

# LANDSWAP – LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY WORKING TOGETHER FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY OUTCOMES

## **N Poole**

Lockyer Valley Regional Council, Gatton, QLD

## **Introduction**

The ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi provided wise advice in his proverb '*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step*'. This proverb is particularly relevant to Disaster Recovery and the challenges that we face in that field.

In today's modern society, rich with architecture, infrastructure, and technology, when disaster strikes and lives are lost, it is a very levelling experience: suddenly, it does not matter who you are, what you have, or where you come from. People unite in order to restore what is broken, both physically and emotionally. From this unity, seeds can be sown for dramatic change – change that comes from a desire that this tragedy will never happen again.

The vision for the Grantham landswap was the first step in a long journey towards recovery, resilience, and sustainability for the residents in the Lockyer Valley who chose to participate in the Australian first landswap.

## **Context**

The Lockyer Valley is a rich agricultural district in South East Queensland that is home to approximately 37,000 people. In December 2010 and January 2011, a series of floods occurred around the region, and these culminated in a catastrophic flood on January 10, 2011, that was referred to as 'an inland tsunami', which brought death and destruction to the region. Nineteen lives were lost and approximately 2290 properties were inundated.

## **Background**

As a result of these overwhelming floods and their trail of destruction, an innovative solution was needed to help the community recover and move forward. Even while supporting the community during the turmoil and heartache that followed the flooding, the Lockyer Valley Regional Council, led by Mayor Steve Jones and CEO Ian Flint, were able to devise a potential solution within one week.

The momentum for a creative and permanent solution to the regular flooding was gathering support and taking shape in the form of a voluntary landswap. While an investigation into Australian history reveals that land swaps were undertaken in the 1800s and early 1900s, none of these were structured and directly led by Local Government.

The Lockyer Valley landswap plan was for Council to provide a flood free block of land in exchange for the flooded block of land, on a like-for-like basis, so that residents could rebuild their town one house at a time in a purposefully designed new estate. While this could have become an onerous and potentially risky undertaking, the real danger in not proceeding would have been the possible alternative: that Grantham might have become a ghost town.

Furthermore, it was logical and made great sense for residents, particularly those who were insured, to (re)build their house on a block that was high and dry above the floodwaters, rather than rebuild on the same block that flooded and in the area where so many of their neighbours, friends, and family lost their lives. Residents who were not insured gained access to other government and charity funding to assist in removing and/or rebuilding their homes. The Queensland Premier's Disaster Relief Fund provided much of the additional funding available.

Grantham and its surrounding area is a small community with a population of approximately 492 at the time of the 2011 flood. This landswap provided an opportunity for a new beginning in a flood-free area in Grantham, and an opportunity to leave behind those dreadful memories and uncertainties about future flooding events.

## **The Role of Community Engagement**

The landswap project can be divided into three key elements: community engagement, planning, and construction. This paper focuses on Community Engagement.

From the project's inception, the community was involved in discussions, meetings, consultations, workshops, and informal chats in order to consider their thoughts and feelings as the project unfolded. The aim of the community consultations was to demonstrate to the community that they are valued, that Council does care for them, and that they are supported in their community decisions. The community was consulted regularly and dynamically, albeit with incredible sensitivity considering the loss of life that occurred in the region during the 2010/11 floods. This sensitivity needed to be balanced with the need to make timely decisions to enable the project to move forward and to provide residents with a sense of security and stability.

Pivotal community engagement workshops were held throughout March 2011. These workshops were facilitated by the well respected Jude Munro AO who led the Grantham residents to uncover what it was that defined their area and what would become the foundation for how the landswap would unfold. The workshop drilled down to core community strengths, values, facilities, plans, dreams, and goals. All community members were given an equal voice and vote, and the community determined the key issues, which were presented for discussion and definition without judgement from the Council.

This workshop achieved a number of goals including a clear direction for planning, as well as the essential community engagement opportunity for the residents to feel that they have helped to shape the future of their community and to take ownership of the community development. That is, the plans were not being imposed on the residents: the residents were the ones entrusted to contribute to their own future – the future of Grantham itself. This created a powerful sense of ownership and community support.

## **Making a start**

Council partnered with a number of professional bodies and within two months of the flood, Council secured a suitable property of 935 acres on which to construct a master planned community.

The details of the Planning and Construction are not discussed here; however, the integration of these processes with community engagement was imperative for a

successful outcome. Each area needed to listen to the other in order to develop a cohesive process and to achieve the outcomes and goals of the project.

## **Government**

The Queensland Reconstruction Authority (QRA) was a significant initiative of the Queensland Government in assisting in the recovery from the 2011 floods. The QRA was able to streamline the processes for Council to enable the planning process to move forward at an unprecedented rate. Furthermore, it was essential to secure combined funding from State and Commonwealth governments for the project, and this was not an easy undertaking for the LVRC Mayor Steve Jones. Council had exhausted as much budget as it could in purchasing the land; therefore, much effort was expended on preparing the case for funding so that the plan could proceed. The funding was approved to the extent of \$18 million with strict conditions about its use for the project.

## **The Challenges**

Of course, there were cynics who did not believe in the process and the ability of Council to deliver their ambitious plan. At every opportunity, we needed to build trust in Council and its representatives. The Mayor, elected members, and Council staff were in the community on a daily basis carrying out various roles, and it was imperative that we were well informed and sharing the same information in any interactions with the community. Furthermore, we had to be willing to answer the tough questions; those that people who have just experienced a devastating loss would ask when their trust and confidence is fragile. Gradually, trust was built with most of the cynics, and eventually there could be no dispute as they witnessed the building of the new estate.

It is crucial to remember that many Council staff themselves were impacted by the flood, both directly and indirectly, and they were trying to deliver amazing service at such a stressful time. The recovery has progressed for months and years; many will argue that it still continues now, more than four years after the 2011 floods. During the initial recovery stages, Council made psychological support available to staff in groups and individually, including family members as well. This provided recognition that staff were going above and beyond for the residents, and it aided in supporting the return of some 'normality' to the region.

## **The Learnings from the Project**

One of the first considerations was finding the right people for the project. We needed people who could move mountains, cut through red tape, and get results. We needed sensitive people who could interact with vulnerable, traumatised residents. We needed an innovative team with a solution-focussed attitude who could work together solving problems without arrogance. Never underestimate the value of the right people. For us, it all came together, but it could easily have faltered with the wrong people.

## ***Case Managers***

Some of the key learnings from a Community Engagement perspective include the value of providing Case Managers as the face of Council to the community, which enabled traumatised residents to direct all enquiries to Council via one person with whom they could develop a relationship and build trust. Having a small yet committed team of community engagement professionals allowed the project's planning and construction to be informed and focussed on achieving the outcomes in a cost and time efficient manner.

It was the little things that counted in these relationships. It was listening to residents who said:

- *“We have a mortgage – how can we possibly negotiate a change of collateral?”* Council and the QRA invited the local Bank Managers to meet and provide a solution for transacting a landswap with a mortgage involved.
- *“What about capital gains tax? We have an investment property and we don’t want to be slugged this tax when we sell.”* Council, QRA and solicitors negotiated with the ATO, and the ATO waived Capital Gains Tax for the project.
- *“What about transfer duty and solicitor’s fees? We can’t afford them.”* The QRA arranged for the Office of State Revenue to provide an *ex-gratia* payment to cover the transfer duty. Two law firms offered their services pro-bono for the residents. Two other law firms offered their services pro-bono for Council.

Furthermore, additional support from local businesses and State government were crucial in helping residents feel supported. Local businesses provided free mapping services and concrete at reduced rates. The Premier’s Disaster Relief Fund provided some funding to residents whose principal place of residence was damaged. Throughout this process, the Case Managers were able to present a portfolio of assistance available for residents, together with all information in print form, to reinforce the verbal conversations.

### ***No project is perfect***

Even with the best intentions of Council and Government, this project was not a ‘one size fits all’ opportunity. Some residents chose not to participate because the landswap was not the best solution for their personal circumstances. Thus, the landswap being voluntary was a critical factor: residents were provided with choices and opportunities, and they were encouraged to consider all aspects before making their decision to participate. Making the best decision with the information available at the time is the best outcome that any resident can expect.

Furthermore, during the project, there were obstacles that needed to be overcome. For example, when considering the moving of houses from the flood affected area to the new estate, while the route appeared direct and close, there were height and load restrictions on those roads. Therefore, an alternative route had to be determined and then negotiated with various stakeholders including Queensland Rail, without causing concern with the participants.

At a time when the residents were still fragile, they did not need to be bothered with details that could have become stressors. Thus, through utilising the skills of the team and working together to achieve the aims of the project, these obstacles could be overcome. The participants were able to experience a relatively seamless process and were not cognisant of the behind the scenes workings. Therefore, while the project management and organisation were complex and intense, the participants were supported with the wrap around service and were not noticeably affected by the obstacles that the team faced.

### **What are the key components of a successful project?**

The success of a flood recovery and community engagement project can be defined in different ways depending on the project’s context and purpose. In the Grantham landswap, the four key components that defined its success included the landswap uptake, the fairness of the process, the wrap around service, and the timeframe.

If one measure of success of a voluntary landswap project is defined by the uptake of properties made available, then the Grantham landswap can be defined as a success from the perspective that 100% of available blocks were taken up. Residents were provided with options and choices about what they could do with their flood affected properties; the landswap being just one choice that they could make.

The process to allocate blocks was facilitated by an external organisation using a ballot system. Similar to voting in the Senate, participants were provided with a ballot card on which they numbered their preferences. An example would be if a participant owned a 4000m<sup>2</sup> block of land, they would number their choice of the 45 blocks of that size that were available, with their first choice as number 1 and their last choice as number 45. This provided fairness to all participants and kept Council at a distance from the process in order to develop a deeper trust in the Council and the impartiality of the ballot process.

It has been said that the 'wrap around service' provided by Council was a critical element for the success of the project. This wrap around service involved looking at all aspects, details, and issues of a person's personal recovery process, and the team offered assistance where possible or referred them to another agency; then, the team followed up to ensure an outcome was achieved. When traumatised people are faced with complex solutions to their painful problems, they need support to deconstruct these solutions into bite-sized pieces that can be achieved. It was the Case Managers and Project Coordinator who were tasked with making each project achievable with this wrap around service. As time moved on and residents were more able to take control, less support was required and thus offered. Recovering residents felt empowered by the progress that was being made, and they felt that they had sufficient control at the right times.

Timeframe is another element for success. The first house on the new estate officially opened on 8 December 2011 – less than eleven months after the devastating flood. Residents had put their lives on hold to rebuild after the floods, and this was a very pleasing outcome; it also demonstrated that it was possible to recover in a timely manner. It was due to the tenacity and efficiency at all levels that enabled the fast tracking of this project.

The project operated under a policy endorsed by State Government. Over time, this policy was amended in order to include other considerations that were not evident at the time the original policy was written. These changes all needed to be approved through State Government processes, but they were streamlined in most cases. This demonstrated to the community that Council listened and were willing to make adjustments where possible.

## **Conclusion: Resilience and Sustainability**

The Grantham landswap was a major undertaking from its conception through to its completion, and there were many lessons learned along the way that should be shared to enable other communities to proceed with confidence in an area that has had little promotion or success on the world stage. This project demonstrates how a small Local Government exceeded expectations and succeeded in bringing together government funding and community expectations.

With governments increasingly aligning their budgets to fund projects where resilience and sustainability are key components, the value of landswap as a viable and sustainable solution to flood plain management where smaller communities face regular inundation, cannot be overstated.