

Victoria Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

The Committee Secretary
Environment and Planning Committee
Victorian Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
Melbourne Vic 3000

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry that the Environment and Planning Committee is undertaking into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities.

This submission is by Lighter Footprints, a group of concerned residents (now around 2000) from Boroondara and Whitehorse municipalities who came together in 2006 to see what we could do about the serious challenge of climate change. Our community recognises that climate change has been scientifically demonstrated for some years, and the extent of the challenges leads us to be impatient for effective action.

We would welcome the opportunity to speak further with the Committee to explain and provide specific examples of what we are doing.

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Our Position

The debate around climate change has become complex, multi-faceted and highly politicised. This has resulted in almost total policy failure especially at the federal level of government. Recent experience has shown that our institutions are incapable of handling the problem and that we need to develop new mechanisms and approaches to find a solution. The response can no longer be left to a small group of decision makers and legislators in structures designed for much simpler times to determine how to manage this challenge.

An effective response must be built on widespread community involvement in which each and every person becomes part of the solution. In such circumstances, there is a

role for community action groups to foster this involvement and to act as an intermediary between decision makers and the broader population.

Our experience as a well-respected, long established and influential community action group has demonstrated to us the effectiveness of a group such as Lighter Footprints to increase community understanding and awareness of the issues surrounding climate change and to build capacity to act.

There are many similar groups to ours throughout Victoria and Australia who work with their local community to act as mediators and translators in this complex and rapidly changing field. While each have adopted a different approach to the task, they are generally motivated by an understanding that this threat can only be met by getting the majority of the Australian population on board and taking action.

What role can community action groups play in tackling climate change?

Lighter Footprints provides a tested and effective example of the important role that community action groups can play in getting widespread support for and involvement in activities to tackle climate change.

This role takes a number of forms including:

- Creating a critical mass of local people who share a desire to work together to do something to address the daunting challenge of climate change
- Providing opportunities for members to increase their knowledge and to share their skills and expertise as a basis for taking action
- Offering an established platform for advocacy directed at decision makers in all levels of government
- Identifying opportunities for contributing to the dialogue around climate changes through participation in formal consultation exercises and thereby giving voice to people who may not normally be represented in such discussions.
- Giving language and content to people so they can participate more persuasively in informal community conversations on the complexities surrounding climate change.

Empowering our members to be more effective participants in tackling climate change

Lighter Footprints seeks to empower its members so that they can interact with and influence both the general public and decision makers at all levels of government. The voice of the community must be heard in determining what should be done to respond to this challenge. It is essential that people feel ownership of the solutions put place. It is also essential that they fully understand the issues so that they can participate effectively in the implementation of these solutions.

Group culture as a tool of empowerment

Much of the empowerment we give our members is a consequence of the respect we

pay to the diversity of skills and expertise we have in our group and the recognition that this diversity can create new opportunities to contribute. We encourage and support our members to develop their knowledge and capabilities and to explore new ways to participate in the public debate.

We put a lot of effort into providing support for all our members and supporters to participate in ways that reflects their own set of skills and expertise. This reflects the existence of a culture within the group that encourages people to step forward and work with others feeling that they will be supported and valued in what they do.

An important part of the culture is the non-partisan nature of the group. We recognise that climate change is an issue that must be addressed in the political arena. This extends across the spectrum from the voters to include members of government at all levels as well as government officials. However, we believe that we will be much more effective if we are seen as an independent, politically unaffiliated group that does not adopt a party-political approach but seeks to contribute in ways that are objective and based on evidence and reason.

This value of non-partisanship and independence from any particular political party or candidate encourages the involvement of a much wider range of people in a broader array of activities. We also consider that this enhances Lighter Footprint's credibility and helps open doors that may otherwise be closed. We consciously encourage membership from all sides of politics and we take care to maintain our reputation of being concerned with the issues rather than pushing any particular line.

As a consequence of this reputation, we regularly meet with our local politicians of all persuasions and at all levels to discuss climate change. We use these meetings to provide them with information and give them access to experts in the business and research world. Sometimes this may be in the form of a conversation with people working in the field such as members who operate technical or economic businesses or who are scientific researchers or academics. Often, it involves providing research papers or publications that we have access to through our contacts with other organisations including universities and research bodies.

Structure as a tool of empowerment

Our structure also encourages high levels of participation in the group and its activities. Lighter Footprints is a loosely organised group that brings together people from a wide range of demographic, professional and technical backgrounds. There is a core organising group of people some of whom have been with Lighter Footprints for many years and others more recently active. This core group works with a large surrounding network of members and supporters that continues to expand over time.

The relative informality of our structure provides flexibility and capacity to respond quickly to matters as they arise. It also gives members a framework that they can use to work on particular projects building on their specific skills and expertise and giving them access to others that they can work with.

Information transfer as a tool of empowerment

A primary way we seek to empower our members and our local community is through the transfer of knowledge and information on climate change. We often serve as an interface between lay members of the public and knowledgeable people in academia, industry, politics, administration and other specialised fields which have relevance to climate change policy and action. This provides people with the tools and confidence so they can participate in this important community conversation in a more perceptive, positive and informed way.

Lighter Footprints is effective in this task of knowledge and information transfer because we are well known and respected throughout the Boroondara and surrounding municipalities. We meet regularly in a number of different forums and work amongst ourselves and with our local community to advocate for better policies and actions to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Our public meetings draw attendances in the hundreds – the recent Candidates Forum in the Hawthorn Arts Centre attracted over 700 people. This meeting was streamed live on Facebook at

<https://www.facebook.com/LighterFootprintsMelbourne/videos/1745684822244791/>



Figure 1: Candidates Forum, Is Climate the Issue of the Moment?, April 2019

Our regular monthly meetings provide platforms for expert speakers on a wide range of

topics and usually have from 60 to 80 people attending. These expert speakers are keen to come because they know we will attract a responsive audience and provide them with a valuable platform to share knowledge. These meetings are also streamed live on Facebook.



Figure 2: 'Don't Mention the Emergency!', Jane Morton, November 2018

We participate in local street festivals and always attracts a lot of attention and interest especially amongst young families around our technology-based models. The conversations we have at all these events are stimulating and help raise understanding and awareness especially since they involve peers talking to peers in everyday language.



Figure 3: Lighter Footprints street stall at the 2019 Glenferrie Festival, Hawthorn

An interactive list of Lighter Footprint events from May 2018 to the present can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/pg/LighterFootprintsMelbourne/events/>

Identifying new opportunities for participation

Lighter Footprints is constantly on the lookout to identify new ways to encourage its members and supporters to interact with decision makers and the local community to increase awareness and understanding of climate change and to participate in the debate on how to respond to this challenge.

We use all forms of media to enable our members to communicate their concerns and to raise understanding of the scientific, technical and economic policy aspects of climate change. We have a very lively and eloquent letter writing group which consistently has letters published in The Age, The Herald Sun, The Australian Financial Review, even The Australian as well as the local media. Our website <https://lighterfootprints.org/> and Facebook page <https://www.latest.facebook.com/LighterFootprintsMelbourne/> publicise our events and posts videos of the speakers at our forums and monthly meeting. Our email newsletters keep members and supporters in touch with each other and aware of LF's activities and plans. We also promote events and engage in dialogue with the wider community via Twitter <https://twitter.com/litefootprints>

We consistently contribute to parliamentary and government inquiries at Federal, State and local levels by making submissions on behalf of the group and also encouraging our members and supporters to prepare their own.

We have several working groups to facilitate action in specific areas. These small groups bring together members and supporters with a shared interest in a particular topic such as energy transition or local government. Participants plan their own work program and cooperate productively on projects and activities to bring about change in their particular area of interest.

For example, our Energy Transition Group is looking to create sets of resource materials on a range of subjects that they can use in meetings with other community groups such as Rotary, U3A or Probus or in schools, church groups or other areas. The Local Government Group has been working on providing information and policy ideas to local Councillors and Council officers on how to overcome a likely shortfall in the Council's emissions reduction targets. In both cases, the diversity of skills in these groups and the support they have provided to each other have given members the confidence and capacity to participate in ways that they probably would not have done otherwise.

Working with other groups

Lighter Footprints has close links to other environmental and climate change groups which allows it to focus on educational and information transfer activities and to leave more activist approaches to other groups.

Our members often participate in activities organised by other groups adopting different ways to climate change advocacy. Groups involved with more direct action than us may call for specific support for marches and vigils etc and where this resonates with

our members, they join these actions. This spreading of the types of actions open to people who care about climate action means that Lighter Footprints can maintain a more measured approach that suits most of its members, while networking on a range of other styles of action.

Outreach to our local community at election times at all levels of government

Our non-partisan approach means that Lighter Footprints does not support any political party, or any particular individual who stands for election. We build on this stance to lobby for policies that are based on good quality scientific evidence and which represent sound and fair responses to the economic and social aspects of the challenge of climate change.

At election time, LF holds large forums which provide a platform for all candidates to explain their climate change policies and are attended by large numbers of voters from the local electorates. LF also joins with other independent climate action groups to assess these policy stances against the best science and to make these assessments available to voters, in the form of scorecards. Its aim is to inform voters who want to know where their candidates stand on climate.

Conclusion

The level of policy failure that has bedevilled climate change policy development and decision making particularly at the Federal level of government has meant that we can no longer rely on our institutional framework to develop and implement good quality solutions for the existential threat we are now facing. Time is running out and we must energise and involve every part of our community to take action.

An immediate example of an environmental problem that can only be solved by reaching out and activating all players is how to address the collapse of Victoria's waste management and recycling processes. This requires huge changes in community behaviour that can only be achieved by the population at large buying into fixing the problem.

Community groups have an important role in facilitating this buy-in. They can act as the interface between decision makers and the people at large through their role as communicators, educators and translators of knowledge and information. They can be a means to build and energise capacity within community to work on implementing programs and finding new ways to tackle climate change.

Recommendation

We recommend that the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee request the Government to provide financial and other support for community groups working on environmental, sustainability and climate change issues to enhance their capacity to act as an interface between decision makers and the broad community.

Support could include grants to assist the group extend its reach into the community and make its communication more effective. This could include purchasing equipment

such as computers, video equipment, microphones, projectors or other tools; to undertake training and capacity building with the group; or to undertake projects that add value to the work of legislators and administrators.

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On behalf of Lighter Footprints Committee

26 August 2019