

ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT: FINDINGS FROM REGIONAL TOWNS IN QUEENSLAND

Bhishna Bajracharya¹, Irphne Childs², Peter Hastings²

¹*Bond University, Gold Coast, QLD, Australia,* ²*Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, QLD, Australia*

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports selected results from a survey of Queensland local governments, conducted in late 2009, that investigated their adoption of state-level disaster management policies and guidelines. The survey comprised an online questionnaire distributed to all Queensland local governments, augmented by focus groups held in the regional coastal and inland administrative centres of Cairns, Mackay, Rockhampton, Emerald, Charleville and the Gold Coast. The paper identifies and analyses the issues and strategies of local governments in adopting state government disaster management policies and guidelines, and engaging their communities in disaster management.

Background

In Australia, disaster management (DM) is organised under a tiered, “all agencies” framework that involves all levels of government (EMA, 2004). Support for DM can be progressively escalated through the local, district, state and national tiers as dictated by the circumstances. The Australian disaster management system also features an “all hazards”, “comprehensive” approach that requires disaster managers to take an integrated approach to manage the range of hazards likely to affect a locality, and to develop responses across hazard prevention, preparedness, response and recovery (EMA, 2004).

At the time of the research, disaster management arrangements, roles and responsibilities in Queensland were formally defined by the Queensland Disaster Management Act (2003), and supported by the Queensland State Disaster Management Plan (2008), the Disaster Management Strategic Policy Framework (2005) and associated guidelines. Local government is clearly identified within the state disaster management system as the key management agency for local disaster events, and has significant and wide-ranging responsibilities. These include: the developing and maintaining a local disaster management plan, establishing a local disaster management group (LDMG), and engaging the community in disaster management. Additionally, there are a variety of service-maintenance, coordination and communication responsibilities. In short, local governments with their LDMGs are expected to develop the capacity to deal with local events, coordinate with higher DM tiers as needed, and facilitate a “prepared community”. These responsibilities are further promoted by the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, which advocates the development of improved capacities for disaster management at the local level, and greater community self-reliance (COAG 2009). The Queensland Disaster Management Planning Guidelines for Local Government (2003) and Operational Planning Guidelines for Local Disaster Management Groups (2006) were published in support of the Act to assist local governments to establish DM arrangements. Although there are some variations in disaster/emergency management systems in other states of Australia, the significant and substantive role of local governments is generally consistent.

Other Queensland policies and guidelines also potentially affect local governments engaging with DM. The State Planning Policy 1/03 (2003) establishes state landuse planning policy aimed at mitigating the risks from bushfires, floods and landslides. Erosion and inundation risks are addressed by Queensland coastal management plans (e.g. Queensland Coastal Plan), while wind and fire hazard is managed by Australian, Queensland and local building laws, codes and standards.

This research sought to investigate how local governments in Queensland were faring in their adoption of Queensland state disaster management policies and guidelines, given the significant and diverse roles and responsibilities afforded to them in the disaster management system. Previous survey-based research in Australia highlighted some of the issues faced by local governments in embracing their disaster/ emergency management obligations (SMEC and IDD, 2006; Elsworth and Anthony-Harvey-Beavis, 2007).

In their *National Local Government Emergency Management Survey*, Elsworth and Anthony-Harvey-Beavis (2007) concluded that while local governments generally accepted their role and took emergency management seriously, there were issues and barriers that affected their adoption of required roles and

responsibilities. These often involved: a lack of resourcing, both in funding and emergency (disaster) management staff/ staff time; variability and gaps in local hazard risk information and assessments; and difficulties concerning relationships with other agencies. This survey also revealed that while community engagement was seen as important by local government, community education activities and availability of appropriate information supporting a prepared community were often perceived as lacking.

Based on their survey results, SMEC and IDD (2006) supported increased engagement of the community to address their awareness and understanding of hazards and risks, particularly for improving public acceptance of hazard mitigation measures in landuse planning. The report also promoted the development of partnerships to encourage policy consistency in landuse planning in this context.

More recently, Kusumasari et al. (2010) investigated the capability requirements of local governments in disaster management by way of a comprehensive literature review. Although their sources often referred to developing countries, they also concluded that local government capability was commonly adversely affected by budgetary, staffing and expertise constraints, along with issues of coordination and lack of community engagement.

The Present Study

This paper reports relevant elements of a broader survey-based research project aimed at identifying and analysing issues related to the adoption of state disaster management policies and guidelines by Queensland local governments (Childs et al 2010). The project investigated such adoption under the headings of: building community capacity, council operationalisation of disaster management, and regional partnerships. Within these categories, information was collected to describe councils' progress towards assessing and facilitating public awareness of risks and engagement with disaster management, and their progress towards realising a "prepared community" featuring self-reliance. Engagement with communities and stakeholders beyond their jurisdictions (i.e. regional partnership building) was also investigated.

METHOD

Data were captured from a survey of Queensland local councils that comprised an online questionnaire and focus groups. The online questionnaire was designed in consultation with the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and Emergency Management Queensland (EMQ) to administer closed and open format items targeting aspects of local disaster management activities, capacities and policy/ guideline adoption. The complete questionnaire is published in Childs et al. (2010). Local disaster coordinators (or equivalent/ representative) in all Queensland local councils were invited to complete the online questionnaire on behalf of their council in August 2009. Individual council responses were identifiable by the researchers, but were otherwise isolated and protected under strict ethical requirements. By the close of the survey in December 2009, forty-eight (48) councils of a possible seventy-two (72), a response rate of 67%, had participated. Thirty-five (35) of the participating councils (over two-thirds) were regional councils outside of Southeast Queensland.

Data were coded and submitted to a database for collation and description. Six focus groups with regional councils were conducted between October and December 2009. Participating councils were: Rockhampton Regional, Gold Coast City, Mackay Regional, Murweh (Charleville), Central Highlands Regional (Emerald) and Cairns Regional. The researchers invited a range of roles to each group, including the local disaster coordinator and, other council stakeholders (often also members of the LDMG), a landuse planner, a corporate administrator/ manager and an elected representative. Focus group discussions were organised under the themes of: policy/guideline adoption; public role in disaster management; amalgamation and regional partnerships; climate change issues; and visions/ strategies for improving disaster management. These themes were outlined and forwarded to the nominated focus group attendees prior to meetings to allow them to prepare. Discussions on the day were recorded by the research team, who then generated a written account of each meeting that was subsequently validated by each corresponding council.

Note that at the time of the survey and focus groups, the 2008 version of the Queensland State Disaster Management Plan and the 2005 version of the strategic policy framework were current. A recent update of the plan and arrangements in the last year, in conjunction with amendments to the Disaster Management Act, reinforce a community-resilience based approach to DM and have not overtly changed the basic disaster management principles, nor the roles and responsibilities of local government as investigated by this research. This will be discussed later.

RESULTS

Comprehensive survey results are presented in Childs et al. (2010). In this paper, key results that are most relevant to the themes of “operationalising state policy/guidelines” and “community engagement” will be presented. Note that in reporting results, the identities of respondents are protected, by agreement.

1. Operationalising State Policy/ Guidelines

Local Disaster Plans

The Queensland Disaster Management Act 2003 (DM Act), supported by the Queensland State Disaster Management Plan (SDMP), requires local governments with their Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) to prepare and maintain (i.e. reviewed at least annually) a local disaster management plan (DM Act 2003, s57, s59). With only a couple of exceptions, online questionnaire responses indicated that councils have established local DM plans and a majority (thirty-five (35) from forty-seven (47) respondents) review these at least on an annual or “ongoing” basis, mostly using internal council resources. A further four (4) councils indicated that their plan was currently under revision. Council amalgamations in Queensland in 2008 prompted the review of some plans, although in some cases, it appeared that separate plans for the original entities were being maintained in the interim.

As part of disaster management planning, the SDMP advocates the establishment of business continuity and operational plans by agencies including local government and LDMGs. In this context, business continuity plans detail how local government would provide their services during a disaster, while operational plans provide specific details of tasks, timing, roles and responsibilities in disaster response. The online questionnaire asked councils whether they had internal plans/ arrangements to support normal council operations during a disaster as well as providing support for council’s roles and responsibilities under the local DM plan. Thirty (30) councils stated that they had such plans/arrangements, while eighteen (18) said that they did not at the moment. In a follow-up open-ended item, twenty-three (23) councils specifically referred to either having or developing a business continuity plan. Only four (4) councils reported that this type of planning was yet to be addressed at all, while others held less formal arrangements that they considered to be effective. In commenting further, several councils raised the difficulties in developing such plans given staffing and expertise constraints, and the complexities introduced by recent council amalgamations such as having to assimilate officers and processes, and manage larger areas with new risk profiles.

DM Incorporation Across Council Corporate Planning and Landuse Planning

From a more general perspective, the online survey asked participants to indicate the degree to which DM requirements were incorporated into council plans (Tables 1 and 2). Responses reflect a high proportion of at least satisfactory incorporation of DM into council corporate and operational plans, and into annual budget processes (forty-three (43), forty-two (42) and thirty-eight (38) councils out of forty-eight (48) responding councils respectively). Relatively low uptake in community/local plans was noted (twenty (20) of forty-eight (48) respondents).

To assist local governments to integrate a DM perspective across council corporate planning processes, the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) published a workbook backed up by an extension program (LGAQ, 2008). Online questionnaire results reflected only a small uptake of this resource, even though comments suggested a positive view of its usefulness.

The incorporation of DM requirements into landuse planning and master plans was moderate (thirty-two (32) and twenty-three (23) councils from forty-eight (48) respondents reporting at least satisfactory incorporation). The situation was clarified by specific questioning that yielded data showing a high uptake of DM-related planning controls including restrictions on building in hazardous areas and applying landuse zoning appropriate to hazard risk (forty (40) and forty-one (41) councils of 45/44 responding) (Table 2). This is consistent with the adoption of planning guidelines required by State Planning Policy 1/03 (SPP 1/03) and Queensland coastal management plans. Other controls including the strategic location of critical infrastructure, creation of buffer zones (e.g. for bushfire), and adaptation/ enforcement of building design codes were supported by smaller council majorities. Least supported were policies for acquiring (buying

back) high risk properties, with thirty-eight (38) of forty-five (45) responding councils stating that they had no policy. A probable need for such a policy was highlighted by events of the recent Queensland “summer of disasters”, and in considering possible changes to hazard risks under climate change.

Focus group discussions regarding the integration of DM with landuse planning reinforced the view that councils were generally diligent in applying SPP1/03 and relevant coastal policy. It was apparent, however, that DM and landuse planning functions are clearly separated entities within councils. Evidence of routine, systematic collaboration between planning and DM groups was illusive, though such collaboration was viewed as desirable by most focus groups. Cross-council involvement in regional risk studies was seen as one mechanism by which greater interaction could be facilitated.

Table 1: How Well are DM (Disaster Management) Requirements Incorporated into the Following? (Online Questionnaire)

	Very well incorporated	Satisfactorily incorporated	Limited incorporation	Very limited/not specifically acknowledged	Total # responding councils
Council Corporate Plan	13*	30	2	3	48
Community/ Local Plan	8	12	12	16	48
Council Operational Plan	12	30	2	4	48
Planning Scheme (landuse planning)	8	24	10	6	48
Master Plans	3	20	9	12	44
Annual Budget Process	7	31	5	5	48

* number of responding councils

Table 2: What Types of Land Use Planning Controls are in Place in your Council to Reduce Community Vulnerability to Hazards? (Online Questionnaire)

Controls	Yes	No	Total # responding councils
Buffer zones (e.g. for bushfires)	34*	11	45
Restrictions on building in hazardous areas	40	5	45
Landuse zoning appropriate to hazards risk (e.g. sportsfields on floodplains)	41	3	44
Raising floor levels of buildings and/or rezoning following a significant event	33	12	45
Strategic location of critical infrastructure (e.g. hospitals, schools, emergency services, evacuation routes)	31	14	45
Adaption/ enforcement of building design codes for other hazards (e.g. wind, slope, fire)	34	11	45

Buy-back/acquisition policy for high risk properties	7	38	45
--	---	----	----

* number of responding councils

“Real World” Execution of State DM Arrangements – Group/Agency Roles

The DM Act, the SDMP (2008, 2011) and the Disaster Management Strategic Policy Framework (2005, 2010) assign specific roles and modes of interaction between the groups (e.g. state, district and local disaster management groups) and the coordination positions they define as Queensland’s hierarchical DM arrangements. At the focus groups, the efficacy of this system, as it is applied in the “real world”, attracted detailed discussion and a variety of issues were raised. The basis of these was often perceived inconsistencies, uncertainties and overlap in the adoption and execution of ascribed roles confounded by confusing “webs of reporting”. (Childs et al 2010).

Some focus groups referred to “short circuiting” of processes. There was a perception expressed that in an emergency, state authorities (e.g. Emergency Management Queensland, EMQ) “arrive” in regional jurisdictions and “take over” the situation management – leaving local groups and stakeholders (with local plans, resources and knowledge) feeling sidelined. They asserted that the Queensland DM system prioritises local management, even when intervention is requested through district, then state levels. An example was raised wherein post-disaster materials, not requested by the LDMG and not needed, were sent by the state authorities without consultation, creating extra burden to local recovery efforts. In another example, state emergency management facilities were inappropriately located in a hazard zone, against the advice of the local council.

The commenting focus groups suggested that situations such as these can arise because state-level agencies do not always understand or appreciate the significant DM and planning capacities of some of the larger regional councils. Councils emphasised a general need to recognise and action the LDMG and its roles as the cornerstone of DM (as is established by the Act and Plan), systematically and consistently, together with local government.

Specifically mentioned by several focus groups in the present context were so-called regional Emergency Management Queensland (EMQ) Officers (representatives of EMQ deployed to regional areas) and the Queensland State Emergency Service (SES). The role of regional EMQ officers was claimed to be uncertain by some focus group participants, some of whom suggested that roles of providing technical assistance to local groups and advocacy to state levels were not being enacted. The positioning of the SES was also perceived by some as problematical in that SES volunteers, usually locals, were sometimes deployed to localities away from their affected home regions during widespread disasters. This resulted in feelings that locally fostered and funded capacity had been removed at the whim of state authorities.

Policy and Guideline Development and Adoption

Again, focus group discussions provided rich data on specific problems of state policy adoption by councils and LDMGs. In commenting on Queensland’s overall DM system, several councils felt that top-down, operationally-biased processes and cultures prevailed, contrary to the intentions of the comprehensive, all-agencies policy. It was claimed that this discouraged the development of mitigation strategies not directly related to response or recovery operations.

At greater resolution, several focus groups reported dissatisfaction with the processes of State DM policy guideline development and dissemination. A prominent observation was that state-sourced guidelines were sometimes not applicable to local contexts – not “fit for purpose” in their application – or contrasted with local policy adoption efforts already underway. One example cited concerned cartographic design for storm-tide/inundation mapping. A number of coastal councils reportedly had begun to develop mapping protocols when state guidelines required them to adopt another protocol that they considered significantly more difficult for the public to interpret. Focus groups expressed a strong desire for enhanced and timely opportunities to review and contribute to state policy and guidelines during the development stage to alleviate such problems. Additionally, implementation times of guidelines or the establishment of requested sub-plans, and the number of these, were often seen as inappropriate to existing council budget cycles, resourcing, skills and therefore lead times needed for compliance. Even larger councils commented that it may take two years or longer to fully implement a guideline – rather than months, which reportedly has been previously requested from state-level.

Table 3: With Regard to your Council's Current Situation, Please Comment on the Following Areas. (Online Questionnaire)

DM Adoption Factors	Needs substantial improvement	Needs some improvement	Is satisfactory	Total # councils responding
Policy				
Council support for DM	1*	18	29	48
Integration of hazard and disaster management across the range of Council functions (where desirable)	6	23	18	47
Clarity of State government policies/guidelines and their application (e.g. SPP103)	9	19	19	47
Coordination				
Availability of relevant local information/data (including spatial data)	4	29	14	47
Availability of relevant local information/data from external sources (e.g. State and federal agencies)	8	23	16	47
Integration of Local, State and Federal DM approaches	11	20	16	47
Communication / engagement with EMQ/ DES	9	13	25	47
Resources				
Availability of skilled personnel (i.e. in planning/ risk management/ analysis)	7	30	10	47
Staffing allocation to DM planning/ exercises	9	23	15	47
Time allocation for DM planning/ exercises	10	23	14	47
Funding allocation for DM planning/ exercises	13	22	12	47
Other resourcing for DM planning (equipment, GIS, training, surveying etc.)	10	26	11	47
Access to external funding beyond usual Council revenue streams for DM activities	23	18	6	47
Community Support for DM				
Local political will & consistency in supporting DM	5	11	31	47
Support for regional DM partnerships & planning consistency	5	18	23	46
Local community will in supporting	7	25	15	47

DM				
Community engagement	9	27	11	47

* number of responding councils

Summarising the Status of DM in Councils

In responding to a general online questionnaire item, very few councils (three (3)) stated that their overall circumstances regarding DM had deteriorated over the previous three years. The online questionnaire then asked participants to comment on the present status of their council across a range of factors related to DM policy adoption and operationalisation (Table 3). These data provide some clarification of issues raised earlier.

Though not by overwhelmingly majorities, councils were most satisfied with local community and council support for DM. Engagement with state agencies (e.g. EMQ) was also reasonably satisfactory, though just a little less than half of responding councils sought improvement. Most needing substantial improvement were factors relating to DM funding – notably access to external funding. The availability of local data, DM-related resources/tools and skilled personnel to effect analyses featured prominently as factors needing either substantial and some improvement. These results are generally consistent with previous survey research and other comments made here online and in focus groups.

The overall sense of the researchers is that across most factors for most councils, “substantial improvement” is not required. Results are, however, wide-ranging and are highly dependent on the individual council contexts – for example size, staffing, resourcing, stakeholder motivation and so on. The researchers noted that for many councils, the DM coordinator role was filled by an officer with additional responsibilities in engineering, administration etc. – that is, the DM role was effectively a part-time responsibility. The location of the DM function within each council also varied widely, ranging from engineering sections through to administration, corporate services and the roads and infrastructure sections.

2. Community Engagement

In line with the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, first extended in 2008, the SDMP (2008, 2011) strongly endorses the concept of a prepared (resilient) community, characterised by proactive planning and self-reliance of the community and individuals therein. In the latter context particularly, local government is nominated as having a prime responsibility for community safety, and therefore the promotion of community resilience to the public.

Support and Promotion of a “Prepared Community”

From the online questionnaire, forty-six (46) of forty-eight (48) responding councils moderately, strongly or very strongly supported the proposition that the general public should take greater personal responsibility for managing their own hazard risks, and building resilience. Many commented both online and in focus groups on a desire for able members of the public to achieve a capacity for “3-day self-sufficiency” following a disaster. This, however, was very much yet to be realised, according to several focus groups, who consistently expressed their perception that the public, particularly in urban localities, maintained high expectations that local government and emergency services would manage risks on their behalf and be able to provide rapid assistance and restoration of services in a disaster. One council noted that this view may be reinforced by messages from state-level agencies themselves, who have promoted their role as “there to help” after a disaster.

Both in focus groups and online, a number of councils reflected on their perception of public apathy (or at least disengagement) towards DM matters. The recent “summer of disasters” is likely to have changed this situation, but the longevity of greater public cognisance, as has been historically illustrated, is questionable.

The researchers’ impression of the online and focus group data is that most local governments at least acknowledge their responsibility to educate the public on the hazards and risks that they face, and appropriate responses. One-third of councils (of forty-eight (48); online survey), however, stated that they had not attempted to assess public awareness of hazards and/or risk and/ or preparedness for disaster events. Eleven (11) councils (of forty-four (44) responding) indicated that they had no strategy for engaging the community to promote self-sufficiency, and three (3) councils had no strategy to improve public awareness of hazards/risks/DM. Nevertheless, a majority were attempting to engage the public in developing their hazard/ risk awareness and coping capacities, most commonly through the production and/or

dissemination of written pamphlets, booklets, web-based information and media advertisements. Less common was more interactive public engagement such as school visits and public meetings (seventeen (17) council responses in the context of improving awareness) (Table 4). Survey comments reflect that time and resourcing pressures are key deterrents to progressing initiatives. In focus groups, substantive state and national education resources and programs were acknowledged as useful, but some focus groups asserted that they often did not reach target audiences, were not tailored to local circumstances, or “doubled up” on locally generated items. A desire for greater support and local interaction in the design, production and dissemination of materials was expressed. More coordinated state-level programs, materials and marketing backed by timely, locally-adapted-and-targeted campaigns was frequently proposed as a superior model to the present situation.

One council raised the importance of risk communication strategies in promoting hazard awareness and risk management to the public and organisations. It was claimed that at the time of the research, this area was a “policy void”. This was illustrated to an extent by the previously outlined focus group discussions that eluded to the problems arising from inconsistent cartographic protocols between the state and some coastal local councils in communicating storm tide inundation risk.

Table 4: How is Your Council Attempting to Improve Public Awareness of Hazards and/or risk and DM (Preparedness, Preparedness, Response and Recovery) in your Local Community? (Online questionnaire)

Comment Category	Number of Comments*
Pamphlets/ mail/ booklets	17
Media/ warnings (unspecified)	14
Web	12
Meetings/ workshops (direct engagement)	8
Other direct engagement (inclusion in DM meetings etc.)	6
“Campaigns”	6
Electronic Media (incl. talkback)	4
DM plan/ council information/ libraries	4
Collaborations (between councils & organisations)/ DM planning	4
Not/ None	3
Specific council projects	3
School-based education	3
Email	1
“Kits”	1
Rates Notices	1
Other	3
	Total comments classified = 90 Total Councils responding = 47

* number of comments, but with no doubling up within a council

Availability of Risk Information to the Public

While councils generally supported promoting greater public awareness and self-reliance, the researchers noted that the specific risk information relevant to the public in this context is not always readily available to them (Table 5). Although the public were usually able to access general descriptions of hazards in their area, more detailed information on specific risk levels/ likelihoods in their locality were frequently only available on request to councils (seventeen (17) councils), or not made available from councils at all (seventeen (17) councils). Nine (9) councils suggested that they themselves did not have this type of information. The lack of quality of the information held by councils was often cited as a deterrent to public release. More than one-third of responding councils claimed not to have risk information at the individual property-level with cost/ resource constraints cited by a few as an explanation.

Table 5: What Hazard and/or Risk Information is Held by and/or Available to Your Council? Within this, what is Available to the General Public?

	Availability to Council				Availability to the General Public		
	Not accessible/ available	Accessible to Council	Held by Council	Owned by Council	No	Yes, on request	Yes, public
Descriptions (i.e.) text of local hazards and/or risks	1*	6	11	27	3	23	20
Maps of hazard incidence/ events (in the past)	9	2	11	20	13	24	5
More detailed maps showing risk levels and likelihoods of hazards	9	7	7	19	17	17	9
Risk/ likelihood at individual property level	18	5	7	12	21	16	5

* number of responding councils

Public Engagement with the DM Planning Process

In general, online questionnaire results show that the public has a limited involvement with development of local DM plans, and a small majority of responding local councils stated that they had no strategies to increase community engagement in the DM planning process. Where it occurs, public participation was most commonly effected through public representation on committees/ working parties (nineteen (19) councils), public comment/ submissions on drafts (fourteen (14) councils) and through public meetings (eight (8)

councils). At the other extreme, five (5) councils asserted in comments that public consultation was not needed.

Barriers to Increasing Community Engagement

In an open-ended format, online survey participants were asked to comment on the problems they perceived in achieving increased community engagement in DM planning. As suggested previously, perceived public apathy was identified – in this question amounting to one-third of all comments made, which was greatest proportion of all responses. Other relatively frequent comments could be categorised under: staffing, resourcing and financial constraints; and the character of local population geography. Comments concerning the latter raised issues of in-migration rates from other areas (notably to coastal local government areas) and that new residents lacked hazard/risk understanding in their new environment. Difficulties in accessing remote or dispersed populations in larger, regional local government areas was also pointed out, particularly given local staff/resource constraints.

Broader Engagement – Regional DM Communities

Queensland DM policy is generally supportive of collaborations across local government borders (e.g. DM Act 2003, s31) but does not prescribe specific requirements or mechanisms. Just prior to this research, partnerships between some Queensland local governments were “forced” as a result of council amalgamations in 2008. Twenty-eight (28) councils participating in the online survey were amalgamated councils. In the context of DM, several saw advantages of amalgamation in bringing together more resources and expertise, but at the expenses of having responsibility for a larger area, and the effort required to combine DM approaches, plans and integration across council business. Some larger, “DM savvy” councils claimed further disadvantage in having to deploy use extra time and resources to bring lesser councils, with whom they had been amalgamated, “up to speed” in DM.

Regarding regular inter-council collaborations, the survey comments revealed that there was wide support for councils developing regional partnerships for DM. Several regional council alliances had already formed, most commonly featuring staff, data and expertise sharing – though such arrangements were still in the minority overall. Focus group discussions reinforced support for the development of regional partnerships with other councils and described the organic growth of some of the existing alliances. Partnerships were usually initiated relatively informally through opportunism and personal contact at the council level, as councils sought out others for their experience, expertise, information and training. Memoranda of understanding were frequently, but not always, established to formalise arrangements. Some larger councils were enthusiastic in adopting DM mentoring and training roles for others. This mode of partnership development, initiated and maintained at the local level, was strongly viewed as preferential to a state-run administrative framework. Rather, the state could facilitate opportunities for councils to develop partnerships themselves (e.g. fund and organise meetings, forums etc.).

DISCUSSION

The results of this research broadly support those of earlier Australian survey-based research (SMEC and IID, 2006; Elsworth and Anthony-Harvey-Beavis, 2007) and the wider literature review of Kusumasari et al. (2010). In summary, local governments in Queensland are generally taking their responsibilities for DM seriously and have local support in doing so, but can struggle to meet policy/guideline adoption requirements and integrate DM across council functions as a result of funding, resource, time and expertise constraints. The high resolution of information gained in this research via the detailed online survey and focus groups suggested that while council stakeholders generally support the concepts of the Queensland DM system, it is the “real world” deviation from set policies and arrangements within a perceived “top down”, operationally-biased state culture that can cause problems for them.

At the time of the survey work, several councils were concerned at perceived public apathy towards DM, and hence the public’s continuing reliance on governments and emergency services to manage risks on their behalf, and assist them rapidly in a disaster. The online questionnaire asked participants in an open-ended format to nominate the support they needed to address issues of building community resilience and self-reliance. Many identified greater state-level support as desirable – particularly in the areas of assisting local government to access funding for staffing and resources; and support and cooperation for education and marketing/ awareness-raising programs.

In 2009, the Queensland government reviewed its disaster management legislation (O’Sullivan and The Consultancy Bureau, 2009). The review came to several conclusions and recommendations consistent with the findings in this research including: the competence of most local groups, provided they were supported;

and the need to clarify some individual roles and protocols for coordination and consultation between disaster groups, including local groups and the state. Also raised were the arrangements involving the SES, roles of Emergency Management Queensland in local DM groups and supporting capacity building and greater attention by the state in guiding DM stakeholders in “how to” achieve DM policy/guideline requirements. Consequent changes to the DM Act, the Queensland SDMP and hence the Queensland Disaster Management Arrangements came into effect during 2010/2011.

While the review of legislation addressed matters of Queensland’s disaster management arrangements, particularly roles, responsibilities and coordination within the DM system, the present research also yielded practical issues regarding community engagement, DM integration across local government functions, local government data, resource and timing issues for policy/ guideline adoption, and partnership building. The following points emerge from this research

- In line with contemporary policy based on building community resilience, local councils need assistance (i.e. from state level) through coordinated, locally contextualised programs to: more directly engage the public in hazard awareness, and risk and disaster management; modify public expectations of emergency/government agencies’ roles and capacities; and hence promote greater public self-reliance – i.e. 3 day public self-sufficiency after a disaster. In several cases, however, the lack of ready public (and even council) accessibility to quality, high resolution risk data is seen as problematical in this pursuit.
- Councils should seek to further integrate DM across all council planning and functions, and particularly landuse planning. This is beyond simple adherence to state planning policy, and refers to routine, systematic engagement between DM and landuse planning groups within councils to ensure that landuse change/development does not create unnecessary additional burdens for DM.
- Partnerships and regional DM alliances between local councils should be facilitated, but allowed to develop at the “grass roots” level. Such partnerships may go some way in addressing issues of staff, resource, risk data and expertise constraints in some councils, and foster DM consistency across regions and the state.
- In the broad area of resourcing for DM, local councils should be mentored to take more advantage of additional/ external funding opportunities and be supported with technical, data acquisition and expert assistance in risk assessment and DM plan development, possibly from the regional level of EMQ.
- In line with O’Sullivan and The Consultancy Bureau (2009) the roles, responsibilities, coordination and protocols of engagement between the levels of the Queensland DM system and stakeholders therein should be critically monitored and policy/ guidelines consistently followed. Local government/LDMG DM roles, capacities and limitations should be understood and respected. Councils should maintain at least a permanent, full-time DM coordinator position.

CONCLUSION

In Queensland, local governments and local disaster management groups bear significant responsibilities for disaster management, comprising roles across prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Though faced with staffing, resourcing, data and expertise constraints, this research found that the majority of local governments support their disaster management functions and are making progress in adopting relevant DM policy and guidelines. In line with contemporary policy, progressive councils are now seeking to create resilient, prepared communities by fostering public self-reliance, integrating DM across all council functions including landuse planning, and developing regional partnerships. They generally support Queensland’s DM system, but desire a consistent, coordinated and consultative application the state’s disaster management arrangements.

REFERENCES

- Childs IRW, Hastings, PA, Bajracharyo, B and Godber, A 2010, Policy into practice: adoption of hazard mitigation measures by local government in Queensland, Institute for Sustainable Resources, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. Available online at: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/42060/> (accessed 14-07-11).
- COAG (Council of Australian Governments) 2009, National disaster resilience statement, Publicly released: 7 December 2009. Available online at: http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2011-02-13/docs/national_strategy_disaster_resilience.pdf (accessed 14-07-11).
- Disaster Management Strategic Policy Framework 2005 and 2010, State Disaster Management Group (Qld).
- Elsworth, G and Anthony-Harvey-Beavis, K 2007, National local government emergency management survey, Australian Local Government Association and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Final Report.
- EMA (Emergency Management Australia) 2004, Emergency management in Australia: concepts and principles, Australian Emergency Manual Series – Manual 1. Available at: <http://www.ema.gov.au/www/emaweb/emaweb.nsf/Page/Publications> (accessed 14-07-11).
- Kusumasari B, Quamrul Alam and Kamal Siddiqui 2010, Resource capability for local government in managing disaster, *Disaster Prevention and Management*, vol. 19 no. 4, pp. 438-451.
- LGAQ (Local Government Association of Queensland) 2008, Incorporating disaster management into local government corporate planning practices, a practical guide for corporate planners, LGAQ.
- Operational Planning Guidelines for Local Disaster Management Groups 2006, Department of Emergency Services (Qld).
- O'Sullivan, J and The Consultancy Bureau 2009, Report on a review of disaster management legislation and policy in Queensland. 09-051 Report Final.
- Queensland Disaster Management Act 2003 (Qld).
- Queensland State Disaster Management Plan 2008 and 2010, State Disaster Management Group. (Qld).
- SMEC (Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation) and IID (Institute for International Development) 2006, Local government land use planning and risk mitigation. National Research Paper Prepared for the Australian Local Government Association.
- The Queensland Disaster Management Planning Guidelines for Local Government 2003, Department of Emergency Services (Qld).
- The State Planning Policy 1/03 Mitigating the Adverse Impacts of Flood, Bushfire and Landslide (Qld).