



Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary & Waterway Management

Technical Report 78



Enhancing the role of local government in cooperative natural resource management

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February 2006



CRC for Coastal Zone
Estuary & Waterway Management



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Summary project report

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Summary project report

(Research report no. 7 in the series for the CRC's Environmental Planning for Natural Resource Management project.)

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Published by the Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary
and Waterway Management (Coastal CRC)

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data

Enhancing the role of local government in cooperative regional natural resource management:
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QNRM06321

ISBN 1 921017 61 9 (print and online)

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Abbreviations and acronyms

Coastal CRC	Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary and Waterway Management
CSPs	Case study partners
FNQ NRM Ltd	Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management Limited
GH CMA	Glennelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority
NRM	Natural resource management
RCS	<i>Glennelg Hopkins Regional Catchment Strategy</i>
SEQ	South-east Queensland
SEQ WCG	South East Queensland Western Catchments Group

Executive summary

The current regional community-based framework for natural resource management (NRM) has provided challenges and opportunities for improving the uptake of NRM at local government level. These initiatives have potentially strong links to local government's existing statutory and institutional frameworks for environmental planning and management processes and practices.

This project was a collaborative research project of the Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary and Waterway Management (Coastal CRC) in partnership with the Environmental Planning Group (Griffith University) and a number of regional NRM bodies. It was undertaken as an action research program using a longitudinal study with three selected NRM regional bodies as collaborating research partners. The project's regional NRM case study partners (CSPs) were:

- South East Queensland Western Catchments Group Incorporated (Queensland);
- Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management Limited (Queensland); and
- Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority (Victoria).

These three regions contain a wide diversity of urban and rural local governments which vary significantly in physical size, population, resources, internal capacity and commitments to planning.

At the commencement of this project in 2005, these three NRM bodies were implementing or starting to implement their accredited regional NRM plans. However, there was not a full commitment from local government to take up all of the NRM responsibilities assigned to them in these plans. In fact, there was a wide variation across the regions of local government involvement in the preparation of these regional NRM plans. Evidence suggests there was an expectation that all of the stakeholders (including local government) would automatically implement their assigned NRM responsibilities under these regional NRM plans.

These observations accord with the literature which confirms that continuous renegotiations are normal and should always be part of the ongoing implementation phase of the planning process. There is also strong evidence that the plan implementers should always be part of the plan-making phase.

The research has highlighted a range of barriers and capacity deficiencies that constrain local government from fully embracing their assigned NRM responsibilities. The study also noted that many of the local government NRM responsibilities were already being undertaken but in different programs and in different forms to that defined in the regional NRM plans. Hence there is an immediate need to review the NRM capacity and undertakings of each local government with the intention that the regional NRM bodies commence renegotiations with the local government authorities in their region.

The research has highlighted the urgent need for each regional NRM body to commence this renegotiation process on an individual basis with each local authority in its region. Agreements reached in these renegotiations should be confirmed in a Memorandum of Understanding supported by a local government engagement strategy and annual action plans. These initiatives should be supported by the results of the review of the NRM capacity of each local government. The major intention of these initiatives should be to improve NRM uptake by local government to the point where the relevant mutually agreed NRM priorities of the regional NRM plans are transferred into the normal planning and management processes and practices of local government. This should be undertaken in the context of a collaborative implementation arrangement for the regional NRM plan and should involve all regional stakeholders.

To support these principal recommendations, this project has developed a number of tools to assist both the regional bodies and local government. In particular, this set of web-based tools is designed to allow local government to enhance their capacity to improve their NRM uptake in response to their assigned responsibilities from their respective regional NRM plans. The tools focused on three specific areas of assistance, namely:

1. An interactive local government *Self assessment guide to establish NRM capacity* that can assist them to complete an independent audit of their NRM capacity and shortfalls;
2. An interactive *NRM plan roadmap* that steps the user through the relevant planning instruments and links with the associated complex of NRM and NRM related legislation. This tool is designed to facilitate the incorporation of NRM science into local government planning; and
3. A model process, *Towards a simplified and enhanced grant application process for NRM*, to assist local government and their local community to access funding to support the completion of their assigned NRM responsibilities.

These tools are contained in a project-specific part of the Coastal CRC web site, and are available to assist local government in planning for NRM. The proposed initiatives are supported by a set of recommendations to the regional NRM body and local government which were derived directly from the collaborative research program.

The principal recommendation requiring the regional NRM bodies to collaboratively develop a formal engagement strategy with each local authority in their region is designed to secure the local authorities' long term commitment to the implementation of NRM in their area of responsibility. This will produce a strong local government network capable of addressing their existing and future NRM responsibilities under any future set of renegotiated arrangements. The recommended local government Engagement Strategy and its associated NRM capacity enhancement initiatives have been designed to elevate the collaborative partnerships between regional NRM bodies and local government to new and potentially much more productive levels.

1 Introduction

1.1 General

The relatively recent establishment of a regional community-based framework for natural resource management (NRM) planning and program delivery throughout Australia provides both challenges and opportunities for achieving sustainable outcomes for NRM at regional and local levels. Local governments potentially have a leadership role in implementing NRM arrangements; however, there are a number of barriers that need to be overcome before this can occur. This document outlines some of these barriers identified by both regional bodies and local government and suggests strategies and mechanisms for overcoming them.

These NRM initiatives have the potential to move existing state and local agencies to a higher order of regional cooperative and community engagement. However, because of the longstanding existing statutory and institutional frameworks for environmental and natural resource planning and management that exist at the local government level, these initiatives will have to evolve in recognition of those frameworks. This suggests that there are key links between NRM and existing planning processes and practices that must be addressed. It also suggests a different and evolving role for local government within these new regional arrangements.

The evolving arrangements for local government in NRM are the subject of this research project. It has a focus on environmental planning for NRM with the intent of enhancing the role of local government in collaborative regional NRM. The project was collaborative in nature and was initiated by the Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary and Waterway Management (Coastal CRC) in partnership with the Environmental Planning group (Griffith University) and a number of regional NRM bodies. These research partners are introduced in Section 2 and described in detail in Appendix 1.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 Research questions

The evolving arrangements for local government in the current NRM landscape raise a number of important questions. These include:

1. What are the key elements of successful cooperative planning and management involving local governments, to achieve successful sustainable outcomes in NRM at regional and local scales?
2. How are regional NRM outcomes dependent on, or benefited by, existing statutory planning processes and practices?
3. What are the changing dimensions and responsibilities for local government in these emerging voluntary collaborative regional NRM arrangements?
4. What lessons can be learnt from the experiences of local government participation in successful regional cooperative NRM bodies?
5. What opportunities exist to improve the incorporation of NRM science into the statutory and non-statutory planning processes of local government operating at the regional scale?

1.2.2 Study objectives

In response to these research questions, a collaborative research project was established to address the following study objectives:

1. Understand the role of local government in voluntary regional cooperatives for natural resource planning and management.
2. Understand the key elements required for successful cooperation by local governments operating in voluntary NRM management arrangements at the regional scale.
3. Define the key links between natural resource management and the existing planning processes and practices of local government operating at the local and regional scales.
4. Identify key barriers and constraints to improved NRM uptake by local government.
5. Facilitate and identify opportunities for local government to enhance NRM outcomes from voluntary regional cooperative planning arrangements.
6. Identify opportunities to integrate NRM science into planning processes (statutory and non-statutory) and practices operating at the local and regional scales.

These research objectives directed the study towards achievement of the range of expected short-, medium- and long-term outcomes outlined in Section 3).

1.3 Report organisation

The methodology that responds to the above research questions is introduced in Section 2 and is supported by a number of appendices. Section 3 outlines the project outcomes targeted, as well as the principal research outputs in terms of the range of reports generated throughout the action research program. The regional NRM bodies' perspectives of local government's NRM responsibilities under their plans are summarised in Section 4 while the next section (Section 5) summarises the perspectives of local government on their assigned NRM responsibilities under the region NRM plans. Section 6 highlights the acknowledged barriers to improved local government NRM uptake which need to be accounted for in enhancement initiatives. Strategies to engage local government in NRM across the regions are discussed in Section 7. The principal web-based tools that this project has developed to support local government NRM enhancement are described in Section 8. The final section outlines a series of recommendations to the regional NRM bodies and to local government that the project has identified as necessary to improve NRM uptake by local government.

2 Methodology

The nature of the research questions and study objectives required the research to be conducted as an action research program involving a number of voluntary regional NRM bodies as the case studies. This allowed a longitudinal study to be undertaken of these case studies as a collaborative research partnership between the Environmental Planning for NRM project of the Coastal CRC and the selected regional NRM bodies.

To this end, it was essential that the collaborating research partners had accredited regional NRM plans and had begun to implement (or were beginning to implement) these plans at the start of this research project in early 2005. Three case study partners (CSPs) met these conditions, albeit their accredited plans were at different stages of implementation, as were their associated regional investment strategies. Nevertheless, these documents provided the necessary publicly agreed position on anticipated local government involvement in collaborative NRM and their expected NRM uptake in their normal processes and practices. The CSP documents are included in the reference list at the end of this report (see FNQ NRM 2005; GH CMA undated a, b; SEQ WCQ 2004).

The project's regional NRM CSPs who agreed to participate in this action research program were:

- South East Queensland Western Catchments Group Incorporated (SEQ WCG)¹ – based in Ipswich, Queensland;
- Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management Limited (FNQ NRM Ltd) – based in Innisfail, Far North Queensland; and
- Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority (GH CMA) – based in Hamilton, Victoria.

These three regions contain a wide diversity of urban and rural local governments which vary significantly in physical size, population, resources, internal capacity and commitments to planning. They also had varying degrees of involvement in the preparation of the regional NRM plans for their respective regions. A detailed description of these participating CSPs is contained in Appendix 1.

¹ During the course of undertaking this study, SEQ WCG was amalgamated with the NRM SEQ to form SEQ Catchments, thus creating one accredited regional NRM body for the SEQ region. This project has retained reference to SEQ WCG, however, as it was the original CSP who took part in the action research. Nevertheless, it is understood that the project's recommendations are relevant to the new SEQ Catchments group.

A further consideration behind the final selection of these CSPs was their involvement in two different state statutory local planning systems (i.e. Victoria and Queensland) as well as three different regional planning regimes. Consequently, this diversity allowed the widest investigation as possible of barriers, constraints and opportunities for NRM uptake into local government planning processes and practices.

The conditions of the CSPs' implementation within these different planning regimes facilitated the immediate commencement of the action research program at the beginning of 2005. The specific tasks of the research program are set out in Appendix 2.

The establishment of the expectations that the regional NRM bodies and local government had for local government uptake of NRM was achieved through a series of workshops conducted in each CSPs region. These workshops also assisted in setting the early direction for the action research program. The specific details of these workshops are described in Appendix 2.

3 Project outcomes and research reports

3.1 Existing and anticipated project outcomes

The study was guided by its research objectives towards the achievement of the range of short-, medium- and long-term outcomes set out below.

Short-term

- Local governments from the regional NRM research partners use an enhanced cooperative working arrangement to facilitate the delivery of regional NRM outcomes through existing and evolving statutory and non-statutory planning and management arrangements.
- Local governments improve their participation in regional NRM efforts by the collaborative application of enhanced statutory and non-statutory planning processes.
- Stakeholders (including but not limited to local governments) from other regional NRM bodies access the research results and research products from this study.

Medium-term

- Stakeholders (local governments) from other cooperative regional bodies adopt the proven planning and management processes and procedures from this research.
- There is broad-based local government acceptance and enhanced capability leading to a leadership role for local government in NRM planning and policy implementation.

Long-term

- An enhanced degree of community engagement is developed with local government, involving shared decision-making and cooperative implementation of regional NRM policies.
- A strongly integrated science-planning partnership is formed for NRM policy development and implementation and involving local government operating at the regional and local scales.

3.2 Research reports

Due to the action research nature of this project, it was decided to document the research findings progressively as each discrete study step was completed. This

allowed the CSPs to be informed of the findings earlier than if one main report was produced at the completion of the project. Consequently, the project has produced a communication strategy and a series of seven separate reports (see citations in Table 1). Two case study partners commissioned additional research work specific to their local and regional needs during the course of this study. This work has been reported separately (Low Choy, 2005; Low Choy, Steiner & Maccheroni, 2006) but is also shown in Table 1.

This current—and final—report builds on the previously released research reports and provides a linking summary for the project. As well as providing a summary of the project's research reports, Table 1 also identifies the specific study objectives each product addresses, and shows their publication status.

The relationship between the principal reports of this research project is illustrated in Figure 1, along with the main sources and research activities relied upon for the study.

Table 1: Project research reports, specific study objectives addressed, and publication status

No.	Research report	Study objectives addressed	Citation	Publication status
1	Communication strategy	5, 6	Low Choy & Maccheroni (2005a)	Published on CRC web site
2	<i>Regional NRM bodies' perspectives on future local government involvement in NRM;</i> research report no. 1	1, 2, 3	Low Choy & Maccheroni (2005b)	Published on CRC web site (softcopy available)
3	<i>Local government perspectives on future involvement in NRM;</i> research report no. 2	1, 2, 3	Low Choy & Maccheroni (2005c)	Published on CRC web site (softcopy available)
4	<i>Web page initiative;</i> research report no. 3	3, 5	Low Choy & Maccheroni (2005d)	Published on CRC web site
5	<i>Capitalising on opportunities: Incorporating NRM into local government planning;</i> research report No. 4	3, 4, 5	Low Choy & Maccheroni (2005e)	Published in hard copy and on CRC web site
6	<i>Securing the foundations – Towards improved local government NRM engagement;</i> research report No. 5	3, 4, 5, 6	Low Choy & Maccheroni (2005f)	Published in hard copy and on CRC web site
7	<i>Improving outcomes – Web-based tools for enhancing local government NRM planning;</i> research report no. 6	5, 6	Low Choy & Maccheroni (2005g)	Published on CRC web site (softcopy available)
8	<i>Enhancing the role of local government in cooperative regional natural resource management – Summary project report;</i> research report no. 7	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Low Choy & Maccheroni (2006)	Published in hard copy and on CRC web site
9	<i>Towards a local government engagement strategy;</i> a report to Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Low Choy (2005)	Report to client
10	<i>Bridging the barriers – A study of local government NRM uptake opportunities in the Western Catchments of SEQ</i>	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Low Choy, Steiner, & Maccheroni (2006)	Report to client

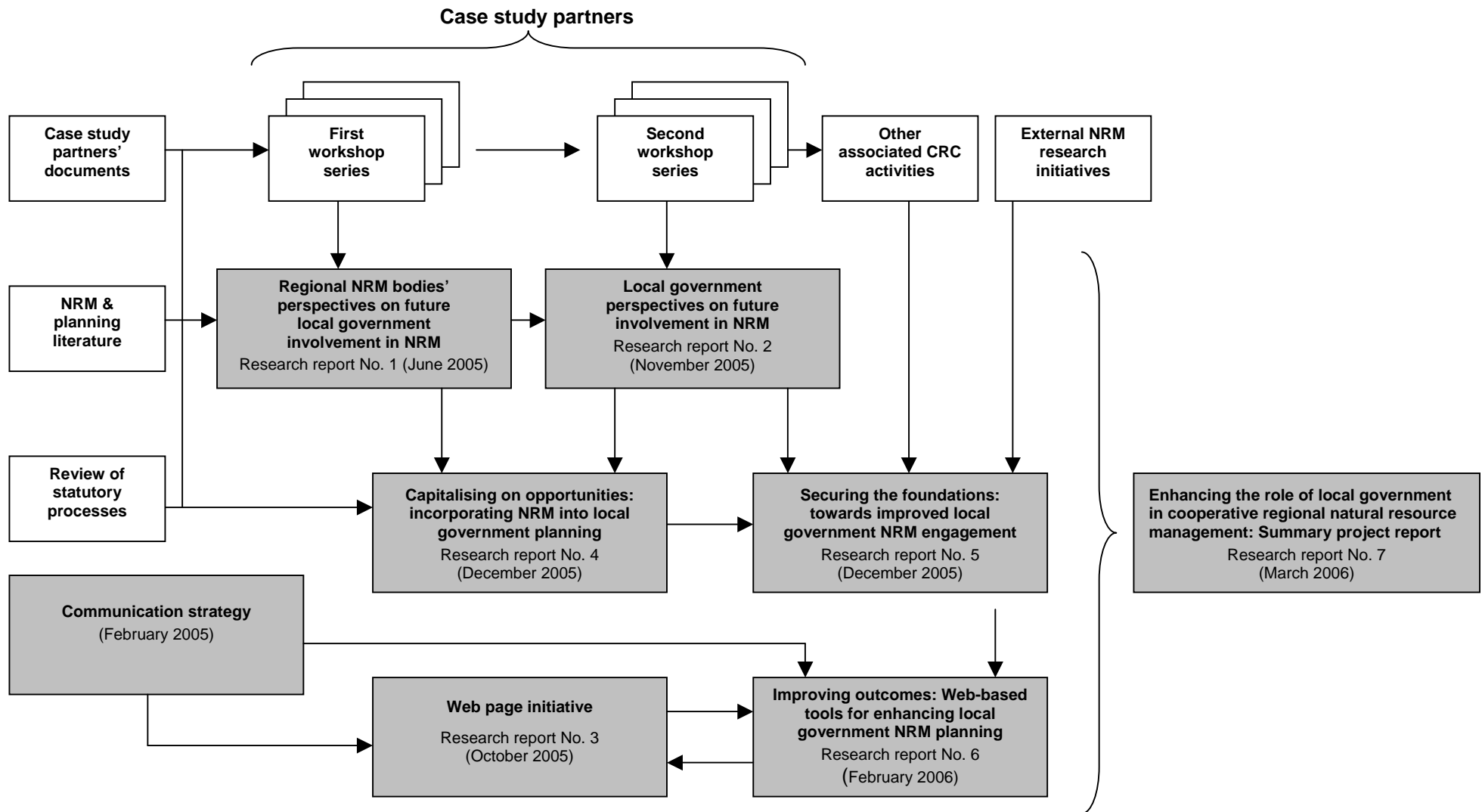


Figure 1: Relationship between research reports and the principal sources and activities of the investigation

4 The regional NRM bodies' perspective

The first round of workshops sought to ascertain how the NRM Board members and staff of the regional NRM bodies understood the challenges of implementing their (then) recently finalised regional NRM plans. The workshops were specifically directed towards identifying the potential opportunities for the collaboration and involvement of local government in the implementation of these plans. The generic conduct and findings of these workshops included the themes of:

- the need to clarify and promote the roles and responsibilities of local government in NRM;
- NRM education, training and expertise within local government;
- more effective and meaningful networks for the communication of NRM matters to local government; and
- the need for enhanced strategies for community and stakeholder engagement by local government in NRM.

There was general acknowledgement in all regions that local government does and can play a crucial role in the successful achievement of various desired outcomes of the regional NRM strategies. There were high expectations that this should be achieved through the existing processes of local government, particularly their statutory planning processes.

It was universally acknowledged that opportunities existed to incorporate NRM matters into local government's mandatory corporate planning processes, their statutory planning processes and their operational plans that drive the day-to-day activities of councils. Opportunities to extend the incorporation of NRM considerations were also noted in relation to local government's development control processes.

There was strong support for improving local government's involvement in NRM through their daily operations and on-ground works. While it was recognised that there was a wide variety of existing NRM involvement among local governments, the major themes for their future involvement were identified as including:

- pest management (plants and animals)
- biodiversity, including the protection of regionally significant (terrestrial and aquatic) ecosystems
- waterways health and water quality

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- soil decline and salinity
- climate (particularly greenhouse, climate change and air quality)
- agricultural systems (including the protection of good quality land)
- urban systems (particularly waste disposal, urban stormwater and effluent treatment).

All regional NRM CSPs fully acknowledge the need to engage local government in the implementation of their respective NRM Plans. Each had a different set of relationships with the local governments in their region and had addressed the needs and opportunities to engage their local governments in their own way.

The findings from the first workshop series were invaluable as they provided a unique insight into the corporate 'mind' of the NRM Boards and their staff at a crucial time in the commencement of the implementation of their respective regional NRM plans. The participating CSPs provided a snapshot of their current intentions and understanding of their desired role for local government engagement in their implementation processes. This information was crucial in guiding subsequent research on local government involvement in regional NRM and directing the development of enhancement processes and tools for local government.

5 The local government perspective

The second workshop series with elected members and staff of local governments from the CSP regions was designed to ascertain how they saw the challenges of addressing and implementing the responsibilities that have been assigned to local government through the (then) recently finalised regional NRM Plans. These workshops provided the local government perspective on their assigned responsibilities under the NRM plans and the outcomes could be compared with the results of the first workshops.

The second workshop series identified a number of common findings across all CSPs. The findings, which relate to how local government can contribute to the implementation of regional NRM plans, were grouped into six discrete themes and included:

- the need for NRM funding and the engagement of NRM and planning staff with appropriate experience;
- the need to improve local government's capacity to deliver NRM;
- the need to raise NRM awareness and provide education to local government;
- improved community and stakeholder engagement;
- improved federal and state government support mechanisms for the devolution of power to local government; and
- ensuring the regional bodies actively participate in collaborative partnerships with local government for the successful delivery of NRM activities.

The processes and functions that local government considered could be utilised to support the implementation of the NRM regional plans included those outlined below.

Planning

- The existing (modified) local government planning system and associated framework
- The corporate planning process (provides the mechanism for the integration of NRM into local government's core business)

- Enhanced strategic, statutory and operational planning functions and planning tools and instruments (e.g. planning schemes, environmental management plans).

Operational management

- Existing (enhanced) reporting systems to include NRM projects and initiatives
- Local government's role as a public landowner and land manager and their involvement in committees of management.

Community engagement

- Existing links to established community groups for the delivery of NRM
- Community consultation processes—could be further enhanced by project exemplars to show successful on-ground projects
- Existing council communication processes enhanced to provide NRM operational standards, guidelines, checklists and fact sheets.

It was agreed that this enhancement would only be successful if additional financial and human resources were made available to local government. The enhancement of local government's capacity to facilitate NRM across its core business activities requires appropriate local government funding and the engagement of specialised NRM staff with the ability to strategise as well as carry out effective implementation of NRM initiatives.

It was noted that local government has a long history of successfully carrying out various NRM activities such as weed and animal pest management. These activities along with other landcare activities provide essential process tools that can be expanded and built upon to create a wider NRM focus by local government. These initiatives can be further enhanced through collaborative partnerships with the regional NRM bodies. These partnership arrangements will assist local government with the implementation of desired regional objectives and management action targets as identified in the regional NRM Plans of each CSP. All of the enhancement initiatives required the development of greater cooperation between local government and their regional NRM bodies.

The second workshop series reflected ongoing engagement of local government stakeholders in the emerging regional NRM processes of the CSPs. Their findings reiterated and reinforced the findings of the first round of workshops, specifically in terms of the challenges, barriers and enhancement requirements for improved

local government NRM uptake. Importantly, they provided a unique insight into the local government 'mind' through the eyes of the participating local government elected members and staff.

Subsequent research into the existing statutory and non-statutory planning systems of local government have confirmed the existence of these opportunities for improved NRM uptake by local government through their processes and practices (see Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005e).

6 Barriers to improved local government NRM uptake

Local government representatives from the CSP regions identified a range of barriers hindering improved local government NRM uptake. These include:

Main barriers for local government

Local government's internal structure and limited dedicated NRM human resources were identified as the most significant barriers. The lack of dedicated NRM staff and available technical NRM expertise are limitations that affect a wide range of local government activities, including internal activities and external communications with the community. These barriers are exacerbated by local government's constrained financial resources and finite rate base which is particularly acute for smaller Local Authorities. There is a strong expectation that external sources are necessary to address these resource shortfalls.

Barriers related to the regional body and the regional NRM plans

The lack of clear definition between the NRM roles and responsibilities of local government and the regional bodies has resulted in considerable confusion. Other barriers related to a lack of clear communication channels between local government and the regional body. These barriers were placing the partnership arrangement between local governments and their respective regional NRM body at risk.

Barriers between local governments

Identified barriers here included a lack of regional coordination among local authorities; cross-boundary issues such as the lack of continuity in resource management; and a lack of compatibility between technical systems supporting planning and policy development.

Other barriers for local governments

Overwhelmingly this included the lack of any long-term certainty in state and federal government funding arrangements for NRM and similar initiatives. Local government is particularly concerned about the continued delegation of responsibilities to them without the necessary resources. There are some questions as to whether local government could financially support additional NRM responsibilities under their current financial arrangements. Different sets of priorities presented by overlaps between some state government programs and NRM objectives also presented barriers to local government.

Barriers related to the community

This principally entailed a lack of community understanding of NRM matters and especially of local government's NRM role. Other barriers included local government's limited capacity in expertise, time and resources for effective community engagement on NRM matters.

7 Improved local government engagement

There was evidence that there was an expectation from the regional bodies in all CSP regions that local government would automatically implement their assigned NRM responsibilities as originally proposed in the collaboratively derived regional NRM plans. However, this study has confirmed that renegotiations are a normal part of the ongoing implementation phase. This situation strongly suggested that the regional bodies have an excellent opportunity under these renegotiation requirements to develop a stronger collaborative partnership with local government. This could be formally achieved through the development of individual engagement agreements between the regional bodies and each local government in their region.

These engagement agreements should be assigned a high priority and described in a separate document—for example, a local government engagement strategy. These individual local government engagement strategies should clearly articulate a convincing case for local government collaborative involvement in the regional NRM plans and should spell out:

- the division of responsibilities for NRM initiatives and management between the three levels of government, the regional NRM body, various community groups and other stakeholders who may become involved from time to time;
- the sources of funding and other resources available to each stakeholder and local government;
- the expected financial responsibilities of local government with respect to the NRM Plan and its implementation; and
- a process through which local government can incorporate NRM matters into their corporate plans² and their statutory plans and policies (see Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005e).

'Roadmaps' were derived for each CSP region to highlight opportunities for the incorporation of NRM science into the traditional forms of local government planning activity (see Appendix 3). These roadmaps can be used by local government to find appropriate pathways for linking NRM responsibilities attributed to them in their respective regional NRM plan to their normal core planning activities. They illustrate for local governments:

² Termed 'council plans' in Victoria.

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- an overarching framework under which planning takes place and in which NRM issues can be related to those planning endeavours;
- pathways through which NRM matters can be directed or guided for incorporation into local plans; and
- associated planning activities which may impinge on or influence local planning activities.

Separate roadmaps were developed to account for the different planning systems that existed in each of the CSP regions due to state and regional differences (see Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005e). Three classes of approaches for incorporating NRM are associated with each roadmap, specifically:

Class 1: where local government is totally subject to the statutory requirements of a formal regional plan³;

Class 2: where local government is subject to voluntary requirements of a formal regional plan; and

Class 3: where local government is subject to the direct statutory requirements of its state government in the absence of a formal regional plan.

As all local authorities in Australia fall into one of these three classes, these roadmaps have national applicability.

³ The regional plan here refers to a state government-derived or a joint state and local government-derived regional plan for growth management or regional development as opposed to the regional NRM plan.

8 Web-based tools

To ensure maximum utilisation of the project's outputs, a web page was developed to facilitate the streamlined collection, dissemination and exchange of research findings as well as to maximise the delivery of the project's outputs. The outputs (including planning tools) were designed to assist the CSPs and local government stakeholders to enhance their role in the implementation of cooperative regional NRM targets. The web page was designed to:

- provide communication mechanisms and discussion forums for key stakeholders connected into the project;
- communicate to key stakeholders the value of collaborative approaches to natural resource management and the benefits of local government involvement; and
- provide enhanced opportunities for capacity building for key stakeholders and their supporting local government agencies.

This study's research findings highlighted a range of issues faced by local government and the regional NRM bodies with regard to NRM, including:

- the need for local government to build capacity and enhance its role in NRM (internally and externally);
- enabling local government to adequately assess its own capacity to uptake NRM into its core business activities while delivering on-ground initiatives and programs through collaborative NRM partnerships;
- providing assistance to local government to navigate the complex range of legislation and the associated non-statutory planning processes; and
- improving the success rate of NRM grant applications through the provision of guidance and training in the preparation of focused grant applications for NRM funding.

Consequently, mechanisms were designed to enhance the capacity of local government to fulfill their assigned and agreed NRM responsibilities under their regional NRM Plans. This relies to a large extent on local government taking the initiative in their capacity enhancement process. This in turn would allow local government to perform a leadership role in the implementation and delivery of cooperative regional NRM in their respective regions.

The three tools that were developed have been designed to assist local government and other users in different but complimentary ways. The tools focused on three specific areas of assistance, namely:

1. An interactive local government *Self assessment guide to establish NRM capacity*;
2. An interactive *NRM plan roadmap* that steps the user through the relevant planning instruments and links with the associated complex of NRM and NRM related legislation; and
3. A model process, *Towards a simplified and enhanced grant application process for NRM*.

8.1 Self assessment guide

The local government *Self assessment guide to establish NRM capacity* provides local government with:

- a means to assist them to assess their NRM capacity;
- the opportunity to gauge where they are in terms of their capacity to facilitate and deliver NRM project initiatives internally and externally;
- an opportunity to gain a better understanding of their financial and human resource commitments to their assigned NRM responsibilities;
- a method that allows local government to identify the gaps, in terms of NRM, in their planning instruments and development assessment processes;
- a means to explore mechanisms and programs currently used for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on current plan/policy implementation and to ascertain how these can be enhanced to accommodate NRM initiatives and undertakings; and
- the opportunity to better understand community and external relations for the delivery and implementation of NRM initiatives and programs.

The aim of this self-administered assessment guide is to provide local government with a tool to assess their capacity to undertake NRM within their local government area in response to their assigned responsibilities under their respective regional NRM plans.

The assessment looks at four groups of council activities and functions and a number of distinct components under each activity/function, namely:

- Governance (council NRM organisation; financial resources allocated to NRM; staff NRM resources; council's NRM policy instruments)
- Human resources (internal capacity building for NRM)
- Planning (corporate plan; planning schemes; development assessment processes; operational plans; monitoring, evaluation and reporting)
- External affairs (community and external initiatives; external relations).

A number of guiding principles that were derived from the collaborative research with local government is referenced against each capacity component being assessed.

The local government self assessment guide can be accessed at:

<www.coastal.crc.org.au/epnrm/assessment.html>.

8.2 NRM plan roadmap

The roadmap steps the user through the complex field of statutory planning instruments and processes. The tool provides a step-by-step guide for local government to all of the relevant NRM statutory requirements that directly and indirectly impinge on the NRM plans and policies in their region. The roadmap outlines the planning instruments required to be addressed as well as providing a short description of each piece of related NRM legislation. It provides a direct interactive *Hotlink* to the web site containing the specific pieces of legislation. This tool simplifies the navigation of and access to the relevant planning instruments directly related to NRM for each local government. The three roadmaps that were developed for the CSPs are illustrated in Appendix 3.

8.3 Simplified grant application process

The *Simplified and enhanced grant application process for NRM* tool is a model process for local government to follow for grant application assistance on two levels. Firstly, it can be used by an individual council applying for NRM funds from the regional NRM body or from external-to-region sources. Secondly, it can be used by a council to assist community groups to apply for NRM funds. This tool includes a facility to engage councils in the first level of application, or community groups in the second level. It also provides enhancement opportunities to improve their skills at preparing and submitting grant applications with the intention of achieving a higher rate of successful applications. The outline framework for this tool is illustrated in Appendix 4.

9 Principal findings and recommendations

The findings from the research have resulted in a series of recommendations to the regional bodies and to local government.

9.1 Joint recommendations for regional bodies and local government

These two-party recommendations⁴ propose that the parties:

- jointly promote and undertake independent audits of the NRM capacity of individual local authorities, to identify specific capacity-building and enhancement initiatives that could be (re)negotiated;
- jointly identify opportunities to share resources between local governments in the one region and with the regional NRM body;
- jointly develop a formal internal capacity-building program for the elected members and staff of local government;
- negotiate an arrangement that can coordinate and rationalise the various existing and separate local government forums (statutory and non-statutory) that cover NRM matters within the regional body's area of responsibility;
- establish dedicated NRM coordinators with individual or collective local authorities as part of the proposed local government engagement strategy; and
- introduce a formal adaptive management framework into the respective planning processes of the regional NRM bodies and local government to address the implementation of the regional NRM plans through existing statutory and non statutory planning at the local government level.

⁴ In most cases these joint recommendations require local government to carry out the action with overall facilitation or establishment being provided by the regional body.

9.2 Recommendations for regional NRM bodies

Recommendations directed towards the regional NRM bodies propose that they:

- renegotiate and complete a separate memorandum of understanding with each local authority to specify NRM responsibilities and resourcing arrangements;
- collaboratively develop a separate local government engagement strategy and associated annual action plans with each local authority;
- establish a high level, strategically focused local government advisory panel as a separate forum that recognises local government's unique and special role in NRM;
- establish an annual (or biannual) regional NRM–local government workshop/conference to review progress, share experiences and scope future opportunities;
- establish a joint regional NRM–local government community awareness and communications program to promote NRM;
- appoint a full-time local government liaison officer to oversee the implementation of the local government engagement strategy and its associated action plans;
- develop an advisory system to assist local government and the community to access and apply for NRM funding; and
- establish a process to facilitate the flow of NRM science into individual local government initiatives and activities.

9.3 Recommendations for local government

Recommendations directed towards local government authorities propose that they:

- include an unambiguous commitment to NRM in all major public policy documents, particularly in their respective corporate plans and annual reports;
- improve coordination and alignment between each council's principal planning and management instruments (including the corporate plan, financial plans, statutory planning instruments, local laws, operational plans and non-statutory documents);
- explore internal sources for additional resources (e.g. environmental levy or similar);

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- realign and streamline existing environmental management efforts in comprehensive manners that can produce savings and provide a cost-effective means of addressing NRM responsibilities;
- clarify internal institutional NRM arrangements through the designation of a council committee and a specific internal council branch that have responsibility for NRM policy and operational matters;
- establish a staff position for a dedicated, appropriately qualified NRM officer (full- or part-time according to needs);
- streamline communications within council for the dissemination of NRM matters;
- maximise the use of existing local government–community networks and supporting infrastructure to advance NRM matters;
- implement an internal NRM awareness and education program for council staff and elected members;
- extend community environmental education programs to embrace NRM;
- use existing national and state local government networks to access NRM material and resources;
- utilise the web-based tools and research outcomes from the Environmental Planning for NRM project of the Coastal CRC; and
- revise future planning documents to reflect agreed NRM commitments contained in regional NRM Plans and future agreements with the regional NRM body.

In summary, the priority local government NRM capacity-enhancement initiatives that the study has recommended for immediate implementation include:

- The completion of an independent audit of the capacity of each local authority to identify their existing NRM capacity and shortfalls;
- The incorporation of NRM science into local government planning, using the strategic frameworks outlined by the NRM roadmaps; and
- The provision of assistance to local governments and their local community to access funding to support the completion of their assigned NRM responsibilities.

10 Conclusion

Conducting the research in association with the CSPs and local government has ensured that its findings and outcomes are directly relevant to the immediate needs of the regional bodies and the local government authorities in their regions. This led to the design and development of a set of web-based tools aimed at providing local government with the means to address the enhancement of their capacity to improve their NRM uptake in response to their assigned responsibilities from the regional NRM plans.

The research findings suggest that each regional NRM body should collaboratively develop a formal engagement strategy with each local authority to secure their long-term commitment to the implementation of NRM in their area of responsibility. This will involve a series of renegotiations which have been shown to be a normal part of the ongoing implementation phase. This can provide the regional body with an excellent opportunity to develop a stronger collaborative partnership with local government while producing a strong local government network capable of addressing their existing and future NRM responsibilities under any future set of renegotiated arrangements.

The recommended local government engagement strategy and its associated NRM capacity-enhancement initiatives were designed to elevate the collaborative partnerships between regional NRM bodies and local government to new and potentially more productive levels. This should produce a more sophisticated collaborative partnership arrangement with better integrated working arrangements, more enduring structural mechanisms promoting improved communications, interaction and coordination, a shared decision-making forum and a fuller and more productive cooperative plan/policy-making and implementation environment for NRM.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Case study areas and research partners

South East Queensland Western Catchments Group Incorporated (SEQ WCG)⁵

SEQ WCG comprises the following principal local authorities, fully and partly in the NRM region, and contained within three catchments within its area of interest, including:

Local authorities: Boonah Shire; Caboolture Shire; Caloundra City; Crows Nest Shire; Esk Shire; Gatton Shire; Ipswich City; Kilcoy Shire; Laidley Shire; Rosalie Shire; and Toowoomba City.

Catchments: Stanley & Upper Brisbane catchment; Lockyer catchment and Bremer & Mid Brisbane catchment.

Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management Limited (FNQ NRM Ltd)

FNQ NRM comprises the following local authorities, fully and partly in the NRM region, and contained within eight catchments within its area of interest, including:

Local authorities: Atherton Shire; Cairns City; Cardwell Shire; Dalrymple Shire; Douglas Shire; Eacham Shire; Herberton Shire; Hinchinbrook Shire; Johnstone Shire; Mareeba Shire; Wujal Wujal Aboriginal Council and Yarrabah Aboriginal Council;.

Catchments: Barron catchment; Russell catchment; Mulgrave catchment; Johnstone catchment; Tully–Murray catchment; Herbert catchment; Trinity Inlet; and Mossman–Daintree catchment.

Glenelg–Hopkins Catchment Management Authority (GH CMA)

GH CMA comprises the following local authorities, fully and partly in the NRM region, and contained within three principal catchments within its area of interest, including:

Local authorities: Ararat Rural City; Ballarat City; Corangamite Shire; Horsham Shire; Glenelg Shire; Moyne Shire; Northern Grampians Shire; Pyrenees Shire; Southern Grampians Shire; Warrnambool City; and West Wimmera Shire.

Catchments: Glenelg Government river basin; Hopkins river basin, and Portland Coast drainage basin.

The accompanying figure illustrates the location of the three CSPs in eastern Australia (see Figure A1).

⁵ During the course of undertaking this study, SEQ WCG was amalgamated with the NRM SEQ to form SEQ Catchments, thus creating one accredited regional NRM body for the SEQ region. This project has retained reference to SEQ WCG, however, as it was the original CSP who took part in the action research. Nevertheless, it is understood that the project's recommendations are relevant to the new SEQ Catchments group.



Figure A1: Location of case study regional NRM partners

Appendix 2: Methodological approach

Action research program

The specific action research tasks that were carried out with respect to each case study (regional NRM body) involved:

- identifying the expectations that regional NRM bodies and local government had for local government involvement in NRM at the commencement of the implementation of regional NRM plans;
- examining the collaborative processes involving local government as they commenced the implementation of their assigned responsibilities associated with the regional NRM plan for their respective region;
- benchmarking the current collaborative planning and management arrangements in the case study areas;
- identifying the barriers and constraints that inhibit collaborative NRM activity involving local government;
- identifying the opportunities to facilitate and improve NRM uptake by local government through their statutory and non-statutory processes and practices;
- providing a comprehensive approach and strategy for enhanced and continued local government involvement in NRM under collaborative regional arrangements;
- developing an appropriate suite of planning tools to support and enhance local government's cooperative NRM venture; and
- developing web-based tools for local government to facilitate their successful application in the planning and management frameworks for NRM.

Workshops

Workshops to establish the expectations of regional NRM bodies and local government authorities for local government uptake of NRM were conducted in each CSPs region and took the form of:

Series 1: Workshops with the Board members and staff of each regional NRM body. Conducted in the home location of each CSP, these workshops were used to set early direction for the research, with a focus on achieving the following objectives:

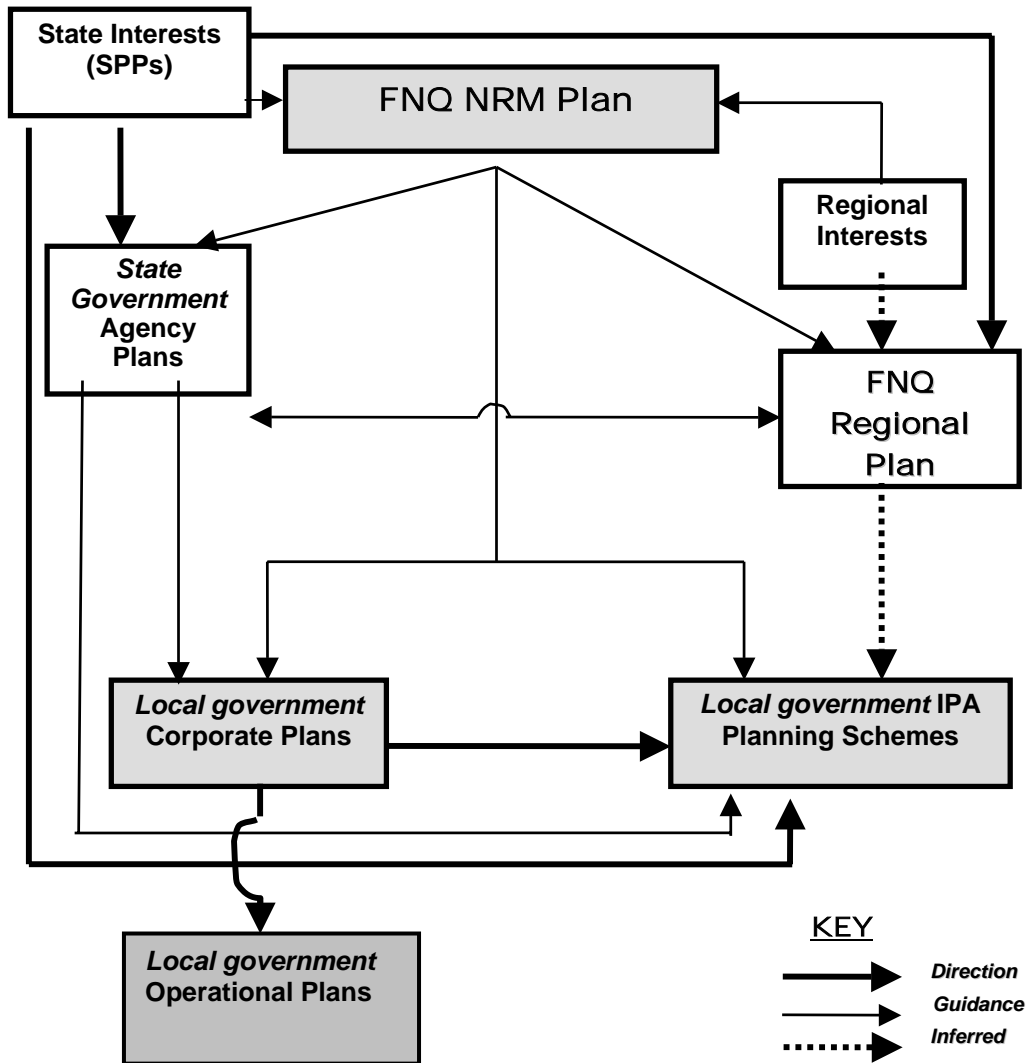
- to understand the NRM Board's appreciation for the implementation phase of their NRM plan;
- to identify the key challenges that workshop participants see in implementing their regional NRM plan;
- to highlight and prioritise the key aspects for enhancement initiatives to assist in the implementation process; and
- to identify the principal roles for local government in the implementation phase of regional NRM plans.

Series 2: Workshops with representatives from the local authorities from each of the CSP regions. The objectives of the second round of workshops were:

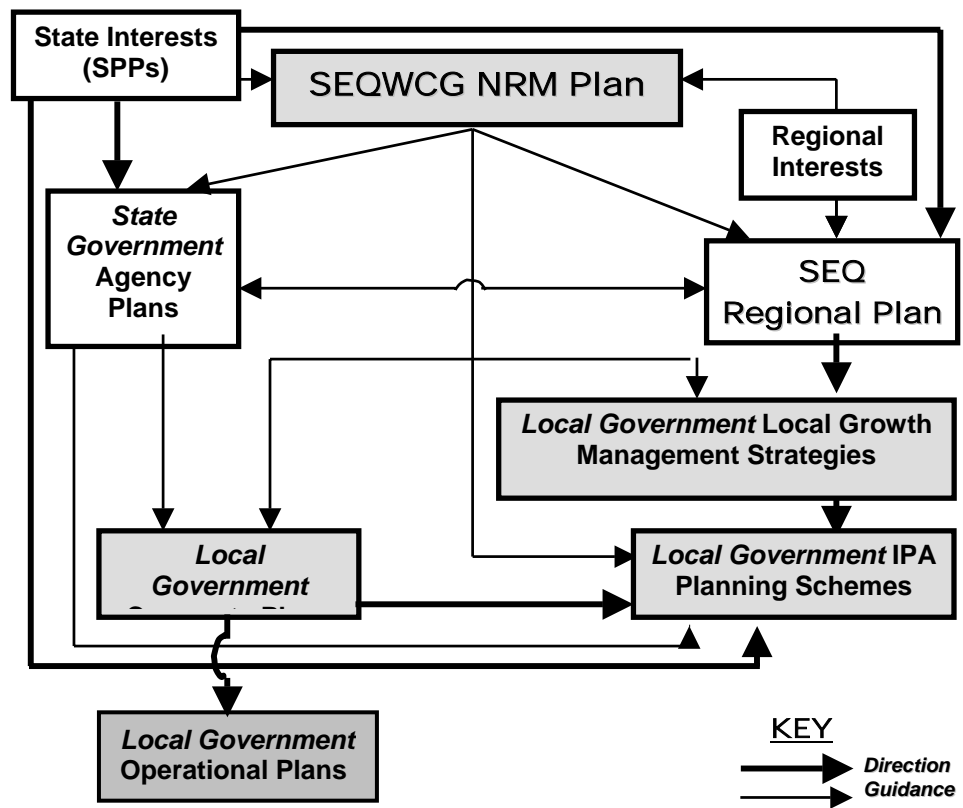
- to understand local government's appreciation of their principal roles and responsibilities in the implementation of their regional body's NRM plan;
- to understand local government's experience from the implementation phase of their regional bodies NRM plan;
- to identify the key challenges that local governments experience when implementing the local government NRM aspects of their regional body's NRM plan; and
- to highlight priority enhancement initiatives to assist local government to fulfill their role in the implementation of their regional body's NRM plan.

These second-round workshops were designed to involve a cross-sectional representation of local government officers and elected members. These representatives included councillors, chief executive officers, senior planning and environmental staff and other physical services staff who had a particular focus on NRM issues.

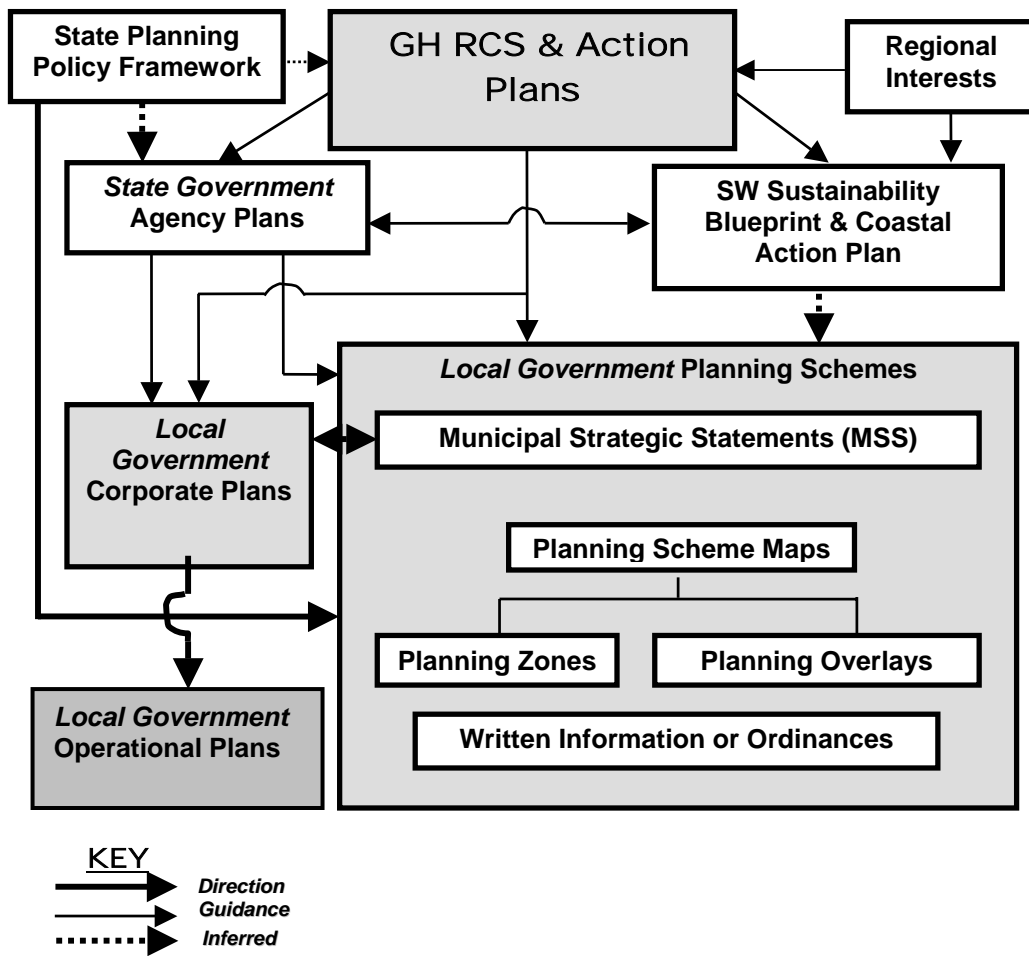
Appendix 3: Roadmaps for incorporating NRM science into local government planning



Class 1 Local government NRM roadmap (SEQ WCG case study)

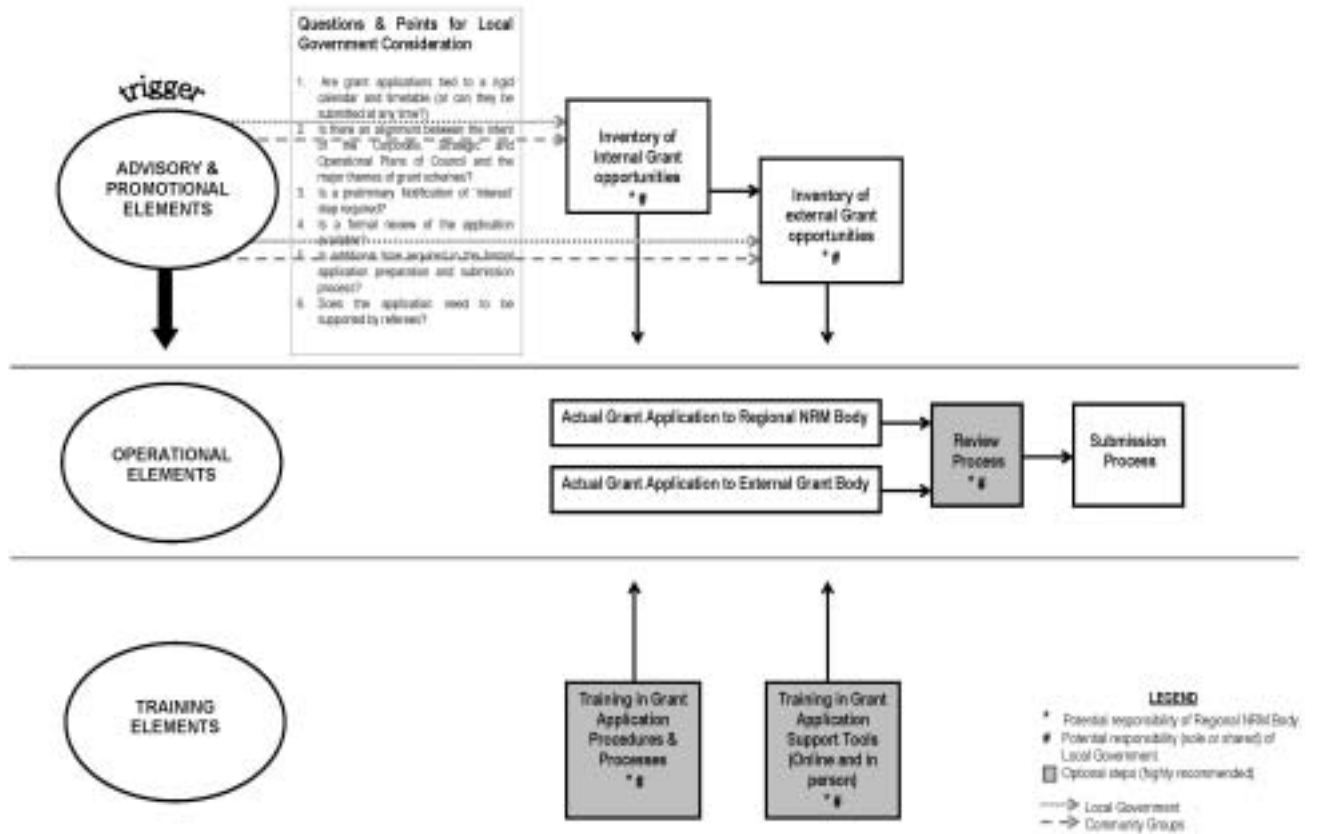


Class 2 local government NRM roadmap (FNQ NRM case study)



Class 3 Local government NRM roadmap (GH CMA case study)

Appendix 4: Outline framework of a simplified and enhanced grant application process for NRM



TOWARDS A SIMPLIFIED AND ENHANCED GRANT APPLICATION PROCESS IN NRM