Councils creating change – driving the sustainable water management agenda in local government

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Key Points

- There is currently significant interest in how to "mainstream" WSUD in local government – WSUD practice has reached a stage where the technical concepts are well understood and the challenges now are organisational and political
- This presentation will introduce a game plan for thinking strategically about sustainable water management in local government, which aims to address the organisational and political challenges
- A key idea underpinning this plan is the importance of locally relevant water management objectives based on tangible outcomes which matter in the local context

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Keywords

Sustainable urban water management, WSUD, organisational change, capacity building

Introduction

Water sensitive urban design (WSUD) has become a common idea in Australian local government over the last 25 years. However despite significant successes over this time frame, WSUD is still effectively a niche practice:

- While many councils have implemented successful WSUD projects, the majority of public domain WSUD projects still tend to be undertaken as one-off initiatives, often funded by grants

- While many councils have made significant efforts to include WSUD in their planning controls for new development, implementation is still patchy. While stormwater treatment systems have become relatively common, broader aspects of WSUD (e.g. integrated water cycle management and landscape integration) have been somewhat lost along the way. It is still rare to see holistic implementation of WSUD in the private domain

Therefore there is currently significant interest in how to transform WSUD from a niche practice to the mainstream – to make WSUD "business as usual". In this context, the challenges have shifted from technical to organisational and political.

Strategic game plan for sustainable water management

In this context we have been working with several NSW councils to help them conceptualise how they will continue to drive a WSUD or sustainable urban water management (SUWM) agenda. Reflecting on the successes that different councils have achieved over the years, we have identified some of the most important strategic moves which have been important in creating change in different organisational contexts. We have developed a game plan for strategic change, which is designed for local government to work out their own framework and action plan for sustainable water management.

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The game plan has been structured to recognise that every organisation is on their own journey, and there is no such thing as a recipe for success. The game plan is deliberately open-ended, as it is intended as a flexible guide to generate ideas. It suggests potential courses of action and allows each organisation to work out a set of actions which are appropriate for the local context.

The game plan includes four steps, shown in Figure 1. The following sections describe each step, explaining why it is important and introducing the key issues to explore at each stage. The conference presentation will illustrate the use of the framework, based on recent examples.
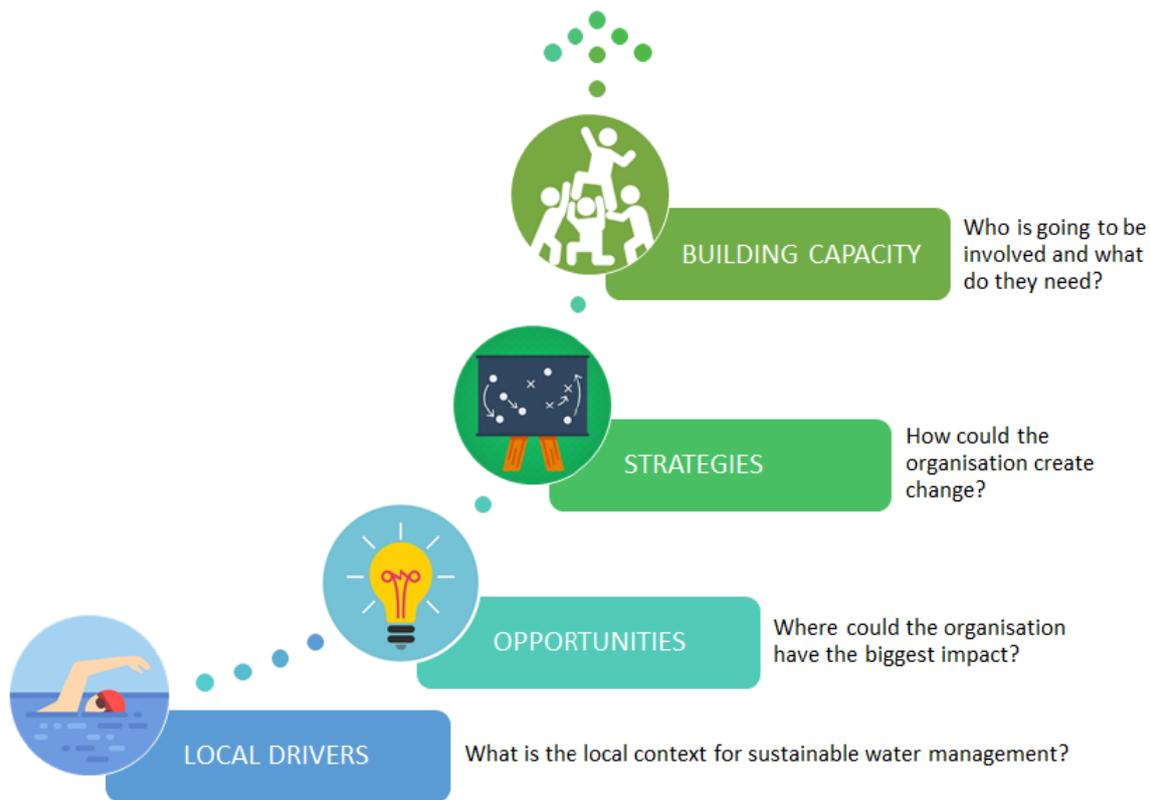

Figure 1. Game plan graphic

Local drivers: what is the local context for SUWM?

Currently in Australian cities, WSUD is often framed in terms of quantitative targets for reducing potable water demand and reducing pollutant loads. However these targets can be difficult to understand and they don't tell the story of what WSUD might achieve. If people have questions about outcomes, we lack satisfactory responses. Progress towards these targets is slow and it can be difficult to justify to decision-makers that their investments are paying off.

In contrast, a clear local narrative can be a powerful tool for developing political and organisational support. People need to understand why WSUD/SUWM is important and what it could achieve. Will we be able to swim in the river? Will we see iconic species returning? The Parramatta River Catchment Group (PRCG) campaign to bring back swimming to the Parramatta River is a great example showing the power of a clear narrative around a concrete outcome that people can connect with and support.

This local narrative can also establish the context for local goals and objectives, which will set Council's agenda. When the PRCG set a goal to bring back swimming, their objectives became focused on activating

swimming sites. Water quality has become just one consideration among many facets of creating an active recreational site (McGregor Coxall 2017).

In Australia we often default to reference points associated with pre-European conditions, however in urban areas these goals can seem out of touch. For example, research on the urban stream syndrome has shown that significant degradation occurs above approximately 5% directly connected impervious (DCI) area (Walsh *et al* 2004). What hope does this leave for urban catchments with more like 50% DCI? We need realistic goals and objectives for urban streams, which are linked to positive social and ecological outcomes. The Living Waterways framework (O'Neill et al 2015) attempts to address this need.

Opportunities: where could the organisation have the biggest impact?

Local government has a significant role in water management, with many potential avenues for action. However resources are limited and each organisation needs to determine how they will allocate scarce time and a limited budget, to have the most effective impact. For example, is it more important *in the local context* to improve sustainable water management in new development, or to focus efforts on retrofit projects or routine capital works? Is it better to prioritise key catchments and receiving waters, or are all catchments of equal importance? Many of these questions can be explored quantitatively to help prioritise opportunities.

An important consideration here is the organisation's capacity to support each opportunity. Sometimes it's better to pick one initiative and execute it well, rather than trying to pursue every opportunity, with piecemeal outcomes. Negative experiences can result in backlash against new practices.

Clear local drivers, established in Step 1, will help define the most important opportunities. For example, many local government areas will be able to identify different catchments with different objectives, and strategies for water management will differ in these different catchments. For example, catchment types might include:

- High priority catchments which drain to high value, sensitive receiving waters, where the focus may be on protecting ecosystem values

- Catchments undergoing significant change (e.g. redevelopment), where the focus may be on achieving the best possible outcomes from the redevelopment process

- Catchments with strategic opportunities (e.g. potential swimming sites), where the focus may be on particular sites with potential for improved outcomes

In the presentation we'll look at Wollahra LGA as an example where this approach has been applied.

Strategies: how could the organisation create change?

As noted earlier, mainstreaming WSUD requires organisational change. How can a few committed individuals in an organisation convert a niche practice into business as usual? Cross-council collaboration is important, but how to keep up the momentum? Champions can play an important role, but where do champions come from? Political and senior executive support is critical, but how can it be won?

Once strategic opportunities are identified, they can be implemented in a strategic manner so that they not only address technical issues, but they also begin to address the organisational challenges. Developing a new strategy, policy or plan can involve collaborators, build shared understanding and commitment, and win supporters. In the presentation we'll look at Blue Mountains Council's journey to becoming a water sensitive city, illustrating how they are using a strategic water management planning process to address organisational challenges.

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Beyond the organisation itself, there is also the potential to influence others to bring about change – for example the PRCG's swimming campaign has attracted stakeholder support, community interest, media attention and political engagement in local and state Government.

Building capacity: who is going to be involved and what do they need?

The most important question to ask about capacity building is who needs to be involved in implementing new initiatives and strategic interventions, and what do they need to succeed? Do they need training, workshops, guidelines, or other tools? Or is it more important that they gain senior support and secure funding?

A recent review of the Clearwater capacity building program (Bratieres and Jadraque 2016) concluded that WSUD is an engagement and investment problem, as well as a technical problem. They recommended that capacity building should:

- Concentrate on "soft" skills rather than purely technical skills

- Focus more on organisational strengthening

- Expand the target audience to include mid/higher level decision-makers and "unconverted" audiences

This suggests a shift away from technical training and guidelines (which are already abundant in WSUD) into broader capacity building activities. The principles recommended by Bratieres and Jadraque (2016) are strongly linked to the approach outlined in Steps 1-3. In the presentation we'll look at a recent capacity building program run by the Cooks River Alliance, as an example where this approach has been applied.

Conclusions

WSUD objectives in Australia are typically centred on water conservation and pollutant load reduction targets. This has led WSUD down a relatively narrow technical path. It has become difficult to explain the tangible benefits of WSUD to decision makers or to inspire support for WSUD amongst a broad non-technical audience. However in order to bring WSUD into mainstream practice, widespread support is critical.

We have developed a game plan for local government to think strategically about sustainable water management in terms that people can understand, connect to and support. The first step in the game plan underpins all of the others and is centred on establishing a local narrative to define water management objectives in terms of tangible outcomes that matter in the local area. The game plan also encourages councils to think about where the organisation can have the biggest impact on the outcomes, how to create change in line with the desired outcomes, and how to approach capacity building to support the process.

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