



BRIEFING PAPER

HORNSBY EARTHWISE – TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE SUSTAINABILITY

PROJECT SUMMARY

Council has a strong history of leading its community by example to progress sustainability. To this end Council developed Hornsby earthwise, Council's program for corporate and community sustainability initiatives. Council's Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework is one of these initiatives. Since its introduction in early 2005 Council has incorporated TBL into Council's Management Plan, developed a TBL Checklist for all Council Business Papers and has trained all senior staff on TBL principles.

Evaluation by postdoctoral research staff at UWS has determined that this TBL framework that has been implemented is leading and innovative, and that the progress to date has been successful and significant.

OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the project was to integrate Triple Bottom Line (TBL) into the decision making processes across Council to ensure consideration is given to social, environmental, and economic factors equally. More specifically the objectives were:

- To provide a framework for the effective and efficient roll out of TBL throughout all of Council's planning, operational and reporting processes.
- To improve decision making within Council and the quality of life within the Shire by ensuring sustainability principles are considered as part of Council's processes.

RATIONALE

TBL was identified by the Councillors as a key initiative for Council to progress as part of its Management Plan. As TBL is applied through two integrated 'streams' it was decided that Council would review both its decision making and the reporting processes.

Work undertaken to date, in particular the TBL Checklist and the progression towards Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) alignment is considered leading and innovative, placing Council in a position as a potential national and international leader of public sector sustainability reporting.

The implementation of TBL within Council was driven by an overarching TBL Policy framework developed by an internal TBL Working Group. The objectives in the TBL Policy were determined through a management review of the gaps in Council's existing decision-making and reporting processes, and an analysis of the risk areas that could significantly affect sustainability outcomes.

IMPLEMENTATION

TBL was highlighted as a key initiative in Council's Management Plan for implementation across Council. The target audience of the TBL project was all Council staff, in particular senior management and Councillors.

In February 2005 a TBL Working Group, made up of voluntary representatives from each Division across Council, was established to progress TBL. Since its establishment the Group has progressed:

- The incorporation of TBL into Council's Management Plan.
- The development of a TBL Checklist for all Council Business Papers.
- Trained all senior staff on TBL principles.

There were no direct costs to Council associated with the introduction of TBL, as all training and resources were absorbed by existing budgets. The only direct cost that was associated with the roll-out of TBL was funding of the TBL evaluation report. Council engaged the UWS's research centre - Australian Expert Group in Industry Studies to prepare the TBL evaluation report that involved:

- Development of a method of evaluating TBL processes in local government.
- Providing policy advice and tools to Council in progressing the TBL agenda.
- Contributing to the theory and practice of sustainable development policy analysis.
- Developing a partnership with Council in providing independent sustainability research.

As part of Council's Management Plan, Council has again identified TBL as a key initiative, providing TBL explanations for each of Council's six Strategic Themes within the Plan. These are highlighted through the use of TBL symbols and complimented through the use of sustainability indicators aligned to the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI).

ACHIEVEMENTS

Council embarked on the development of a TBL decision making tool (the 'TBL Checklist') that incorporates TBL considerations into its Council reporting system. This TBL Checklist has been developed and implemented over a 12 month period, with all staff and Councillors involved in the process trained in TBL.

This TBL implementation has been comprehensively evaluated by postdoctoral research staff at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) through the observation of staff workshops, focus groups and analysis of TBL summaries over a 12 month period.

The methodology undertaken by UWS as part of the evaluation consisted of two phases, the TBL Checklist evaluation and the evaluation of indicator use in Council reports. The methodology was as follows:

- A literature review of current practice in sustainability impact assessment & TBL decision making.
- Direct observation and analysis of council focus groups, training sessions, and the executive committee.
- Analysis of completed TBL checklists.
- Review of existing management plan indicators and benchmarking against TBL best practice.
- Identification of the key issues and recommendations for TBL decision making.
- Identification of key issues and recommendations for TBL indicators.

From this evaluation UWS determined that the TBL decision making framework that Council has developed is leading and innovative, and that the progress to date has been successful and significant. The development of reporting is the other side of TBL. The evaluation undertaken by UWS identifies that Council has already developed a leading reporting culture with significant expertise and investment in sustainability indicators. To further enhance this existing reporting process Council is now developing TBL measures that assess the impacts of the organisation itself rather than just external conditions. Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the leading global approach for TBL sustainability reporting is being used to identify the steps Council can take to achieve this. Being part of the Centre for Public Agency Reporting's GRI Alliance in 2007 places Council in a position to become a national leader of public sector sustainability reporting.

CHALLENGES

UWS's TBL evaluation report included five detailed recommendations derived from the evaluation process to provide Council with a practical and achievable approach to the long term implementation of TBL within Council. These recommendations relate to:

- Structure and development of the TBL Checklist.
- Training and organisational change.
- Resources and support.
- Monitoring, review and evaluation.
- Policy reform and further initiatives.

To address these areas the TBL framework will continually be refined by the TBL Working Group and the necessary changes implemented through Council over time using a learning approach. Over the next 12 months the TBL Working Group will also explore opportunities for rolling-out TBL into other decision-making processes within Council, such as tendering, capital works programs and the employment of staff.

SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK

A TBL Policy has been endorsed by Council to integrate TBL sustainability principles into the decision making processes across Council to ensure consideration is given to social, environmental, and economic factors equally. The TBL principles adopted by Council include:

- Fairness and equity between and within generations.
- Long-term planning for future generations.
- Efficiency – more with less, less waste.
- Interdependence – economy, society, environment.
- Caution – avoid risk of serious or irreversible damage.
- Maintenance of assets, natural and built.
- Value – recognition of value of the common goods.
- Net benefit – genuine progress, not just financial gain.
- Vision – hope for the future.

From the TBL Policy a TBL sustainability framework has been incorporated within Council's Management Plan whereby a social, environmental and economic bottom line explanation is outlined for each of the six Strategic Themes. This is highlighted by the use of sustainability symbols throughout the Plan that are complimented with sustainability indicators to measure progress towards achieving the TBL principles.

Council is also aligning with the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). The GRI is an independent non-profit organisation that has developed globally applicable sustainability reporting guidelines and indicators for voluntary use by organisations. These GRI guidelines and indicators will assist Council in TBL reporting and improving operational practices for sustainability.

The implementation of all of these TBL initiatives is being facilitated by the TBL Working Group made up of representatives across all of Council's Divisions. This Group is also responsible for the ongoing management, evaluation and reporting to ensure that TBL principles are met and maintained across Council.