

# Submission on National Urban Policy Consultation Draft

3 July 2024

Bob Webb, Hon. Assoc. Professor, ICEDS, Australian National University

Robert Freestone, Professor, School of Built Environment, University of New South Wales

Jago Dodson, Professor, Urban Policy, RMIT University

on behalf of the authors of Future Earth Australia's *Sustainable Cities and Regions Strategy* (2024) published with support of the Australian Academy of Science and *Australian Urban Policy: Prospects and Pathways* (ANU Press, 2024) published with support of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

## Introduction

This submission responds to the Australian Government's call for submissions on its consultation draft for a National Urban Policy (NUP) released in May 2024. It draws on insights from two recently published open access documents: the 2024 update of the national 10-year *Sustainable Cities and Regions Strategy* developed by Future Earth Australia (the *FEA Strategy*) and the 2024 book *Australian Urban Policy: Prospects and Pathways*.

**The *FEA Strategy* was sponsored by the Australian Academy of Science (AAS) and Future Earth Australia (FEA)** and is based on extensive local and national consultation with approximately 400 cross-sector and cross-spatial scale organisations and individuals. ***Australian Urban Policy* was sponsored by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA)** and is based on contributions from 40 of Australia's leading and emerging applied researchers and policy professionals many active at the interface of academia and public policy.

***The opportunity to provide feedback on the NUP Consultation Draft is welcomed.*** This initiative by the Australian Government sets a foundation for greater and more explicit recognition of cities and regions in national development, and their policy settings gaining greater alignment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commitments. We trust the final NUP will receive bi-partisan support at the highest level.

We and other lead contributors to the two initiatives sponsored by AAS, FEA and ASSA would be pleased, in conjunction with the Academies, to contribute further insights from this work into development and implementation of the new national urban policy.

This submission is complementary to that we understand is to be made by AAS, FEA and ASSA, providing more detailed recommendations, background and rationale.

***Our submission makes four major recommendations to ensure that the new policy settings are not only timely but genuinely transformative, in summary:***

- 1. Recognise the challenges in urban capabilities***
- 2. Include a transformative 'Urban Capabilities Enhancement' Objective***
- 3. Clarify the aspirations in the Policy***
- 4. Better codify the Policy application***

The document has three main parts and an Attachment:

**(A)** a one-page **summary of our recommendations** for amendments to the draft NUP, **(B)** the **background and rationale** behind these recommendations, **(C)** **details of the two publications** which informed the recommendations; and the **Attachment** with a draft of **the proposed additional Objective 7 to the NUP**.

## (A) Summary of recommendations

**1. Recognise capability challenges: The NUP should recognise that all NUP Goals and Objectives are threatened by significant current urban capability challenges** in leadership and governance, stakeholder and community engagement, knowledge and innovation, and policy-practice and research collaboration; **and the reinforcing impact of interdependencies between these capabilities.**

**2. Include an ‘Urban Capabilities Enhancement’ Objective: The NUP should add a 7<sup>th</sup> Objective to significantly enhance these capabilities** and delivery of the other 6 Objectives. **A draft of such an Objective** (see Attachment) is consistent with *Australian Urban Policy* and draws on the extensive consultations for the *FEA Strategy*. This includes actions that the NUP should commit to:

- more cohesive governance with a clear line of sight between national, state/territory and city/region visioning, goals, and planning;
- better-scoped national urban performance indicators to measure progress, recognising commonalities and diversities across cities/regions; and to support Measuring what Matters;
- much improved knowledge, understanding and management of systemic interdependencies, synergies and trade-offs across urban objectives, policy portfolios, sectors and scales;
- more inclusive and meaningful stakeholder and community engagement supported by national guidelines and sharing of best practice, with a special focus on the disadvantaged;
- significant enhancement in the value of urban knowledge, research and innovation through a nation-wide distributed Knowledge and Innovation Hub network to share, synthesise and improve the uptake of knowledge, and to identify, facilitate and upscale local innovation;
- enhanced investment in skills development and collaborations between policy-practice and research, focused initially on NUP implementation.

**3. Clarify the aspirations in the Policy:** The promise of a shared Vision, Goals, Objectives and Principles, and how they are to be advanced, should be clarified and enhanced:

- clarify the intended use of the Objectives, and commit to translating them into a number of collaborative time-bound national ‘missions’ with local innovation and experimentation
- provide clearer, and less repetitive connection between Goals, Objectives and Principles
- make better use of the Principles from the outset, recognising that some are equally applicable at national levels, and match or add to aspirations in the draft Objectives
- identify in a new NUP Appendix the national policy and strategy level initiatives that are currently inadequate or missing (including a National Settlement Strategy or equivalent)
- confirm the proposed set of national urban standards and guidelines that are to be developed and updated in the future, including potential financing guidelines.

**4. Better codify Policy application:** How the Policy will be applied in practice should be clarified:

- include roles for regional/metropolitan planning in the Urban Roles and Responsibilities
- clarify intended coverage of smaller regional settlements
- clarify any differentiation of aspirations according to spatial and time scales
- include principles to apply to overall NUP implementation, consultation and review.

## (B) Rationale for recommendations

This provides background, elaboration and explanation of each of the four major recommendations.

### 1. Recognise the challenges in urban capabilities

***Recommendation 1: The NUP should recognise that all NUP Goals and Objectives are threatened by significant current urban capability challenges in leadership and governance, stakeholder and community engagement, knowledge and innovation, and policy-practice and research collaboration; and the reinforcing impact of interdependencies between these capabilities.***

The book *Australian Urban Policy* repeatedly stresses the importance of ‘capabilities’ for high-level strategic leadership and other enablers for transformative policy moves. The *2024 FEA Strategy* is similarly built around ‘capabilities’ and this term is used through this submission. The updating of the 2019 FEA Strategy from a further round of consultations confirmed that significant urban capability challenges have if anything intensified. Both the original and updated Strategy see an effective NUP as a cornerstone of any response, provided it addresses the capability challenges identified and recognises the key interdependencies between these capabilities so that they can be mutually reinforcing. These nation-wide enabling capabilities should be a key focus of the NUP. Without them all the other Objectives are unlikely to be achieved.

Currently there is no statement in the draft NUP of the many capability challenges identified. Just a few aspects of directional intent are to be found isolated in individual Objectives and in some aspects of the city focused Principles.

### 2. Include a transformative ‘Urban Capabilities Enhancement’ Objective

***Recommendation 2: The NUP should add a 7<sup>th</sup> Objective to significantly enhance these capabilities and delivery of the other 6 Objectives. A draft of such an Objective (see Attachment) is consistent with Australian Urban Policy and draws on the extensive consultations for the FEA Strategy.***

The Draft Objective 7 adopts the format of the other Objectives to identify the main challenges and proposed actions in response. More detail on each proposed action is to be found in the *FEA Strategy*. For the NUP to have real impact we suggest it will be crucial to commit to these proposals as part of or ahead of the final NUP approval. A summary of some key directions for each capability follows.

#### 2.1 More cohesive leadership and governance – from visioning to navigation

Cohesive leadership and governance will be needed at all levels, and sustained through political cycles. The *FEA Strategy* covers all phases in the governance cycle from visioning and goals-setting, through planning and design to implementation, performance monitoring and ongoing adaptive navigation under inevitable uncertainty.

**Line of sight across tiers of government.** In addition to a national vision the *FEA Strategy* proposes that a NUP agreement between governments should require participatory shared visioning and goal-setting at all levels, so that they reflect both the commonality and diversity in our cities, but with a clear line of sight between levels. The nation-wide *FEA Strategy* workshops included participative visioning for the host city which demonstrated both commonality and diversity across cities. The Strategy proposes a national commitment to ensuring that all cities above 50,000 population have or develop metropolitan plans that demonstrate alignment with the NUP as well as with state/territory policies and city/region challenges and opportunities.

**Well calibrated performance indicators.** The *FEA Strategy* proposes that the NUP should commit to developing a national 'urban performance indicator set', learning from the experience of limited usage of previous indicators. The draft State of the Cities charts on pp 4-5 of the NUP are an indication of the sorts of indices that might be relevant but also demonstrate that there is more work to be done to establish representative (but flexible) indicators recognising the multiple potential uses. For example:

- they are necessary to establish baselines and targets to measure progress and so support policy implementation, monitoring and ongoing adaptive navigation at national (e.g. State of the Cities and Regions reports), state/territory and metropolitan/regional levels;
- they can be very helpful to crystallise shared understanding of the definition and intent of Goals/Objectives;
- they can focus on indicators for the sequence of primary through intermediary drivers of change necessary to meet each Goal/Objective and any related mission, and so help identify appropriate objective/mission scope and leverage points;
- they can support problem and sector-specific evaluations. The former COAG Reform Council's report on capital city (metropolitan) strategic planning processes in 2012 provided a valuable national assessment of performance according to an agreed set of national planning content and process criteria aimed at ensuring Australian cities attain many of the aspirations included in the draft NUP; and
- because of the extensive scope of urban indicators, they can support Treasury's wellbeing framework *Measuring what Matters* as well as translation to the UN SDGs, connecting national and international concerns.

## 2.2 Understanding complex interdependencies – a systems view.

Enhancements to both governance processes and knowledge programs are needed to address the many interdependencies within and between urban systems, supporting coherent NUP implementation at all levels. The draft NUP rightly states that "the goals are part of an interrelated and dynamic system in our cities and suburbs. The six objectives and their associated key urban challenges all relate to one or more of these goals. In many cases, addressing one goal in isolation may have a positive or negative impact on the others".

There is recognition in urban and regional research of the value of systems thinking at many levels. Almost every contribution to *Australian Urban Policy* refers to systems of some kind: urban water,

ecological, transport, governance, compliance, planning support etc. Both the *FEA Strategy* and *Australian Urban Policy* emphasise the importance of accounting for the most significant interdependencies but also the limited understanding of how these play out in practice, especially in terms that can help decision-making. This is recognised as a very significant feature of typically place-based urban and regional issues in focusing on environments where many or most of the issues come together.

The *FEA Strategy* proposes that urban research should be identified as a national research priority in the current federal government review process; and more specifically that the NUP should commit to a strategy and program to significantly improve the knowledge of the interdependencies across urban systems. These interdependencies play out in synergies (co-benefits) and trade-offs across goals/objectives, policy portfolios and sectors, and at various spatial scales from national to local. Management of the interdependencies also requires strong institutional arrangements across portfolios. These measures will materially assist with ongoing evidence-based decisions on policy, strategy, planning and investment, including meaningful NUP implementation, especially when also supported by the knowledge and innovation brokering and sharing network/ platform referred to in Section 2.4 below.

### 2.3 Guidance for inclusive stakeholder and community engagement

The NUP recognises and demonstrates the essential inputs from stakeholders including the Urban Policy Forum and First Nations and disadvantaged people. Feedback in preparation of the *FEA Strategy* was that engagement with stakeholders and communities at all levels often excludes key groups and seems ineffectual, even when the intent may be good. The feedback was that this issue, especially for the voices of First Nations and disadvantaged peoples, was so important for success going forward that a NUP should commit to development of national good practice guidelines for various urban contexts, and a curated good practice knowledge platform to share experience nationally and locally. The *FEA Strategy* proposes that federal, state/ territory and local governments should develop and follow such practices, demonstrating by example that similar processes should be identified and followed by others.

### 2.4 Enhancement of knowledge and innovation capabilities

The *FEA Strategy* consultations identified a need for significant enhancement in the value of urban knowledge, research and innovation through a nation-wide but distributed approach to facilitating, sharing, synthesising and improving the co-development and uptake of knowledge and co-design and upscaling of innovation.

The draft NUP states that “as a partner in urban policy, the Australian Government also has a role to play in improving information and data about Australian cities, in collaboration with other levels of government. The Australian Government is fulfilling this role by publishing a regular State of the Cities report to provide an accurate and up-to-date picture of life in our cities.”

While welcoming return of these reports, there are other very significant challenges to attend to in Australia's knowledge and innovation capabilities that will hamper the necessary urban transformations. The *FEA Strategy* notes that urban knowledge, being primarily developed to inform decision-making, extends beyond underpinning urban data or monitoring. In particular urban knowledge and associated research are currently extremely siloed, fragmented, and under-utilised. This limits access to the synthesised evidence required by decision-makers. The challenge is accentuated by fragile and fragmented research funding. At the same time recognition of increasingly complex interdependencies of urban-related policies and decisions requires enhanced knowledge co-development and sharing across as well as within urban sectors and scales (see Section 2.2 above).

Similarly, for innovation there is very limited sharing of outcomes which limits potential for upscaling, and increasing recognition that urban innovation may need to be in various combinations of environmental, social, economic-financial, technological and governance domains.

The *FEA Strategy* proposes supporting more connected and synthesised knowledge to complement current excellent but sector or location specific research through a nationally distributed network and brokering approach of Knowledge and Innovation Hubs supported by a shared knowledge platform. Together these will support collaborative local co-design and innovation and also significantly improve the sharing, uptake and upscaling of both knowledge and innovation. This nationally supported approach would be guided by a National Urban Knowledge and Innovation Forum comprising key research, policy, practice, stakeholder and community representatives, complementing the Urban Policy Forum.

## 2.5 Program to support collaborative Policy-Practice and Research

*Australian Urban Policy* begins with an argument for the better connectivity of urban policy and research, canvassing several strategies and pathways for facilitating more evidence-providing research, including collaborative co-research. The *FEA Strategy* consultations also found that urban issue framing, planning and decision-making would be enhanced by stronger collaborations between policy-makers, practitioners and researchers. The *Strategy* then translates these findings into formal recommendations for knowledge exchange and collaborations focused on NUP implementation, backed by research support, fellowships, scholarships and secondments providing upskilling and practical experience of each other's worlds.

However, the NUP does not yet acknowledge the significant gap that still exists between policy-practice on the one hand and research on the other. Australia has internationally excellent expertise and capabilities on both sides of this interface but is not yet putting them together to make us world leading. It is proposed the NUP recognise this gap and the need for new tertiary programs and professional development to produce cohorts of urban researchers, practitioners and policy-makers with the advanced skills to better frame issues and co-develop and apply new knowledge that serves emerging national and local goals.

### 3. Clarify the aspirations in the Policy

***Recommendation 3: The promise of a shared Vision, Goals, Objectives and Principles, and how they are to be advanced, should be clarified and enhanced.***

The aspirations of the NUP Consultation Draft are commendable by including:

- a shared national urban vision (still to be fully articulated) and draft goals, objectives and principles that indicate the breadth and interconnectedness of urban policy issues, and
- the intention to work with states and territories to develop initiatives that deliver on the shared vision, consistent with the Policy objectives.

We hope that the proposed National Vision statement will be explained and available for comment before finalisation.

The 5 Urban 'Goals' in the NUP are in fact identical to the 5 'Urban Outcomes' identified in the *FEA Strategy*. This is welcome and also provides some continuity and consistency as three of the goals (sustainability, liveability and productivity) have been banner goals in previous national urban policies/strategies, and the other two (resilience and equity) have previously been subsumed in the first three but have gained greater prominence in recent years. Social justice and equity are frequently flagged as a major policy responsibility in *Australian Urban Policy*. We note also that all five goals are key proposed criteria in the Infrastructure Policy Statement.

Combined with the Objectives and Principles the draft NUP is therefore strong on expressed aspiration. However, conveying that aspiration could be enhanced especially by demonstrating coherence within and between the Vision, Goals, Objectives and Principles and approaches to how they are to be advanced.

#### 3.1 Clarify intended use of the 'Objectives' and develop missions

It would be helpful to clarify the intended application of the 6 draft Objectives. For example, is it the case that the 5 Goals are meant to stay relevant for the long term (potentially multi-decadal) but the Objectives are intended to be medium term priorities that will help drive investment and related decisions? If so, would they then be positioned as 'next level down outcomes' that currently provide the greatest leverage on achieving the urban goals? In any event, how the Objectives will be used should be made clear as this determines how they are best defined and scoped.

The *FEA Strategy* also refers to the development of a *mission-based approach* to crystallising core priorities and bringing about focussed but adaptive transitions towards urban goals. In a national context multiple Goals/Objectives can in part be progressed by a small number of collaborative and time-bound national 'missions'. These would be combined with local initiatives, innovations and experimentation providing complementary and connected approaches to adaptive urban transformation across scales and locations.



We recommend that the NUP commit to developing such a mission-based approach to delivering on urban priorities, recognising that an actual mission must be collaboratively defined and established. Missions need to be understood and framed in a way that they may contribute to multiple Goals/Objectives, and can lead to cross-portfolio/policy and policy-practice-research collaborations, stakeholder/community collaboration and engagement, and focussed delivery against medium as well as any longer-term targets. Many urban issues have characteristics that would benefit from mission-oriented thinking and the federal government has already shown interest in this approach more generally across portfolios.

As an urban example, the European Union has adopted a mission to “Deliver 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030; Ensure that these cities act as experimentation and innovation hubs to enable all European cities to follow suit by 2050”, with the processes in place to align and combine policies, programs and stakeholders at multiple scales and locations to achieve this immediate to medium term mission. The 4<sup>th</sup> NUP Objective “Our urban areas are sustainable: Supporting urban areas to improve sustainability and achieve net zero emissions by 2050” is similar in theme but without the immediacy and processes of the EU mission.

### 3.2 Better connect Goals, Objectives and Principles

While the Goals are succinct enough, the NUP presents through Objectives and Principles as a lengthy list of aims and values. While there may be ‘devil in the detail’ for some stakeholders, the overall articulation of aspirations brings together many familiar and accepted desirabilities in enhancing the sustainability, resilience, productivity, quality and justice of urban life. While different emphases can be noted and some gaps identified, little here seems contestable. There would be significant agreement about the compendium of aspirations assembled. However, we do have reservations about the complexity of presentation with the inventory lists of goals, objectives and principles accumulating to a formidable, and in places redundant, listing with the precise interrelationships between these uncertain. It should be possible to recognise more clearly – possibly graphically - the critical connections if not trade-offs in practice, especially between various Objectives and between Objectives and Principles.

### 3.3 Make better use of the NUP Urban Principles

The draft Principles in NUP Appendix A are intended to “guide the way cities and other human settlements are planned, designed, financed, developed, governed and managed, and thereby help us achieve the Policy goals and objectives.” They will undoubtedly be very helpful for that purpose.

However, their value could be further enhanced by recognising explicitly that some of the content is equally applicable at federal, state and territory as well as local levels of policy, and so could be better reflected and incorporated in the national Objectives rather than concluding the NUP with another set of high-level desiderata. These include many of the principles on governance under Principle 1; on pursuing evidence/knowledge for decision-making under Principle 4; the related sub-point on ‘improving results against indicators’ under Principle 5; and the opportunity to better

support urban innovation under Principle 6. We have reflected some of this connection in the draft of Objective 7.

### 3.4 Identify other policy gaps and policy alignment to advance Objectives

Alignment across policy areas is important. NUP Appendix B is useful in showing a great deal of current policy relevant to each Objective, although it carries the risk of complacency if construed as a ‘business as usual’ audit. There needs to be a clearer indication as to whether or how such policies are currently actively supporting and/or supported by the NUP intent, the relative significance of each policy to the NUP, and which policy initiatives are missing or need change to meet that role.

As one example of a missing ‘policy level’ support, while there are many generalised references to spatial directions and strategies, the NUP should commit to developing at least the outline of a National Settlement Strategy to pull these threads together. In this regard *Australian Urban Policy* recognises a present “lack of firm normative direction”. Such direction seems desirable for a NUP policy that aims to “prioritise and guide Australian Government investment and policy directions” and could be done with the analytical support of Treasury’s Centre for Population (not mentioned in the NUP).

On interdependencies between the NUP and other policies, the NUP notes that it supports “other national priority agendas, such as housing, productivity, social cohesion, disaster resilience and climate action”; and elsewhere that the NUP is supported by other “national level policies that are key inputs to urban development, including housing, infrastructure, transport, climate, migration and labour.” This conveys a very high level of interdependencies in both directions. *Australian Urban Policy* recognised this interactive expansiveness across five main realms: sustainability, the environment and conservation; population, settlement, and urban form; justice and wellbeing; productivity and infrastructure; and transition needs and challenges. The NUP should make more explicit the institutional principles, processes and roles behind making this crucial two-way commitment happen, starting at the national level.

### 3.5 Clarify the intended set of National Standards and Guidelines

The NUP should record the intended range and structure of national regulations, standards, frameworks and guidelines that are expected to be developed or maintained, and followed at all levels, as well as national guidance. Some are mentioned in the Principles (e.g., national best practice guidelines such as nationally recognised sustainable building and precinct ratings). *Creating Places for People: an urban design protocol for Australian cities* (2011) is mentioned but there is a case for an updated version to capture more recent best practice developments. This earlier document for example makes no reference to acknowledging and responding to First Nations values. Previous federal governments have committed to developing national-relevant guidelines on various urban issues including housing, heritage, residential development, and various standards and principles.

We also suggest that the NUP consider committing to the development of financing and resourcing guidance. While there are precedents and processes for sharing of urban and infrastructure funding between Commonwealth and State/Territory governments, private sector and to a lesser extent local government, NGO and philanthropic funding will also be crucial to deliver on the NUP aspirations. This topic is clearly a crucial enabler where the NUP should contemplate some important principles from a government perspective.

There is scope for innovative approaches to financing some types of investment. For example, the extensive investment and financing necessary for decarbonisation could in some cases be scoped and structured to simultaneously provide urban co-benefits in local regions or neighbourhoods. Also, investment in urban green and blue spaces that might be considered unviable or marginal on traditionally scoped ROI calculations could be more attractive if (sometimes longer term) co-benefits are legitimately included in the scope. In another example, the *FEA Strategy* envisages that local Knowledge and Innovation Hubs as part of a national network of Hubs might be funded by a partnership of federal, state/territory and local governments, private sector, philanthropic organisations, universities and other research bodies, and NGOs, where the respective contributions might change over time as the Hub's role and contribution matures.

#### 4. Better codify the Policy application

##### ***Recommendation 4: How the Policy will be applied in practice should be clarified.***

We acknowledge that the essential vision of the NUP remains to be drafted but how the Policy is expected to be put into practice could be made clearer.

##### 4.1 Add some Urban Roles and Responsibilities

Clarifying respective and collaborative roles, as in NUP pp.13-15, is key to defining governance approaches. We identify several related issues that could be addressed. First is the need to clarify at the national level the respective roles of the Planning Ministers' Meeting forum, the Heads of Planning Group and the interjurisdictional working group moving forward. Second, is the need to expand on State/Territory roles in metropolitan/regional level strategy, planning and monitoring; this is particularly important as there is usually no formal governance at this level, even though there is increasing recognition of the importance of metropolitan/regional level strategy and planning. Third, the aspiration for collaboration with local government and what that might look like needs to be developed. Fourth, community groups, NGOs, professional bodies and research institutions need to be recognised as having important roles in informing and participating in governance processes, even if not usually in formal decision-making roles.

## 4.2 Clarify application to smaller regional settlements

The focus appears to be on challenges and opportunities in big cities and large-scale urban development with regional settlement issues deferred to the Government's Regional Investment Framework. The NUP should apply to the wider settlement network without any arbitrary divide between urban and regional, especially given the evidence of pandemic-induced and continuing trends toward counter-urbanisation, the possible need to redefine regional roles in the effort to decarbonise the economy, the spatial dimension of long-term population growth and immigration, and the systemic connections acknowledged between rural and urban communities.

## 4.3 Differentiate for spatial and time scales

There is also a generic and to some extent de-scaled quality to aims that could apply across many scales, at the same time as issues and opportunities that are specific to the federal level are not necessarily brought out. The genuinely national focus and levers within what is a national government initiative could be more explicitly expressed. This is so in time as well as space. One critical undefined term used frequently through the NUP is 'future' but usually without any clarifying or even indicative sense of short, medium, long (or very long) terms.

## 4.4 Cover NUP implementation, consultation and review

An emergent issue is overall implementation. The categorisation of numerous existing government policies, standards and guidelines in constituting the building block initiatives of an emergent NUP gives some substance to the desire to 'hit the ground running' although the connection to an integrated NUP may in some cases be more apparent than real. The current federal infrastructure commitments and continuation of the previous government's 'City Deal' programs take care of some 'big ticket' items. Three new grant schemes with modest funding are reaffirmed alongside the coordinative and clearinghouse functions of the core secretariat. These are however undeveloped in terms of their response to the Vision, Goals, Objectives and Principles of the NUP. Just how these actions will integrate and support transformative change in constituting a substantive core national policy layer remains unclear.

More generally a final NUP might also be expected to give some indication of how implementation is to be progressed and managed and whether and when it might be scheduled for overall review as opposed to any progressive navigational changes.

## (C) Details of the two publications which informed these recommendations.

This submission is in part based on two substantial initiatives that have recently investigated complementary aspects of urban strategy and policy.

Future Earth Australia (hosted by the Australian Academy of Science) published a 2024 update of the national 10-year *Sustainable Cities and Regions Strategy*, first published in 2019 based on extensive cross-sector interviews and workshops in cities around Australia. The updated Strategy was based on inputs from the same (approximately 400) cross-sector and cross-spatial level participant organisations and individuals involved in the original version. It identifies the aspirations and challenges identified by participants nationally and for their cities; and the key capabilities that are needed to support future urban developments, the very significant issues with those capabilities, and the future strategies for their transformation. The strategies included requirement for a comprehensive National Urban Policy (NUP) that amongst other things drives and supports those capabilities and strategies.

Webb, R., Dodson, J., Steele, W., Stafford Smith, M., Pradhan, A., and Nairn, K. 2024. *Sustainable cities and regions: 10-year strategy to enable urban systems transformation*. 2024 Update to the 2019 Strategy, Canberra: Future Earth Australia, The Australian Academy of Science. ISBN: 978-0-85847-880-0.

Available at: [www.futureearth.org.au/sites/default/files/2024-05/sustainable-cities-and-regions-update-2024-web\\_0.pdf](http://www.futureearth.org.au/sites/default/files/2024-05/sustainable-cities-and-regions-update-2024-web_0.pdf)

The Academy of the Social Sciences of Australia (ASSA) sponsored an online workshop in late 2021 with logistical support from UNSW City Futures Research Centre and also the RMIT Centre for Urban Research and the Australian National University. This involved a total of 40 contributors including some of Australia's leading social scientists, academic thought leaders in urban policy, emerging urban scholars, and applied researchers and policy professionals active at the interface of academia and policy. The workshop presentations translated into 21 substantive chapters. These investigate a range of issues including the characteristics of effective urban policy as well as sectoral policies with national resonance addressing issues such as infrastructure, population distribution, transport, housing and environment that are highly relevant in urban and regional contexts.

Freestone, R., Randolph, B., and Steele, W., eds. 2024. *Australian Urban Policy: Prospects and Pathways*. Canberra: ANU Press, 2024. ISBN 9781760466299 (print) and 9781760466305 (online).

Available at: <http://doi.org/10.22459/AUP.2024>

## Attachment. Objective 7: Urban capabilities significantly enhanced

### Summary

Significantly developing the key capabilities that are necessary to deliver on the aspirations in all of the other Objectives and Goals, as well as recognising the mutually reinforcing connections between these capabilities that can set them on an upward trajectory.

### Key urban challenges

- **Underpinning capabilities:** The urban challenges identified in Objectives 1-6 will require transformational change, requiring significant enhancement in urban capabilities in leadership, governance, engagement, knowledge, research and innovation partnerships.
- **Leadership and governance:** Urban leadership and governance need greater cohesion across jurisdictions, sectors, spatial scales and time scales to ensure the ability to navigate transformational change under great uncertainty.
- **Stakeholder and community engagement:** Governance and knowledge development processes need more inclusive and meaningful engagement with stakeholders and communities, especially those who suffer economic, social and/or environmental disadvantage.
- **Extensive innovation:** Transformational change will require combinations of social, financial, economic, environmental, technological and governance innovation.
- **Research and knowledge:** The fragmentation of urban research, innovation and knowledge must be addressed to generate greater uptake of knowledge and upscaling of innovation.
- **Policy-practice-research collaborations:** Increased collaboration is needed to bridge gaps between policy-making, practice and independent evidence-based research.

### Discussion

Cohesive leadership is linked to urban visioning, policy, strategic planning and governance that is collaborative and integrated - horizontally across portfolios and through a 'line of sight' between all levels of government. Visioning and strategy are desirably co-developed with involved stakeholders and impacted communities. Partnerships will also need to be developed to support innovative financing approaches to share the funding of projects across public, private and other sectors, including better capturing of co-benefits.

Urban transitions will need to be steered across scales from national to local. Coherence over time will require consistent and sustained policy but change and uncertainty also require the ability to flexibly navigate transition pathways by learning quickly from innovations to meet shared urban visions, goals, objectives and collaborative strategic missions.

Cohesion is also challenged by just how many interdependencies there can be in both directions between urban and other policy areas, both within and outside the 'urban portfolio' (e.g., infrastructure and transport policy, regional policy, housing, industry and employment, government services, migration, climate change and decarbonisation, environment, health, and social cohesion). These require a broader systems approach to issues framing and strategy development. Because urban strategies impact all 17 of the UNSDGs they provide a good opportunity to systemically translate the SDGs into the Australian context.

Previous attempts at national urban performance indicator sets have not been put to good use, yet there are multiple reasons why performance indicators are important, as long as they allow extension and flexibility to also reflect local issues. There is also an opportunity to link with the Treasury's Measuring What Matters framework as acknowledged in Principle 5.

There are many urban relevant frameworks, guidelines, regulations and standards even at the Commonwealth level, as inventoried in Appendix B of the NUP. Some will need rationalising or updating (e.g., *Creating Places for People: an urban design protocol for Australian cities* (2011) to capture more recent good practice). It is also timely to review previous federal government commitments to develop national-relevant guidelines on various urban issues (including housing, heritage, residential development) in the national interest.

Inclusive stakeholder and community engagement is essential if urban policy, planning and implementation are to be successful. This includes participation in governance processes, co-design of urban solutions and co-production of urban knowledge in a governance framework characterised by transparency, accountability and probity. Locally, that should reflect a place-based approach that delivers shared value through meaningful engagement with local communities including First Nations people, socially disadvantaged people, multicultural groups, all levels of government, the private sector and academia.

However, in practice, engagement is often found to be ineffective even when the intent may be sound. Currently there is no national vehicle for establishing and sharing good engagement principles and practices that can be applied in various urban contexts.

The federal government needs more evidence-informed decisions and greater innovation. While there are excellent individual research institutions carrying out urban research and many local innovations, overall, urban knowledge, research, and innovation are extremely siloed, fragmented, and under-utilised.

This challenge is accentuated by the need for a systems approach to better understand the fundamental drivers of change and the complex interdependencies of urban-related policies and decisions within and across scales. It is necessary to understand synergies (co-benefits) and trade-offs. There also needs to be recognition that urban innovation may be sourced from various combinations of environmental, socio-economic, technological and governance domains.

There has been national investment in urban data management and access (especially via AURIN) and this will need to address the increased data opportunities from digital city technologies and infrastructure. However there has been no corresponding investment in urban knowledge synthesis, access and brokering, including research and innovation outcomes, or in urban innovation facilitation and upscaling. There is a need for a national urban knowledge and innovation infrastructure to address these issues.

There is too often a gap between policy-practice on the one hand and research on the other. Stronger collaborations between policy-makers, practitioners and researchers would lead to shared understanding of urban issues and missions, commissioning and uptake of evidence for policy, planning and decision making, and opportunities to mutually improve each-others' skills and practices in the public interest.

### **Possible actions**

Activate enhanced capabilities through an Urban Capabilities Improvement Program, with program design and implementation guided by policy-makers, practitioners, stakeholders, community representatives and research institutions.

- **Develop leadership and governance capabilities by:**
  - establishing a collaborative visioning and governance framework to inform the evolving NUP and an implementation plan
  - requiring all urban centres greater than 50,000 population develop or revise city-wide plans for 'line of sight' alignment with NUP as well as with state/territory policies and regional and local challenges
  - embedding the SDGs and related national goals into urban policies and plans at all levels with national goals, indicators and targets framework for all cities, recognising necessary variation between cities, and regular performance audits aligned with the NUP
  - building knowledge of interactions, synergies and trade-offs within and between urban systems including a national cross-sectoral research and knowledge platform, to support NUP implementation at all levels, including strategy and investment framing and assessment and input to State of Cities and Regions Assessments
- **Commit to stakeholder and community engagement through:**
  - embedding inclusive participation within NUP development and implementation at all levels, ensuring recognition of the rights of First Nations peoples and engagement of normally marginalised groups
  - developing national engagement good practice guidelines and associated platform to enhance and share knowledge on engagement
- **Invest in urban knowledge and innovation enabling initiatives through:**
  - recognition of urban and regional research as a national research priority
  - establishing a multi-sector National Urban Knowledge and Innovation Forum to guide future research and innovation agendas
  - creating in partnerships with state/territory governments and others a distributed network of cross-sector Knowledge and Innovation Hubs at city and regional scales, and a National Hub, to collectively facilitate innovation, learning and cross-sector knowledge sharing, coproduction and uptake
  - co-developing an open access urban knowledge platform to facilitate knowledge and innovation sharing, supported by government and industry
  - facilitating the linkages of Australian researchers and institutions into international urban research networks
  - supporting the existing biennial State of Australasian Cities (SOAC) Conference series under the auspices of the Australian Cities Research Network (ACRN)
  - augmenting research funding allocation for urban research through existing agencies such as the Australian Research Council
- **Enhance policy-practice and research collaborations by:**
  - building the capability and capacity of urban researchers and policymakers/practitioners to respectively co-develop practical knowledge and commission/apply such knowledge, through collaborations linked to NUP implementation at all levels