

Sustainable Neighbourhoods Volunteer Survey Results

November 2016



About Sustainable Neighbourhoods

Lake Macquarie City Council initiated the Sustainable Neighbourhoods program in 2008 to empower residents to act on local environmental and sustainability issues. The program aims include the following.

- 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.

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.

As part of the program, 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 15 active Sustainable Neighbourhood groups. The Alliance provides the governance and support structure for groups to operate effectively, without each having to duplicate processes and resources.

Review of Sustainable Neighbourhoods

In July 2016, Council staff together with Alliance Board members initiated a review of the Sustainable Neighbourhoods program in order to:

- Identify the current status of the Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance and network; and
- Assist with the development of an Alliance Strategic Plan.

The review process includes a range of engagement and research activities to gather input from various stakeholders to the Sustainable Neighbourhoods program.

This report details the results of the volunteer survey, conducted in August – September 2016.

An additional report will be produced, summarising the results of all of the review activities.

Further information

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Summary and discussion of results

Survey responses

The survey achieved a 14% response rate (74 responses), and represented volunteers from almost all active Sustainable Neighbourhood groups.

Current involvement

Respondents were asked about their current involvement, and were offered different questions based on their response. Where relevant, some comparisons were made between these 2 groups.

- Current volunteers, 68% (longer survey).
- Not currently volunteering, 32% (shorter survey)

Interest in Sustainable Neighbourhoods and motivation for being involved

Overall, the most common interests and motivations were reported as:

- Environmental sustainability is important
- Community participation and action is important

These results reflect a consistency with the aims of the Sustainable Neighbourhoods program, and identify potential to utilise these key messages to recruit new interest and participation.

“I believe strongly in community participation and in caring for the environment - both locally and globally.”

The detailed results show considerable passion for a range of environmental issues, and community participation.

There was an apparent difference between current volunteers and those not currently volunteering.

- Current volunteers indicated a high motivation to “help or volunteer in my community”, whereas those who do not currently volunteer did not as readily indicate this as an interest.
- Those not currently volunteering are interested in “knowing what’s happening in my local neighbourhood”, whereas this did not score highly as a motivating factor for current volunteers.

These insights can be useful to tailor promotional messages and increase participation in the program. For example, focussing on Sustainable Neighbourhoods as a valuable way to help may attract more volunteers.

Respondents who are not currently volunteering were asked what would encourage them to participate more actively. The biggest encouragement indicated was “If there was an event or project that interested me, or directly affected me”.

A number of people indicated that they “could take on a small task, but don’t want to attend regular meetings”. This indicates the importance of breaking larger projects up into specific or smaller roles, and promoting those more defined opportunities to contribute.

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Demographics

Approximately 80% of respondents are aged over 50; over 50% are retired; and 88% do not have any children under 18.

Those who work (part time or full time), were less likely to be currently volunteering; and retirees and students appeared more likely to volunteer.

Those who are currently volunteering spend approximately 1 hour per week (median) doing Sustainable Neighbourhood work, and have been involved with the program for an average of 3 years.

Promotion

Throughout the survey, respondents identified increased and more effective promotion as a priority. Volunteers want Sustainable Neighbourhoods to be widely recognised, respected, and accepted as a mainstream part of community life.

The most common way respondents heard about Sustainable Neighbourhoods was through face-to-face interactions (eg events, promotional stalls, and friends/family), and email newsletters. These are clearly effective. The apparent lack of reach of other promotional avenues (eg websites, social media) may reflect our relative inexperience in using these mediums. Skill development in these areas could assist and improve our reach to engage with different demographics and audiences.

Fewer respondents reported hearing about Sustainable Neighbourhoods through traditional media such as newspaper and radio. This is likely because articles or interviews appear relatively infrequently.

Group dynamics

A high proportion (>70%) of current volunteers agreed with a range of positive factors about how their local group operates. Most agreed their groups:

- are welcoming
- relevant
- work well together
- hold well planned events
- have productive meetings
- understand common objectives
- recognise and value individuals' skills; and
- enjoy each other's company.

Areas for improvement include:

- Sharing the workload among group members
- Putting the most energy into the most important things.

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Volunteering and 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' the group as people move away or drop out.

Current volunteers also indicated they require additional resources (money, time, volunteers, equipment, advice etc) to successfully complete their projects. Over 80% of volunteers indicated the most need for:

- Volunteers (to help plan and implement our projects)
- Participants (to attend our events and engage with our projects)
- Increased public promotion of Sustainable Neighbourhoods

"We only have an extremely small number of people who are active in our group, therefore everything is left to the same people to undertake."

Personal impact

Current volunteers reported a number of positive impacts resulting from their involvement, including:

- Making new friends,
- Learning something new,
- Feeling more connected, and
- Making a valuable contribution.

"The most part it has been a very positive experience for me overall. I have learned a lot and gained new skills that I have never done before."

All of these factors are valuable as positive reasons to get involved and to encourage increased participation.

The major negative impact is "frustrated by lack of action or too much bureaucracy".

Detailed results reveal a number of sources of frustration, including:

- apparent apathy from the wider community;
- inaction or unresponsiveness from sections of Council; and
- reliance on a small group to do the majority of work.

"Several of our projects have been held up because relevant Council officer had moved to another job."

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Wider impact of Sustainable Neighbourhoods

The majority of respondents indicated that “we have an effective forum to raise and address local issues”.

A range of successful projects and achievements were highlighted as inspiration for future activities.

There was some indication of a number of additional positive impacts, but most were reluctant to attribute impacts as resulting directly from Sustainable Neighbourhood activities.

“I strongly believe that our work has just begun.”

The Sustainable Neighbourhood Alliance

Current volunteers generally demonstrated a consistent and accurate understanding of the role of the Alliance and the Alliance Board, including

- supporting local groups
- providing insurance
- risk management
- financial assistance
- incorporated body
- administration
- guidance
- coordination, and
- oversight.

The most important function of the Alliance is to support the activities of local groups, and over 70% of volunteers indicated that they thought this function is currently being fulfilled.

Two functions were identified as needing improvement by about 40% of volunteers. These were:

- Assist with fundraising and financial management
- Develop, coordinate and implement projects common to all member groups

Future vision

Increased visibility, engagement, and community participation in Sustainable Neighbourhoods is a clear priority, along with developing a more coordinated network of groups.

When forced to prioritise issues, the top 3 priorities for each topic area included:

Natural environment

1. Protecting natural areas
2. Cleaning up and preventing litter
3. Regenerating native bushland (Landcare)

Sustainable living

1. Advocating for improved footpaths and cycleways
2. Encouraging uptake of renewable energy
3. Reduce household waste and general consumption

Community wellbeing

1. Encouraging community events
2. Neighbourhood beautification and place-making
3. Developing effective neighbourhood communications

Many respondents reported that it was difficult to prioritise, as all of the issues listed were considered very important

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