

Sustainable Communities



A NATIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR URBAN AUSTRALIA

URBAN AUSTRALIA: THE NEED FOR ACTION

To be successful Australia's cities and towns need to be diverse, vibrant and inclusive communities.

Our cities are global portals and vital for engagement with the international economy, generating some 80% of GDP. This is an urban nation that relies on its cities and sophisticated and knowledge exports to sustain national prosperity. If our cities are not efficient attractors of such capital and capable of retaining people with high level skills and capabilities we will not have a sustainable economy.

Our cities also need to be inclusive, healthy environments that are rich culturally and socially. They must be vibrant, exciting, accessible and safe places in which to live where our heritage is respected and we can build social capital and reduce poverty.

Creating sustainable cities requires planned action.

A NATIONAL ACTION PLAN

A consensus is emerging for a nationally coordinated approach to the sustainable development of urban communities just as we have national strategies and policies in areas such as competition, salinity, regional development, water and transport.

Four groups have collaborated to develop Sustainable Communities: A National Action Plan for Urban Australia. The bodies are the Planning Institute of Australia, the Property Council of Australia, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, and the Intergovernmental Planning Officials Group. After two summits, numerous papers and much discussion, what is proposed is a national program to improve the economic, social and environmental performance of Australia's major urban areas.

The National Action Plan comprises seven propositions that are interdependent and will inter-relate at four key levels: governance and direction, policy recommendations, review and funding, and action mechanisms.

Elements of the Mix

Governance and Direction	Policy Recommendations	Review and Funding	Action Mechanisms
COAG Ministerial Councils	Parliament Treasurer Executive Agencies Departments	Sustainable Communities Commission National Sustainable Communities Fund	Intergovernmental Agreement Urban Action Plans Local Government Expert Committees

PROPOSITION ONE: A SHARED VISION

There is much public debate about economic, social and environmental sustainability. The emerging agreement is that we need a national strategy and coordinated actions at all levels. We particularly need to raise the sustainability of our major urban centres.

Key elements we aspire to are economic wellbeing, social cohesion and stability and, above all, ecological sustainability.

The vision is for prosperous, fair and sustainable urban communities, delivered by governments and their partners working together.

PROPOSITION TWO: NATIONAL PLAN OF ACTION

The National Action Plan will establish the measures that should underpin sustainable urban communities. It will be built on such principles as: integration; partnership; equity; economic efficiency; spatial integrity; accountability; evidence-based decision-making; and public/private neutrality.

An intergovernmental agreement between the Australian Government and participating State and Territory governments and the Australian Local Government Association is proposed as the mechanism for converting the vision and principles into action. The agreement would cover all the key elements of the National Action Plan (i.e. the following steps).

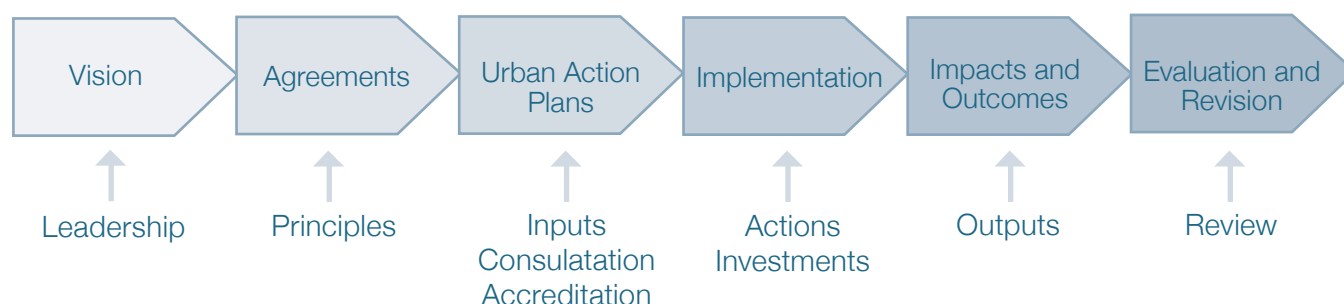
PROPOSITION THREE: URBAN ACTION PLANS

The National Action Plan for Urban Australia will operate at both a national and local level. At the local level, Urban Action Plans will be developed for specific communities identified as being priority areas. The plans will be certified by a Sustainable Communities Commission and funded through a National Sustainable Communities Fund.

The focus will be on areas of significant population density, important economic activity and emerging structural change. Attention will also be given to areas that are vulnerable to competition, rely upon capital investment, could impact on the natural environment and set high benchmarks.

The boundaries for Urban Action Plans will be developed in consultation with governments and will generally include aggregations of local government authorities. The plans will adopt a “whole of area” approach. They will facilitate a specific program of additional activities and investments, which together raise the sustainability of areas where national interests are at stake.

Process Overview



PROPOSITION FOUR: SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES COMMISSION

A Sustainable Communities Commission of three independent commissioners will govern the National Action Plan.

The Commission will be a statutory authority with responsibility to guide, assess and report on progress, both national and locally. It will be accountable to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and will recommend funding to the Australian Government Treasurer. It will not set policy or reform agendas, which is the role of COAG. Instead, it will drive the implementation of the sustainable communities intergovernmental agreement agenda.

The Commission will provide community education and communications on sustainable communities and will conduct public hearings to accredit plans and evaluate performance against them. It will accept references from and give advice to COAG with its reports tabled in Parliament.

PROPOSITION FIVE: NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES FUND

Implementation of the National Action Plan will require significant investment of resources. The Plan proposes the creation of a National Sustainable Communities Fund, supported principally by the Australian Government. It will support major infrastructure projects, offset transition costs, provide implementation payments to governments and help develop the local capacity to plan and implement projects.

The National Action Plan will mobilise several billions of dollars for investment by accessing a wide range of funding avenues. Sources will include reinvestment of asset sales revenue, reduced tax advantages for environmentally damaging activities, co-investment contributions and productivity dividends.

PROPOSITION SIX: PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Performance indicators will be developed and used for quantitative and qualitative assessment of the starting position and the changes achieved by the National Action Plan.

The indicators will be developed via an inquiry reference to the Productivity Commission by the Treasurer. The indicators will include measures of prosperity, quality of life, fairness, sustainability and partnerships. They will facilitate assessment of the performance of each of the steps: the National Action Plan, the Intergovernmental Agreement, the Sustainable Communities Commission, the National Sustainable Communities Fund, the regulation reviews and – at the local level – the Urban Action Plans.

The Commission will be able to engage appropriate external bodies to prepare performance reports. It will report through the Treasurer to COAG and the Australian Parliament on both national and local performance. The National Action Plan for Urban Australia will be accountable to the community that it serves.

PROPOSITION SEVEN: SUSTAINABLE REGULATION

All governments have policies, practices, legislation and/or regulations that impact on the sustainability of our urban communities. We propose that parties to the Intergovernmental Agreement undertake an independent review of the impact of their activities upon sustainability. Activities will be assessed for their consistency with the sustainability principles in the Agreement, and modified accordingly. The review needs to be independent and needs to link in with the review processes of the COAG National Reform Agenda.

Potential areas for regulation review include taxation, pricing of and access to transport, water usage, planning policies, development approval processes, building codes, fiscal responsibility arrangements and migration laws, many of which have already been identified by, which these sustainability reviews will dovetail with.

All new legislation and regulations that are subject to impact statements will also address the impact on sustainability.

TIMELINES

The timeframe for the National Action Plan allows for appropriate negotiation and consultation. It is proposed to have the Vision agreed during the 2006/07 financial year and the National Action Plan and Intergovernmental Agreement drafted by the end of 2007. A finalised agreement could be signed in 2007, with the first Urban Action Plans accredited during 2008 and performance reviews commenced in 2009.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The key source document for the National Action Plan is the June 2006 report on Sustainable Communities: A National Action Plan for Urban Australia prepared by the Centre for International Economics for the Sustainable Communities Roundtable.

