

... sound urban growth management policy must be based on sound and well funded research and information... We owe it to our cities and their inhabitants to do no less.

(Urban Frontiers Program)<sup>1</sup>

## Research and Feedback

- 9.1 The committee is acutely aware that there are no 'quick fix' solutions to many of the environmental challenges Australia faces. The aim of the report and recommendations is to direct Australian urban policy onto a path of sustainability by 2025.
- 9.2 The final issues the committee addresses in this report concerns the research needs to build sustainable cities, the need to report back to all Australians, and Australia's regional responsibilities.

## Research

- 9.3 During the course of the inquiry, the committee received evidence that suggests that, despite the wealth of information on sustainability that is available today, there may be a number of gaps in research and lack of funding for some areas of research.

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1 University of Western Sydney Urban Frontiers Program, *Submission 113*, p. 12.

- 9.4 The Urban Frontiers Program at the University of Western Sydney, for instance, drew the committee's attention to the lack of available data and research work to inform current planning policies. Urban Frontiers comments on funding cuts to research into urban policy, with a detrimental effect on sound policy initiatives.<sup>2</sup>
- 9.5 The committee notes, however, that the Australian Government has increased funding for environmental research, and the committee supports funding for environmental R&D and innovation programmes, administered by the Environment and Heritage portfolio.<sup>3</sup>
- 9.6 In terms of urban research, the committee notes that CSIRO's research programme related to urban systems performance is worth around \$30 million per year.<sup>4</sup> There are also a number of Cooperative Research Centres currently engaged in work related to the built environment, urban materials and sustainable technologies.
- 9.7 There may, however, be a case for enhancing urban policy research, possibly through the development of an Institute for Urban Sustainability and Population Health, which would bring together professionals across a number of fields.
- 9.8 The committee was also told that Australia has a 'natural advantage' in a number of research areas (coal, uranium, 'dryness') and the Government should be providing research support where Australia can lead and export.<sup>5</sup>
- 9.9 The CSIRO also recommends that capabilities and data be assembled to 'develop blueprints for sustainable cities'.<sup>6</sup>
- 9.10 The committee was unable to form a more developed view regarding the level of research into sustainable cities and believes that an audit of such research would be an appropriate first step.
- 9.11 The committee considers that such an audit may be undertaken by the Australian Sustainability Commission recommended in chapter 3. The results of the audit would form the basis for future policy in this area.

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2 University of Western Sydney Urban Frontiers Program, *Submission 113*, p.12.

3 Department of Education Science and Training, *Budget Information 2005 at a Glance*, see [http://www.dest.gov.au/portfolio\\_department/dest\\_information/publications\\_resources/resources/budget\\_information/budget\\_2005\\_2006/at\\_a\\_glance.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/portfolio_department/dest_information/publications_resources/resources/budget_information/budget_2005_2006/at_a_glance.htm)

4 CSIRO, *Submission 91*, p. 9.

5 Mr Hugh Ralston, Warren Centre of Advanced Engineering, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 April 2005, pp. 71-72.

6 CSIRO, *Submission 91*, p.7.

## Recommendation 30

- 9.12 The committee recommends that the Australian Government:
- **conduct an audit of existing research and funding opportunities for issues relating to the built environment and urban policy to ensure the adequacy of technical and policy research in this area; and**
  - **give consideration to nominating the built environment as a national research priority.**

## Feedback

- 9.13 As partly canvassed in chapter 3, the committee considers that reporting mechanisms are vital for Australia to measure its achievements and monitor areas where further initiatives are needed.
- 9.14 Reporting frameworks are critical; however, they do not contribute in a meaningful way to a commitment to sustainable living practices at the household or neighbourhood or even city level.
- 9.15 Previous chapters have drawn attention to the need for education of industry and the public. However, the committee is also keenly aware that sustainability is not a path that people or industry can be forced to take.
- 9.16 Minimum regulatory requirements will set a direction; however, real change comes from a personal commitment to achieve best practice and from a drive for innovation that develops new and more efficient and sustainable materials.
- 9.17 Thus, the committee identifies a need for feedback at the local level, to challenge the mentality that the problem of sustainability is overwhelming or is the responsibility of someone else.
- 9.18 It is not within the powers of the Australian Government to set up reporting and feedback mechanisms at the local neighbourhood, regional or even city level. For the most part, this must be driven by local governments, and the committee sees great value in providing resources that may assist local governments in this task.
- 9.19 The committee urges State and Territory governments, and local governments to give consideration to this concept.

## The Swedish model

- 9.20 At the 2004 National Conference of Parliamentary Public Works and Environment Committees, representatives of this committee in the 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament heard the Swedish Government outline its process of setting sustainability objectives, mapping the steps to achievement of those objectives, and the intermediate assessment system to report on progress.
- 9.21 In 1999, the Swedish Parliament had voted to adopt 15 environmental objectives:
- Reduced climate impact;
  - Clean air;
  - Natural acidification only;
  - A non-toxic environment;
  - A protective ozone layer;
  - A safe radiation environment;
  - Zero eutrophication;
  - Flourishing lakes and streams;
  - Good-quality groundwater;
  - A balanced marine environment, flourishing coastal areas and archipelagos;
  - Thriving wetlands;
  - Sustainable forests;
  - A varied agricultural landscape;
  - A magnificent mountain landscape; and
  - A good built environment.<sup>7</sup>

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7 For further information on Sweden's environmental objectives, see [www.miljomal.nu](http://www.miljomal.nu)

- 9.22 Underpinning these national objectives are five fundamental principles:
- Promoting human health;
  - Safeguarding biological diversity;
  - Protecting cultural heritage;
  - Preserving long term productive capacity of the ecosystem; and
  - Ensuring that natural resources are properly managed.
- 9.23 The committee has chosen to refer to the Swedish model as a paradigm for Australia for two reasons. Firstly, the Swedish Parliament has established a high benchmark that is not framed around the usual rhetoric of sustainability. Sweden frames its overall challenge as one of ‘handing over to the next generation a dynamic but sustainable society in which the major environmental problems have been solved.’<sup>8</sup> This challenge demands of the nation not only targets of sustainability, but solutions to current environmental issues.
- 9.24 Secondly, the Swedish system has introduced an approachable set of objectives and system of public reporting. The objectives themselves are in plain language (with the exception of one specialised technical term), in keeping with this as a national set of objectives that the population must relate to and identify with.
- 9.25 The committee considers that there is a valuable lesson in this for Australia. The Australian charter of sustainability and the COAG agreed targets (as outlined in chapter 3) are important measures and would form the basis for policy funding decisions. However, on a more practical level, policy must connect to and become part of Australian everyday life. This is a vital ‘feedback’ and engagement process.
- 9.26 A vision for sustainability must engage Australians and have meaning – it must close the gap between policy makers and the lived reality of Australians who will, ultimately, be the practitioners of sustainability principles.
- 9.27 The Swedish model has taken this philosophy a step further in its reporting process. Each objective is measured against a set of defined targets and timeframes. Some objectives are represented by several targets, other by only one or two. Similarly, the targets range in timeframes.

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8 Mr Jan Bergquist, Chairman of the Environmental Objectives Council, Sweden, Presentation to the National Conference of Parliamentary Public Works and Environment Committees, Melbourne, July 2004.

- 9.28 Sweden reports to its people its national progress in a one page chart, with measurement of progress towards each target falling into one of three categories and represented pictorially:
- Difficult to achieve;
  - More action needed; or
  - Achievable.
- 9.29 In the example presented to the 2004 conference, there were a range of happy, sad and neutral symbols to represent successes and areas where evaluation of programmes and additional effort was required. This allows people to gauge, at a glance, achievements and progress.
- 9.30 It is the view of this committee that Australians deserve the same type of engagement and feedback in the form of a snapshot report card.
- 9.31 In addition to the Swedish model, which has been developed specifically to measure sustainability, the committee notes Australian models, such as the Tidy Town competition or Celebrate WA as useful examples that might be emulated. The latter is a not for profit organisation that fosters pride in Western Australia, by:
- Recognising the contribution and achievements of individuals, groups and the State
  - Developing a sense of community
  - Engaging the community in celebratory and commemorative activities
  - Building on our unique heritage, culture, identity and location <sup>9</sup>
- 9.32 The committee considers that if we expect a change in behaviour and consumption patterns, we need a set of objectives, targets and a reporting system that closes the information loop and reports back in a way that makes sense to all.

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9 See Celebrate WA at [www.celebratewa.com.au](http://www.celebratewa.com.au)

### **Recommendation 31**

9.33 **The committee recommends that, with reference to the Swedish model of environmental objectives, the Australian Government:**

- **develop an accessible and identifiable set of national environmental (or sustainability) objectives for Australia (based on the Australian Sustainability Charter recommendation in chapter 3);**
- **implement a national report card for Australia which represents transparently and simply our progress towards the objectives; and**
- **encourage similar programmes at a community level, possibly emulating the Tidy Towns or Celebrate WA programmes, but focusing on sustainability.**

## **Australia's regional responsibilities**

9.34 In making its recommendations in this report, the committee recognises that many issues fall under State and Territory or local government jurisdiction. However, sustainable cities are a matter of national priority, which must also be given direction, governance, and where needed, funding, from the Australian Government.

9.35 Further, this committee believes that, as part of its national responsibility, Australia must extend the commitment to sustainable cities beyond its borders. As one of the major developed nations into the Southern Hemisphere and in particular in the Asia Pacific region, Australia has a greater responsibility to demonstrate to its neighbours that sustainability and development are not mutually exclusive, and sustainability does not need to impose an economic penalty.

9.36 In the most basic sense, we are impacted by the sustainability (or lack thereof) of the cities in neighbouring countries. Their pollution or waste or economic prosperity directly impacts on Australia. It is therefore in our interests to foster sustainability on an international basis.

- 9.37 The committee notes that there are currently several international sustainable cities networks operating. For instance, the International Centre for Sustainable Cities is a non-profit organisation based in Canada. It has projects operating in several Asian cities.<sup>10</sup> The World Health Organisation also runs an extensive Healthy Cities programme across Europe.<sup>11</sup>
- 9.38 The committee considers that Australia should take a leading role in initiating a Sustainable Cities network across Australia and Asia.

### **Recommendation 32**

- 9.39 **The committee recommends that Australia investigate opportunities to establish a Sustainable Cities network across Australia and Asia, and extend its regional and international commitment to urban sustainability through avenues such as:**
- **Technology and research exchange;**
  - **Pilot demonstration projects, particularly in the area of water and waste treatment;**
  - **Increased aid for social development in urban areas; and**
  - **Local government partnership programmes.**

Dr Mal Washer

Committee Chair

August 2005

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10 See [www.icsc.ca](http://www.icsc.ca) for an outline of the Centre's objectives and current work.

11 See [www.who.dk/healthy-cities](http://www.who.dk/healthy-cities)