how climate change was addressed in the Climate Plan. Good deliberative community engagement, in particular, was reported to de-politicise climate action amongst councillors, and increased councils' sense of accountability to the community for climate action.
- Many officers remarked on the fact that the Council Plan process is an iterative one and expressed hope that time and repetition, as well as lessons learned this year, would improve this process. Many hoped for stronger and more integrated actions from future plans, yet few councils had undertaken a formal evaluation of their Council Plan development process when interviewed or surveyed during Stage 2.

Enablers, barriers and support needs
- Councils said the following factors were enabling in embedding climate action into the Council Plan:
  - Strong existing commitments, e.g. Climate Emergency declaration or a zero-carbon plan
  - Internal climate emergency working groups and other forms of internal support
  - Support from councillors and staff members and acknowledgement by organisation (especially the Executive team) of climate change as a cross-cutting issue and priority
  - Being identified as a priority in the Community Vision
  - Departments and teams working well together across the organisation
  - Results from community consultation and deliberative engagement processes.

- Councils said the following factors were barriers to embedding climate action into the Council Plan:
  - Budget constraints and limited resources
  - Internal conflict between departments and competing priorities
  - Lack of awareness amongst staff; lack of guidance
  - Lack of leadership
  - Community resistance
  - Uncertainty about roles and responsibilities of council in climate change adaptation
  - Lack of detailed understanding of what climate change will mean to the municipality and council assets, operations and services, including the financial impacts of climate change
  - Differing levels of understanding of climate change across the organisation
  - Low resourcing relative to the scale of the climate emergency
  - Impacts of COVID-19
  - Short timeframes and lack of clear process (in developing the Council Plan)
  - Councillor hesitancy; lack of councillor champions
  - Lack of organisational maturity.
- Councils felt the following types of support were needed:
  - Capacity building for staff: peer learning opportunities, resources, filling knowledge gaps, case studies, training, induction, templates
  - Targeted education of leaders about their responsibilities
  - Guidance from the Victorian government, such as embedding climate action in the Local Government Performance Reporting Framework; standards on drawdown, emissions, and fleet; technical data collection assistance such as flood modelling and climate scenarios; data on local climate impacts
  - Support from advisory committees (internal and external members)
  - Support to get a consistent approach to assessing financial impacts of climate change
  - Guidance on how to embed climate change into actions, strategic objectives, and themes in the absence of an overarching target or a strong climate theme.

Analysis and recommendations

These findings are analysed and lessons are drawn out. A range of recommendations are provided based on these lessons, for both councils and other bodies who support them, including the Victorian Government, peak bodies (e.g. the Municipal Association of Victoria) and regional bodies such as the Victorian Greenhouse Alliances. These are summarised in Table 1 over page.

Opportunities for further work

There are opportunities to build on this piece of research in future, including:
- Exploring the potential benefits of and methods for a consistent approach to including, addressing, integrating and embedding climate change in Council Plans
- Reviewing *Embedding climate change in your Council Plan* and expanding this to provide concrete examples of good practice in terms of embedding and integration
- Offering training, further peer learning, and other forms of capacity building to support council officers undertaking the next round of Council Plan development
- Conducting further research (e.g. further surveys, reviews, interviews or other methods) to investigate the success of different approaches to climate change in different Council Plans and in different types of councils.

Lessons	Recommendations	

• Integration and embedding are important to ownership of climate action but staff don't know what this looks like and don't understand their roles re climate change.
• Strong and specific measurable targets aid accountability but there is a lack of agreement on how these should be approached.
• Strong leadership is needed from councillors, executive teams and at every level.
• Deliberative community engagement helps keep councils accountable and is enabling, but is new for many councils.
• Few councils have evaluated their council plan development processes to inform future work.
• Councillors and staff need clear, well-defined roles and responsibilities in the Council Plan process, and to understand legislative requirements.
• Councils don't know how to resolve competing priorities, and have limited funding to address these.
• Both climate change action and a successful Council Plan process take time, money and resources.
	Councils:
	• Consider these topics early and address them explicitly in the planning process.
	• Provide explicit guidance to staff on how to work together collaboratively.
	• Work with other councils and regional alliances to explore the potential benefits of and methods for a consistent approach to including, addressing, embedding and integrating climate change.
	• Provide training for all staff to understand council role and own role in addressing climate change.
	• Educate councillors and executive teams on local government roles and responsibilities, climate change risk and impacts.
	• Review and evaluate the 2021 council plan processes in terms of meeting legislative requirements and addressing the Community Vision successfully, including addressing climate change, maximising the contributions of staff and successful implementation in years to come.
	• Clearly define roles, responsibilities and scope of the Council Plan process explicitly and early and hold councillors and officers to it.
	• Review resources that address the need for councils to elevate their climate action and resolve competing priorities, e.g. Council and community Action in the Climate Emergency, Local Government Climate Emergency Toolkit
	• Factor climate change into long-term financial planning.
	• Allocate both budget and human resources to match the level of ambition of climate goals.
		Others:
		• Support councils to explore the potential benefits of and methods for a consistent approach to including, addressing, integrating and embedding climate change.
		• Provide best-practice examples of including, addressing, integrating and embedding climate change in Council Plans and in successful processes and methods used.
		• Provide support, training and more detailed guidance to councils on:
		  ○ Legislated roles and responsibilities regarding climate change
		  ○ What strong, specific measurable targets look like and how to create them, including guidance on the role of targets
		  ○ Deliberative engagement, as well as mechanisms for holding councils accountable for their community engagement processes
		  ○ Considering, integrating and representing work with multiple outcomes (especially those that cut across traditional silos, such as climate change)
		• Share existing work on the prioritisation of climate change and provide guidance on how to address this in the Council Plan.
		• Provide more support to councils through the Council Plan process and to address climate change.

Table 1: Summary of lessons and recommendations for councils seeking to embed climate change in the Council Plan

Background

Roles

- The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning funded this research through the Supporting Our Regions to Adapt program.
- The Western Alliance for Greenhouse Action (WAGA) coordinated the overarching project *Climate Ready Councils* for which the Project Control Group was the How Well are We Adapting Project Control Group.
- The Northern Alliance for Greenhouse Action (NAGA) coordinated this research project and contracted Planet A Consulting to undertake Stage 1 of the research. NAGA completed Stage 2 of the research.

Context, goals and scope

In Victoria, new Council Plans for 2021-2025 have been developed throughout the course of the last year in the context of a new Local Government Act (2020). The new Act included requirements for Councils to develop a community vision and to undertake deliberative engagement with the local community to arrive at this community vision and a new Council Plan to enact that vision (see Council Plan Process, page 6).

There have also been other significant recent developments in the policy context in Victoria, with a raft of inter-related documents released by the Victorian Government, implementing directions initiated by the Victorian Climate Change Act (2017), and the Local Government Act (2020), across relevant departments and sectors.

These include:
- The Department of Health's Tackling climate change and its impacts on health through municipal public health and wellbeing planning: Guidance for local government (October 2020) which provides advice to local government on their responsibilities for responding to climate risks and impacts on human health and wellbeing through Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.
- The Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions' *Integrated Strategic Planning and Reporting Framework for Local Government*, which advises Local Government on the implementation of the new Victorian Local Government Act (2020). The overarching principles of this framework include giving priority to 'achieving the best outcomes for the municipal community including future generations' and taking 'economic, social, and environmental sustainability (including climate change risk)' into account.
- The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's
  - Place-based climate change adaptation resources government, business and community (October 2020)
  - Local Government Climate Change Adaptation Roles and Responsibilities under Victorian legislation
  - Melbourne's Climate Journey discussion paper (community engagement on regional adaptation planning).

A prominent feature of this policy work is the clarifying and highlighting of local government's opportunities, responsibilities and duty of care in preparing their communities for climate impacts and in factoring this thinking into decision-making from the outset of their planning processes and at the highest level.

This research set out to investigate how climate change is embedded in the new Council Plans: councils' most important strategic planning documents. It also looks at how climate change has been included in the Council Plan development process and highlights key opportunities and barriers to embedding climate change into the Council Plan.

This project is part of an overarching project, *Climate Ready Councils*, which aimed to improve how climate change adaptation is embedded across councils at the governance level and identify how to improve their adaptive capacity, including identifying how councils can develop a council plan that ensures climate change is prioritised and embedded across councils' governance processes.

The key questions this research set out to address were:
- How has climate change been included and addressed in the Council Plan process and in the new Council Plans?
- How well has climate action (both mitigation and adaptation) been embedded and integrated (see Key Concepts over page)?
- What are the barriers and enablers in terms of embedding and integrating climate change in the Council Plan?

The role of this research within the overarching project is:
- To draw out insights and lessons from the new Council Plan process regarding how climate change has been included both in the process and in the ultimate outcomes.
- To share this learning in order to build councils' knowledge of and capacity to include and address climate change in the Council Plan, and particularly to embed and integrate climate action.

Methodological overview

Councils from across Greater Melbourne were invited to take part in this project through the Greenhouse Alliances, and 35 officers from 20 councils joined a reference group with an associated discussion forum on Basecamp. These 20 councils were fairly evenly spread across Melbourne, with six each in the eastern and western regions, five in the north, and three in the south-east, and a mixture of inner-urban, suburban and peri-urban councils. Just over 20 council officers joined an initial online workshop to discuss the project and provide early input on their plans for addressing climate change in their Council Plans, perceived barriers, and support needs.

Selected councils were then invited to take part in interviews and surveys.

The focus has been on drawing out insights and lessons, and so the research methods have been aimed primarily at obtaining rich, in-depth qualitative data through structured and semi-structured interviews and surveys. Some quantitative data was also collected through the surveys, but this is indicative only as it reflects self-reported perceptions on the part of a relatively small number of officers.

The stages of the research and methods used are summarized below:
- Stage 1 (Before release of new Council Plans) – March-June 2021
  - Review of existing Council Plans (i.e. Council plans for 2017-2021)
  - Surveys and structured interviews conducted with council officers during the Council Plan development process

- Stage 2 (After release of new Council Plans) – August-November 2021
  - Review of new Council Plans (2021-2024) and comparison with previous plans
  - Surveys and semi-structured interviews conducted with Council Officers after completion of, and reflecting on, the Council Plan development process.

Key concepts

Embedding, integration and climate change as a 'cross-cutting theme'
One of the key goals of this project was to investigate how councils are embedding and integrating climate change in the Council Plan, and how this can be done successfully.

Traditionally, in both Council Plans, and in councils as organisations, climate change action has often been one discrete part of council operations and planning. In the Council Plan, for example, where it has been included at all, it has often been included in one Council Plan objective, theme or section related *specifically to* climate change or, more often, sustainability generally. Likewise within a council organisation, climate change action has often been seen as the exclusive purview of the sustainability team.

Staff working on climate action, especially climate adaptation, have long recognized, however, that climate change is an issue that *crosses* many areas of a council. Climate impacts, for example, are felt by staff and patrons in leisure centres, libraries, community centres, youth centres, maternal and child health centres as well as town halls and office buildings. Climate change affects the planning of staff in asset management, open space, community development, health and wellbeing, Indigenous partnerships and economic development, to mention just a few areas.

For this reason, many council officers, including many of those interviewed through this project, express a belief that climate change is best addressed in a coordinated way across many areas of council, rather than in piece-meal way in different areas, or being *contained* in just one area. In terms of the Council Plan, this belief often manifests as support for including climate change, and climate change action, throughout the Council Plan, under multiple objectives, across multiple work areas, with specific goals and actions relating to those objectives and work areas and their role in climate change mitigation or adaptation. This is what is meant by climate change as a 'cross-cutting theme'. This may or may not mean that there is still one primary strategic objective that refers to climate change action as its core reason for being.

The words 'embedding' and 'integration' are also often used interchangeably to refer to this approach, and there are also analogies to this in organisational structure, in that staff with a sustainability-focussed role who work in teams outside of the sustainability team are sometimes referred to as being 'embedded'

throughout the organisation and as playing a role in 'integrating' climate work. While these terms are often used interchangeably, it can be useful to think of them this way:

- **Embedding** is the inclusion of climate actions and objectives across multiple themes or strategic objectives (in a Council Plan) or in multiple teams (across an organisation).
- **Integration** is the logical, strategic and practical linking and coherence of climate action (in a Council Plan or across an organisation).
- **Climate change as a cross-cutting theme** refers specifically to the inclusion of climate change in some form across multiple areas of a Council Plan (i.e. it's a type of embedding).

One of the arguments for embedding, as defined above, is to gain a sense of ownership of climate action across an organisation. This means that most if not all staff see climate action as part of their core business and see how their role and their work contributes to the organisation's goals regarding climate change action (mitigation, adaptation or both).

Council Plan Process

Every Council in Victoria is required to create a new Council Plan, once every four years, to guide their actions as an organisation over the next four years. This process includes a community engagement process, and the new Victorian Local Government Act (2020) includes requirements to facilitate the development of a Community Vision, through a deliberative engagement process, to guide the council planning process (see Community Vision and Deliberative Engagement below). In general the council planning process includes the following steps, not necessarily in this order:

- Initial broad community engagement
- Development of the Community Vision through deliberative engagement
- Internal (staff and councillor) discussion and input
- Drafting of the plan
- Exhibition (the public release of the draft plan, for feedback from the community in the form of formal submissions)
- Finalisation of the plan and endorsement at a Council meeting.

This year all Victorian councils were required to have completed this process by the end of October 2021. Councils also undertake an annual review and action planning process to guide yearly actions.

Community Vision and Deliberative Engagement

One of the questions this study set to explore was what role the increased focus on community engagement might have on the inclusion of climate change in the Council Plan. The new requirements for deliberative engagement were of particular interest and are summarized over page (pages 8-9).

6.1 Community Vision (s 88)	
Requirements	Council must develop, maintain, and review a Community Vision with its municipal community using deliberative engagement practices. The Community Vision has an outlook of at least 10 years and describe the municipal community's aspirations for the future of the municipality. It should describe the social, economic, cultural, and environmental aspirations for the future of the municipality.
Accountability and who is engaged?	The Council: – is responsible for facilitating the articulation of the Community Vision – is responsible for maintaining and reviewing the Community Vision – must ensure that an appropriate community engagement policy which includes deliberative engagement practices is adopted, and – needs to provide directions and resources to the Executive to inform the development the Community Vision. The Executive designs and implements a transparent process with the genuine aim of understanding the aspirations of the community, this may include: – providing background data and planning information – facilitating community engagement – integrates feedback and outcomes into relevant service, asset and land-use programs to develop an achievable Community Vision The 'municipal community' must be consulted and involved through a deliberative consultation process.
Implications	All Councils will need to plan and resource an appropriate process to develop a Community Vision in the period from November 2020 to October 2021 to: – formally initiate a community visioning process – determine how it will satisfy deliberative engagement requirements – consider how they will establish a framework for community dialogue – analyse strategic options and gain consensus and legitimacy for a preferred future – establish a program for implementation that outlines the roles and responsibilities of Council and other stakeholders The Community Vision will consider long-term issues such as inter-generational equity, societal changes, environmental impacts, and climate change.

Box 1: Extract from Technical Description of Section 6.1 of the Local Government Act (2020)

The Victorian Government provided the following advice to Victorian Councils, with other tools, regarding their expectations of deliberative engagement.

INFORMATIVE Deliberation requires that people have detailed, in-depth, and balanced information before they come to judgement. This includes hearing different perspectives, including the views of experts and interest groups.

INFLUENTIAL Deliberation requires decision makers to give weight to and implement the outcomes [of the engagement] to the greatest extent possible.

DELIBERATIVE Deliberation goes beyond conversation and dialogue. It requires those deliberating to weigh up options and come to judgement on a problem. Deliberation isn't about people giving you a wish list. It results in clear direction for council decision- makers.

REPRESENTATIVE Deliberation requires that the deliberating group is representative of the whole community.

TIME Deliberation requires that the deliberating group is given sufficient time to become informed about the issues, weigh up options and come to judgement. Long form processes are usually 4-6 full days. An online process or a short process can be held over 2-3 days.

BLANK PAGE REPORT Deliberation requires that participants respond to the remit by writing their own report [and] … present their report directly to decision makers for consideration. Deliberation isn't about holding a short workshop ... Nor does the organisation gather feedback to create their own report. It allows the council to hear directly from their community without any interpretation from consultants or council officers.

CLEAR REMIT Deliberation is about the deliberating group responding to a clear remit that goes to the core of the issue, shares the dilemma, and promotes open discussion. Deliberation isn't about responding to easy issues. It allows council to receive solutions to complex problems.

TRANSPARENT Deliberation is a public process that is seeking to build trust in democratic decision-making and all aspects should be made public, unless there are extenuating circumstances.

INDEPENDENT FACILITATION Deliberation is designed and facilitated by an independent professional facilitator with experience in deliberation.

INCLUSIVE Deliberation requires that barriers to participation are removed so that anyone feels they could participate in a deliberation.

Box 2: Summary of Principles of Deliberative Engagement from A Short Guide to Deliberative Engagement for Councils, which the Victorian Government contracted Mosaic Lab to create and provided to Victorian Councils, with other tools, via Engage Victoria

Findings

Stage 1

Review of existing Council Plans

In Stage 1, ten existing Council Plans (2017-2021) from across Greater Melbourne were reviewed by consultants Planet A. This accounts for approximately a third of Council Plans in the region so should be seen as an indicative sample rather than a comprehensive review.

In these ten Council Plans:
- In no cases was climate change mentioned explicitly in more than one strategic objective – however in one case it was identified explicitly in the Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan (MHWP), which can be seen as being on at least as high a strategic level of importance as a strategic objective.
- This instance of climate change being embedded in the MHWP was one of three cases in which climate change was mentioned explicitly in another area of the plan (aside from more detailed actions) – i.e. as a strategic challenge, and as an underlying contextual theme.
- Where climate change was explicitly mentioned in one strategic objective (9/10 plans), four plans specify climate action in terms of both mitigation and adaptation. Eight have an exclusive or primary focus on adaptation.

In general, content on climate change is at a high level with little operational detail included.

Summary and analysis of Stage 1 interviews and surveys

Eleven interviews were conducted with councils across Greater Melbourne in Stage 1, including three councils in the East of Melbourne, three in the West, two in the South-East and four in the North. Interviews were typically attended by 2-3 officers from each council, usually one or two officers each from corporate planning and sustainability teams, occasionally with the addition of other staff such as health planners responsible for the Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan. Interviewees were a mixture of officers, coordinators and managers. Many interviewees also filled in a pre-interview survey, or this was completed during the interview.

Each interview was conducted online via Microsoft Teams or Zoom, recorded with verbal consent from participants and led by the researchers. Councils were at various stages of Council Plan development and therefore some questions could not be answered by some participants. One council did not provide numerical answers. Many questions were in the form of a 5-point Likert scale as follows: 1 = Very low; 2 = Low; 3 = Moderate; 4 = High; 5= Very high.

This stage of the research revealed several key findings that have informed Stage 2 and will be further explored in the analysis of Stage 2 findings. These findings are summarized briefly in this section, with further detail on the questions and responses provided in *Appendix 1: Data from interviews and surveys – Stage 1*.

The importance and role of the Council Plan

Council officers believed that embedding climate change in the Council Plan would be an opportunity to embed climate change across their organisations. The review of the previous iteration of Council Plans (2017-2021), however, suggested that the way this had been done previously had often been at such a high level that plans did not include climate change action at an operation level. There had been opportunities to include operational-level climate change actions in lower-level strategies and plans in interim years and this was noted by interview participants as extremely important. In this scenario, the linkages between the Council Plan and climate change actions in other plans and strategies were seen as key. (See also *The role of the Council Plan, why embedding and integration is important and climate change as a cross-cutting theme*, page 23).

Previous Council Plans did not significantly embed climate change nor have a high level of Influence on climate change action

Most council officers interviewed felt that there was only a low to moderate level of embedding and integration of climate action in the 2017-2021 Council Plan. These Council Plans had only a moderate level of influence over councils' climate change actions.

Guiding frameworks for Council Plan development

There was little consistency found in terms of frameworks being used to assist with the development of the new Council Plans. As a result, councils were each determining the best framework to follow. Only some councils had made use of Victorian Government documents and the guide produced as part of this project (*Embedding Action on Climate Change in Your Council Plan*). (In Stage 2 some officers reported that this guidance had come too late in their process, while others also said that the conversations and consultation conducted in creating this guide had helped their early thinking.)

Climate change as a cross-cutting theme

Of the six councils that anticipated that climate change would be a cross-cutting theme of the next Council Plan, five of these were councils that had made a climate emergency declaration. Many councils reported having a core group of officers driving their council's progress in relation to embedding climate change in their Council Plan and service delivery. This was sometimes facilitated by climate champions in the executive team or councillors, and sometimes impeded by limited support and drive from upper management and/or councillors.

Support for including climate change in the Council Plan

Interviewees generally perceived that their community were moderately satisfied with the level of integration of climate action in the 2017-2021 Council Plan. Of three important stakeholder groups (executives, councillors and communities), communities were seen to be the most supportive of embedding climate action in Council Plans, followed by councillors, and then by executives – who were still seen to show better than moderate support.

Internal capacity to integrate and embed

During Stage 1 just under half (5/11) of councils felt that their Council was taking a leadership role in embedding climate action in their Council Plan. Many councils reported strong intentions to embed climate action into daily roles and responsibilities across council business areas and service delivery through the Council Plan. Council officers generally expected that their organisation would reflect good governance in terms of climate action to a considerable extent, and a moderate to moderately high level of agency and ability to undertake climate change action.

Councils also reported that there were substantial knowledge gaps that needed to be addressed in order for councils to integrate climate change into their Council Plans, organisation and work effectively.

Generally, teams across Councils were believed to understand that they have a role in taking action but there was often a lack of practical guidance on how to do so. One participant stated that "*there is a solid understanding that they need to, but lack of knowledge as to how. There is the will, but the skillset is not there yet.*"

One council cited the formation of an internal Climate Change Steering Committee as an important mechanism for building internal collaboration and capacity for embedding. The same council also mentioned that creating case studies of successful embedding and integration, as well as dedicating time to consultation and conversation with each department helped staff to understand this process.

The need for support and leadership from other levels of Government

Councils said that they need more support: "*Maybe state government needs to play more of a leadership role… We are so connected to the community, on the front line. Our community expects us to play a bigger role… so can other levels of government play a bigger role to support councils?*"

Enablers and barriers

The interviews revealed a number of factors that had at that stage acted as enablers or barriers to embedding climate action into the Council Plan (see Table 2 over page).

Enablers	*Barriers*
• Climate emergency declaration • Zero-net Carbon Plan • Internal climate emergency working group • Internal support • Internal risk assessment • Support from councillors • A passionate core workforce • Being a well-resourced council • Risk and governance training delivered by external lawyers • Inclusion of climate change in key strategic documents	• Budget constraints and limited resources including rates capping • Internal conflict between departments and competing priorities • New council election refocusing priorities • The departure of supportive senior staff • Lack of awareness amongst staff • A long-term financial plan that doesn't mandate climate change action • Confusion on climate change science; not knowing where to start with information gathering; lack of guidance • Lack of leadership drive • Council culture of not wanting to be a leader • Massive community and council growth

Table 2: Current enablers and barriers as identified as of Stage 1

Interviewees also listed a number of factors predicted to act as enablers or barriers to embedding climate action in the Council Plan in the future (see Table 3 below).

Enablers	*Barriers*
• Insurability, or lack thereof, encouraging adaptation • Champions amongst new councillors • Widespread significant events (such as a global pandemic) may • demonstrate what can be achieved under pressure • Emerging from COVID lockdown may be an opportunity to create a 'new normal' to make long-lasting change • Making and keeping councillors, directors or CEOs accountable (e.g., through KPIs)	• Individual political agendas of elected representatives • The four-year lifespan of the Council Plan (which does not ensure longevity) • Another pandemic-like disruption • COVID lockdowns (which may affect community engagement efforts) • Natural disasters that demand attention and prioritisation • Resource allocation; COVID-recovery competing with climate action • Lack of appetite for Climate Emergency declaration and language • Lack of councillor/executive champions

Table 3: Potential/future enablers and barriers

Officers suggested that councils could be better supported through the Council Plan development process in the following ways:

- Peer sharing opportunities
- Resources on how to "bump climate change up the agenda"
- Targeted education to address specific knowledge gaps
- Case studies from other councils who have had success
- Education materials for staff; more training on "what does this mean to me?"; inductions to build knowledge on climate change for new staff
- Template training modules for staff – procurement, event management, service delivery, general education on climate science and how it affects urban areas
- Collated resources that help ensure drawdown is effective
- A resource to link executive managers' responsibilities with potential actions and to support them being leaders
- Embedding climate action in the Local Government Performance Reporting Framework to tie actions to the future for benchmarking
- Working with the Municipal Association of Victoria
- Standard measures on drawdown, emissions, and fleet
- Technical data collection assistance: flood modelling and climate scenarios, for example specific technologies and working with engineers
- Customised knowledge sharing across work areas
- Knowledge of climate impacts and how climate change impacts affect work areas which will, in turn, identify opportunities to change service delivery (e.g., library attendances increasing for libraries and the cancellation of health appointments on very hot days).

Stage 2

Review of new Council Plans

In Stage 2, six Council Plans were reviewed only briefly, as information on the inclusion and integration of climate-related content was collected more systematically through both the survey and interviews.

Of these six Council Plans:
- All plans addressed Climate Change in multiple areas of the plan (though not necessarily across multiple strategic objectives); many referred to climate change in a prominent way in the introductory sections as a key theme to be addressed.
- There was more embedding than found in Stage 1:
  - Two of the Council Plans included climate change in only one strategic objective
  - Two included climate change across two strategic objectives (though with much less prominence in one)
  - Two included climate change quite substantially in three or more objectives (3/6 and 5/6 – see an example of visible embedding and integration below).

In general, content on climate change in these plans is more prominent, more substantial, more detailed, and more integrated than those reviewed in Stage 1.

An example of visible embedding and integration

The City of Greater Dandenong (CGD) took a very systematic and explicit approach to embedding and highlighting climate change (and other themes) across the Council Plan, illustrated below. As the Council Plan with the highest degree of embedding of those reviewed, and certainly the most visible representation of embedding, their approach is worth noting. Early in the plan, CGD identifies five Health and Wellbeing Priorities – including climate change and health – and these are woven throughout the entire Council Plan and represented visually by an icon (see Figure 1 below: Climate change and health icon). By this means CGD's Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan has been integrated into the Council Plan.
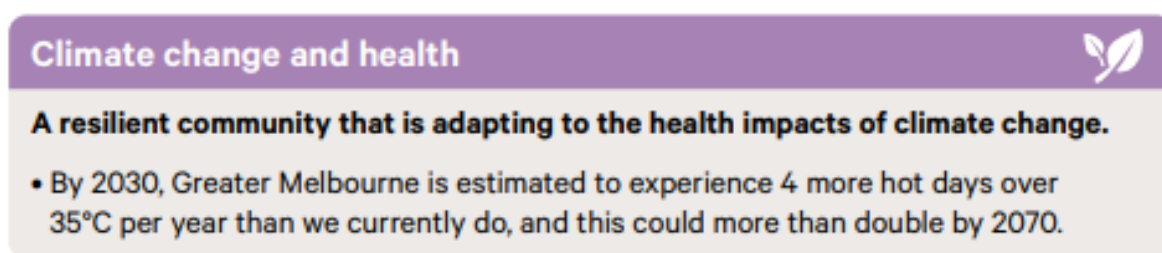

Figure 1: Climate change and health icon in the City of Greater Dandenong Council Plan

This icon appears wherever actions contribute to climate change and health outcomes, drawing linkages that might not otherwise be obvious to readers, whether community members or staff members.

In Figure 2 below, for example, there is an action to "*Improve access to quality infrastructure and spaces that enhance community participation, encourage visitors and deliver positive health outcomes for current and future generations*," making the link explicit between community "infrastructure and spaces" and the health outcomes of not only current but future generations (in the context of a changing climate).

Figure 2: Visual representation of the integration of Climate change and health into Strategic Objective 3: *A city of accessible, vibrant centres and neighbourhoods* in the City of Greater Dandenong Council Plan

Summary and analysis of data from Stage 2 interviews and surveys

All of the councils who participated in the first round of interviews were approached to participate in both Stage 2 surveys and interviews. All completed the survey, as did some councils who had participated in earlier consultations but not interviews. Six were able to participate in the interviews. The survey was also distributed to all councils who had participated in earlier parts of the project.

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with councils across Greater Melbourne in Stage 2, including one council in the East of Melbourne, one in the West, two in the South-East and two in the North. Interviews were typically attended by 2 officers from each council, usually one officer from corporate planning and one from sustainability. These interviews were designed to explore the themes identified in Stage 1, as well as themes emerging from the completion of the Council Plan development process and the new council plans, in some depth. These responses complemented the quantitative data from the survey by providing a wealth of qualitative data, presented according to theme – see *Qualitative data: recurring themes from interviews,* page 23)

Survey responses

A survey was distributed from late October to mid-November to explore officers' reflections after the completion of their Council Plans. The survey focused on numerical ratings, as a complement to the more qualitative nature of the interviews, although qualitative data was also elicited in the form of comments.

Fourteen officers across eleven councils responded to the survey, including all of the six councils who participated in the second round of interviews, as well as a handful each of those who had participated in the first round of interviews and those who hadn't participated in any interviews. Respondents were fairly evenly spread across Greater Melbourne.

Those respondents who provided their role were evenly split between sustainability and corporate planning teams (6 of each), and tended to have senior roles, with four managers, three coordinators, two senior officers and three officers responding.

The survey responses are summarised briefly in this section. More detailed responses are included at *Appendix 2: Data from surveys – Stage 2.*

- Climate change has been included prominently in the new Council Plans but embedding is only partial. Respondents were generally quite positive about the extent to which their council had included and addressed climate change in their new Council Plan, with nearly half (6/13) believing their councils had included climate change "very prominently" and addressed it "very well." The rest felt that it had been included at least "to some extent" (2/12) if not "quite well" (5/13).

  Respondents were less positive about the extent to which their council had embedded and integrated climate change in their new Council Plan, with a third (4/12) believing their

councils had embedded and integrated climate change only "somewhat" meaning that it "appears in more than one area/section/theme/objective but only in depth in one." Half (6/12) were more positive, reporting that climate change is "Well integrated and embedded across two or more areas/sections/themes/objectives." Only two respondents felt climate change is "Well integrated and embedded across all or most areas/sections."

Respondents rated their new Council Plan in terms of leadership in embedding climate action. Just over half (7) felt their council had played "somewhat" of a leadership role, while nearly half said they had taken a leadership role "to a very great extent" (2) or "quite a lot" (3). These results are similar to those of councils interviewed in Round 1 (see also Appendices 1 and 2).

- Of the councils who used an existing framework to develop their Council Plan, all felt that they had followed the framework and that it had aligned at least to some extent.
- Responses were mixed on whether Council Plans had "strong and measurable targets".
- When asked whether the Council Plan will influence their (climate-related) work over the next four years, more than half (7/13) of respondents predicted that the influence would only be "moderate." More than a third (5/13) said it would influence their work "quite a lot" and only one council said it would influence their work "to a very great extent."
- When rating the extent to which they predicted teams across their councils would understand their roles in climate action, more than 60% of respondents (8/13) felt that teams' understanding would be "moderate," with a handful believing teams would understand their roles "quite a lot" or only "a little" (3 and 2 respondents respectively).
- Respondents rated their new Council Plan in terms of whether it demonstrates leadership in embedding climate action. Just over half (7) felt their council had played "somewhat" of a leadership role, while nearly half said they had taken a leadership role "to a very great extent" (2) or "quite a lot" (3). These responses are similar to those given in Stage 1.
- Respondents were asked to rate the level to which their new Council Plan reflects four principles of good governance in terms of climate action: accountability, transparency, fairness and robustness. Respondents consistently tended towards a moderate rating.
- Respondents were also asked to their council's capacity to take strong action on climate change, based on the following factors agency, ability, ownership and collaboration. The vast majority of respondents consistently tended towards moderate to high rating. These responses are similar to those collected in Stage 1.
- When asked to compare the level of support of different stakeholder groups for embedding climate change in the Council Plan, respondents seemed to rate councillors and community as slightly more supportive than the Executive team and other staff, but on average all four groups of stakeholders were rated around an average of 4 ("very supportive"). These results are similar to the results found in the Stage 1 interviews (see also Appendix 2, Tables 6-7, page 18).
- Respondents generally felt that there was a stronger focus on community engagement than in previous years.
- When asked to estimate the level of community satisfaction with how climate change had been embedded, most felt their community would be "satisfied" or "very satisfied."
- When asked if an evaluation of the Council Plan development had taken place, surprisingly few respondents (4/11) said yes.

Respondents also provided some qualitative data in terms of commentary about what they saw as the enablers of and barriers to embedding climate change in the Council Plan.

Barriers	Enablers
• Some resistance among older residents • Limited Guidance from State Government • Uncertainty about roles and responsibilities of council re Climate Change adaptation • Lack of detailed understanding of what climate change will mean to the municipality and Council's assets, operations and services • Differing levels of understanding of climate change across individuals, Teams, and Directorates and their roles and responsibilities • Low resourcing of action relative to the climate emergency we face • Impacts of COVID-19 • Misalignment of detail of action on climate change with the Council Plan. • Measures that are not quantifiable. • Lack of information regarding financial impacts of climate change including impacts on expenditure (e.g., increased maintenance and service delivery) and income (e.g. rates, rent) • Very short timeframes and lack of clear process. • Councillor hesitancy or lack of councillor champions • Lack of organisational maturity	• Supportive Corporate Planning team/coordinator/officer • Acknowledgement by organisation /Exec of climate change as a cross-cutting issue/risk. • Strong support from Councillors and youth sectors, organisational support • Council declaring a Climate Emergency; having an existing a Climate Emergency Plan • An internal audit undertaken of Council's Climate Change Adaptation Response, which included a recommendation that climate change be embedded in the new Council Plan. • Development of a Climate Emergency Strategy & Action Plan, which included specific actions relating to embedding climate change into the new Council Plan • Raising of awareness (including Council's roles / responsibilities) as part of the internal stakeholder engagement undertaken in the development of the Climate Emergency Strategy • Interest of specific Councillors • A supportive Executive Team • Being recognised as a key priority and strategic objective area • Strong strategic direction from Council. • Input and feedback from subject matter experts across the organisation • Being identified as a priority in the Community Vision • Initiative, commitment and ability of Health Planner to try to strengthen considerations of climate emergency in the health plan • Sustainable Environment and Organisational Performance and Engagement departments working together well • Results from community climate change survey and deliberative engagement process

Table 4: Barriers and enablers identified in Stage 1

Respondents also provided their ideas about how council officers could best be supported to embed climate change in the Council Plan, including:

- Progressive building of capacity tailored to different service units, so they understand the connection and have ownership - not just as a stand-alone activity related to Plan
- Continued review of the operating environment, external climate and existing plans to ensure councils address the right issues at the right time
- Support from internal and external advisory committees
- Targeted engagement with Councillors and Executive including on responsibilities and legislation
- Support to get a consistent approach to assessing financial impacts of climate change, which will help executives and councillors be more comfortable with assumptions
- A strategic process to develop the Council Plan (i.e., bringing together key people across teams over several months to discuss the strategic drivers/themes that shape the plan, providing them with the information, time and structures to develop strategic actions.
- Guidance on how to embed climate change into actions, strategic objectives, and themes in the absence of an overarching target or a strong climate theme
- Use of examples and case studies for the variety of Councils - e.g., early adopters, middle of the road, late adopters.

Officers also noted that these are the first Council Plans to be developed under the new legislative framework, and that they were developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had significant impacts on timelines, project planning and delivery.

Qualitative data: recurring themes from interviews

The role of the Council Plan, why embedding and integration is important and climate change as a cross-cutting theme

Interviews conducted during Stage 1 (see Importance and role of the Council Plan, page 15) indicated that council officers felt the Council Plan was an important tool for embedding and integrating climate change action across councils. At the same time it was noted that this is often represented only at a very high level in Council Plans, thus officers rely on other documents for operational detail, and in this case linkage between these document and the council plan is important. This theme was explored in depth in the second round of interviews, with the following insights emerging.

- On why the Council Plan is so important to embedding climate action:
  - Climate commitments in the Council Plan mean that climate action gains traction within the organisation. It allows sustainability teams to "push [climate action] a lot further. Once sustainability team member commented:
    "It's one thing to have the action plan, but the Council Plan endorsement means I can deliver on the programs – I have the confidence and support to work on the implementation rather than having to spend time on negotiation and getting buy-in.'
  - The Council Plan "*Provides a mandate. Now it's integrated into Business Planning which can act as a spring-board to guide development of actions for the coming year.*"

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- Having climate action included in the Council Plan (even if not embedded in multiple areas) is expected to "*help with engaging with areas that are more hesitant to incorporate it because we can tie it back to an endorsed document.*"
- In fact some councils describe the process of embedding climate action across the organisation as a "*giant behaviour change program*" and the Council Plan is just one factor in that process.
- The Council Plan adds a stamp of endorsement to the ongoing process of progressing climate action (particularly with climate emergency framing):
  "*It gives a bit more weight to the [climate strategy] to come. It's part of a progression. We've approved this, then the next step is a climate emergency declaration.*"
- Inclusion in the Council Plan supports the improvement of existing programs, especially strengthening the monitoring, planning and reporting: "*What gets measured gets done.*"
- The public nature of the Council Plan aids accountability: "*We know that having entries about climate emergency will influence our work because it's a public promise, and we'll be looking at it every year and at the end of four years.*"
- The Council Plan can enable new projects.

- On why embedding and integration of climate action in the Council plan (including making climate change a cross-cutting theme) is so important:
  - It means that more than one director is responsible for climate action.
  - It makes climate action visible, allowing people who are responsible to see that their role contributes to climate action.
  - It recognizes there are multiple outcomes from and contributions to climate action (not just related to environmental sustainability).

- Conversely some officers who described their councils as maintaining the traditional approach of grouping all climate-related actions under a climate-related objective, and making the sustainability team responsible for those actions, felt there were some advantages, while acknowledging the limitations.
  - Having its "*own theme and focus… gives [climate action] prominence*"
  - There may have been a perception that if climate is applied as a cross-cutting theme across the plan, it wouldn't have its own objective (and therefore would lose focus and prominence).
  - Some councils reported intentionally minimizing repetition across other themes so as to avoid duplication, while acknowledging that finding some way to represent the cross-cutting nature of climate strategies could have been beneficial (*compare An example of visible embedding and integration* page 19).
  - Some councils felt that including climate change across all strategic objectives would have made their Council Plan "*unusable.*"

- Other officers identified this as a 'siloed' approach and felt it inhibited a more innovative approach. They identified the following disadvantages:
  - Staff across the organisation (i.e. outside of sustainability teams) will not be helped by the Council Plan to understand their role. They:
    "*Won't necessarily see what they have to do. It doesn't help people to understand their responsibilities, and it just reinforces the status quo and the silos.*"
  - They felt that the sustainability team may be seen as being solely responsible for climate-related actions and may have to "*push [actions from] the [climate] strategy through, without the drive from the top*" that the Council Plan could have provided.

- o This speaks to the core concept of culture change whereby all areas of council owns climate action as core business: "*We've lost that opportunity for everyone to understand that [climate action] is something that everyone should do.*"
- o This approach doesn't align with some existing climate strategies, which have specified that climate should be integrated across all Council Plan objectives.

Strong actions versus well-integrated, embedded actions

It's important to note that a Council Plan with very strong climate action can be lacking in integration and embedding, and plan with strong integration and embedding doesn't necessarily include very strong climate action.

One council, for example, said that climate change had been addressed very well "*as a dedicated focus, with strong actions, framed as climate emergency*" including many indicators, and with "*more focus on climate than ever before*" but were "*not sure it's been truly embedded.*"

As above, some councils explicitly identified embedding as inhibiting very strongly worded actions, with softer actions being more readily accepted at the Council Plan level.

Councils in both these categories saw their Council Plan as being the next step in an evolutionary process and hoped for both stronger and more integrated actions from future plans. Nevertheless some officers expressed frustration because what they are seeing is incremental improvement when what they are looking for is transformational change.

Using other strategies and integration with other plans and processes

As mentioned in the survey results (see page 21) more than half of respondents anticipated only a moderate level of influence from the Council Plan over their next four years of work, and this was consistent with their perception of the influence of previous Council Plans. Given the importance attributed to the Council Plan, how can we explain this, and what does influence a council's workplan?

- Council officers working in councils that had not traditionally had very strong climate action included in their Council Plan have still found ways to achieve climate action: *"There's more than one way to skin a cat. If we can't get it into the overarching principles of the plan, we get it into the details and actions. We rely on the broader suite of strategies. We don't put all our climate change eggs in the Council Plan basket… we use other documents to get a more holistic result."*
- Some officers also saw opportunities for tightening and strengthening actions through the Annual Action Plan process and therefore did not see the Council Plan as the be-all and end-all.
- Some councils characterized themselves as being intentionally reserved in terms of public commitments, preferring to be judged on their delivery of concrete actions, and being willing to put the resources in to achieve them.
- Other officers felt that with their new Council Plan the opportunity for embedding and integration had "*been lost*" and that there wouldn't be a chance to try again for another four years, while they did acknowledge that there could be other opportunities in the meantime such as annual reviews and the implementation of the existing climate strategy.

- Other councils pointed to a more integrated planning process which has brought together the Council Plan with long-term financial planning and asset planning, and the integrated reporting associated with this, as an enabling environment. While acknowledging that the linkages between different strategies and plans could be stronger and clearer, they felt that this would happen in the next iteration and that this was a good first attempt at this kind of integration. They felt it would enable more initiatives to be funded internally and would give the organisation confidence that they could be delivered because the financial planning has been done.
- Similarly some councils had integrated their Council Plan with their Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan, or otherwise coordinated the processes of development of two separate plans, and this provided the opportunity to include more actions relating to both climate and health.
- Many councils acknowledged that regardless of what ended up in their Council Plan, the collaboration between teams throughout the Council Plan process, and the organisational conversations that took place, were very important. Officers reflected that these conversations contributed to culture change and even the 'culture' of the Council Plan, even if the words included were not exactly what they had hoped for. One officer commented:
  "Sometimes the most important and powerful thing you can do to create change – particularly in terms of climate emergency and how we put it into our daily work – is those conversations with people."

Specificity versus aggregation of actions and targets

Some Council Plans include a host of specific actions relating to climate change, and sometimes these are all included under one strategic objective, whereas in other plans they are allocated to a range of strategic objectives, work areas and teams. Other plans contain very few specific actions relating to climate change, but rather refer to an existing (or future) climate strategy, which contains or is anticipated to contain the operational detail including specific actions and targets.

Staff working with the former (specific) approach tend to view this detail approach as positive, and as exemplifying embedding and integration. They also acknowledge it can come with trade-offs, in that the actions might be 'softer' than they would otherwise be, because they have to be accepted by all stakeholders in order to be endorsed in the Council Plan.

Staff working with the latter (aggregated) approach were mixed in their views. Some felt that they had ended up with the majority of climate-related actions amounting to "*writing a report to council.*" Some staff believed this approach would reinforce a culture of "*ticking boxes*" rather than driving cultural change. Others felt this was practical and appropriate, as they expect only high-level direction from their Council Plan.

Some officers felt that their new Councils Plan was more specific than the previous one and that this was part of an "*organisational maturation process*" moving from "*motherhood statements*" to "*more granular*" content.

Generally staff agreed that the aggregated approach was not strong on engaging teams across council in the work of climate action (in its own right). While the teams that are already engaged "*are doing it,*" some teams "*who are reluctant may not do as much and will be more hesitant to lead.*" They felt that in these cases, success would be highly dependent on how hard leaders, and sustainability staff, pushed. In contrast other officers felt they had this backing from leaders by virtue of increased prominence of climate change in their Council Plan, regardless of embedding (although integration with other planning documents may have played a role).

Strong, clear actions and specific, measurable targets are needed

Reflecting on the actions relating to climate in their Council Plan and whether they would be likely to drive action, some staff noted that there were "*a mix of things that are clearly climate-related and others that are more ambiguous.*" They felt that many areas "*were a bit unclear … some were open to interpretation; some might not have a good climate outcome*" depending on how they are implemented.

One of the key weaknesses identified by these officers was a lack of clear and measurable targets. They explained:

"*(Without measurable targets) we can't be held accountable to the right trajectory. We're not going to know where we need to refocus. Measures are really important in trying to understand performance and cause-and-effect relationships, and it's really significant in helping focus people on the most important things.*"

Strong leadership is needed

- Many councils reported strong support from councillors as one of the enabling factors for climate change in their Council Plan. Some described the strong influence of one or more 'climate champions' on other councillors and on the directions taken in the Council Plan.
- Fewer councils reported that strong support from executive teams had been a feature of the process in interviews (however Executive support was characterised as strong in Round 1 and in the Round 2 survey results, though possibly less so than other groups – see also Appendix 2, pages 17-18).
- Where strong support from leaders is absent, officers see that individual teams in council will be left to their own devices as to how much of a role in climate action they take on.
- When strong leadership from councillors was seen to be missing, this was primarily attributed to political influences.
- When strong leadership from executive teams was seen to be missing, this was primarily attributed to perceived costs.

The Council Plan is an iterative process and 2021 was an unusual year

Many officers remarked on the fact that the Council Plan process is an iterative one and that many councils were attempting some things for the first time – including deliberative engagement and embedding climate change – and that this was all taking place in the unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many expressed hope that time and repetition, as well as lessons learned this year, would improve this process.

Climate emergency declarations – do they make a difference?

- The majority of councils that had made a climate emergency declaration reported that this had made a difference in enabling inclusion and integration of climate change in their Council Plan:
- "*It was helpful that council had already committed to their declaration. This stuff has to be in there because you've already made this commitment and you can't then have a council plan that omits any reference to it.*"
- Having a climate emergency strategy was also seen as a strong enabler, often because the hard work of organisational negotiation, socialization and buy-in had already been done. Sometimes this provided a starting point for content in the council plan, which could easily be endorsed by the executive team because they had already agreed to it in other documents.
- Some councils also reported that other work that had been catalysed by a climate emergency plan, such as internal audits, made a big difference by identifying climate impacts and implications across council and mandating integrated planning.
- Officers felt having climate emergency "*up front and across the board*" in the Council plan would give them impetus for action.
- Other council officers noted that the adoption of a climate emergency approach had had a profound influence on councillors, who ultimately own the Council Plan. Some of the most meaningful actions in the Council Plan came directly from councillor workshops in the development of the plan in these cases. This included individual councillors championing approaches from existing climate emergency plans, which provided a "push to do better." As above, the passing of a climate emergency declaration seemed to elevate councillors' sense of responsibility and commitment: "*We can't declare [a climate emergency] and then not include this in our decision-making.*"
- Presenting a climate emergency plan to the deliberative panel was also reported as a powerful influence:
- "*It has given us a mandate to make sure these things are there. The community has pushed council to do better, because they know what's in the climate emergency plan and they are pushing for more.*"
- Some officers reported that their climate-related ambitions had preceded their climate emergency declaration, and so didn't attribute a strong influence to the declaration itself but rather a pre-existing high level of commitment.

The impacts of increased focus on community engagement, especially deliberative engagement

A number of councils identified the increased focus on community engagement, and particularly the deliberative engagement process (see *Key Concepts*, pages 11-13) as being a strong and positive influence on how climate change was included and addressed in the Climate Plan.

Good deliberative community engagement was reported to have the following benefits.

- It allowed councillors to hear directly from the community on what was important to them, including climate change. This had the effect of de-politicizing climate action amongst councillors, and thus enabling stronger climate action in the Council Plan. This was particularly true for councils that haven't traditionally been perceived to have a lot of strong political or community support for climate action.

- Councils feel a stronger sense of accountability to the community for climate action.
- The deliberative process itself helped community members to gain a deeper understanding of climate change and local government's role in addressing it, which in turn influenced the community vision and elevated the issue with councillors.
- When deliberative panels were given the opportunity to have input at multiple stages (i.e. not only developing the Community Vision but also providing feedback on how well the Council Plan reflected that vision) this strengthened the council's sense of accountability to the community for climate action, and prompted them to add and adjust climate-related content.

Specifically in relation to the inclusion of climate change in the Community Vision some officers speculated that such strong statements "*may not have gotten through without hearing it first-hand from the community – that had a big impact.*" This is especially the case with councillors who "*simply don't agree with the research they receive – they just rely on what they hear directly. They don't realise it's only 1% of the community they are hearing from. Sometimes that becomes your reality.*"

Other councils described community engagement processes that didn't align fully with the requirements of Section 6.1 of the Local Government Act (2020) (See *Key Concepts* page 10-13). In some cases interviewees described a process that, while more intensive than in previous years, was missing key elements of a deliberative engagement approach, and there was a feeling that this had weakened the influence of the community, and that the Council Plan was solely "*the councillors' plan.*"

Other councils had already experienced very strong and vocal community support for climate action for some years, and they reported the deliberative process as being less influential in terms of climate action (due to community influence already having been strong).

A lesson from the deliberative engagement process was that focusing on specific topics, rather than just gathering general input on the vision, is valuable.

Where climate change was not able to be included explicitly in the community engagement process, or where community engagement itself was restricted (e.g. due to COVID-19), councils were able to find alternative methods, for example by conducting community surveys on views on climate change.

Another influence of both community input and the COVID-19 context was the strength of community sentiment on the importance of green spaces in their immediate local area, because these had become a primary source of recreation in the context of lockdowns.

The role of climate risk management, legal obligations and capacity of leaders
Multiple councils identified the importance of a risk management approach to climate change.

This was particularly the case in terms of the support of executive teams. More than one council described the enabling influence of a new director or CEO who had brought a strong climate risk management lens to the council plan process. This was especially the case where a senior leader had direct experience with managing climate impacts.

One officer described a "*lightbulb moment*" with their senior leadership when climate risk was embedded in the Local Government Act (2020) Act:
"*[They said:] Okay, now we have to [manage climate risk]. If it's in the Act, there's no question about it. If that's a requirement, that's a requirement. Let's get on with it.*"

They also noted that this message had been communicated strongly when the Act was being developed.

At the same time some officers felt that their Council Plan "*barely meets minimum requirements, just scraped through the basics*" in terms of their responsibilities under the Local Government Act (2020) to manage climate risk. They felt that in retrospect they would have spent "*more time on obligations under the Act. Experienced councillors were not across the changes and new councillors just didn't know about it.*"

Reflecting in particular on whether councillor education on climate risk might have changed the process or outcomes, officers wondered whether climate risks are too long-term to influence councillors, who tend to be focused on their four-year term. This emphasized the benefit of specific actions over the next four years: "*In order to get to the long-term outcomes you have to work on them over time.*" Staff also mused on whether councillors need to build their capacity for critical thinking in order to assess the Council Plan more strategically and systematically.

Engaging councillors

Several officers commented on the importance of engaging with councillors and in doing so early (see also *The role of climate risk management, legal obligations and the capacity of leaders,* page 29).

Council staff often conduct workshops with all councillors as one of the primary ways of engaging councillors in the process. In 2021 face-to-face workshops were not possible during periods of tight COVID-19 restrictions, but council staff found that one-on-one online interviews with councillors were successful. This might be particularly beneficial in highly politicised or polarized councillor groups.

In more than one council, for example, climate change itself was seen as a politically charged term, and some councillors felt that some community members would not be supportive of its inclusion. This emphasizes the importance of councillors either hearing directly from community members about their concerns around climate change, or being presented with data on the local community's views on climate change.

Staff also suggested that the way in which councillor workshops are facilitated has a strong influence on the level of embedding and integration of climate change in the Council Plan. If, for example, the facilitator led councillors to reflect on how well their draft Council Plan represented the Community Vision, and whether there were sufficient actions, targets and measures to ensure that the Community Vision would be enacted, the results could be very different to when a facilitator might use a very light facilitation style and allow councillors to guide the course of a workshop.

Analysis

What does best practice look like?

A theme emerged from several related discussions about:

- the relative value of embedding in the Council Plan, versus the importance of avoiding duplication and keeping the plan at a strategic level, as well as the potential for embedding to lead to "watering down"
- the desire for new and specific actions to be enshrined in the Council Plan versus the belief that the linking of an existing strategy is the best way to capture climate action
- the importance of specific and measurable targets within the Council plan versus other documents.

That theme is that while many council officers have many common experiences and influencing factors, there is not a commonly agreed definition amongst council officers of what best practice is in terms of how climate action is included in Council Plans. It may be that best practice (or the best practice that is politically achievable) looks different in different contexts (for example in a council where climate change is politically divisive versus in a highly unified council).

A focus for future work could include attempting to establish a common definition of best practice, while acknowledging the varied typology of different councils, and that varied approaches may be needed for varied contexts. Or it may be that a consistent approach could be enabling and needs further support and mandate from the Victorian Government.

The role of leadership and organisational support

A point that was agreed across all surveys and interviews was the importance of leadership in gaining organisational support for climate action – especially in terms of embedding action across multiple areas of a council. This leadership is needed at all levels – from councillors, from executive teams, from managers and officers, as well as from community members and from the Victorian Government.

Councils are getting better at including and addressing climate change

In general there was a unanimous perception (also borne out by the review of Council Plans) that climate action in Council Plans is becoming stronger, more specific, more integrated, better embedded and more reflective of community concerns. There is nevertheless a varying level of concern across officers that the current rate of improvement, while encouraging, is not enough to address the scale and complexity of the challenges that climate change poses and local government's role in protecting communities from negative impacts and maximizing positive action.

What are the barriers and enablers?

The table over page draws out, summarises and categorises the barriers and enablers identified from the interviews. It should be taken as read that a lack of enablers is a barrier in itself, but to avoid duplication, the table on barriers focusses on barriers that came up in their own right.

Key types of barriers	Barriers
Lack of resources	• Funding for councils, both in general and in terms of responding to climate change, was seen to be insufficient: "*We are under resourced for what we have to do. Assets are coming to their end of life and climate change is accelerating that.*"
Lack of time	• Conversations with councillors and the community take time and this is not always built into the Council Plan process. • Councils need to get better at factoring in and addressing predictable delays and dependencies (for example the need for new councillors to get up to speed, the need for the council Plan to address the Community Vision). • Rushed process is a barrier to the creation of new actions – when there is not enough time, councils fall back to existing actions.
Lack of understanding amongst staff	• "*Staff still don't know what [climate action] means for them – yet.*" • The multi-faceted nature of climate change and related impacts is not understood or reflected, leading to a lack of integration and embedding. • Practical examples of embedding are needed.
Lack of good process	• Officers find it challenging to manage councillor input. • Many officers found that strong collaborative work was not reflected in the final Council Plan – the drafting and approval process resulted in "*pared back*" or even "*dumbed-down*" content.
Lack of clear goals / ambition	• There is a lack of agreement on whether Council Plan targets should be aspirational or achievable and officers don't know how to resolve this tension • "*It is more integrated than before but it's not there yet*" – incremental. improvement has been achieved but officers are looking for transformational change. • Many councils know that "*business as usual is no longer good enough. It's a nice thing to say but a hard thing to do.*"
Lack of commitment to embedding / actively siloed approach / competing priorities	• Officers find it hard to get past "Siloed thinking and territorial attitudes" to get other staff to "*understand that it's an organisation-wide responsibility and everyone has a part to play.*" • There are competing priorities: "*[Climate change] has to be given the same amount of air-time as other topics. It's not [seen as] more important.*"
Lack of leadership/ support/ guidance	• Officers say they need more support and guidance from higher levels of government (for example, guidance on "best practice in long term financial planning only mentioned climate change once, there's nothing on how to factor [climate change] into budgeting"). • Councils are wasting resources and "*reinventing the wheel*" in the absence of definitive advice: "*We had to go get advice from CSIRO!*"
Complexity and far-reaching impacts of CC	• The complexity of the work facing councils is daunting and time-consuming: "*We have to get everyone on board because [climate change] is SO wide-reaching and it takes a long time to get all the knowledge and to look at it piece by piece – we need to look holistically.*"

Table 5: Summary of barriers to embedding climate change in the Council Plan

Key types of enablers	Enablers

Strong leadership	• Direction from the Victorian Government has enabled councils to:
	  ○ better understand their responsibilities to address climate change
	  ○ attempt deliberative engagement (many for the first time).
	• Leaders' direct experience climate impacts enables strong internal advocacy
	• Strong leadership from councillors, executive teams and at every level down to officers enables organisational support for climate action
	• Educating councillors about their roles and responsibilities re climate change
	• Taking a strong risk-management approach
	• Allowing sufficient time and allocating resources to have meaningful conversations with councillors, as well as giving them access to external experts, can build greater understanding and commitment
	• Strong existing commitments, targets and plans and allocated budget
	• Climate emergency declarations are powerful public commitments

Genuine community engagement	• Truly deliberative community engagement can enable:
	  ○ accountability to the community
	  ○ de-politicisation of climate change and thus stronger climate action
	  ○ deeper community understanding of climate change and local government's role in addressing it, which elevates the issue with councillors
	• Where community engagement is restricted, alternative forms of consultation and research can help council to understand community sentiment
	• Allowing sufficient time for good community engagement processes

Integration and collaboration	• Embedding climate emergency actions throughout the Council Plan – not just in one area of the plan can enable innovation, collaboration, engagement and ownership of climate leadership and action across council
	• Internal staff conversations can change the culture and understanding of the organisation – even if this doesn't translate into explicit words in the Council Plan
	• A flexible approach to embedding climate change in council documents enables thinking beyond the Council Plan. Meaningful actions can be embedded in the Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan and other council strategies (ideally linking back to strategic directions in the Council Plan).
	• Strong collaboration between areas of council
	• Sufficient time and clear processes for staff across the organisation to be involved in not only contributing their own work but reviewing others' work
	• Developing both internal and community understanding of the connections between climate change and human health
	• Councils learning from each other and from Greenhouse Alliance projects
Specific and measurable goals	• Strong, specific, measurable targets can enable accountability to the organisation and to the community, the ability to monitor and correct course if off-track and better reporting to drive more action
Good internal process; allowing time	• Starting very early to identify which staff to speak to both in terms of content and how to get community input • Giving staff time, mandate and freedom to contribute and multiple opportunities for input and feedback (including responding to community and other input)

Table 6: Summary of barriers and enablers for councils in embedding climate change in the Council Plan

Recommendations

In this section the main lessons from the previous sections are summarized and corresponding recommendations are provided. These recommendations are primarily for councils (white background), but there are also recommendations for other parties, such as the Victorian Government, peak bodies such as the Municipal Association of Victoria, and regional bodies such as the Victorian Greenhouse Alliances (pale orange background).

Lessons	Recommendations
Staff don't yet know what integration looks like and not all staff understand their roles in addressing climate change, yet this is seen by many as key to a collaborative, coordinated climate action. There is not yet full agreement on whether or how to do this and different councils have different needs in this area. Organisational and cross-organisational conversations are valuable.	• Consider this topic early and address it explicitly in the planning process. Provide guidance to staff on how to work together. • Work with other councils and regional alliances to explore the potential benefits of and methods for a consistent approach. • Provide training for all staff to understand councils' roles and goals in addressing climate change and their own roles in contributing to that. • Support councils to explore the potential benefits of and methods for a consistent approach to including, addressing, integrating and embedding climate change. • Provide best-practice examples of including, addressing, integrating and embedding climate change in Council Plan content and in successful processes and methods used. • Provide training for council staff to understand climate change, and the roles and responsibilities of local government in addressing climate change.
In order for an embedding approach to get traction and to be part of the endorsed plan, strong leadership is needed from councillors, executive teams and at every level down to officers.	• Provide councillor and executive team education on local government's roles and responsibilities, and climate change risk and impacts, as part of the Council Plan process and the councillor induction process. • Provide support and more detailed guidance to councils on this, including continuing the education process on legislated roles and responsibilities regarding climate change.
Strong and specific measurable targets help keep councils accountable to themselves and to the community. There is a lack of agreement on whether Council Plan targets should be aspirational or achievable and officers don't know how to resolve this tension.	• Consider this topic early and address it explicitly in the planning process. • Work with other councils and regional alliances to strengthen capacity and support for this. • Provide support and more detailed guidance to councils on what strong, specific measurable targets look like and how to create them. Provide further language and guidance to address the role of targets and how to approach goals and targets in terms of aspiration versus achievability.
Genuine deliberative community engagement helps keep councils accountable and can enable an embedding approach. This is a	• Consider this topic early and address it explicitly in the planning process. • Work with other councils and regional alliances to strengthen capacity and support for this.

new approach for many councils and more capacity is needed.	• Provide more guidance, support and training on deliberative engagement and mechanisms for holding councils accountable for their community engagement processes.
Many council officers describe the council plan process as iterative and hope for improvement, yet few councils have so far undertaken a formal evaluation of their council plan development processes from 2021 to inform future work.	• Review and evaluate the 2021 council plan processes not only in terms of meeting legislative requirements but in terms of addressing the Community Vision successfully, including addressing climate change, maximising the contributions of staff and on successful implementation in years to come.
	• Provide further specific guidance on addressing, embedding and integrating climate change in the Council Plan. Embedding Action on Climate Change in Your Council Plan should be reviewed now that a full cycle is complete and should be added to over the next four years.
Officers find it challenging to manage councillor input. Councillors and staff need very clear and well-defined roles and responsibilities in the Council Plan process, need to understand the scope and legislative requirements of the Council Plan and be held to this.	• Clearly define roles, responsibilities and scope of the Council Plan process explicitly and early and hold councillors and officers to it.
	• Provide further specific guidance and capacity-building on best-practice processes, roles and responsibilities in the development of Council Plans.
Councils don't know how to resolve competing priorities, and have limited funding to address these, leading to trade-offs.	• Councils that have declared a Climate Emergency (and even those who haven't) - review the range of free and accessible resources such as o Council and community Action in the Climate Emergency o Local Government Climate Emergency Toolkit (These explicitly address the need for councils to elevate their climate action to the "number one priority of council after the delivery of … core functions.")
	• Build capacity in councils to consider, integrate and represent work with multiple outcomes (especially those that cut across traditional silos, such as climate change). • Share existing work on the prioritisation of climate change and provide guidance on how to address this in the Council Plan.
A successful Council Plan process takes time and resources.	• Consider this topic early and address it explicitly in the planning process. • Actively work with other councils and regional alliances to share learning and workload.
	• Provide more support to councils through the Council Plan process.
Climate change action requires budget and human resources	• Factor climate change into long-term financial planning. • Allocate both budget and human resources to match the level of ambition of climate goals.
	• Provide more financial support to Councils

Table 7: Summary of lessons and recommendations for councils seeking to embed climate change in the Council Plan

Conclusion

The Council Plan is a very important – but not the only – way for councils to formalize their commitment to climate change action, and to embed and integrate strong climate change action across both their planning documents and their organisations.

With their new Council Plans, councils have made progress in terms of:
- Elevating the prominence of climate change and climate change action
- Eliciting and addressing the community's views and concerns about climate change
- Embedding climate change in multiple areas of their Council Plans and other strategic plans
- Integrating climate change with meaningful and effective linkages (both textual and organisational) between disparate plans, work areas and objectives.

Many council officers believe, however, that there is much more that can be done in all of these areas and have identified some particular areas that they feel need to be strengthened:
- Making sure community engagement is genuinely deliberative and effective and reflected well by the Council Plan
- Including strong, specific and measurable goals, actions and targets in the Council Plan such that councils can be held accountable to the community and within the organisation, and so that effective evaluation can take place and corrective action taken if councils are not delivering what they set out to
- Building the capacity of councillors, executive teams, and staff across the organisation to understand climate change, and local government's role in addressing it, as well as individual councils' goals and how different areas of council contribute to these goals
- Resolving competing priorities.

There is a lack of consensus around what constitutes best practice in terms of addressing, embedding and integrating climate change in Council Plans.

There are opportunities to build on this piece of research in future, including:

- Exploring the potential benefits of and methods for a consistent approach to including, addressing, integrating and embedding climate change in Council Plans
- Doing more work at the regional level, given the limited funding and resources of individual councils
- Reviewing the guide produced early on in this project (*Embedding climate change in your Council Plan*) now that a full Council Plan development cycle is complete and over the next four years as more lessons are learned and plans are implemented (successfully or otherwise), and expand this to provide concrete examples of good practice in terms of embedding and integration
- Offering training, further peer learning, and other forms of capacity building to support council officers undertaking the next round of Council Plan development
- Conducting further research (e.g. further surveys, reviews, interviews or other methods) to investigate the success of different approaches to climate change in different Council Plans and in different types of councils.