



How to overcome common barriers and make the most of key drivers to sustainability

About this guide

This guide draws upon research completed in 2009 for the Urban Sustainability Support Alliance by the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF), University of Technology, Sydney, into the [Barriers and Drivers to Sustainability in Local Government](#).

This guide has been developed to assist council sustainability practitioners to identify key drivers and common barriers often experienced when working towards sustainability.

Why develop a guide?

The guide adds value to the research by providing practical examples of strategies councils have used to overcome barriers and make the most of key drivers to sustainability. The examples provided have come directly from sustainability practitioners who have shared their initiatives with the USSA.

The barriers and drivers are listed broadly in the order of significance identified in the research.

Complementary barriers and drivers are grouped together to assist you to see the inter-relationships between barriers and drivers.

More information:

If you have additional examples to add to this guide or if you require any assistance in taking any of the following actions please contact the USSA on (02) 9242 4000 or email ussa@lgsa.org.au

Electronic copies of the research report and this guide are available from the USSA website: www.lgsa.org.au/ussa look under "research".





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Commonly identified Barriers and Drivers to Sustainability:

Barrier = ☹️





Driver = 😊

Common Barrier or Driver	What the interviews tells us	How can I overcome this barrier? or How can I make the most from this driver?
☹️ Lack of Organisational Support	<p>A lack of leadership or the failure of leadership to inspire others in the organisation.</p> <p>Despite a good reputation, the sustainability agenda often relies on individuals and occurs only in pockets across councils.</p>	<p>Use examples of what other councils have done. Case studies can be used as a business case for sustainability.</p> <p>External experts or facilitators can be used to help raise awareness of sustainability internally.</p> <p>When communicating to senior management on sustainability issues do it in a meaningful and memorable way. Try using statistics and graphs.</p> <p>Get you sustainability initiatives recognised externally by submitting awards applications.</p>
😊 General manager and senior management support	<p>The level of personal commitment, knowledge and leadership provided by senior management, in particular the General Manager of the council.</p>	<p>Recognise staff achievements in the area of sustainability. The intranet and staff newsletters are possible tools.</p> <p>Reward staff achievements in the area of sustainability eg Staff Awards Program</p> <p>Ask your GM to endorse your work by inviting them to speak at relevant meetings and training sessions.</p>
😊 Mayor and councillor leadership	<p>Strong leadership from the elected council.</p> <p>Simply having one or two new councillors who are open to, and positive about, sustainability can be a key driver.</p>	<p>Harness councillor support by inviting them to pilot and champion councils sustainability initiatives.</p> <p>Use your mayor as a speaker for council events.</p> <p>Encourage councillors to become representatives on sustainability committees.</p>

Common Barrier or Driver	What the interviews tells us	How can I overcome this barrier? or How can I make the most from this driver?
 Gap between Theory & Practice	<p>A mismatch between what is espoused and what is practiced.</p> <p>Policies not being carried through to implementation.</p>	<p>Integrate sustainability into councils management plans, job descriptions and induction training.</p> <p>Build momentum by doing the little things right. It is better to excel in a few targeted areas rather than have average performance across a wide range of areas.</p>
 Sympathetic organisational structure	<p>The level of openness of staff to change can effect how sympathetic they are to the sustainability agenda.</p> <p>A council motivated to come up with new and improved ways of doing things.</p> <p>A history of strong leadership and a policy of recruiting people with these values and skills can contribute to a sympathetic organisational culture.</p>	<p>Make the most of a positive organisational culture by involving staff from across the organisation in sustainability planning and actions.</p> <p>Create opportunities for staff to exchange ideas about sustainability. Start an internal sustainability committee or host lunch time sustainability discussions.</p>
 Lack of staff capacity and high staff turn over	<p>Staff with responsibilities for engaging their organisation or community in sustainability, feel the pressures of their wide ranging responsibilities and the types of skills required of them.</p> <p>There is a need for increasing skills of staff more generally.</p> <p>High staff turnover and loss of corporate knowledge.</p>	<p>Improve staff capacity to work on sustainability issues by developing an internal sustainability committee made up of staff from different divisions.</p> <p>Support professional development opportunities around sustainability.</p> <p>Consider implementing a mentoring program to give staff additional support.</p>
 Dedicated sustainability staff	<p>Having a sustainability position or a sustainability team was identified as a major enabler.</p> <p>However regardless of a person's job title or position within council, staff who are highly motivated and posses skills in motivating others are extremely important.</p>	<p>Recognise dedicated staff by offering incentives such as staff bonuses and awards.</p> <p>Encourage sustainability staff to speak at conferences.</p>

Supporting councils in their journey towards sustainability

Common Barrier or Driver	What the interviews tells us	How can I overcome this barrier? or How can I make the most from this driver?
☹ Competing priorities	A lower priority for environmental or social equity issues was often a reflection of prevailing community attitudes, or lobbying by particular interest groups.	Host sustainability workshops to raise community awareness and build community support. Use community expectations and concerns to highlight the importance of sustainability issues.
😊 Media coverage of global and local issues	Increased media coverage of sustainability issues can increase the level of understanding and support for issues such as climate change and other environmental issues.	Use an interesting angle and eye catching pictures. Link local sustainability programs and events to current and dominant issues in the media.
😊 Active and engaged community	Active communities can have a major influence on the policies and priorities of the elected council. For example the influence of letters advocating action on particular issues.	Involve community champions in workshops; e.g. to give a short presentation on a topic of their interest. Popular social media tools such as Facebook and YouTube can be used to harness community support.
☹ Inadequate systems for managing information	For many councils, data management and IT systems present real challenges. The problems of complex and incompatible systems, or lack of automation, can add to the time involved in planning, coordination and reporting.	Use internal financial management systems to track sustainable procurement. Investigate the use of external companies to monitor your water and energy consumption.
😊 Effective management systems	Internal management systems that brake down silos and ensure easy access to information can help achieve sustainability outcomes.	If you are using good systems for sustainability outcomes promote their use both internally and externally.

Common Barrier or Driver	What the interviews tells us	How can I overcome this barrier? or How can I make the most from this driver?
 Lack of internal and external funding	<p>A lack of resources can limit the implementation of actions in sustainability plans.</p> <p>The current economic climate is putting a strain on council budgets, with implications for staffing.</p>	<p>Set up a revolving energy fund. The money that is saved from reduced energy consumption is reinvested in sustainability programs.</p> <p>Use a grant database to track upcoming grants and avoid missed opportunities.</p> <p>Partner with other councils or organisations to develop regional grant applications.</p> <p>Apply for an environment/sustainability levy.</p> <p>Identify and implement low cost initiatives.</p>
 External funding	<p>External funding allows greater access to resources that support sustainability internally.</p>	<p>Use the opportunity of external funding to integrate sustainability into councils operations.</p> <p>Regularly communicate your project outcomes to senior management to increase ownership. Ensure your sustainability initiatives are as self sustaining as possible when the funding ceases.</p>
 Difficulty dealing with government agencies	<p>While relationships are often very good at a personal level with officers in other government agencies, the lack of co-ordination between federal and state plans and agencies, and between state agencies, complicated work at the local level unnecessarily and often hindered progress.</p>	<p>Partner with state and federal agencies in grant applications.</p> <p>Network with government agencies.</p> <p>Organise round tables with government agencies to progress difficult issues.</p>
 Partnerships and external agency support	<p>Positive partnerships with other agencies such as local Catchment Management Authority (CMA) and/or Regional Organisation of Councils (ROC).</p>	<p>Use your partnerships to increase resources, provide joint training opportunities and facilitate information.</p>

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😊 Supportive Legislation	The principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development outlined in the Local Government Act 1993 and related requirements can be used as an important driver.	Educate the community, council staff and councillors about legislation eg USSA's Understanding Sustainability for Councillors Course Link councils sustainability projects to relevant legislation.
😞 Inadequate Legislation	While legislation was recognised as a driver, it was also a common view that it is behind current practice and that the debates and issues in the Local Government sector now are at a very different stage from when the Local Government Act 1993 was drafted.	Actively participate in consultation phases of key legislation. Aim to go above and beyond the requirements.
😞 Research and development challenges	Environment and sustainability positions generally required new knowledge and new ways of doing things, but time for reflection, reading and keeping up with developments is a challenge. Costs involved in obtaining reliable data, and finding appropriate and affordable external assistance can also be a challenge.	Partner with universities to gain access to sustainability research and expertise. Subscribe to sustainability networks which allow for transfer of knowledge and approaches eg sustainablenet@yahoo.com
😞 The language of sustainability	While practitioners in this area understand sustainability is convenient short hand for a set of well understood principles, the term often proved problematic when used in a broader audience. This is often adds to confusion about the term "sustainability".	Encourage council and the community to define what sustainability means to them. Develop a shared sustainability vision and understandings. Sustainability newsletters, sustainability induction and sustainability surveys can be used to build awareness of key principles.