

## Article

# Climate Emergencies in Australian Local Governments: From Symbolic Act to Disrupting the Status Quo?

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the emerging phenomenon of climate emergency declarations. We focus on the case of Victoria Australia and the 30 councils who have declared a climate emergency with a particular focus on three councils. We explore the drivers, meanings, and implications and to what extent the subsequent plans reflect a reframing of local government roles and actions. We find the emergency declaration movement is catalysing councils beyond symbolic declarations potentially opening up space for change and disruption. Of interest in this paper is also the principal and theoretical implications for citizens, local government, and for research that is connected with this emerging trend. We highlight conclusions, ideas, and perspectives that can be drawn from this study of the Australian practice of climate emergency declarations.

**Keywords:** climate emergency; climate change governance; local government



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## 1. Introduction

Climate change entails an unprecedented global disturbance [1] and piecemeal climate change action on different societal scales is insufficient to address the challenges associated with it [2]. In 2020, 11,000 scientists called for climate change and its impact to be understood as a global emergency [3]. They demanded that climate action move beyond 'business-as-usual' towards societal transformation that addressed the root causes of climate change, cf. [4–6]. A growing number of social movements has echoed this call including, School Strikes for Climate (initiated by Greta Thunberg), Extinction Rebellion, the Sunrise Movement, the Green New Deal, and the Fearless City movement [5,7–9]. With the weight of science and bottom-up social pressure for urgent and systemic change, governments, civil society organizations, and businesses around the world have declared climate emergencies (CE) [10–12]. Additionally, as observed by Nissen and Cretney [13], 'Climate emergency' was Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year for 2019. In addition, the spread of COVID-19 and the handling of this crisis has given traction to emergency politics as a crisis response [13,14]. This has also given rise to "... a number of contested and controversial narratives at the intersection of the pandemic and climate change" [13] (p. 2).

Local governments are at the forefront of the CE declaration movement [9,15,16]. The local scale has been a site of climate action for many years [17,18] and cities around the world are at the 'strategic front' in terms of mitigation and adaptation [12,19,20]. Regarding mitigation "... cities are recognizing their potential contribution to mitigate climate change and have aspired to achieve net-zero in cities around the world" [21] (p. 379). This is an agenda with transformational potential and by the end of 2020, more than 800 hundred cities globally had pledged to become net-zero and in some cases net-zero policies are combined with, or integrated in, CE declarations [21,22].

On 5 December 2016, Darebin, a council located in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, became the first local government in the world to declare a CE after a long campaign by local actors [23]. After Darebin, a growing number of local governments and cities around the world followed their call [12,14,24] and by late 2020 it was estimated that over 1700 local governments across 30 countries had declared a CE.

As this research field is emerging, there is a need for situational analysis of CE declarations and their enactment in different localities [13] (p. 5), including a better understanding of their motivations and purpose [15]. In addition, as highlighted by Howarth, Lane, and Fankhauser [15], little attention has been paid to the local scale in the context of emergency declarations.

In line with these arguments, the aim of this paper is to examine the rise of CE declarations in local governments in Australia. We do this by asking three questions:

- Who is driving the CE declarations (bottom-up/top-down) across local governments and what are the motivations?
- What are the implications for local government policy, planning, and organization?
- Are CE declarations symbolic acts or do they have potential to shift policy and practice beyond ‘business-as-usual’?

Our study focuses on the Australian state of Victoria, where 30 of its 79 local governments have declared a CE since 2016. Across Australia, 96 local governments have declared a CE, accounting for over eight million Australians. This analysis focuses attention on the drivers, meaning, and implications of CE declarations across Victorian councils. We also examine three local CE plans to offer insights into the prospects for accelerating responses to climate change, moving away from ‘business-as-usual’ responses. Therefore, the contribution of this study is to add to the emerging and growing body of knowledge and research into how CE declarations enacted at the local scale and to the broader research field studying society’s efforts to handle the complex and multifaceted problem of climate change.

## 2. Perspectives on Climate Emergencies

The foundation of the CE discourse is an understanding of climate change as a security threat [9,13]. Accordingly, a central part of the CE framing is “... ‘crisification’, invoking specific qualities of unpredictability, irreversibility, rapid change, and critical juncture” [14] (p. 2). At the same time there are, of course, a variety of approaches to this emergency [13] (p. 4). For the CE movement to herald a step change in local climate action, however, declarations have to entail a move from a ‘business-as-usual’ approach, that often has characterized local government responses [17,25] to a transformed emergency mode [12].

In the disaster management literature, an emergency is a reaction to an event that threatens society or the environment requiring “... a co-ordinated and rapid response” [26] (p. 159). Emergency responses often entail far reaching changes in regular governance that can limit political and democratic processes [9,14,24]. Hence, desires for urgent and radical change can lead to misuse of powers reinforcing already existing power asymmetries and limiting the scope of influence from marginalized or indigenous communities, highlighting issues of equity and climate justice [27–29] for a more in-depth discussion on the impact of climate change on indigenous communities, see [30,31]. A CE declaration has the potential to consolidate incumbent power relations and, furthermore, enable “... an excessive use or abuse of executive powers” [13] (p. 4). At the same time it can, within a longer time frame, be part of evolving political struggles and, accordingly, involved in defining a CE, which is clearly political [14].

Climate change impacts and connected risks and emergencies are complex and involve multiple scales, conflicts, or lack of clarity in policy approaches and high levels of uncertainty placing high demands on policy and governance [32,33]. CE declarations are emerging and the body of research on the subject is developing [7–9,12–15,20]. Emergency types differs in terms of degrees of scale, policy approaches, and levels of uncertainty [2] and there it is still unclear what ‘emergency’ in CE declarations mean [9]. There are, how-

ever, some definitions of what type of emergency climate change gives rise to as this one by Gilding [34] (p. 5):

An emergency is a situation where the normal ways we manage society and the economy cannot adequately deal with the risk we face. It implies, therefore, a change to what we do, commensurate with both the scale and urgency of the risk.

Hence, the perception is that climate change leads to a large-scale emergency where regular societal processes do not suffice. Sutton [35] (p. 7) argues the aim for declaring a CE is:

... to get society into emergency mode for long enough to restructure the economy so that we can provide people and (the rest of) nature with maximum protection from the impacts of climate change.

Hence, the climate emergency is an extraordinary threat that calls for extraordinary measures with potentially far reaching societal, political, and democratic consequences [36]. Declarations of emergencies are usually formulated by national or state governments giving government institutions far reaching authority under formal legal procedures. A local government CE declaration is different [9].

When it comes to the arguments for local governments to declare CEs, previous studies have highlighted three categories of motivations: (1) political positioning and signalling of climate action intentions, (2) articulation of local concerns and commitment to sustainability, and (3) pressure from civil society and local groups [9].

Central to the CE literature is that climate change is real, the threats are imminent and that there is need for urgent action and for a leadership that facilitates such action. The CE literature also stresses the importance of a focus on vulnerability within the local community and its individuals and the inclusion and empowerment of communities and individuals through learning.

### 3. The Local Government Context in Victoria

Before progressing to outline our theoretical perspectives, methods, and data, it is useful to provide some brief context for local governments in Victoria, Australia, around which CE declarations have emerged. As one of the lead local governments driving the CE declaration movement, Darebin City Council characterizes a council servicing one of the more politically progressive communities in Melbourne, Victoria. The role of elected greens councillors in driving stronger action on climate change was central to Darebin taking the lead on declaring a climate emergency.

The rapid uptake in Victoria of other councils declaring a climate emergency was driven by both a community-led campaign and council-led leadership. One driving force was the David Spratt and Phillip Sutton publication "Climate Code Red" [37], which presented evidence that the global warming crisis was worse than contemporary official reports had indicated. As a consequence, they argued, a rapid response was needed that moved "... beyond the capacity of the society's normal functioning" [37] (p. 130) that enabled political action away from the political trade-offs, often observed in 'normal politics'.

This current moment in the role of local government action on climate change is quite different to other examples of local governments acting on climate change in the Australian context. The ICLEI Cities for Climate Protection program, for example, which many councils signed up to in the 1990s, also demonstrated leadership by local government. This was not inspired by a community campaign nor related to mobilizing community action, but rather a global municipal alliance focusing on reducing internal council emissions. The last twenty or so years of climate politics in Australia particularly at the national level has generated frustration at both state and local scales around a lack of progress in setting stronger climate change policies and targets [38,39]. This has led to bottom-up responses attempting to drive action on mitigation and adaptation.

There is much written about the constraints that local governments operate within [20,40,41] in terms of power and resourcing, but the same literature also highlights the significant role they play in driving action across the suite of climate responses required to reduce emissions from the built environment and mitigate risks to communities associated with the impacts of climate change. Notwithstanding the critical role of supportive policies and targets set at higher levels of government, there is no doubt that local governments have been playing a key role in climate action in Australia.

The year 2019 was a remarkable year, with many climate records being set. Not only was it the second warmest year on record for surface temperature, it was also the warmest year on record for ocean heat content, as well as for low sea ice content [42]. Australia experienced both the warmest and driest year on record [43], culminating in the 2019–2020 ‘mega-fires’, which burnt over 19 million hectares, with an estimate of over one billion animals being killed [44]. The current context driving local government declarations, we would contend, highlights the changing public perceptions around the urgent need to address climate change particularly in light of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires and the more recent 2019/2020 bushfires that burned more than 46 million acres (72 square miles) along the east coast [45]. Within the ongoing political tensions around transitioning to a low carbon energy future in Australia, local communities and local governments are finding ways to push against ‘business-as-usual’ and garner political support for change.

#### 4. Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical perspectives that informs our study, “green populism” and “symbolic politics”, are elaborated below.

Declarations of local government CEs opens up for a wide variety of positive and negative interpretations. Some scholars has categorized CEs in the ‘green populism’ category [24]. Populism in general has a strong transformative agenda as it challenges the status quo with the introduction of ‘new’ political conflict dimensions with the aim to mobilize perceived excluded actors [46,47]. ‘Green populism’ can entail mobilization with the aim to rescue human and non-human life from environmental threats [48]. Populist movements often use symbolic action within the political sphere to create change [49]. Arguably, CE declarations on the one hand, may create spaces for new engagements in politics and wider social issues but may also, on the other hand, depoliticize and/or narrow existing democratic arenas and institutions [13].

Local government CE declarations can be perceived as symbolic politics, cf. [50,51] that do not necessary entail any substantial and systemic changes, but rather reproduce social relations in incumbent politics [13]. Accordingly, an analysis of local government CE declarations need to include how they are implemented and if and how they impact local government sector, policy areas, and planning or if they are merely superficial add-ons to ‘business-as-usual’ [52]. Symbolic statements can be understood as action in itself [9,15]; however, they have a signalling value to the local government organization, citizens, and other actors that the local government perceives the climate issue as a real and important threat [51,53].

#### 5. Methods

In this study, we utilize four key clusters constructed in an interplay between the key themes of the CE literature presented above and a set of salient terms and phrases identified in our 26 sets (the CE declarations analysed) of data material, cf. [54]. These clusters were then each defined around four themes—(1) Urgency and Acknowledgment; (2) Vulnerability; (3) Leadership and Advocacy; (4) Engagement and Education. These themes are discussed below, with indicative examples drawn from the declarations. Together they characterize the content of the CE declarations analysed.

To explore what declaring a CE means for local government, the initial step was to establish the features or key themes of CE declarations. CE declarations were gathered from local government websites within Victoria. The most common form was as a press/media

release. Given the nature of the releases, each statement/declaration varied significantly, in terms of word length and content.

Hence, this research involved a desktop analysis of CE declarations from 26 local governments in Victoria drawing on a database—[climateemergencydeclaration.org](https://climateemergencydeclaration.org) (accessed on 10 November 2021). At the time of writing, 30 local governments were listed in Victoria, however only 26 local governments had explicitly stated they had declared a CE. In mid 2020 a survey was sent to each council resulting in 13 responses primarily from environment department officers, capturing further details about progress in actioning the CEs, and relevant factors bearing on progress. A sample of three local governments, the cities of Darebin, Moreland, and Yarra City Council, all located in inner Melbourne, were selected for further analysis. These three were identified as the most advanced in their CE plans in relation to the demand of inclusiveness and the need to move beyond “business as usual”. The analysis of three CE action plans draws on the work of Davidson, Briggs, Nolan, Bush, Håkansson, and Moloney [20] who propose a “... climate emergency response attribute framework” consisting of ten attributes. They used this framework to assess CE responses by the City of Darebin, Australia, and Auckland City Council, New Zealand. Accordingly, the overall findings draw on extensive data material from four sources: 26 CE declarations, 13 local government surveys, 3 CE action plans, and 4 practitioner interviews.

## 6. Analysing Local Government CE Declarations

The Victorian context provides fertile ground for this investigation with over thirty local governments across Victoria having declared a CE. This means that 40.5% of the Victorian local governments have declared a CE, in comparison to 26.5% of New South Wales local governments, 23.5% of South Australian local governments, and 1.29% of Queensland local governments. Of those Victorian local governments, Darebin City Council, an inner-city local government, in metropolitan Melbourne, was the first in the world to declare in 2016 a CE and that urgent and large-scale action is needed to avoid destructive climate change. Following Darebin’s declaration, over ninety-six local governments across Australia have declared a CE, which encompasses over eight million Australians.

### 6.1. Theme 1: Urgency and Acknowledgment

A theme of Urgency and Acknowledgment is prominent throughout the Victorian CE declarations. That is, acknowledging that we are in a state of a CE, and what will be done by local government actors within the municipality to address targets, and the goals or objectives included in the declaration. What this means varies between each municipality.

Urgency manifests by qualifying actions as ‘immediate’, ‘critical’, ‘prioritized’, and of course, ‘urgent’. Melbourne City Council speaks in terms of immediacy:

We know that immediate action to reduce emissions and adapt to the impacts is needed now if Melbourne is to remain a liveable city for future generations to visit, work and live in.

City of Melbourne [55]

This acknowledges climate change as a phenomenon, recognizing climate change science, and recognizing the state of emergency. It is signalled in Melbourne City Council’s “We know”, above, and more expansively by Kingston City Council’s statement below:

By declaring a Climate and Ecological Emergency Council is recognizing that climate change is already causing significant damage to the economy, society, and environment and that urgent action is required to reverse current trends.

City of Kingston [56]

Acknowledgment is also evident in Mornington Peninsula Shire Council’s accepting ‘responsibility’ in this statement, where it is joined with the theme of urgency and to move beyond just signalling:

A Climate Emergency is a resolution for immediate and urgent action to reverse global warming. It is an unequivocal statement that it is the responsibility of every level of government, every community and business, and every person to:

- reduce emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change
- plan to adapt to the changes that cannot be avoided.

Declaring a Climate Emergency is more than just words.

Mornington Peninsula Shire (in Mirage News) [57]

As a recurring element in these themes, ‘action’ has a strong rhetorical aspect, visible in Mornington Peninsula Shire Council’s emphasis on action, not simply ‘words’.

### 6.2. Theme 2: Vulnerability

A theme of Vulnerability covers the meaning of the impact that a changing climate has and will have on the municipal location (severe weather events, geographical related impacts), community, and individuals. Throughout the declaration, vulnerability is referred to on two fronts; the geographical vulnerability of the locale for which the council is responsible and the impact on people living in the cities and shires (with reference to there being particular groups less able than others to respond effectively to a changing climate and its consequences). For example, Bayside City Council pinpoints the danger posed by warming:

Bayside is a coastal municipality and with 17 km of shoreline vulnerable to sea-level rise and storm surges, we are already experiencing first-hand the effects of climate change.

Bayside City Council [58]

So too does Warrnambool Shire Council:

Our region will be further affected by this climate emergency, including extreme weather events, bushfires and sea level rise.

Warrnambool Shire Council [59]

Brimbank City Council references the vulnerability of its people in this statement:

We need urgent action to avoid these negative impacts on our community, and particularly help our most vulnerable communities.

Brimbank City Council [60]

### 6.3. Theme 3: Leadership and Advocacy

A theme of Leadership and Advocacy captures the political aspects of making a declaration. It can cover both local governments talking about the failure of leadership from other levels of government as well as emphasizing the opportunity for local government to take a leadership role. This is evident in Port Phillip City Council’s declaration:

... we’re just one council ... But there are many moments where we are required to step up and show leadership—and this is one of them.

City of Port Philip (in Mirage News) [61]

Frankston City Council urges action from higher levels of government:

Council will also advocate to both state and federal governments to declare a climate emergency and implement legislated programs to drive emergency action to reduce greenhouse gases.

Frankston City Council [62]

Hence, local government perceives that it can fill the role as a forerunner and challenge state and federal governments to join the action on climate change.

#### 6.4. Theme 4: Engagement and Education

A theme of Engagement and Education encompasses recurring terms and phrases dealing with: the need for the organization to educate internally, through community engagement processes, the education of community members, and engagement of the organization with other forms of government. Indigo Shire Council talk about the importance of education and working together to combat climate change:

Education is a vital part of this, so we will be convening a series of public meetings to address and educate our community and work together to develop a suite of ideas to help tackle the threats from climate change.

Indigo Shire Council (in Mirage News) [63]

Mount Alexander Shire state the importance of engaging with the community and working collaboratively, to respond to the CE. Given the emergence of these declarations, local governments themselves are learning and this involves working with their respective communities:

... draw on the wisdom of the experts and our community to find solutions to plan and adapt to the impacts of climate change for the sake of our children, our grandchildren, and future generations. The development of our next climate change strategy will be an important part of this work.

Mount Alexander Shire Council [64]

The engagement of a broad set of actors is central to some of the councils and 'business-as-usual' is no longer an option. Mornington Peninsula Shire states that

... that governing bodies can no longer continue business as usual, it means that they are recognizing the seriousness of the situation.

[65]

And that the council can facilitate that the Mornington Peninsula

... set an example of how a community can work together to achieve a sustainable but prosperous area, through encouragement from and support by the Shire.

Mornington Peninsula Shire [65]

#### 6.5. The Four Themes in the CE Declarations: Summing Up

In terms of the distribution of these themes across the declarations, and of how they are employed or evident, it can be noted that not all the four themes appear in all the declarations, but they are prominent across a majority of them. It is clear from the declarations that each local government may have its own understanding of what a CE declaration should entail, requires, or could include to make them effective, robust, or persuasive tools and that councils have different motivations for making a declaration.

### 7. Analysing the Survey: Drivers and Motivations for Declaring a CE

Key findings from the survey of local governments was that the primary driver for declaring a CE was bottom-up community pressure. Hence, community pressure along with a responding councillor leadership was considered as the engine driving the CE declarations. Not all responding Councils had developed a CE action plan, but most were in the process of doing so. Most had a climate change strategy in place with a small number having no strategy in place at the time of declaring a CE. A central priority for all councils was the reduction of council emissions, with 70% stating that community emissions reduction was a key priority. Of the 13 respondents, 50% identified community resilience and urban greening as key priority areas.

A suite of key actions following the declarations were identified by respondents including: a review of all council policies (85%); collaborating with other councils and community advocacy (70%); internal council stakeholder engagement and wider stakeholder engagement (61%) with policy advocacy also featuring as a key action area (53%).

In addressing the question of whether the CE had been understood by various departments within councils, however, almost 40% said no. As to whether CE training/education had been provided within councils, 77% said no. The responses suggest there is significant work to be done to deepen the understanding and engagement within councils around the implications of declaring a CE. This was reinforced by the fact that 60% of respondents highlighted that there was opposition to declaring a CE from councillors, community, and internal council staff.

The survey asked respondents what success would look like for their council following the declaration of a CE. Most respondents (90%) defined success as achieving an integrated climate response across all areas of the council. The open-ended answers also referred to: “raising awareness across council departments”; “achieving net zero carbon emissions” by a selected date (various goals and dates); “a mobilized community” who can respond to the climate challenge through “individual actions” and; “acknowledgment of the climate emergency from State and Federal Governments”.

### 8. Analysing Three CE Plans

Three CE plans were examined from leading inner city councils in metropolitan Melbourne: Darebin City Council [23], Moreland City Council [66], and Yarra City Council [67]. Darebin’s Climate Emergency Action Plan [23] was endorsed in August 2017, after becoming the first council globally to declare a CE in December 2016. The plan is clear in recognizing the urgency for action from all levels of government in responding to the emergency. The plan sets out an ambitious target of becoming carbon neutral by 2020, but does not make mention of prioritizing a CE mode above other council activities, although it does state that incrementalism will not work. The plan states financial allocation as well as partnerships and alliances as important actions. A key strategy of the plan is a focus on community mobilization, empowering and engaging members of the community to be able to take action, and building resilience to prepare for more frequent climate impacts, recognizing that those that are vulnerable will feel the effects most. The plan highlights the importance of monitoring and reviewing actions and outcomes.

Moreland’s Zero Carbon Moreland Climate Emergency Action Plan [66] was adopted in November 2019, recognizing that the state of CE requires urgent action by all levels of government, including a collective effort with local government and community. The plan states that Moreland Council is committed to achieving zero-net emissions by 2040, but also acknowledges that there are sources of emissions that they “cannot control” [66] (p. 5). There is no explicit statement in the declaration that this is an overall prioritization of the CE in regard to council operations. Moreland’s plan clearly outlines actions/programs, with detailed funding allocations.

The plan recognizes the importance of collaboration and advocacy with the community and partnerships in order to build a social movement required for transformation. Throughout the plan, State and Federal levels of Government are acknowledged as holding the power to pull the ‘levers’ [66] (p. 8) to transition to zero carbon. They refer to the development of a ‘program logic’ [66] (p. 24), which will help to monitor and evaluate, measure success, and learn lessons. Lastly, the plan acknowledges those that may face ‘energy poverty’ [66] (p. 12) and how targeted support can alleviate this.

The City of Yarra’s Climate Emergency Action Plan [67] adopted in June 2020 acknowledges that responding to the CE effectively requires social and economic transformation. As part of responding to the CE, the City of Yarra has committed to an ‘ambitious’ goal of net-zero emissions by 2030 [67] (p. 27), using the COVID-19 pandemic as a resilience opportunity to ‘build back better’ [67] (p. 6). There is, however, no explicit recognition in this plan of any prioritization of the CE response over other council operations. The plan does provide detailed resource allocations under each strategic priority, but acknowledges financial constraints in the short and medium term due to the pandemic.

Yarra’s plan recognizes the role of the community, highlighting social mobilization as their strategic priority and identifying that the council has a large role to play in engaging

and enabling the community to create change. A clear purpose of the emergency response is to restore a safe climate, which is presented as currently unsafe due to the unprecedented global warming we are experiencing, and to achieve this it states “... we must go ‘beyond business-as-usual’” [67] (p. 9).

The plan outlines the need to create a climate adapted city, through the use of blue and green infrastructure, to adapt to a changing climate, creating resilient built form. There is reference to how the council will report, monitor, and review the plan, keeping the implementation of the plan transparent. Throughout the plan there is recognition that local government is only one actor and that all levels of government must respond to ensure a safe climate, with calls for advocacy as a means of achieving this prominent throughout. Yarra also highlights how or where actions include partnerships such as; the Northern Alliance for Greenhouse Action (NAGA), Council Alliance for a Sustainable Built Environment (CASBE), and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV). Lastly, there is recognition that climate change will affect those low income and vulnerable populations the most, with the council acknowledging this and aiming to respond accordingly.

### 9. Analysing the Interviews: “A Lot of Little Experiments”

To build on insights data from the survey and CE declarations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four practitioner respondents involved around CE at local government level (presented as Participant X below). While common themes emerged across the interviews, there was some variation in terms of how each council is responding to their declarations, attributable to different rates of progression of CE responses, internal resourcing, and how local governments frame the CE within their municipality. As one respondent put it regarding embedding climate change “in all activities”, you are seeing “... a lot of little experiments across the country” (Participant A). The following highlights key findings from interviews, picking up particularly on the significance of declaring a CE for local governments and the implications of a CE mode for councils.

Interviewees acknowledged that the declarations represented a significant moment in their respective organizations’ action on climate change. One interviewee suggested that declaring was a way for councils to demonstrate legitimacy as a “... leader on climate action” and stated, “... it’s really that acknowledgment that incremental change is not enough and that we need that transformational change” (Participant B). Another said the declarations represent a “... way of thinking [that] is about normalizing that we need to do things very differently ... genuinely embedding [climate change] into different disciplines and different ways of thinking” (Participant C).

At the same time, one interviewee admitted that “... when you actually speak to some [council] officers [they] will say, I’ve got no idea what this actually means” (Participant A), highlighting that not everyone has a universal understanding of the implications of declaring. Among the interviewees, the declaration of a CE was met with a sense of pride and achievement (not underestimating the seriousness or urgency of the issue) in having acknowledged something that many other Australian local governments have been unable to do. The interviewees’ observations about declarations dispelled any possibility that CE declarations might be being seen as weakly symbolic or as not a significant action in their own right.

In terms of council operations and governance following CE declarations, one interviewee discussed governance arrangements as consisting of “... bringing more of that capacity [for climate change response] in-house” (Participant B) with funding being used internally rather than externally. Interviewees expressly stated that they were not in CE mode as this state would be defined by ‘activists’ and that the probability and/or legality of that would actually be difficult to achieve. To explain this, one interviewee offered that a CE mode is a radical shift and would have implications that were so broad they were difficult to tackle: “... that’s people’s jobs, that’s whole of organizational and service structure” (Participant B). As was pointed out, adopting a CE mode would mean “... you stop doing a whole bunch of stuff and put all your money into doing the stuff that’s

driving this” (Participant B). Another interviewee described that ‘activist’ CE mode is difficult because “... we’ve got to bring people along here” (Participant C). There was a strong sense that despite the significance of the declarations, proclaiming a CE could not guarantee that a council would or could unambiguously prioritize urgent climate change action over other objectives.

## 10. Discussion: Local Government CE Declarations—Implications for Priorities and Actions

This research offers insights into the challenges and prospects for accelerating effective responses to climate change resulting from emerging CE declarations. They represent a new stage reached in local government recognition of climate change as scientific reality and as a real and present threat, and in these governments’ responses to this threat. While the declarations vary in how they present and convey the threat, and also in the nature and extent of the mitigation and adaptation responses, they identify for their local communities, the analysis of declarations made by 26 Victorian local governments shows they have common themes: a concern for timelines, the condition of ‘emergency’, and the climate science (Urgency and Acknowledgment); a foregrounding of climate change’s impact on community and locale (Vulnerability); an emphasis on councils leading the way and seeking to extend possibilities and legitimacy for action (Leadership and Advocacy); and by an intention to form receptive, informed and well-resourced communities and to dialogue with other authorities. The declarations tell a convincing story of a complex and present threat that demands heightened attention now, through joined-up policies and practical actions.

The theme of ‘Urgency and Acknowledgment’ is consistent across Victorian local government CE declarations. Whilst the declarations acknowledge the science and urgency to act, assessing the CE action plans of Victorian local governments, Darebin, Moreland, and Yarra, shows that there is currently little prioritization of climate change action above all other council policies and actions. The plans to some extent fall short of the ambitions of Council Action in the Climate Emergency (CACE), who argue that the most important goal for councils is achieving maximum protection for human and non-human life, through CE responses. If prioritization of climate change action over other local government action is taken as the threshold for being in emergency mode, then the declarations of CEs studies here are not reaching this threshold.

Certainly, questions about an emergency mode led to hesitant answers from interviewees, with one participant endorsing “... [the] need for transformational change and [the] need to do it in a decade”, but qualifying this by pointing out “... we’ve also got to do it in a way that brings people along” (Participant C). This position indicated that emergency mode may be seen by some officers as something that has to be progressed in a manner that ensures the support of the community, including those most vulnerable. Other officers take a stronger stance:

Climate emergency is coming along and saying, no, that’s not enough. We need to actually accelerate that again. So, for councils it’s sometimes stepping into areas they’re not used to working in.

(Participant A)

### *Attributes of CE Plans*

Each of the CE action plans studied was mapped against ANON 2020 CE response attributes framework. The ten attributes that comprise the framework are: Purpose of Action, Urgency of Action, Prioritization of Action, Institutional Resource Mobilization, Restoring a Safe Climate, Adapting to a Changing Climate, Plan for Informed Action, Coordination Partnerships and Advocacy for Action, Equity and Social Justice. These attributes “... provide a useful heuristic” [20]. In addition to these attributes, the paper also focuses on the land-use planning response to CE.

Each of the plans of Darebin, Moreland, and Yarra plans were assessed according to how well they included or addressed each of the ten attributes. Each plan was reviewed,

noting the use of all salient terms (including synonyms) and features (e.g., repetition, prominence) and cross-referenced against the attribute's framework. All three action plans were identified to have met all attributes with the exception of 'Prioritization of action'. Hence, it was unclear in each plan how CE actions were being prioritized above other council policies and actions. This lack of prioritization raises critical questions on the real impact on CEs in actual local government planning, policy, and action. Whilst Victorian local governments are currently not 'prioritizing' climate change action above all else, the declarations are nevertheless challenging councils to deepen and strengthen their response.

The extent to which and the particular way in which each council's plan meets the individual attributes varies from plan to plan, which is to be somewhat expected given the time between plans, with the City of Darebin publishing their climate action plan in 2017, compared to the City of Yarra in mid-2020. For example, Yarra's action plan is particularly strong in detailing its coordination, partnerships, and advocacy for action.

The variation between plans can also be seen by considering the attribute 'Institutional Resource Mobilization', for which it can be said each council's action plan meets. The City of Darebin outlines \$427,000 for the implementation of the CE plan, with no clear breakdown of funding allocation, other than \$127,000 towards funding programs and \$300,000 towards purchasing green power. Compared to this, the City of Moreland provide a more detailed breakdown. For example, under 'action/program' they highlight "Est. \$200k in 2020/21 for Planning Scheme Amendment process", further identifying "Est. \$117k/pa from 2020/21 for a Zero Carbon Moreland Implementation Lead". Further assessment of the extent of resource mobilizations for these figures, representative for both councils, could take into account what percentage of total council expenditure these allocations were. Finally, the City of Yarra, which recognizes financial constraints due to the COVID-19 pandemic in its plan, describes its actions simply as "... commencing with existing resources". In some cases, costs are identified, but with the qualification "... subject to future budget processes".

This analysis used the ten attributes identified by Davidson, Briggs, Nolan, Bush, Håkansson, and Moloney [20] as a 'heuristic' device; however, as this example of Institutional Resource Mobilization begins to suggest, there is clearly scope for a more detailed and technical comparative analysis in further research. This would have the potential to create more precise and instructive guidance for governing bodies to implement future CE plans.

As far as use of the basic heuristic goes, the achievement in the three action plans of nine of the ten attributes is grounds for arguing that CE declarations have moved these plans in the direction that Meerow and Woodruff [68] calls "... stronger climate planning". Interviewees stated that these declarations have brought about a 'step change' in their respective organizations with "in-house funding" providing for "dedicated officers" (Participant B), thus building capacity for local government CE responses. Opportunities are also being grasped such as COVID-19 being used by the City of Yarra declaring to "build back better" in response to the pandemic. If a step change still leaves "... a lot more to be done" (Participant C), it can nevertheless be in the direction of transformational or radical change and beyond 'resilience plans' [68] where resilience means "... maintaining the status quo" [69] (p. 3).

## 11. A New Role for Local Government?

Having discussed some practical and concrete actions deriving from the 'push' that CE declarations have given to action plans, activity of a different kind is also important. This is the work of advocacy and activism.

Survey responses from 13 local governments highlighted that 'community pressure' was a key deciding factor for Councils declaring a CE and it is argued that this is an important shift in the local government governing context.

Climate emergency is different because it's emerged out of the community, and so you've got a group of people now who are looking to hold councils to account

on what they do. And that's different from the way councils have approached governance of climate change before.

(Participant A)

This new level of accountability presents a challenge for local government, to do with managing the local politics of getting and maintaining widespread community support. While the declarations are about acknowledging the science and the need for transformational change, local governments must mobilize the community or as stated "... bring people along" (Participant C). The language around CEs has been identified as potentially alienating, confronting people with the message that we must act immediately and that 'business-as-usual' is no longer an option without dire consequences. Part of overcoming this might be the 'normalizing' that one interviewee spoke of (Participant C). Normalizing might mean equipping and empowering respective communities with the tools and actions to deal with the climate crisis. The declarations are an opportunity for such normalization.

The importance of this is registered in the three CE plans with their focus on 'social/community mobilization' as strategic priorities. The emphasis is on enabling citizens and communities to become 'active' and to 'advocate for further change'. Given this, it might be appropriate to think of these local governments as 'activist governments', propelled by climate change activist groups within their municipalities, and willing to take on and endorse their arguments. As activist governments they are committing themselves to mobilize their wider populations. One interviewee, for example, spoke of "... educating the voters so that they make the choice undeniable" (Participant B). As activist governments—and acknowledging that they are only one part of the climate change response puzzle and that a lot is outside their control—they are pushing for further policy implementation by State and Federal Governments to enable mitigation and adaptation. This means that the Councils are going beyond the previous limits of their advocacy role as highlighted by McGuirk, Dowling, and Bulkeley [41].

## 12. Concluding Remarks

This research highlights that CE declarations do signify a stronger climate response from local government, and that emerging action plans do reflect many of the attributes needed for robust and viable CE strategies [20]. If we re-connect to our research questions, the following conclusions can be drawn.

It is clear that the CE is driven by community pressure as well as leadership from elected councillors. From our study, it is more difficult to judge exactly how this pressure impacts local governments following their declarations or 'what's next?' as Howarth, Lane, and Fankhauser [15] ask in their study of declarations across the Greater London boroughs. We are seeing similar declaration trends across cities globally, clearly driven by bottom-up mobilization supporting findings in climate science driving the need for urgent action. That is, CEs are driven by a combination of local concerns and pressure from civil society.

For the local governments of Victoria, a central starting point in declaring a CE is climate science recognizing the severity of the situation from the global to the local. This is further reinforced by observable impacts of climate change in close geographical proximity such as severe weather events in creating vulnerabilities that are also asymmetrically allocated among different population groups and geographical areas. There are the geographical vulnerabilities located in areas for which the council is responsible, but also a recognition of the fact that particular groups are less able than others to respond effectively to a changing climate and its consequences. Another is that 'business-as-usual' is no longer viable.

This leads to conclusions that immediate action is needed in order to mitigate future emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Central to these arguments is the need to create a liveable environment for contemporary and future generations, as well as highlighting responsibilities for governments, communities, business, and individuals. Climate action plans studied are clearly incorporating the importance of both mitigation and adaptation in responding to the CE. While there is recognition that local governments

cannot act alone, declaring a CE certainly increases community pressure on them to move beyond the status-quo.

There are also arguments that highlight the leadership role of city and regional government in relation to other tiers of government. With local governments acting as forerunners in acknowledging the science and urgency to respond, this strengthens the credibility of arguments and advocacy directed towards both state and federal governments. The CE declaration movement opens up opportunities for local government to occupy the role of positive agitator or mobiliser challenging other government actors to join the urgent action on climate change.

While declaring a CE can be understood as political positioning and an important symbolic act by local governments, it remains to be seen to what extent CE plans can mobilize significant change within councils. As was identified in the London boroughs study, local governments are constrained by already stretched resources [15]. While local governments have a history of taking leadership on sustainability and climate change (i.e., ICLEI, Covenant of Mayors, etc.), the CE movement could be considered a step change in local government action on climate change. Our research found that CE declarations were organizationally significant, generating a new level of accountability for local government to respond to climate change particularly as they are largely community driven processes. They demand stronger climate planning, and the development of more in-house capacity to respond, but also the need for more education and training of officers. This we suggest will challenge local governments to develop their capacity to innovate and experiment with new ways of working together and with their communities. City power partnerships and the solar savers initiatives, where councils enable low-income earners to purchase solar, are a few examples of how this is already happening. For some councils, this means developing a climate change action plan for the first time, but for others it pushes them to extend beyond 'business-as-usual', in setting emissions reduction targets for example, or in how they invest in community mobilization projects through partnerships and advocacy. It will almost certainly mean demonstrating accountability and transparency around climate action planning.

As discussed above, the literature calls for awareness as CE declaration can include authoritarian tendencies, but in this study we did not find any authoritarian approaches to climate change. We conclude, rather, that the CE movement, encompassing a growing number of local governments is demonstrating grassroots leadership and is stimulating local action, which was also found to be the case in London [15]. We would also contend that CE declarations and subsequent plans are forging a space for ongoing political struggles [14] and opening up opportunities for more inclusive engagement with communities around climate action. For example, Darebin Council is currently engaging with a range of 'at risk' or vulnerable communities including indigenous elders and organizations to better understand climate change impacts and how it can better support their needs. The legitimacy of the CE movement will be measured by action, not merely symbolic declarations. Local governments are constrained and under resourced in most instances, which undermines the investment required to meet the scale of social, technological, and organizational transformation that climate change demands. That said, it is the local government and city scale where innovation and social change is already happening. Whether CE declarations catalyse innovative, just and accelerating actions remain to be seen.

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