



**CLIMATE
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Local Government Climate Risk and Capability Series

ARTICLE 2

Why Local Government will determine Australia's Climate Resilience

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CONTENTS

Where National Ambition Meets Local Delivery	3
Gaps Identified by the National Adaptation Plan	4
The Central Role of Local Government	4
A Three-Dimensional Capability Model	5
Applying the Subsidiarity Principle in Practice	6
Policy and Practice Recommendations	7
Forward-Looking View	7
References	8

Where National Ambition Meets Local Delivery

In my previous article, I explored Australia's evolving approach to climate adaptation and the important progress reflected in the National Adaptation Plan and emerging partnership frameworks. These initiatives represent a significant step toward stronger national coordination. Yet the success of these efforts will ultimately depend on how effectively adaptation is delivered on the ground. This article looks more closely at the role of local government in that equation and why councils hold a pivotal position in translating national adaptation goals into real-world resilience.

Australia's capacity to adapt to climate change will be determined not only by national ambition, but by how effectively resilience is led and delivered at the local level. Councils sit at the nexus of people, place and policy, where the physical impacts of climate change are most visible, and where practical solutions can be most quickly realised. Delivering the National Adaptation Plan will depend on whether local governments have the capability, authority and resources to act.

These conditions place local government at the centre of Australia's climate resilience challenge. While national policy provides direction, adaptation ultimately occurs through local planning decisions, infrastructure investments and community partnerships. Several defining characteristics of councils explain why they are uniquely positioned to lead this work.

Deep local knowledge: Councils understand their landscapes, infrastructure, ecosystems and communities in granular detail. Their asset registers, planning instruments and environmental data provide a highly localised understanding of climate risks, from flood-prone catchments and heat-exposed suburbs to vulnerable community groups.

Community trust and connection: Local government is the level of government most closely connected to communities. Councils interact daily with residents, businesses and local organisations, creating trusted relationships that enable them to communicate risks, convene stakeholders and support community-led adaptation.

Statutory authority and delivery mechanisms: Councils already hold many of the policy levers required to embed adaptation into everyday decisions. Through planning schemes, development approvals, infrastructure management and local services, they shape land use, infrastructure design and environmental outcomes.

Integration across local systems: Local governments operate at the intersection of planning, infrastructure, environment, finance and community services. This cross-sector role allows councils to integrate climate considerations into multiple systems rather than addressing them in isolation.

Frontline exposure to climate impacts: When floods, fires, storms or heatwaves occur, local governments are typically the first responders and the last to leave during recovery. This proximity to consequence gives councils a direct understanding of climate risk and a strong incentive to strengthen long-term resilience.

Taken together, these attributes position local government as a critical delivery partner for national climate adaptation. The National Adaptation Plan reflects this reality. It assumes that many adaptation actions will be implemented locally. However, it also recognises that the capability and institutional capacity required to deliver this role is uneven across the sector.

Gaps Identified by the National Adaptation Plan

The NAP outlines seven national adaptation domains, including infrastructure, nature, communities, health, and finance. Across these, it recognises that local government capability and coordination are crucial, but councils are not equally prepared or able to deliver adaptation. Key issues include:

- **Inconsistent legislative mandates** – Not all States require councils to address climate risk in planning and asset management, resulting in fragmented responses.
- **Short-term, competitive funding** – Many adaptation initiatives rely on one-off grants rather than predictable streams that allow long-term investment.
- **Variable data access** – Councils often lack downscaled, location-specific climate projections to inform decision-making.
- **Skills and workforce shortages** – Many councils have limited staff expertise in climate risk, resilience planning, or systems integration.
- **Limited integration across sectors** – Adaptation remains siloed, with insufficient coordination between councils, utilities, and emergency services.

These challenges echo findings from the IPCC (2022), which noted that effective adaptation in urban systems depends on institutional capacity, leadership continuity, and community engagement.

The Central Role of Local Government

Local governments already play a significant role in delivering Australia's adaptation effort. The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) estimates councils collectively invest over \$400 million annually in adaptation, a figure projected to double by 2030. Their work spans coastal management, flood mitigation, emergency response, and community resilience programs.

The NAP reinforces the subsidiarity principle that decisions should be taken at the lowest competent level of government. However, competence depends on adequate authority, resources, and skills. Without these, councils risk being assigned responsibility without the authority, resourcing or system alignment required to deliver.

Effective local leadership therefore requires a shift from viewing councils as service managers to recognising them as partners in national resilience, supported through stronger governance frameworks and targeted investment.

While councils are increasingly identifying and understanding local climate risks, a further challenge is emerging - how those risks are prioritised, funded and translated into measurable outcomes. This remains an area of ongoing development across Australia's adaptation system.

A Three-Dimensional Capability Model

Delivering the NAP requires strengthening local capability across three dimensions: people, systems, and partnerships.

1. People, Leadership and Workforce Development

Adaptation is a leadership challenge as much as a technical one. Without leadership capability, climate risks remain confined to strategy documents rather than embedded in everyday decisions about planning, assets, finance and community services. Councils need leaders and staff who can:

- Integrate climate risk into everyday decision-making.
- Collaborate across disciplines and jurisdictions.
- Engage communities in co-designing solutions.
- Lead with confidence under uncertainty.

A foundational level of climate literacy is required among elected members and senior executives, enabling them to understand climate change as a long-term strategic risk that cuts across all council functions. Without this, climate considerations remain siloed; with it, they can be integrated into core decisions about assets, finance, services and community outcomes.

Developing workforce capability involves updating position descriptions, embedding climate resilience into performance frameworks, and investing in professional development across the whole of council including planning, engineering, finance, and community engagement roles.

2. Systems: Institutional Integration

Councils must embed adaptation into governance, planning, and asset systems, not treat it as an add-on. This means:

- Strengthening statutory backing for climate-informed planning schemes and building standards.
- Aligning long-term financial plans with adaptation priorities and future asset risk.
- Accessing consistent, downscaled climate data and risk tools.
- Establishing multi-year funding models linked to performance and outcomes.

The NAP's proposed National Climate Adaptation Partnership Framework provides a potential platform for this alignment if it includes local government as a fully participating tier.

3. Partnerships: Communities and Cross-sector Collaboration

Adaptation succeeds when it reflects local realities. Councils are uniquely placed to convene communities, business, and NGOs in co-designing adaptation actions. Building resilient communities requires:

- Community-led adaptation planning, underpinned by local knowledge.
- Partnerships with regional organisations and utilities for shared infrastructure adaptation.

- Integration of social resilience and equity outcomes alongside physical risk reduction.

The NAP recognises that adaptation will fail without community participation and collaboration *“across scales, sectors, and stakeholders.”*

Competence at the local level cannot be assumed. It must be deliberately built and supported. Councils already have the authority and mechanisms to act, but competence in climate adaptation depends on strengthening three interrelated dimensions: people, systems, and partnerships.

Applying the Subsidiarity Principle in Practice

This becomes practical when roles are clearly defined across all levels of government. Recent national initiatives, such as the National Climate Change Partnership, reflect a clear shift toward more coordinated, multi-level governance. These frameworks recognise the role of local government and the importance of collaboration across jurisdictions.

Scale	Primary Responsibilities for Adaptation	Examples
Commonwealth	Set national policy direction, provide funding, ensure consistent data and monitoring, integrate adaptation into national economic and disaster frameworks.	National Climate Adaptation Partnership, Disaster Ready Fund, national climate projections, economic resilience assessments.
State/Territory	Embed climate considerations in planning and infrastructure legislation, deliver regional coordination, and provide technical support to councils.	Coastal management programs, regional flood mitigation, adaptation hubs.
Local Government	Lead local adaptation planning, manage assets, engage communities, and integrate climate risk into governance and service delivery.	Local adaptation strategies, urban heat mitigation, green infrastructure, resilient infrastructure design.

This multi-level approach operationalises subsidiarity while recognising that *“competence”* must include resourcing and technical support.

Because adaptation is place-based, it is ultimately realised through local decisions about planning, infrastructure, and community systems. This places a practical responsibility on local government not only to plan for climate risk, but to ensure that actions taken lead to measurable reductions in risk and stronger resilience over time.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

Six system-level shifts will determine whether Australia's National Adaptation Plan translates into effective local action.

1. **Clarify legislative mandates:** Embed forward-looking climate risk and resilience requirements into planning, building and infrastructure legislation to ensure consistency and enable councils to integrate adaptation into core decisions.
2. **Establish stable, long-term funding:** Replace short-term grants with a predictable, formula-based funding model to support sustained local investment in resilience.
3. **Strengthen local government capability:** Develop and embed a national climate capability framework to build leadership, skills and workforce capacity across all council functions.
4. **Improve access to climate data and technical support:** Provide consistent, downscaled climate data and practical tools, supported by regional hubs, to inform local planning and investment decisions.
5. **Track progress and build accountability:** Implement a national monitoring and evaluation framework to measure adaptation progress, capability development and resilience outcomes.
6. **Enable community-led adaptation:** Support councils to engage communities in locally relevant, participatory approaches that strengthen social resilience and shared ownership of adaptation.

Forward-Looking View

The National Adaptation Plan is a critical step in national coordination, but implementation will rely on local leadership, long-term investment, and strong intergovernmental collaboration.

Adaptation will not be achieved through infrastructure alone. It requires an empowered, skilled, and connected local government sector working in partnership with states, the Commonwealth, and communities.

If the Commonwealth's vision is to be realised, every council must be equipped with the capability, data, and long-term funding to act decisively on climate risk. Australia's resilience will not be built in policy documents but in local streets, parks and communities where adaptation takes form. Ensuring councils have the capability to lead this work will be one of the most important national investments of the next decade.

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About the Author

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This article is part of the Local Government Climate Risk and Capability thought leadership series.