

TO: Urban Policy Input

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SUBMISSION TO: the draft National Urban Policy

The following recommendations build upon our discussion note on the FEA Urban Strategy which provided critical commentary on urban policy in Australia.

Link: <https://www.futureearth.org.au/publications/early-career-urban-research-working-group-strategy-update>

SUMMARY

1. The draft National Urban Policy (NUP) appears to superficially adhere with the international Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework, and thus will not adequately monitor progress and inform policy for the SDGs.
2. The draft NUP could be strengthened by a place-based approach that explicitly considers specific socio-economic conditions and addresses existing and future infrastructure gaps.
3. The draft NUP sets out a vision for implementing circular economies in our cities but needs provide stronger support for vital existing sectors of reuse, repair, and recycling, where jobs are declining and becoming increasingly inaccessible.
4. There are limited national initiatives which support sustainable mixed-use development and the retrofitting of existing suburban areas with quality public transport and active mode infrastructures.
5. Disaster preparedness and climate resilience, and inclusivity and crime prevention are two significant related but distinct concerns for cities. By including them together, it devalues their significance.

6. A focus on productivity is a poor choice for the key actions set within the “Our urban areas promote productivity” as treating individuals as contributors to the productivity of an urban area is dehumanising.

RECOMMENDATIONS

7. Clearly link the State of the Cities Reports and the policy Objectives to SDG Goal 11 indicators.
8. Local Governments (LGs) in Australia must have a more reinforced role in policy implementation because of each LG area's diversity of actors, cultures, economies, and contexts to achieve a place-based approach in contraposition to exclusive top-down policies.
9. Reform the current planning process to enable quicker revision of zoning and standards through collaboration between local and state governments, with clear pathways for local retention of contributions to deliver necessary infrastructure and services.
10. Develop adequate skill sets and launch professional development campaigns to position governments at all levels as dynamic players rather than mere facilitators, capable of delivering diverse housing models.
11. Advocate for a Design Excellence Program in all urban centres to elevate design standards.
12. Establish clear and consistent national standards for high-quality urban landscapes ensures equitable outcomes for communities.
13. Invest in a new generation of professionals skilled in climate-sensitive technologies and capable of delivering high-quality workmanship and infrastructure.
14. Address the need of more robust planning for industrial workplaces, in ways which support higher levels of job and pathway diversity and accessibility. This could focus on achieving the mission of “circular cities,” building from the NUP’s circular economy discussion.
15. Carefully outline specific national initiatives which guide, incentivise, and implement the development of sustainable, inter-connected neighbourhoods with a diversity of housing, services, amenities and opportunities across Australian cities, suburbs, and towns.
16. Address “Disaster preparedness and climate resilience,” and “inclusivity and crime prevention” as separate objectives to allow for appropriate monitoring and funding requirements.

17. Consider reframing the six objectives to accurately capture the changing nature of work practices to more flexible and remote working. The 'productivity initiatives' could also be described as 'participation initiatives' or 'accessibility initiatives.'

COMMENTARY

Empowering Local Governments to reinforce the inclusivity and equity principles in urban sustainability transitions and governance under the draft National Urban Policy

We want to iterate the inclusivity and equity principles in urban sustainability transformations. The strategy correctly identifies collaborative governance, fair and inclusive development, and innovation as its principles. However, we emphasise that these principles should be included in implementation plans as well as policy. For example, we would like to bring to your notice the lack of policy participation made available to local non-state actors such as civil society organisations, small and medium-sized organisations (SMEs), different community groups and individuals – because of their capacity and time constraints. We strongly recommend the implementation of local consultations via local governments (LGs) to ensure that local actors are part of the policy that applies to them, thereby fostering a sense of involvement and consideration in the decision-making process.

To implement the above suggestions made to the draft National Urban Policy, we reiterate the critical role of local governments in harnessing the local voice, knowledge, and credibility. Yet, LGs must be empowered in terms of mandate, resource, and capacity building to deliver these services effectively in national policy implementation. In summary, LGs in Australia must have a more reinforced role in policy implementation because of each LG area's diversity of actors, cultures, economies, and contexts.

Adherence with the international SDGs framework - Multi scale and multi-level monitoring

The United Nation Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 6 July 2017 proposes a robust system of indicators to monitor progress and inform policy. While the framework is refined annually, the draft National Urban Policy should link the State of the City Snapshot section of the report and the policy Objectives to Goal 11 indicators. This linkage will facilitate easier multiscale and multilevel comparison of results and, most importantly, ensure accountability across all levels of government and stakeholders.

Objective 1: No-one and no place left behind.

To ensure all communities benefit from housing initiatives, a substantial shift toward a place-based approach is necessary. This approach considers specific socio-economic conditions and addresses existing and future infrastructure gaps. In this process, local governments must be empowered to leverage their unique knowledge of local communities

and assets. The current 'Future Homes' initiative in Victoria exemplifies how top-down approaches fail. Proposals for standardised typologies for both inner city and peripheral councils are ineffective without corresponding economic incentives.

To transform the housing investment delivery model, the following paradigm shifts are suggested:

- **From state-blind strategies to place-based approaches:** reforming the current planning process to enable quicker revision of zoning and standards through collaboration between local and state governments, with clear pathways for local retention of contributions to deliver necessary infrastructure and services.
- **From facilitation to leadership:** developing adequate skill sets and launching professional development campaigns based on the Entrepreneurial State concept (Mazzucato, 2018). This approach positions governments at all levels as dynamic players rather than mere facilitators, capable of delivering diverse housing models.
- **From cheap and shortsighted to quality, long-term housing, and infrastructure:** advocating for a Design Excellence Program in all urban centres to elevate design standards. Establishing clear and consistent national standards for high-quality urban landscapes ensures equitable outcomes for communities.
- **From quantity to quality delivery:** investing in a new generation of professionals skilled in climate-sensitive technologies and capable of delivering high-quality workmanship and infrastructure.

Objective 3 - Our urban areas are safe.

“Urban safety encompasses inclusivity and crime prevention strategies while enhancing climate resilience and disaster preparedness.” Disaster preparedness and climate resilience, and inclusivity and crime prevention are two significant related but distinct concerns for cities. By including them together, it devalues their individual significance. They should be considered separate objectives for urban areas, as the initiatives to address challenges posed by each have quite different timeframes. Granted disaster preparedness and resilience is a safety issue, however, it is also a lot more than that. For example, urban heat is also a health and wellbeing, housing design and a biodiversity concern. Addressing resilience and disaster preparedness requires a more holistic approach involving scientific and community knowledge and initiatives to be monitored and adapted over a long-term timeframe. Safety and crime prevention typically has a much shorter timeframe and often requires an immediate response and action with certainty. Separating resilience/disaster preparedness and crime prevention/inclusivity will facilitate the development of appropriate indicators to monitor each issue individually and support the case for appropriate funding to be allocated across appropriate timeframes and governance scales.

**Objectives 4 and 6: Our urban areas are sustainable and promote productivity
- Planning for inclusive workforce development in our emerging circular cities.**

Building from National efforts toward enhancing our manufacturing and renewable energy base, the NUP's discussion of circular economy opportunities is timely and critical for enhancing our cities' sustainability and prosperity. There is substantial optimism that a well-planned implementation of circular cities could generate substantial social benefits including job creation. However, to maximise this opportunity, our cities need a critical rethink in providing land for diverse forms of work located accessibly to workers and job seekers, particularly by non-auto modes.

These precincts or areas should be sources of both professionally based design and research practices with more technical and "industrial" practices for (re)making, repairing, and recycling. Existing policy currently largely overlooks the latter practices, where historic (and typically universally accessible) industrial spaces have been "renewed" in favour of more professional ones. Concurrently the supply of industrial land is diminishing and remaining areas are consolidated in under-serviced urban fringes. This means that for many workers and job seekers, on-the-job training, or lower skill opportunities to work with materials are becoming increasingly inaccessible. These jobs, working with materials, will be critical to support the workforce development and innovation required to facilitate inclusive circular economy transitions. The NUP should more explicitly address this challenge of more robust planning for industrial workplaces, in ways which support higher levels of job and pathway diversity and accessibility overall.

**Objective 5: Our urban environments and communities promote health and wellbeing
- Moving toward networks of walkable neighbourhoods.**

The draft National Urban Policy snapshot (p. 4-5) makes explicit reference to the issue of car dependence, which is timely and vital for setting a vision to plan for liveable, equitable and productive communities. The related principles and actions (pages 34-35, 41-42) are promising first steps, though there are limited national initiatives which provide targeted support at a national level for sustainable mixed-use development and the retrofitting of existing suburban areas with quality public transport infrastructure needed for walkable outcomes.

In addition to the health and productivity impacts of car dependence as outlined by the NUP, many households across the country experience "transport disadvantage." This describes conditions of severe car dependence affecting households with lower incomes, limiting their abilities to find work and engage in local communities and economies. Coupled with existing financial pressures, such as mortgages and rising costs of living, the costs of forced car ownership owing to a lack of viable transport alternatives, can be crippling for families. Conversely, much of the savings people would make from switching modes of transport would benefit local economies, because most car costs are spent on imports (cars, parts, tyres, fuel).

The Draft NUP already identifies the importance of ensuring households have walkable access to groceries, though this should apply to accessing a diversity of functions, including social venues, recreation facilities, retail, education, medical and entertainment. Achieving this, will require a coordinated effort of local, state, and federal governments, in close collaboration with local communities.

Objective 6- Our urban areas promote productivity.

A focus on productivity is a poor choice for the key actions set within this objective. Ability to participate in the workforce is linked to health and wellbeing benefits, but treating individuals as contributors to the productivity of an urban area is dehumanising. Further iterations to this objective should consider a new name that more accurately reflects the challenges being addressed. For example, 'urban areas promote work-life balance.' This would also reflect the changing nature of work practices to be more flexible around office and remote working, which place less emphasis on the journey to work and more focus on neighbourhood services during business hours. The 'productivity initiatives' could also be described as 'participation initiatives' or 'accessibility initiatives.'