Council Ready: respectful engagement, the starting point for cultural change

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Conversations about becoming future-ready often emphasise what we need to do, overlooking the importance of how we do it.

Stage One of the Council Ready program has demonstrated that respectful and inclusive engagement generates new insights, builds confidence and strengthens connections; all of which are foundational to drive change and achieve effective organisational development.

Council Ready is a three-year program that aims to strengthen the emergency management capacity of South Australia's local government sector by providing tailored assistance based on councils' self-identified needs.

The program's first stage involved engagement with all 68 councils. Applying a strengths-based approach, the program engaged with more than 550 council employees, actively including those who contribute to emergency management through everyday council business (e.g. asset management, community development, public health) as well as more traditional emergency management stakeholders (e.g. risk managers, field services).

Workshops were facilitated using appreciative inquiry approaches, framing questions positively and focusing on strengths, with the dual aims of growing participant understanding and generating insights to inform the stage two program design. Workshops were structured around the topics of:

- organisational culture
- disaster risk reduction
- readiness to respond
- recovery
- support required from the program.

A key finding was the breadth of councils' contributions to emergency management. Coding of unprompted workshop data identified 188 discrete emergency prevention, preparedness, response and recovery activities that councils undertake, which were then grouped into 47 themes. These responses helped to understand the levels of consistency across the local government sector. For example, 53 councils (78 per cent) identified stormwater management related activities as making a contribution to emergency prevention, while only 7 councils (10 per cent) identified heat mitigation.

Through the workshops, many people were surprised at how much of their everyday work (e.g. in coastal management, climate change adaptation, public health, community development and stormwater management) contributes to emergency management. It also highlighted the outstanding commitment of experienced and dedicated staff when emergencies occur and the community-centric approaches that characterise efforts of councils in recovery.

The broad participation also enabled councils to become better connected across business units and the strategic-operational divide. This was evident in positive feedback, with 92 per cent of participants identifying that being involved in the workshop was relevant to their particular role in council.

The workshops were followed with a survey, completed by 292 people that captured levels of agreement with 13 statements about emergency management, culture, planning, operations as well as inviting feedback about the assistance councils want from the program. Additionally, over 150 documents were reviewed to identify potentially replicable good practice, understand consistency between workshop findings and documentation as well as to explore connections between strategic and emergency management plans.

Councils are now turning engagement into action. A team of project facilitators is working with each council to develop a plan of locally relevant actions to strengthen their emergency management maturity. This work will be informed by an emergency management maturity model that helps councils identify a desired progression in a way that is relevant to their organisational context and risk profile.

The long-term outcomes sought from this work is a local government sector that is better able to avoid the new risks, reduce and manage existing risks and respond and recover more effectively. Doing so will contribute to the disaster resilience of communities and strengthen the relevance of local government to the communities they serve.