

Strengthening Sustainable Neighbourhoods

Strategic Review
Summary and Recommendations
September 2017



Further information

Lake Macquarie Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance (Inc)

4921 0117

admin@sustainableneighbourhoods.org.au

www.sustainableneighbourhoods.org.au

Lake Macquarie City Council

4921 0333

council@lakemac.nsw.gov.au

www.lakemac.com.au

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1 Executive summary

This report summarises a review of Council's Sustainable Neighbourhoods Program and makes recommendations for consideration in strategic planning and future Sustainable Neighbourhood activities. The review engaged volunteers, participants, Council staff and other stakeholders to reveal what is working well, what can be done better, and aspirations for the future of the program.

Current status

The Sustainable Neighbourhood Program was established by Council in 2008 to empower residents to act on local environmental and sustainability issues. The Program has established a network of Sustainable Neighbourhood groups with over 300 active volunteers who plan and implement a range of successful projects and events.

Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers are community leaders who are passionate about environmental sustainability and community wellbeing. Their participation in the program brings benefits for them, such as making friends and learning new skills, but they can be frustrated by bureaucratic process or perceived apathy from others.

The Sustainable Neighbourhood network is supported by the Alliance, an incorporated association managed by Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers. The Alliance is effectively meeting its primary functions, but relies heavily on the paid Secretariat. A focus on effective fundraising and increasing development of citywide projects would be of benefit.

Council staff view Sustainable Neighbourhood groups as a valuable source of active, engaged citizens; and recognise that Sustainable Neighbourhood projects are often consistent with, or contribute to, Council objectives. There is a desire from Sustainable Neighbourhood groups to increase integration and direct communication with Council staff and Councillors, and to improve communication, timeliness, and responsiveness when dealing with Council.

Future priorities

The review revealed a number of findings, which are discussed in the report, including potential for improvements to:

- marketing, promotions and volunteer recruitment;
- fundraising and financial management;
- local group dynamics;
- citywide support and coordination;
- Council support and collaboration; and
- priority sustainability issues.



Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers at one of their network gatherings.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the review, seven key areas for improvement are recommended. These are intended to be high-level priority areas for consideration in the development of a Strategic and Business Plan for the Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance.

Key recommendations

1. Visibility

Increase the reach and impact of Sustainable Neighbourhoods in the wider community. Prioritise actions to increase and improve promotion, advertising, marketing and media efforts.

2. Volunteer recruitment

Increase recruiting efforts to attract more volunteers, including more young people, to actively participate, generate ideas, and help organise events and projects. Succession planning for Alliance Board members and local committee members should also be improved.

3. Council interaction

Decrease the complexity and number of barriers and bureaucracy, including improved communication, timeliness and responsiveness when dealing with Council, and increase interaction between Sustainable Neighbourhood groups and Council staff more generally

4. Financial resources

Increase resources available to support Sustainable Neighbourhood groups and their projects, including paid staff and financial resources.

5. Training and capacity building

Create more opportunity for capacity building, training, and personal growth of volunteers, including Alliance Board members.

6. Citywide collaboration

Create more opportunities to collaborate and coordinate among local groups, and to increase interaction between the Alliance Board and local groups and volunteers.

7. Council feedback

Increase input from relevant Council staff during initial group development to help ensure each group's aspirations and expectations are realistic.

2 Strengthening Sustainable Neighbourhoods - Introduction

Council established the Sustainable Neighbourhoods program in 2008 to empower residents to act on local environmental and sustainability issues.

The program has successfully engaged a wide range of residents, and established a framework and governance structure for groups to effectively develop and implement their local Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Plans.

The program is currently reliant on direct support from Council, including staff time and operational funding. Ultimately, there is a need to ensure that the valuable work of the Sustainable Neighbourhood network can continue into the long term, regardless of any potential for changes in Council support.

This report summarises a review of the program that evaluated progress and achievements to date, and aims to inform strategic planning for the future of the Sustainable Neighbourhood network.

The review was conducted between July 2016 – June 2017 and included surveys and engagement of a range of stakeholders including volunteers, Council staff, and participants in the program. Appendix 1 details the review activities and schedule.

The report describes the current status of the Sustainable Neighbourhoods network including key attitudes and characteristics of our volunteer base. It outlines the structure of the Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance, and the relationship between Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Council.

The report also details the priorities for the network's future direction, emerging from the review, and makes a number of key recommendations to guide the development of a strategic plan, and to direct further development and improvements to the Sustainable Neighbourhood network.

Sustainable Neighbourhood objectives

- Increase community responsibility and management for sustainable outcomes.
- Protect and enhance the natural environment.
- Reduce individual, household, and collective resource consumption.
- Increase community capacity to prepare for and respond effectively to environmental threats such as natural disasters.
- Encourage community spirit, and increase community resilience, connectedness and wellbeing.
- Encourage and enable people to participate fully and equitably in community life.



Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers at one of their networking events.

3 Current status

3.1 Sustainable Neighbourhood achievements

The Program has established a network of active, skilled and supported citizens who make a meaningful contribution to local community life and address local sustainability challenges.

The success of the Sustainable Neighbourhood network lies in the variety of projects and their relevance to the local community. Residents create projects to directly address local issues and priorities.

The variety of successful projects showcases the excellent environmental and community outcomes that small groups of active citizens can achieve by working together for a common goal, and include activities such as:

- education and awareness raising events;
- practical on-ground environmental projects;
- advocating for improved infrastructure;
- clean up days;
- community-building events;
- encouraging active citizenship;
- expert walks and talks; and
- skills workshops.



Cardiff Area Sustainable Neighbourhood Group volunteer collecting used coffee grounds to distribute to local community gardens.

Examples of the range of projects and activities are available at www.sustainableneighbourhoods.org.au.

Sustainable Neighbourhood groups benefit the individuals involved, and contribute to the sustainability and wellbeing of their local community. The program has:

- increased community awareness of environmental issues and solutions;
- created an effective forum to raise and address local issues; and
- increased the social capital of local communities.



Participants at the Morisset and Peninsula Sustainable Neighbourhood Group's, Preserving Workshop.



Cooranbong Sustainable Neighbourhood Group members take participants on a tour of local Landcare and historic sites

Program progress as of 30 June 2017

Number of Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Plans (SNAPs) developed	24
Number of active Sustainable Neighbourhood Groups	15
Number of financial members of the Lake Macquarie Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance (Inc)	311
Number of subscribers to the 'Sustainable Neighbourhood News' e-newsletter	964

Activity in the 2016-17 financial year

Total number of Sustainable Neighbourhood events and activities held	181
Total number of Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteer attendances (Volunteers contributing their time to plan, organise and run projects)	1266
Estimate of volunteer hours contributed	3340 hours (Equivalent to \$100,185 @\$30/hr)
Total number of attendances / participation at Sustainable Neighbourhood events (Members of the public attending Sustainable Neighbourhood events and projects)	7641

Sustainable Neighbourhood group locations, as of July 2017

Cardiff Area	Cardiff, Cardiff Heights, Cardiff South, Garden Suburb, Hillsborough
Caves Beach - Swansea Area	Caves Beach, Swansea, Swansea Heads
Cooranbong	Cooranbong
Dora Creek	Dora Creek
Dudley	Dudley
Greater Charlestown	Adamstown Heights, Charlestown, Highfields, Kahibah, Kotara South and Whitebridge
LT Creek	Blackalls Park, Fassifern, Fennell Bay
Morisset and Peninsula	Balcolyn, Bonnells Bay, Brightwaters, Mirrabooka, Morisset, Morisset Park, Silverwater, Sunshine, Windermere Park, Yarrawonga Park
Pelican Area	Blacksmiths, Little Pelican, Pelican, Marks Point
Rathmines Area	Rathmines, Balmoral and Fishing Point
Redhead	Redhead
Toronto Area	Carey Bay, Coal Point, Kilaben Bay, Toronto
Valentine	Valentine
Warners Bay Area	Croudace Bay, Eleebana, Lakelands, Macquarie Hills, Warners Bay
West Wallsend District	Barnsley, Holmesville, Killingworth, Seahampton, O'Donnelltown, West Wallsend

3.2 Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers – our greatest asset

The Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance has over 300 financial members, along with many other hundreds of supporters. Volunteers undertake thousands of hours of work to plan, manage and deliver the broad range of activities for their community. Volunteers regularly demonstrate their competence in all aspects of project management and planning, risk management, fundraising, marketing, grant writing, volunteer management, event management and more, in addition to technical skills such as expertise in environmental science, public art and engineering.



Dudley Sustainable Neighbourhood Group volunteers with their 'Welcome to Dudley' Mural.

3.3 Who are our volunteers?

Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers are passionate about a range of environmental issues and recognise the importance of community participation and action. They are community leaders, who regularly volunteer for other community organisations in addition to their Sustainable Neighbourhood role.

Most of our volunteers are aged over 60 and there are slightly more female (56%) than male volunteers. Those who are retired or students are the most likely to be currently active (ie attending meetings or helping organise activities), while those in paid employment are less likely to be active.

Most active volunteers spend about 1 hour per week doing Sustainable Neighbourhood work, while a smaller number report spending up to about 12 hours in a week. Most active volunteers have been involved with the program for an average of 3 years.



Cardiff Area Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers at their Plant Swap and Celebration event.

Local group members work well together, enjoy each other's company, and have a good understanding of common objectives. They have enthusiastic members, and a small but committed core of people who function well together.

Volunteers can be frustrated by a lack of action, bureaucracy, and perceived apathy from the wider community.

3.4 The Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance

Council has worked with Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers to establish the Lake Macquarie Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance Incorporated (the Alliance). The Alliance was established in 2011 as an incorporated, not-for-profit community group, and currently supports over 15 Sustainable Neighbourhood groups. The Alliance provides the governance structure for groups to operate effectively, without having to duplicate processes and resources. The Alliance provides the following.



Sustainable Neighbourhood network members at one of their gatherings

- Legal standing as an incorporated community group .
- Insurance and risk management framework for member groups' activities.
- Independence from Council to enable the Sustainable Neighbourhood network to advocate effectively to Council and other bodies.
- Resources, capacity-building and mentoring.

The Alliance is governed by a group of up to 12 volunteer board members who take responsibility for the broader strategic direction of the network as a whole, advocating on behalf of the network, and supporting Sustainable Neighbourhood groups and their activities. Board members also take responsibility for overseeing risk management, financial management, promotion and other day to day aspects to support the wide range of projects and events of Sustainable Neighbourhood groups.

There is general agreement from the Sustainable Neighbourhood network that the Alliance Board is effectively meeting its primary functions. Key areas for improvement include more effective fundraising, and increased development and coordination of citywide projects.

The network has a consistent understanding of role of the Alliance and Alliance Board, and identifies 'supporting local groups' as its most important role.

Board members report learning new skills, being inspired by the achievements and activities of local groups, enjoying good company, and feeling good about making a difference.

There is recognition that as a volunteer organisation, progress depends on the time and skills of busy volunteers. Having a paid Secretariat position is vital to provide the support and administrative assistance to already generous and busy volunteers.



Greater Charlestown Sustainable Neighbourhood Group volunteers at their Community Celebration event.

3.5 Collaborating with Council

Council staff and programs

Council staff view Sustainable Neighbourhood groups as a valuable source of active, engaged citizens, and recognise that Sustainable Neighbourhood projects are often consistent with, or contribute to, Council objectives.

For many staff members, Sustainable Neighbourhood groups are a valuable way to help promote and support their work, and many have regularly sought feedback from Sustainable Neighbourhood groups. Sustainable Neighbourhood groups regularly participate in Council's programs, and will actively promote Council initiatives throughout the community.



Participants at the Cardiff Area Sustainable Neighbourhood Group's wax cloth making workshop

Councillor participation

There are a number of Councillors who are directly involved in, and very supportive of, their local Sustainable Neighbourhood groups, while others may not be aware of the program at all.

Council support

While Sustainable Neighbourhood groups are generally satisfied with the level and quality of support from Council, there is a desire to increase integration and direct communication with Council staff and Councillors, and to improve communication, timeliness, and responsiveness when dealing with Council.

Some Council officers have identified opportunities to develop Sustainable Neighbourhood's understanding and expectations of Council services or infrastructure.



Caves Beach – Swansea Area Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers at their Eco Angel Clean Up

3.6 Impact of Sustainable Neighbourhoods

Education, awareness raising, and skill-sharing

There is recognition from volunteers, participants and Council staff that Sustainable Neighbourhoods increases environmental awareness in the community, and provides information and solutions for residents to protect and enhance the natural environment; and reduce individual, household, and collective resource consumption.

Sustainable Neighbourhood events cover a wide range of skill-sharing and educational activities related to our natural environment and resource consumption. Participants in

Sustainable Neighbourhood events regularly report that they have learned something new from these activities.

The community-driven nature of the program, and the empowerment of community members to implement their own projects will result in significant behaviour change impacts related to sustainability and resource management on an individual level. While it is difficult to measure, it is likely that this approach will result in long term behaviour change by influencing community norms and reinforcing positive behaviour.



Pelican Area Sustainable Neighbourhood Group volunteers at their stall at the Emergency Services Expo

Social capital

Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers, and participants in their events receive significant benefits for individual wellbeing. They identify that they have made new friends, feel more connected, have learned new skills, and feel like they are making a valuable contribution because of their involvement.

The Program has increased linkages among community members, and acted as a catalyst for genuine friendships and community networks. This increase in social capital creates a more resilient community, who can effectively work together, practice good governance, and respond to local opportunities and threats.

There is general agreement that Sustainable Neighbourhood groups provide an effective forum to raise and address local issues, and increases opportunity for community members to participate fully and equitably in community life.



Participants at the Warners Bay Area Sustainable Neighbourhood Group's Winter Nature Play Adventure

4 Future priorities and direction

4.1 Marketing, promotions and volunteer recruitment

Increased and more effective promotion of the program, local groups, and their projects is a priority. Volunteers want Sustainable Neighbourhoods to be widely recognised, respected, and accepted as a mainstream part of community life. Volunteers want to increase and improve promotion, advertising, marketing and media efforts as a priority.

It is important to celebrate and promote the many successes and achievements of Sustainable Neighbourhoods, and to recognise that success provides momentum, growth and energy.

One of the primary objectives of increased promotion is to boost volunteer recruitment. There was a clear and strong indication that more volunteers and increased participation is needed, to take the load off committee members, and to replenish group numbers as people move away or step back. Volunteers are needed to actively participate in group meetings, generate ideas, and help organise events and projects.

There is also a desire for increased involvement and support from the wider community in general, for example, to participate in Sustainable Neighbourhood events.

Volunteer recruitment and support is by nature an ongoing need, and requires a number of resources at a program level.

Key marketing messages

Results from volunteer and participant surveys revealed some key findings about motivations to be involved in the program. Translated into marketing messages, these include the following.

- Sustainable Neighbourhoods is a valuable way to help in your local community.
- Sustainable Neighbourhoods brings genuine friendships and community connection.
- Sustainable Neighbourhoods is an opportunity to make a difference to the issues that interest you most.



Redhead Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers at their Reusable Bag-making Workshop



Warners Bay Area Sustainable Neighbourhood Group volunteers celebrating their launch event

Marketing channels

Face-to-face interactions (eg events, promotional stalls, and friends/family), and email newsletters are currently the primary communication method. These channels are already effective in attracting participation, especially from existing members and supporters.

The apparent lack of reach of other promotional avenues such as social media may reflect the relative inexperience in using these mediums. Skill development in these areas could boost volunteer confidence, and improve the Program's reach to engage with broader demographics and audiences.

Media such as newspapers and radio can also be an effective method to reach large numbers of people. In general, Sustainable Neighbourhood groups interact well with media outlets and often achieve coverage of their events and projects in local newspapers and radio. However, whether a story is picked up or not can be unpredictable.



Valentine Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers at their planning workshop

4.2 Fundraising and financial management

Fundraising and financial management was also identified as a key area for improvement.

The network collectively has been successful in attracting over \$15,000 in grant funds in the last financial year. While this funding is very valuable, grant funds are almost always project-based; tend to be restricted in terms of eligibility and timeframes; and have strict administrative and reporting requirements, sometimes excessive for the amount of funds being requested.

Diversifying funding sources, and attracting funds for administration and non-project-based activities will help to ensure the longevity of the network, and will give groups more freedom and opportunity to focus on project activities rather than administrative tasks.

4.3 Local group dynamics

Local groups generally report enjoying excellent dynamics and work together well. The primary areas for improvement include finding ways to share the workload more equitably among group members; and to focus the group's energy on the most important things.



Volunteers at the Pit Pony Park planting party with the Greater Charlestown Sustainable Neighbourhood Group

Local groups may achieve this by breaking down volunteer roles into smaller tasks that can be shared more easily, or perhaps by seeking partnerships with other local organisations to increase their reach and share the workload.

Local groups should regularly refer to their Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Plans to help guide their priorities and focus their efforts to the projects and activities that are most likely to gain broader community support.

4.4 Citywide support and coordination

Sustainable Neighbourhood groups face similar issues and challenges across the City. Focussing efforts on coordinated, citywide projects will assist local groups, and the network as a whole, to plan strategically, share resources, build momentum, and leverage each other's successes and experience.

Increasing collaborative opportunities and dedicating time to citywide planning will help achieve this, as well as improving communication channels and informal networking opportunities between volunteers, the Alliance and Council.

Alliance Board

Alliance Board members and the Sustainable Neighbourhood network suggested a number of actions to improve the function and effectiveness of the Alliance Board.

There is a clear need to develop short and long term goals and strategies for the Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance and network as a whole.

There is significant benefit in having Alliance Board members attend local Sustainable Neighbourhood group meetings and events more regularly. It helps keeps everyone in touch, enables direct and frank discussion, and encourages mutual understanding and collaboration.



West Wallsend District Sustainable Neighbourhood Group at the Holmesville Community Garden



Toronto Area Sustainable Neighbourhood Group with their campaign to promote reusable shopping bags

A number of other suggestions related to the management of the Board itself.

- Improve recruitment and succession planning for Board members.
- Improve induction for new Board members.
- Invite temporary or guest Board members to assist with specific roles or contribute specific skills to the Board, as required.
- Board members should embrace an ethic of personal growth and constant improvement.
- Prioritise ongoing training of Board members and provide more opportunity to utilise individual skills.
- Team building exercises or social engagements for Board members can be beneficial.
- Increase adherence to meeting rules.
- Increase opportunity for in-depth discussion among Board members.
- Increase interaction and understanding among the wider community, and bring the views of the wider community back to the Board.
- Review the Board's goals and performance as a regular exercise.



West Wallsend District Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers with Council staff at the new Holmesville Community Garden

4.5 Council support and collaboration

Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers appreciate Council's commitment to community engagement and sustainability, and recognise the importance of Council's investment in the Sustainable Neighbourhoods program. There is ongoing opportunity to improve the way Sustainable Neighbourhood groups are supported by Council, and the way they interact and collaborate with Council more generally.

There is a desire from the Sustainable Neighbourhood network to decrease the complexity and number of barriers and bureaucracy when dealing with Council processes. While volunteers understand the need for rigorous process and transparency, in some instances communication, timeliness and responsiveness from Council staff can be improved. Council's recently updated *Customer Charter and Service Standards* detail the expected standards and response times for various services, and may go some way to improving understanding and expectations.



Rathmines Area Sustainable Neighbourhood volunteers with Mayor Kay Fraser at their Community Celebration event

Feedback from both volunteers and Council staff suggest that increasing interaction between Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Council staff will be beneficial.

Councillor Engagement

There is benefit to improving engagement with Councillors and other elected representatives in the Program, including some suggestion to have Councillor representation on each local group.

4.6 Development of new Sustainable Neighbourhood Groups

There is general acknowledgement of the large Council input of resources and support to establish groups initially, including a neighbourhood wide survey, community workshop, development of the group's Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Plan (SNAP), and regular staff attendance at local group meetings. This direct support is invaluable to encourage participation, establish good governance practices, and assist the group to initiate and implement their projects.



Dudley community members at a Sustainable Neighbourhood planning workshop

Increased feedback from various Council departments during the development of a SNAP would be beneficial to ensure that the group's aspirations and expectations are realistic, and align with Council's plans and resource availability.

Once a group is established, the relatively sudden reduction in Council staff support presents a challenge for volunteers to maintain their group's momentum while taking on broader responsibilities related to running their group and projects. This transition period could be better managed to ensure groups remain confident and effective as they progress. Increased interaction with the broader network, the Alliance Board, and Council support staff during this period may assist to ensure local groups are aware of, and able to access, the support and resources available to them.

Many groups struggle to maintain their volunteer numbers and momentum over time, particularly if key volunteers move away or their circumstances change. Volunteer attrition has caused a number of Sustainable Neighbourhood groups to become inactive or formally dissolve. There may be benefit in prioritising Council resources to renew participation in these struggling groups, prior to starting new groups in the immediate future.



Participants at the Caves Beach Swansea Area Sustainable Neighbourhood Groups Clean Up and Planting Day at Coon Island

When the Program was originally envisaged, very small geographic areas (approximately 2000 households) were selected with the intention of enhancing participants' sense of place and ownership. This has proven a successful strategy where there is a somewhat isolated residential area (eg Dudley, Redhead, Rathmines), that has an existing community and identity. However, many neighbourhood areas do not have an obvious boundary, and for some the boundaries seem arbitrary, and leave the group with a small pool of potential participants.



Warners Bay Area Sustainable Neighbourhood Group members at their monthly coffee catch up

In some cases where small groups have been struggling, Council has been able to renew a group by expanding their neighbourhood area (eg Greater Charlestown, Cardiff Area). This has been a valuable strategy to renew participation in a group, and to increase the pool of volunteers available to work together.

In terms of future Council investment, there appears to be benefit in joining some of the smaller or struggling groups together to give a critical mass of potential participants. This could be achieved by consolidating groups around the city's nine town centre areas.

4.7 Priority sustainability issues

Volunteers rated their top three priorities for each topic area. These results are consistent with the values and actions outlined in their Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Plans, and with broader community vision and goals identified by Council.



Participants at the Dora Creek Sustainable Neighbourhood Group's Eco Angel Clean Up event

Natural environment	Sustainable living	Community wellbeing
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Protecting natural areas 2. Cleaning up and preventing litter 3. Regenerating native bushland (Landcare) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Advocating for improved footpaths and cycleways 2. Encouraging uptake of renewable energy 3. Reduce household waste and general consumption 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encouraging community events 2. Neighbourhood beautification and place-making 3. Developing effective neighbourhood communications

5 References

The following reports detail the complete results from the Sustainable Neighbourhoods review activities. Each of the reports is available to download from www.sustainableneighbourhoods.org.au/strengthening-sustainable-neighbourhoods.

- Volunteer Survey Results, November 2016
- Sustainable Neighbourhood group meetings – Results, March 2017
- Council Staff Survey Results, April 2017
- Event Survey Results, June 2017

6 Appendices

6.1 Appendix 1. Sustainable Neighbourhoods Review - Process and schedule

