

NATIONAL URBAN POLICY

COMMENTARY ON THE DRAFT

Submission



9 July 2024

This submission has been prepared by Future Paths and Roadmender, two collaborating organisations with diverse experience in various facets of urbanism ranging from urban ecology, social cohesion, urban resilience amongst others.

The commentary in this submission is structured in response to select areas covered in the Draft National Urban Policy, as well as participation in the National Urban Policy Consultation Workshop held in Brisbane on 1 July 2024.

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CONTENTS

01 INTRODUCTION

**02 BALANCE BETWEEN MANAGEABLE PARTS
& MANAGEABLE WHOLE**

03 URBAN POLICY AS A GALVANIZING ENABLER

**04 TOWARDS HOLISTIC URBAN POLICY:
EMBRACING COMPLEXITY & INTEGRATION**

**05 NEXUS BETWEEN LIVEABILITY,
SUSTAINABILITY & RESILIENCE**

**06 THE IMPORTANCE OF STAKEHOLDER
ENGAGEMENT**

07 CONCLUSION

“Hyper-specialisation tore up and fragmented the complex fabric of reality, and led to belief that the fragmentation inflicted on reality was reality in itself.”

EDGAR MORIN

INTRODUCTION



Urban areas worldwide are facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities as they adapt to rapid population growth, climate-driven environment and infrastructure impacts, and varying socio-economic dynamics. The draft national urban policy aims to address these issues by outlining five primary goals designed to guide urban development towards sustainability, resilience, and improved quality of life. However, the current policy's structure and approach may not fully capture the complexities and interdependencies inherent in urban systems.

The following commentary aims to highlight a selection of areas covered in the draft policy and discussed in the consultation workshop (in which the authors participated). Our submission is informed by professional experience in a range of areas that have direct link with the policy goals such as urban ecology, civic and open space planning, applied resilience & adaptation planning, and inclusivity practice change amongst other urban policy related disciplines. The central point of this submission is to elevate the need for a more integrated and complexity-based urban policy framework that can effectively respond to the multifaceted nature of urban environments.

BALANCE BETWEEN MANAGEABLE PARTS & MANAGEABLE WHOLE

Key Point:

Cities are complex systems that require policies to move beyond compartmentalised goals, integrating multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to address interconnected urban challenges effectively.

The draft national urban policy outlines five goals. These goals are commendable as they capture conventional expectations. However, the way they are grouped and organised implies that they can be achieved in discrete categories through collaborative efforts—an assumption not fully justified by the policy’s linear structure.

Cities as complex systems demand deeper exploration beyond immediate challenges. While the draft policy provides examples, such as enhancing ‘liveability,’ it overlooks critical factors essential to overall liveability, often dispersed across disparate goal categories like ‘equity’ or ‘resilience.’ The policy’s categorical approach assumes that aggregate goals will naturally yield a robust urban policy outcome—a flawed assumption. Urban systems’ true complexity necessitates a framework rooted in comprehensive complex thinking.

To effectively address urban challenges, policies must transcend compartmentalisation and embrace both multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches. This shift would integrate multiple objectives, exemplified by both tried and tested initiatives with strong evidence behind them as well as emerging initiatives like urban and peri urban agriculture, fostering urban resilience and sustainability through economically viable urban agriculture initiatives.

A transformative urban policy should reframe urban spaces as living systems and restrain urban paradigms that are formed in response to previous challenges. For instance, relying on urban thinking that was not dealing with disaster resilience or urban resilience in general in previous decades would not be helpful in creating resilience that is not defined by risk management frameworks but make more effective use of more nuanced resilience thinking which recognises resilience as a strategy of growth and sustainability despite disruptions and catastrophes.

It must promote interconnected strategies that recognise cities’ complexity and interdependence—essential for vibrant, sustainable urban futures.

URBAN POLICY AS A GALVANIZING ENABLER

Key Point:

Urban policy should act as an enabler that resonates with the diverse motivations of urban residents, fostering conditions that encourage sustainable and inclusive urban development through imaginative and innovative strategies.

If houses are ‘machines for living in,’ then cities, as modern urban environments, are systems where these machines interconnect, enabling communities to thrive. This Corbusian metaphor should prompt critical questions: What is urban policy? What can it deliver that urban communities cannot achieve on their own? Urban communities do not evolve strictly according to policy, nor do urban dwellers consciously act to make a policy work. Many urban residents are unaware of the full scale of any given policy.

For most people living in urban communities, immediate interests are paramount. Therefore, policies must resonate with the realities of urban living: some people live in cities out of necessity due to limited career choices outside urban areas, some remain because they were born there and see no alternatives, and others choose urban life because it aligns with their worldview and so on.

This diversity of motivations is crucial in policymaking. Can an urban policy meet the diverse expectations of urban communities, creating spaces where everyone belongs, where people are healthy, and where they can be productive members of the community?

Considering urban environments as systems for living implies that a policy must be an enabler—imaginative and innovative—capable of addressing the expectations of all who belong to urban spaces. This places significant demands on any policy, as cities are inherently complex systems. By definition, a city embodies complexity. How, then, can a policy guide what is inherently ‘unguidable’?

A viable solution acknowledges that no policy can fully control the evolution of a complex system. At best, a policy can create conditions that encourage interactions leading to outcomes that are sustainable, palatable to the community, and capable of meeting the majority’s expectations.

A transformative urban policy should reframe urban spaces as living systems and restrain urban paradigms that are formed in response to previous challenges.

Focusing on the health of urban communities, two intrinsic dimensions stand out: our relationships with each other and with the natural world. Healthy human communities require these foundational relationships. Urban policy can shape conditions that, if implemented thoughtfully, can be powerful enablers.

One policy option could be developing active ecology precincts. Unlike traditional green spaces, which often focus on symbolism, active ecology precincts foster deep, meaningful human-nature interactions. These precincts integrate commercial viability with ecological sustainability, moving beyond the decorative 'green' elements in commercial-first architectures. Active ecology precincts offer a balanced model where commercial and ecological interactions coexist.

In policy terms, this means fostering a sense of belonging that stems from organising urban spaces to promote health. Healthy individuals and communities are more likely to reinvest in their environments, contributing productively to urban life. Thus, urban policy should enable fundamental needs as prerequisites for sustainable economic activities within complex urban systems.

TOWARDS HOLISTIC URBAN POLICY: EMBRACING COMPLEXITY & INTEGRATION

Key Point:

The policy must embrace systems thinking and complexity theory, moving away from a linear, deterministic approach to foster dynamic and responsive strategies that address the multifaceted realities of modern urban environments.

Following the previous commentary emphasising the need for a more holistic and integrated approach to urban policy, it is crucial to further examine the relationships between the identified goals. The current structure of the draft urban policy reinforces a specific, and in some respects potentially outdated, way of thinking about urbanism and cities. This linear and compartmentalised approach may hinder the dynamic, interconnected nature of modern urban life.

The organisation of the policy in its present form suggests, however unintentionally, a rigid framework that might not fully accommodate the complex realities of contemporary urban environments. To create thriving urban spaces that support vibrant social, economic, and cultural life, the policy needs to promote innovative and diverse strategies for achieving goals such as well-being, belonging, health, sustainability, productivity, and resilience.

By maintaining a compartmentalised approach, the policy overlooks the benefits of, and essential need for systems thinking and complexity theory. These approaches recognise the interdependencies and interactions between various urban factors, fostering a more dynamic and responsive urban policy.

A transdisciplinary approach, which integrates insights from multiple fields, is essential for developing innovative and transformative projects that can effectively address urban challenges. In its current form, draft policy does not go sufficient distance towards recognition of the simple fact that the very urban challenges the policy seeks to respond to are mis-recognised as being domains, rather than manifestations of a complex interplay of both visible and well understood factors as well as so called 'supposedly irrelevant factors' (SIFs).

A good example of a SIF is easily identifiable in limited consideration of urban agriculture. Despite its growing importance for food security, urban food production, and sustainable food systems, the draft policy makes only a single mention of urban agriculture without suggesting any specific actions or recommendations. This oversight is particularly striking given the global trend toward incorporating food production into urban planning.

While draft policy contains valuable information and data it needs to move beyond a compartmentalised approach. By embracing a more integrated and holistic framework, the policy can better address the complex realities of modern urban environments and promote the development of vibrant, sustainable cities.

NEXUS BETWEEN LIVEABILITY, SUSTAINABILITY & RESILIENCE

Key Point:

The draft policy's goals may benefit from being reorganised to reflect their interdependence, treating them as aimed-for indicators of a healthy city rather than discrete endpoints. This reorganisation would likely acknowledge and better address the complexity and interconnectedness of urban systems.

The draft urban policy currently presents five primary goals supported by six objectives. While some objectives align with specific goals, others do not match as clearly. The underlying assumption is that achieving these goals will culminate in an effective urban policy for the future. This assumption is predicated on the logic that these goals, organised in a seemingly logical and intuitive manner, will lead to a comprehensive outcome.

However, a deeper examination reveals that the discussions and suggested actions for each goal are often equally, if not more, relevant to other categories. This interconnectedness is not adequately addressed in the policy, which tends to treat the goals as independent entities. The current approach suggests that by pursuing each goal through its own set of processes, strategies, and actions, the combined efforts will naturally result in a cohesive urban environment. This is a flawed assumption, as it overlooks the complex and interdependent nature of urban systems.

In a more integrated framework, goals should be reorganised to acknowledge their interdependence. For example, resilience activities are central to achieving productivity and sustainability (and, critically, an adaptive capacity). Therefore, resilience should be woven into the fabric of all other goals, rather than being a separate entity. However, the concept of resilience is currently poorly defined in the draft policy. It suggests urban areas should be resilient to something, which is a limited interpretation. Resilience, as a field, is fundamentally transdisciplinary, encompassing disaster resilience, ecological resilience, psychological resilience, business, and community resilience. Resilience is not merely about risk management but is a strategy for competitive growth. It may be useful to expand the understanding of resilience from risk mitigation to building adaptive capacities and an ability to exploit opportunities arising from disruptions is crucial.

Furthermore, what is currently presented as goals might be more accurately described as indicators of a healthy city. These indicators could then be used to measure the success of the urban policy, rather than being treated as endpoints in themselves. By reconceptualising these goals as indicators, the policy could better reflect the multifaceted nature of urban development.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Key Point:

Effective urban policy requires deep stakeholder engagement, ensuring that goals are understood and embraced by a diverse range of participants through clear communication, collaborative governance, and incentives that promote broad participation.

The first point is that the five goals identified in the policy make intuitive sense and are widely acceptable to most stakeholders. These goals include concepts like sustainability, productivity, and resilience, which are generally understood by many. However, the real challenge is ensuring that these goals are effectively metabolised by key stakeholders.

This requires a deeper understanding of each concept and ensuring a coherent interpretation among stakeholders. For instance, if people understand resilience in vastly different ways, as has been shown through experience and substantial body of research and reflected in the policy itself, the chances of achieving resilience are significantly diminished.

A pragmatic approach involves helping people understand the personal benefits and obligations that come with these goals. Significant behavioural changes might be necessary for these goals to be achieved. It's crucial to communicate the opportunities offered by goals like sustainability and productivity to encourage broad participation from diverse stakeholders.

To ensure effective engagement, the policy must include mechanisms that clearly encourage stakeholders to participate and make sense of these goals. Without this, there's a risk that the goals will be pursued by only a narrow group of stakeholders, which is a major risk to any policy's success.

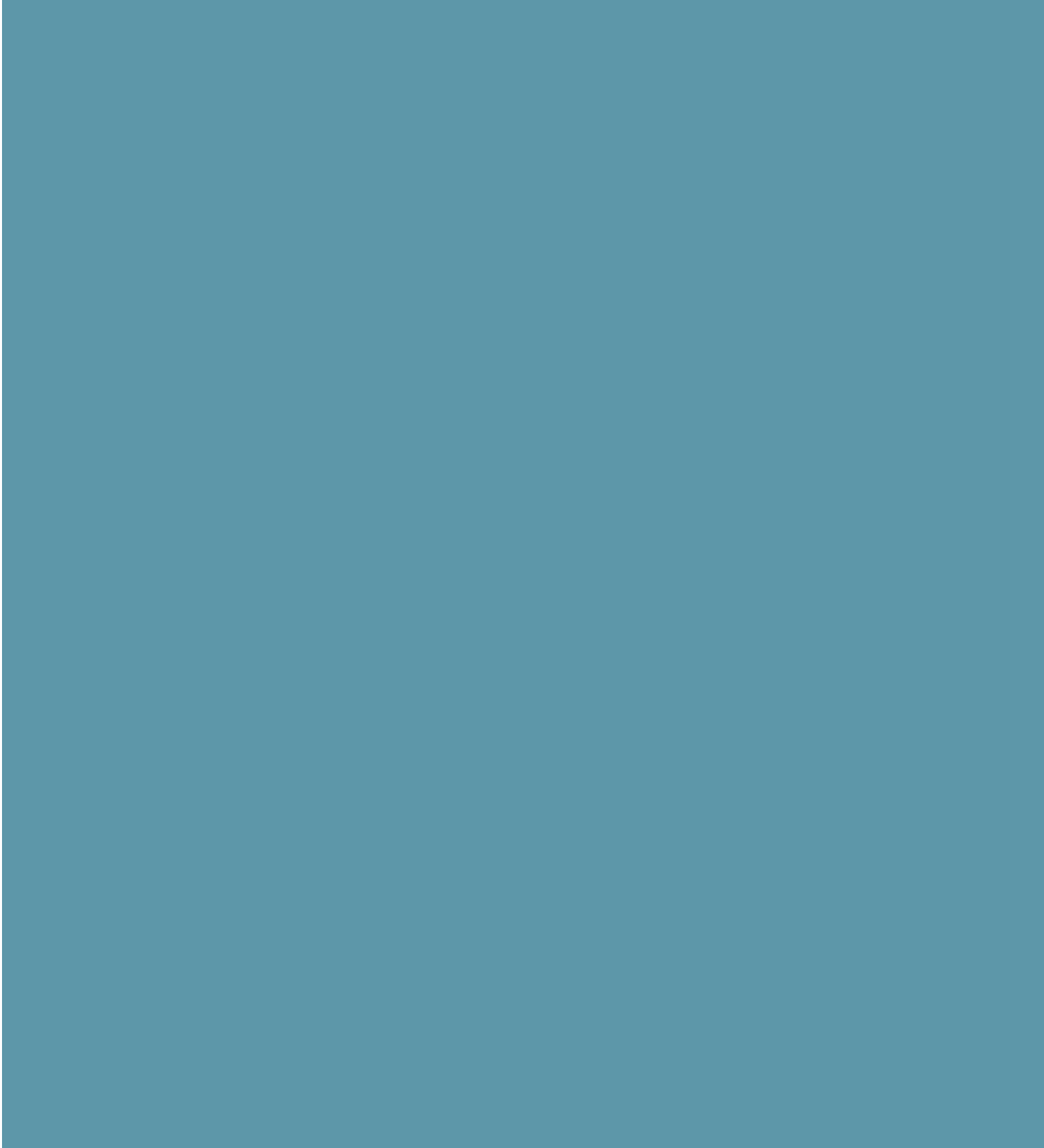
Achieving these goals requires a balance between imposing necessary demands and providing incentives through benefits and opportunities. This leads to the next critical point: the policy must delve deeper into how collaborative work will be governed, measured and ultimately supported.

Collaboration can occur at three levels: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages and can offer significant benefits. These approaches need to be structured in an engaging and understandable way for stakeholders. The final format of urban policy should be more explicit about the role of collaboration and the expectations the Commonwealth Government communicated to its existing and emerging stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The commentary suggests that the current policy structure does not adequately support the development of transformative urban initiatives. The policy's information should be reorganised to highlight the interconnections between goals and to encourage more innovative and integrated approaches. By doing so, the policy can better achieve its desired outcomes, moving beyond conventional actions to embrace more holistic and sustainable urban development strategies.

In summary, the draft urban policy requires a holistic overhaul that addresses both immediately recognisable challenges and anticipates emergent ones. By emphasising goal interconnections and innovative approaches, the policy can better navigate the complexities of modern urban environments, fostering resilience and sustainability effectively.



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