

*How to start a*

**CLIMATE**

**ACTION**

**GROUP**

## ***About Climate Action Groups***

Climate Action Groups are collectives of ordinary but highly concerned Australians who have come together in their local communities to act on climate change.

Climate Action Groups have experienced extraordinary growth over the past few years, with over 200 groups (representing thousands of people) currently operating in local communities across Australia.

The dedication and determination of these groups is testimony to a deeply felt community concern about the threat of climate change and increasing unease in the community about the direction of climate policy in Australia.

Groups generally have no political affiliations, and often represent the people and sentiments of a broad cross-section of Australian society.

Climate Action Groups are rapidly proving themselves to be a powerful force in the public climate debate in Australia

### ***How to start a Climate Action Group.***

All the accounts of how Climate Action Groups (CAGs) have started there is always a single person who takes the first step – a person like you! Perhaps you have heard an inspiring speaker, watched a stirring documentary or just decided now is the time to do something.

There are various ways this initiating person has found others to begin some activity that results in the formation of a group. Here are some ideas:

Two parent friends in the Bayside area in Melbourne put an ad in their local newsletter to find others who might be interested in the issue – see below. From this small beginning the thriving Bayside Climate Action Group developed.

**Global Warming/Climate Change** is a serious challenge our children will face. Are you a parent who is concerned about the environmental conditions in Australia that our children will inherit in 20 years?

**You are invited** to join other Bayside parents to form a community group interested in working with Local, State & Federal Government and Environmental Groups to ensure that Australia meets the challenges of Climate Change. For more details, contact:

Coni Forcey    9598-3272    [forcey5@optusnet.com.au](mailto:forcey5@optusnet.com.au) or  
Lucy Allinson    9533-4863    [allinsoninoz@optusnet.com.au](mailto:allinsoninoz@optusnet.com.au)



Another group started after a letter was placed in a community centre newsletter with a phone number for anyone interested to make contact – and those who met went on to form a group.

Some groups have started when just one person has organised a speaker on Climate Change at a public venue, and then sought interest from those who attended.

Sue Pratt from ***Families Facing Climate Change***:

*“Our groups started with myself and another woman, Anna, talking about our concerns for the environment, climate change...the inaction and denial....at a mothers’ morning tea.*

*We agreed to have a go at something...we chose something small, visiting MP’s. We put an ad in the local school newsletter to invite other interested people to join in the campaign.”*

Another group developed when a woman got together a group of five interested work colleagues to discuss what they could do – over a cup of coffee at a kitchen table.

All the groups developed from an idea for a particular activity, which provided the spring board for an ongoing group to form.

What is most important is to start to do something with others!

### ***What should your climate action group do?***

What sort of things should a community-based local climate action group (CAG) do? How can choices be made between all the ideas?

The answer depends on the particular interests of the people involved, where it is located, and how the group started or is starting.

Four common areas of CAG activity are: education, advocacy, building practical sustainability and working to make changes at the national political level. Many groups have been confronted with the question: which should we do, how many can we do, and how do these activities relate to each other?

***Education:*** Reaching out to the public and the local community including council, schools, churches, service and sporting clubs to provide information and opportunities (such as forums, street stalls, films and public events such as mass-participation human signs) for people to learn more about global warming, how it affects them and why they should get active.

***Advocacy:*** Influencing outcomes, particularly at various levels of government. For example, meeting with local government councillors and introducing a proposal for the council to become "carbon neutral" and then working to achieve this result; or using meetings or other tactics to persuade and pressure local politicians to act on the climate issue in a particular way. Advocacy may also mean working with other local institutions -- such as schools, businesses, churches -- in developing programmes and action with them, whether they be emissions reduction or community outreach and education. Advocacy may involve coordinating events with other groups in your region to provide a stronger result.

Advocacy also means working at the broader and national political level, campaigning to make members of parliament aware of the issue and putting

pressure on political parties to put the planet first and demonstrating to them that they can pay a heavy price at the ballot box if they don't. Working at the national level also provides to chance to work with climate action groups from around Australia to coordinate activities and have one big, united and effective voice.

***Building practical sustainability:*** This may include:

- supporting / administering bulk solar panel purchases and installations for households
- building local renewable energy infrastructure
- involvement in water-saving and water tank programmes
- promoting permaculture and community gardens
- educating and giving practical assistance to people and organisations with energy efficiency

Sometimes these have not always worked well together, with groups disabled by different views as to whether they should be focussing on practical sustainability, or political advocacy, for example.

Here are some practical recent examples:

- a local CAG ran a solar panel programme and it took up all the group's time for a year when people wanted to do other things as well. The group became exhausted and participation dropped off.
- a lot of people joined a CAG to get a discount on their panels, and when they were installed said they had "done their job" and did not continue with participation in other activities.
- people say they are "sick of talking" and want to get practical things done.

Here are some suggestions for thinking about these and similar circumstances, drawn from the practical experience of a number of groups.

***When involved in practical sustainability projects, link them to the broader issues.*** For example:

- Make the link between practical actions and broader policy. People install solar panels, but government is failing to introduce proper feed-in tariff legislation, so advocacy is required to make the panels fulfill their potential as a driver of wider change.
- Local renewable energy initiatives are exemplars for the wider society and government. Make sure successful installations are also a story in the local paper, and that the council and other levels of government know what you are doing and acknowledge it.
- Encourage members to make changes in their own lives, because how we live is important. But if that is all that is done, and education and advocacy at a wider social and political level does not happen, then we will not get the whole-of-society changes that compliment and build on our personal changes.

- ***But do be careful to recognise socio-economic factors.*** For example people who are renting, installing panels and water tanks depends on their landlord and agent who don't want to do it, so their interest in a CAG may be different from home-owners.

In summary, building sustainability resilience must relate to the bigger climate issues. If governments don't act on global warming and it is 3 to 5 degrees warmer by the end of the century than now, many places will simply not be liveable (due to fire, desertification, etc) and a lot of local building of practical sustainability may end up in smoke or dust.

## **How to keep a group alive!**

### ***Recognise different people's interest***

People wanting to do practical things also often welcome the social opportunity. Remember that people keep coming when they feel welcomed and valued. Members of CAGS have different interests which should be respected. People will put their heart into the actions they matter to them. Each one has something to offer, and may need to be concentrated upon separately to ensure they are contributing what they can and that they are linked in with like minds.

### ***Decide on your goals***

Be conscious of the choices. It is possible to spread resources too thinly and try and do too many things, so ensure that the group discusses and makes conscious and informed choices about its future activities. How much time will they take, what will be the result, what is a priority?

Planning and goal setting will help you measure your success as well as keep your focus. Some groups have set aside a day to discuss their options and to agree on a strategic plan for the year. However, that said it is important to be flexible as well!

### ***Name and identity***

Be thoughtful about what the name of your group tells the community. For example a name that identifies a very large geographical area may work against establishing group identity and cohesion. A smaller geographical area such as a suburb rather than a council area may work better. As the group develops it may be best to help foster more similar groups in adjoining neighbourhoods or suburbs than try to cover a huge area yourselves.

*Remember we need a very big movement of active people!*

### ***Administering the group***

- It's a good idea to establish a co-ordinating or management committee to take responsibility for plans and activities.
- Set up email lists, and join a google group (or similar) to facilitate interactions. Sometimes three levels can be useful: -  
For example:

1. Admin for the small group of activists,
2. Actions for the wider group to discuss issues, and
3. News for the wider group who just want to stay in touch on major events and issues.

Members can choose their levels.

These email interactions become the life of the group and reflect the range of interests and sharing of research and other events which then form the direction the group takes.

- Don't overwhelm people with too many emails – one a week of the group's activities is enough for the general supporters, and the list of those who like to chat can flourish then without distracting others.
- Ensure that someone is responsible for the email lists, and for the media contacts.

### ***Tips for meetings***

- Regular monthly meetings help to focus the energy on some specific actions.
- It can be helpful if the monthly meetings begin with a round of comments from each member on what has engaged them in the world of climate change over the previous month. It is also useful to go around at the end requesting any comments which they would like to make – either reflections on the meeting or things they wanted to say but didn't get the chance.
- It makes the work at meetings easier if areas for actions have been agreed previously at a strategic planning day. The detail associated with these areas is then followed up through the monthly meetings.
- Small working groups on issues arising from the meeting can often work very well. These are set up by the larger group: one person offers to lead the group and they meet independently, involving the whole group when they need to.
- Respond to suggestions from the group about activities that may arise, even when outside of the regular plan. If the group agrees then changes to priorities can be made, or a small group can peel off to undertake a particular exercise.
- Inviting speakers on issues requiring particular expertise assist groups' understanding of issues, and provides a sense of authority in the face of confusion.
- Have an agenda and make sure minutes record important decisions and who will follow up with action. A time keeper can help move the meeting along and ensure it ends on time.

### ***Keeping people involved in the group***

The active and continuing involvement of people in building the group depends on whether it fulfils their needs, including:

- it is enjoyable and socially rewarding and nurturing
- does it do the "practical" things they want to see accomplished, which may range from lobbying the local council to providing assistance with reducing the carbon footprint of one's home living, or that of the local school?
- does it recognise different people have different interests, and encourage participation?

### ***Helping new people join the group.***

When someone contacts to join your group by phone or email it can be useful to contact them with information about past activities of your group and to talk or email prior to their first meeting. This can save a lot of time at the meeting bringing them up to speed and can also help them feel more welcomed. It also provides an opportunity to hear of their particular interest and skills that they bring to the group.

A questionnaire can be another useful way of finding out about the interests and skills of a potential new members.

### ***Fundraising ideas***

Once your group is established you could organise an event to launch the group and at the same time raise some funds. The event will provide a chance for the community to learn about your group and also provide a chance for some media coverage.

Examples are : a group garage sale – Moreland Climate Group raised \$600 by charging \$2 for most items – a trivia night, a dinner at a local restaurant with a guest speaker, , raffles, auctions, food. It is often easier to raise money if you have a particular project in mind.

An event is a good opportunity to invite your local MP , and is a good way to begin the relationship with them.

Don't forget to take pictures of your events . They are useful on your website or at later events, or when seeking funds.

### ***Street stalls***

Watch our for local community events such as festivals at which you can set up a stall to display your groups activities, sign up new members. Markets and shopping centre stalls are also a way to get your group know and to sign up active new members or people who want to be in touch with your group and the climate movement.

### ***Setting up a website***

Some groups have found that blog sites using wordpress.com offers a very straight forward way of setting up a website the inexperienced, and they are free.

### ***Working with your local community***

One important part of the work of local climate action groups can be reaching out and linking in with other groups in the local area. These might be schools, Churches, nationality associations, service clubs or local environmental groups.

### ***Finding other groups in your area***

Your council will most likely publish a community directory, which should be available through the council website. This should give you a comprehensive list of the other groups in your area. When you have identified the groups that you want to target, it is simply a matter of calling, emailing or writing to them. Explain who you are and the group you are from, and state that you want to meet with their group to discuss climate change.

### ***What to do when you meet with other groups***

It can be good to prepare information about climate change before you go. This can be in the form of a short presentation or written material. It can be useful to remember that you are not presenting yourself as a climate scientist. After all the reason you are there is because you are both members of the same local community rather than because you are an expert.

This meeting, whether it is a large address or a small meeting with a committee is an excellent chance for you to learn about the issues and concerns of the group you are meeting with. An understanding of their issues and concerns will be vital to your attempts to build your community movement for climate change. Some people involved in community organising suggest that the first time you meet with a group, the members of the group should do the vast majority of the talking rather than you.

If you have an understanding of the people that are in your community, this will better enable you to communicate the urgency of climate change by linking it with their own lives. Having an appreciation of their level of knowledge and engagement with climate change will also be vital knowledge for your climate action group.

### ***An example of a community outreach project***

Darebin Climate Action Now ran two 'community leaders forums' as a way of getting in touch with their local community. Using the council directory, members of DCAN wrote letters to schools, church groups and nationality associations in their area. The letters were addressed to community leaders, and provided information about the date and time of the forum. There were two options for times, one in the early evening and one later in the evening so that the community leaders could identify what time suited them. These forums were successful in recruiting new DCAN members, publicising the existence of the group, and linking DCAN with existing networks in the Darebin area. A sample letter is attached in appendix A

### ***Hints for contacting schools***

Find a supportive parent of a school child to initiate contact with a school community. The more active the parent in their school community the better.

Alternatively many schools have an active environment or sustainability committee so making contact with that group will be a good start.

## **Additional Resources**

- available at [www.ClimateEmergencyNetwork.org](http://www.ClimateEmergencyNetwork.org) / **CAG Resources**

***Step- in to Step It Up on Climate Change: A Kit to Step-In to your Federal MP's Office.*** This great kit is filled with loads of information: preparing for a meeting or sit-in, ideas on how to conduct the sit-in, legal information, abundant creative ideas and past stories, and media tips and contacts.

***ACF's Community Climate Action: An Australian Guide***  
Especially the section – pp 20-23 ***Working together – Community Climate Action***

***Lobbying Resource Kit – from RMIT Community Advocacy Unit.***  
This guide to lobbying is a must for CAGs to guide understanding of the when, why and how of lobbying. It includes valuable case studies, reference material and other lobbying guides.

***Anyone Can: a guide to starting an environmental group and running an environmental campaign by Robin K Villiers Brown***  
A detailed kit outlines great tips on engaging people in settling up and running a campaign.

***Community Engagement and Climate Change: Benefits, Challenges and Strategies: Report for Department of Planning and Community Development, Victorian Government***  
A project and report to strengthen understanding of the ways in which community engagement strategies can be used to support and improve climate change mitigation, adaptation and structural adjustment outcomes.

***The Change Agency*** specialises in supporting effective community education. Their website provides information about their activist training courses, research articles and papers and case studies. They are doing action research projects on the climate movement – the reports are on their website.. [www.thechangeagency.org](http://www.thechangeagency.org)

## Appendix 1: Example of letter to community leaders

Letterhead  
July 31, 2008

Dear Community Leader,

We invite you to a special evening for community leaders to hear an engaging, informative and thought provoking presentation:

### ***Climate Change, You and Your Community***

You have no doubt read and heard a great deal about climate change since Professor Ross Garnaut's draft review was released and emissions trading has been in the headlines. Before Garnaut's final report is released in September, indicating the level at which targets for carbon dioxide reduction be set, we would like to offer you the opportunity to hear the latest science on climate change and take part in a discussion to help your community understand climate change.

Darebin Climate Action Now (DCAN) is a local climate action group that is part of a state wide network of climate action groups campaigning for a safe climate future for everyone. For more information see: [www.ClimateEmergencyNetwork.org](http://www.ClimateEmergencyNetwork.org)

The speaker will be Carol Ride who is the Convenor of Darebin Climate Action Now and also Convenor of the recently formed Australia wide Climate Emergency Network. She has been giving engaging presentations to community groups on climate change for the last 2 years.

**When:** 6.00 - 8.00pm Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> August 2008

OR

7.30 - 9.30pm Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> August 2008

**Where:** Northcote Town Hall Meeting Rooms, High St Northcote.  
(Enter from the door on the south end of the building).

**Melways:** 30 E9

There will be light refreshments available.

During the event there will be an opportunity to ask questions and for further discussion with other community leaders. Please feel free to extend the invitation to any colleagues or community leaders who may be interested in attending.

Please RSVP with the **date** you will be attending by Monday 25<sup>th</sup> August, email: [darebinclimateaction@gmail.com](mailto:darebinclimateaction@gmail.com) or phone .....

Yours sincerely,

Rebecca .....  
Secretary  
Darebin Climate Action Now  
Phone .....