A Sustainable Population for Australia

Issues Paper

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1. Executive Summary

This submission from The Planning Institute of Australia (the Institute) highlights the views of the planning profession about Issues Paper's (the Paper) consistency, purpose and evidence base.

The Planning Institute of Australia advocates that the following five principles should drive a policy approach to sustainable population growth:

1. To the maximum extent possible, inward migration should be equitable in its distribution, have long term predictability and be linked to employment growth to support the vibrancy of the economy, enable cities and regions to plan for growth, and provide housing and infrastructure to support growth. A review every five years rather than every year would assist this approach.

2. Significant infrastructure investment must support a growing population in the major cities. Infrastructure linked to a strategic plan of all major cities is essential for the long term sustainability and quality of life in Australia. This must include the improvement of public transport networks, schools, health facilities, and housing.

3. Consideration must be given to the development of regional cities as destinations for all Australians, including migrants. This will require investment in jobs and fast public transport networks to link those destinations to the major cities. Smaller cities have many benefits for residents’ quality of life.

4. The protection of productive agricultural land, the supply of water and energy, the issues of salinity, flooding and the environmental protection of threatened species must shape the fringe growth of all cities, including smaller regional centres. These issues must be addressed in all plans to grow our cities. Serious consideration of new options for making the best use of urban land must be actively canvassed as part of any sustainable population policy.

5. It will be necessary to adjust Australia’s appetite to consume beyond its means and generate waste in way that pollutes the environment, including the gases contributing to global warming, if Australia is to accommodate an increase in population in a sustainable and responsible way.

These principles are elaborated upon in more detail throughout the submission.

The Institute supports the adoption of a sustainable population strategy by the Australian Government, and believes planning will play a crucial role in delivering or assisting the strategy’s objectives in all three spheres of economic, environmental and social ‘sustainability’. In order for this to be successful, the Institute advocates for a greater consideration of how population and demographic change is supported in a spatial sense, including those areas that will experience decline.
The Institute believes that there are some shortcomings in the purpose, consistency and evidence exhibited by this Paper. The Institute strongly advocates that the final policy position adopted is based on a solid and transparent evidence base, and that it is more consistent and clear in its definition and use of the word ‘sustainable’. There is also room to improve consistency between sections and clarify the purpose of the paper.

1.1 Environmental Sustainability

Planning will have a significant role to play in managing the effects of a changing population on the natural environment. The Institute believes the final policy should have a greater emphasis on the need for Australia’s population to significantly decrease consumption, in tangent with maximising the efficient use of natural resources.

The loss of biodiversity and fertile agricultural land through urban expansion is a significant consequence of population growth in large centres. Planning can assist in addressing this by facilitating infill development and curbing the expansion of greenfield development through determining land suitable for urban development.

In some cases this will mean facing up to the harsh reality that urban areas may need to be contained, but this will have a range of positive effects, including protecting important agricultural land, particularly in peri-urban areas, which once depleted, can never be replaced (it is a finite resource, but is more critical than oil in potentially needing to feed people into the future). Protecting fragile environmental systems, maximising the use of established infrastructure and services, reducing the cost of expending that same infrastructure and services, and building more cohesive and dynamic communities.

The Institute advocates that a population strategy should work in tandem with any National Urban Policy adopted by the Federal Government and city strategic planning systems agreed through the Council of Australian Governments. This can create a spatial design and land use mix that work to minimise greenhouse gas emissions and addresses the impacts of climate change on urban development when considering the distribution of the population.

1.2 Economic Sustainability

Sound planning practice can positively influence the conditions required for investment and economic growth in our cities and non-urban centres. Efficient settlement patterns, better resource management and improved institutional arrangements for development assessment and infrastructure provision will lead to significantly higher rates of economic growth and taxation receipts (PIA, 2004, p. 3).

The Institute recommends that any strategy adopted gives greater consideration to the spatial opportunities afforded when considering prosperity. Population growth and skilled migration should be targeted for prosperity, including planning for employment opportunities and the diversification of the economy in different centres.
The Institute would also like to see an expansion of the demographic issue from one focused entirely on the ageing population to other related issues.

1.3 Sustainable Communities

The provision of infrastructure needs to be more closely linked with land release in order to prevent social exclusion in communities who have decreased access to amenities and services. The Institute strongly recommends greater integration between land-use planning, transport provision (particularly public transport) and infrastructure generally, including social. This will also enhance linkages to any future National Urban policy and the work of Infrastructure Australia.

Work by planners to increase density in existing urban areas needs to be complemented by policies that support a cultural shift in Australia away from the need for large blocks and big houses. The Institute would also like to see the disaggregation of services, as recent trends tend to encompass everything into one large complex. This has the potential to increase social exclusion and generate additional trips by private cars.
2. Relationship between planning and a sustainable population strategy

The Planning Institute of Australia supports the Australian Government adopting a national Sustainable Population Strategy for Australia, particularly in the face of significant population change. Inclusion of the word ‘sustainable’ expands the policy debate from population growth to encompass other critical issues linked to population, including patterns of consumption, demographic change, the impacts of climate change on things such as water, food and energy security, the speed of growth and the capacity to transition.

Institute members want to see a healthy, vibrant future for Australia. Interstate migration, natural population growth and inward migration all support lively cities and a strong economy. A sustainable population strategy based on the issues outlined above would form the basis of more support from the broader community for strategic population growth in Australia. The Institute has some concerns, however, regarding the Paper. The Institute is not pro, nor anti, growth but strongly advocates that good planning is an essential tool to manage the impacts of both population growth and decline. While the Institute appreciates the need for a national strategy to be relevant and applicable to a large variety of locations and several tiers of government, it also believes population cannot be considered in isolation from where it will be located, a large proportion of which will be in Australia’s major urban areas.

Population policy needs to be considered spatially, and the Institute advocates for a greater level of collaboration and interconnection between the strategies and policies that arise from the Paper, the National Urban Policy ‘Our Cities’ discussion paper (released by the Department of Infrastructure and Transport at the same time), and the COAG process on city strategic planning systems currently being responded to by the states and territories. The Institute’s submission to the ‘Our Cities’ discussion paper highlights broad support for the aspirations and objectives contained in that document and responds in more detail to key areas of relevance to planning. This submission is included in the appendices of this report.

While Australia is expected to experience an overall growth in population in coming decades, this growth with vary in its distribution, and some places, such as regional areas, may still experience a decline rather than growth in population. Discussion around the issue of decline is notably absent from the paper and is something the Institute believes needs to be addressed in order to ensure the wellbeing, and therefore sustainability, of future generations of Australians in these areas.

To make any strategy like this effective, it will be crucial to engage effectively with and gain the support of state, territory and local governments, each of which will need to acknowledge that they cannot operate in splendid isolation on such a significant policy issue.
3. General comments regarding the Sustainable Population Strategy Issues Paper

The Institute has identified some shortcomings in the purpose, consistency and evidence exhibited by the Paper. This section addresses general observations of the Institute which relate to the paper as a whole.

In order to create a sustainable population strategy which is articulate and free from misinterpretation, the term ‘sustainable’ must be clearly defined, and then used in a consistent manner throughout the Paper. The Paper initially defines sustainability as ‘wellbeing’, which should encompass the three aspects of economic, environmental and social sustainability; however the paper later refers to individual notions of sustainability, such as economic sustainability. This is contradictory to the initial explanation of the term. The definition of ‘sustainable’ provided needs to address the relationship between the different aspects of sustainability more clearly, and then be used in a clear and consistent manner throughout the Paper.

The intended purpose and expectations of the paper are not clear. The ‘Purpose of This Issues Paper’ states, somewhat ambiguously, that the paper is “… designed to draw out community views about the challenges and opportunities created by changes in our population. This will help to inform the government as it develops a Sustainable Populations Strategy”. There are also inconsistencies between different sections of the paper – some are limited to a discussion of the ‘challenges and opportunities’ to be considered (‘Environmental Sustainability’), whilst others (Economic Sustainability) also provide potential policy options for consideration. The result of this inconsistency is that respondents are not clear on whether they should be responding with regard to prioritising issues, providing suggestions for policy responses, or responding to the policy options already provided. This may in turn be reflected by unsatisfactory responses on which to build.

The Institute is conscious that balancing the environmental, social and economic sustainability of our population is a sensitive and complex task, and therefore strongly recommends that any policy position adopted by the Australian Government regarding a sustainable population strategy are informed by a comprehensive and rigorously assessed evidence base. The Institute feels the Paper needs to provide more specific references to support its content in order to develop an informed policy position. The Paper often makes sweeping references to the Backing Reports provided, and makes generalised policy statements such as “economic prosperity is possible without high levels of immigration”, however, it fails to refer to specific findings in the Backing Papers, which would lead to the adoption of such a position.

In addition to this, the Paper often refers to contradictory findings between the different Backing Reports, a notable example is a reference to one paper stating Australia does not have adequate water resources to support the growing population, while another found Australia to have ‘relatively plentiful water resources in relation to our population’.
While the paper highlights these adverse outcomes, it makes no attempt to reconcile them, or provide specific evidence or references which could assist contributors in formulating an informed response. There is also a disturbing lack of analysis placed on the crucial issue of food security, which whilst linked to water, has an equally important nexus with urban land development, which typically occurs for reasons of historic location, adjacent to food production areas.

The first section of the document relates the intention of the Australian Government to develop a set of key sustainability indicators, and the introduction of sustainability impact statements into the cabinet process. In theory the Institute is supportive of these initiatives; however the reasoning behind adopting these measures, and details of their implementation, should have been included in the Paper.

There are a myriad of sustainability indicators already in use throughout the world and those in existence should inform the development of the proposed indicators in Australia. In terms of planning, the Institute is supportive of the reforms by COAG on Capital Cities, which outline 9 key criteria for future strategic planning of our cities (COAG, 2011).

The Institute, through the Commonwealth Association of Planners and CommHabitat are developing indictors at an international level for the state of cities and regions in the Commonwealth, which it is understood are intended to be developed for consideration at CHOGM in Perth in October.
4. Environmental Sustainability

The Institute believes planning can make a valuable contribution to managing the impacts of population growth and distribution on Australia’s natural resources, and this section addresses the four areas of discussion outlined in the paper: water, biodiversity, food security, and climate change. One of PIA’s 5 guiding principles for the sustainable management of populations states that:

“The protection of productive agricultural land, the supply of water and energy, the issues of salinity, flooding and the environmental protection of threatened species must shape the fringe growth of all cities, including smaller regional centres. These issues must be addressed in all plans to grow our cities. Serious consideration of new options for making the best use of urban land must be actively canvassed as part of any sustainable population policy.”

The Paper only makes passing mention of the need to make efficiency gains in our use of natural resources (including land-use), in addition to significantly reducing our consumption levels in Australia if we are to accommodate the projected population growth in a sustainable manner.

Another of the Institute’s 5 principles states that “It will be necessary to adjust Australia’s appetite to consume beyond its means and generate waste in way that pollutes the environment, including the gases contributing to global warming, if Australia is to accommodate an increase in population in a sustainable and responsible way”. The Institute strongly recommends that the strategy seeks to address the nexus between economic growth, consumption and sustainability by actively facilitating the adoption of an alternative paradigm for measuring the wealth and wellbeing of society.

4.1 Water resources

PIA considers that, as a nation, we must manage surface water, including rivers and streams and groundwater reserves, more sustainably. Much groundwater in Australia is ancient water, which is more appropriately managed as a finite, non-renewable resource, avoiding overuse, waste and contamination. Problems of water quality, quantity and ecosystem health are related to the way water resources are used and associated activities are managed on a whole-of-catchment basis.

By defining how, where and when new development occurs, the planning system can play an important supporting role in planning for water and promoting water conservation. It would be desirable, for example, if planning strategies, development control documents, and development assessment included the principles of the water conservation hierarchy – avoid, reduce, reuse, recycle, and discharge, where necessary, in an environmentally responsible manner.
The Paper outlines several concerns to which planning can contribute, such as the location of populations relative to water resources and water reforms in urban areas. The Institute is supportive of The National Water Initiative (COAG, 2004), which includes a focus on the role of urban planning in water management. In rural areas alternative methods for use of water in agriculture need to be considered, as well necessary changes to policies to allow for industry diversification that could reduce dependence on irrigation and water allocations.

4.2 Biodiversity decline

The Institute acknowledges that land clearing for urban development is recognised as a key threatening process to Australia’s endangered species and ecological Communities by the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999) and the role of planning in managing urban expansion is critical. As outlined in the issues paper, the accommodation of population growth in Australia, particularly in major urban areas can increase demand for urban expansion and put pressure on Australia’s biodiversity.

Planning has an important role to play in facilitating accommodation of higher densities in existing urban areas, protecting existing green wedges and biodiversity on private land, and in minimizing and directing urban expansion. Planning can be responsible for containing the environmental footprint of urban areas through careful site selection, minimising land area and the environmental impact of development within the urban area.

Whilst a large proportion of biodiversity conservation is currently conducted at the national level through reserve systems, increasing pressures from population growth in urban areas highlights the need for greater proactive measures to be built into the land use planning system. These would take account of the inherent significance of biodiversity on par with other planning considerations. In this regard, however, the potential for issues of landowner compensation also needs to be considered.

4.3 Food security

The Institute acknowledges that the sustainable management of a population includes the need to provide food security. As discussed in the previous section on biodiversity conservation, there remains a view amongst many in government, the private sector and the community that Australia has an endless supply of land for urban development. Irrespective of the pros and cons of Greenfield development, land is a finite resource and has typically been under-optimised. In other words land has not been valued for its optimal use leading to substantially inefficient use of land.

This is pronounced in respect to arable land, often in the peri-urban areas adjacent to cities that have historically located in areas that could deliver food production when transportation remained primitive. The reality is that with the likely impacts of climate change and peak oil, these arable areas could again become significant as market gardens on the hinterland of Australia’s major urban areas, yet they continue to be developed for urban purposes.
Australia’s planning and land development systems promote speculation on agricultural land, which gets locked up in a cycle of land inflation, making it uneconomic to continue to be used for food production. This includes recent examples of several states and territories setting in place urban containment boundaries, only to have them frequently extended in response to land development speculation. As Australia’s population continues to grow and there is increased competition for land, retaining this resource for food production could become one of the most significant decisions to take at the start of the 21st century. This will require policy supported at a national level.

Land is a finite resource. Arable land is an increasingly scarce resource, likely to be accelerated through the effects of climate change.

4.4 Impacts of climate change

The Institute is supportive of the Australian Government’s inclusion of the impact of population on climate change in this Paper. Any strategy needs to link the impact population will have on our ability to meet current and future greenhouse gas emission targets, as well as build resilient communities for the inevitable affects of climate change. The Federal Government must implement planning for both climate change mitigation and adaptation, particularly in the context of settlement patterns, food security, emergency management and critical infrastructure.

The planning profession is in a unique position to assist the community in understanding and adapting to the expected consequences of climate change. Adaptation measures help to reduce the implications of the most serious consequences of climate change, which include greater flood risk, more extreme weather conditions, water shortages, and changes to ecosystems and micro-climates.

Planners are also able to actively work on mitigation issues and encourage changes to behaviour such as, promoting energy and water efficiency, sustainable land management practices, primary industry diversification, incorporating efficient energy use in buildings, and including climate change information in environmental assessments. The Institute advocates that a population strategy should work with any adopted National Urban policy to create spatial design and land use mix that work to minimise greenhouse gas emissions and address the impacts of climate change on urban development (metropolitan and regional) when considering the distribution of the population.
5. Economic Sustainability

The Australian economy is substantially dependent on its cities for positive economic development. For Australian cities to drive national prosperity, they will need to successfully embrace a globally focused role as well as their traditional functions. Clearly, planning will play an important role in delivering the conditions required for investment and economic growth in our cities. Efficient settlement patterns, better resource management and improved institutional arrangements for strategic planning and infrastructure provision will lead to significantly higher rates of economic growth and taxation receipts (PIA, 2004, p. 3).

5.1 Population, growth and prosperity

Good planning, interstate migration, natural population growth and inward migration can all support lively cities and a strong economy. The paper has placed an emphasis on the management of population growth across the board and how this will affect prosperity in Australia. The Institute would like to see a Strategy that includes spatial considerations about the location of populations in relation to economic prosperity.

There is the potential for a significant productivity dividend from the spatial planning of cities and regions. When observed at the spatial level, more opportunities to create a competitive edge become evident in the economy. The strategy needs to provide programs that are responsive to the ebb and flow of population levels between places over the long term, as planning will play an integral role in managing the employment opportunities and economic development of these locations, be it for growth or decline.

Economic prosperity should not be pursued to the detriment of environmental or social objectives. A prosperous economy will need to adjust the current trend to consume beyond its means, particularly as the population increases, as current patterns are simply unsustainable both in resource use and by-product outputs.

5.2 Australia’s ageing population

The Institute would like to see a population policy that considers demographic change in the long term, as well as all potential challenges, rather than the immediate one at hand. The Institute acknowledges that the demographic shift to an aged population is a significant challenge that a population strategy should address. The focus of the Paper, however, is heavily premised on the issue of an aging population and Australia’s need to attract a larger, younger workforce to support them. This only addresses one immediate need, and is not sustainable in the long term.
5.3 Availability of skills

Population growth and skilled migration should be targeted for certain economic and productive objectives, such as certain skills and jobs in both cities and regions.

Planning can also play an auxiliary role to educational and social policy in increasing participation rates of existing Australian residents in the labour market, by influencing land-use, services, amenities and infrastructure in a way which decreases social exclusion, facilitates employment opportunities and the delivery of community services in previously under-resourced communities. The Institute is supportive of the objective to increase participation rates of Australia’s Indigenous population and has adopted an indigenous person’s action plan to promote worthy strategies to help achieve greater participation of this population in society and the workforce (PIA, 2010).
6. Sustainable Communities

6.1 Infrastructure

A population strategy needs to consider the demand a changing population creates on existing and potential infrastructure. Planning can ensure the coordination of development and sequencing of land release with social and physical infrastructure delivery, including optimising the use of established infrastructure and services through infill development. Planners frequently encounter issues of inadequate infrastructure provision, particularly in the outer/fringe metropolitan areas. Governments often push for land releases without providing adequate services to the development area, creating both environmental and social problems for inadequately serviced communities. The Institute believes that the integration of planning for land use and transport would go part of the way towards preventing this occurring.

In keeping with the Institute’s position on planning for the mitigation of greenhouse gases, as well as addressing the issues of increased traffic congestion caused by population growth, the Institute would particularly like to see a shift of emphasis from the provision of roads to public transport by the Australian Government.

Public transport is one example of where governments often lag many years behind in servicing areas when there is a need to ensure that these services are provided for new residents from the start of development. The Institute believes that public transport provision is one of the biggest issues facing our cities today. This is also touched on in the Institute’s submission to the ‘Our Cities’ discussion paper and is an area that will require high levels of collaboration between departments and all levels of government.

Infrastructure development and regional connectivity is integral to the economic development of regional Australia. An efficient transport system is a basic precondition for improving the competitiveness of regions and for underpinning a polycentric spatial framework. A lack of basic infrastructure, transport connections and communications technologies will restrict economic development in regional and rural areas. Opportunities should be taken to develop a network of public paths, trails and public/community-based transport connecting regional centres with surrounding towns.

6.2 Housing supply and affordability

The Institute believes that access to adequate and affordable housing is fundamental to supporting quality of life and that future housing stock needs to change in order to meet the needs of Australia’s aging population and changing demographics.

PIA agrees that planning can contribute to improve the situation through “…reform in planning governance, clear and consistent bases for developer charges, and mechanisms for implementation of strategic urban plans (including infrastructure delivery)”, as stated in 2010 State of Supply Report by the National Housing Supply Council.
PIA acknowledges that planning policies are the responsibility of state and local governments, but it is the responsibility of the Australian Government to provide clear policy direction in order to ensure a nationally cohesive approach to affordable housing provision. These policies cover a spectrum of issues that impact housing affordability, from identifying suitable land, ensuring efficient release of land, encouraging energy efficient design, supporting appropriate design and location and in some cases requiring developers to provide a proportion of affordable housing. PIA believes that social mix is a vital attribute of sustainable development. PIA further believes that this legitimizes the use of planning mechanisms to require the provision of affordable housing in areas that would otherwise suffer a deficit in the social dimension of environmental sustainability.

While planning can help to facilitate the provision of higher density housing options to accommodate a growing population in existing urban areas, it is also important that the Australian Government assist with a cultural shift towards alternative forms of housing at higher densities, so that the ‘dream’ of owning a single dwelling on a single allotment becomes less entrenched in Australian culture.

In addition to supply, housing and population policy should consider the needs of Australia’s changing demography, something which is elaborated on in more detail in the Institute’s ‘Our Cities’ submission.

6.3 Liveability

The Paper defines liveability as “the degree to which a location supports quality of life, health and wellbeing for the people who live, work, or visit there”. Planning has an important role in both maintaining the liveability of areas experiencing growth and increasing the liveability and attractiveness of places experiencing decline.

Comments in previous sections about adequate housing supply, urban sprawl and the provision of infrastructure and community services and protection of green wedges and water supply are all opportunities for planning to contribute to maintaining or increasing the liveability of Australian communities in the face of significant population changes.

Spatial distribution, not just provision of services needs to be considered. The Institute considers that a recent trend towards aggregation of services due to economies of scale has lead to social exclusion and a desegregation of communities. The increase in ‘super’ schools, big box retail, libraries and other services is forcing people to travel further, often in a car. Whilst this trend may be good for productivity, it does not contribute to liveability or a high quality of life, particularly for the transport-vulnerable people in society, such as the young, elderly and people with a disability, who rely on conveniently located and accessible facilities.

The Institute recognises that regional areas in particular may require specific attention from planners to prevent decline or promote growth through the strategic promotion of appropriate regional centres as an alternative to urban expansion. A high level of amenity and liveability is crucial for creating attractive environments and the human capital necessary to support a productive, sustainable and flexible regional economy.
Both regional centres and small towns should pursue physical and non-physical strategies to develop distinctive and attractive built environments and opportunities that offer a high quality of life in coherent, integrated communities. Opportunities to encourage tourism based on the skills and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be encouraged.

The Institute acknowledges the inclusion of ‘health’ as an aspect of a liveable community by the Paper, but would advocate for a greater emphasis to be put on the relationship between the built environment, which will be accommodating our population, and their health and wellbeing. Planning and design principles for healthy living are integral to creating sustainable communities, and as such, should be considered in any strategy.

PIA has collaborated with the Australian Local Government Association and the National Heart Foundation of Australia to develop the Healthy Spaces and Places Guidelines, which has also put forward a submission to the ‘Our Cities’ discussion paper, addressing this issue in more detail.
7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Planning Institute of Australia believes a national Sustainable Population Strategy must be adopted to ensure a vibrant and healthy lifestyle for future generations. The Institute also believes that this cannot be achieved without planning.

The adopted Strategy must have a greater emphasis on the spatial dimensions of population growth and decline, address necessary cultural shifts in Australian consumption and housing expectations, and provide for greater integration between land use and infrastructure provision. The Institute would like to see a greater focus on public transport, the disaggregation of services and the protection of biodiversity and agricultural land.
8. References


*Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999)*

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs,


**Supporting position statements:**

- Affordable Housing
- Sustainable Population media releases
- Federal Election Position Statement
- Rural and Regional Development Position Statement
- Climate Change
- Water and Planning
- Housing
- Housing Markets
- Integrated Land Use and Management
- Urban Growth Management