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Environment and Heritage Committee
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission into Sustainability Charter from the Australian Association of Environmental Education

The Australian Association of Environmental Education [AAEE] is pleased to be able to provide this submission into the Discussion Paper, *Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter*.

In structuring its comments the AAEE will deal with three major areas of feedback; some general comments, specific feedback on the draft of the Charter and some input into what is missing from the Discussion Paper and hence the proposed Charter.

1: General Feedback

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage is to be congratulated for developing and establishing a consultation process about sustainability. It is essential that high profile and broadly supported public policy is developed with regard to this important issue. The AAEE has long held the view that the Australian Government should take a much more proactive position on the issue of sustainability. It is of note that the period 2005 to 2014 has been deemed by the United Nations as the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development and that Federal, State and Territory Governments and some Councils are moving towards the development of Decade strategies and approaches. Over the next 10 years sustainability will have a greater profile in the community. But this is occurring in the absence of major Government policy on sustainability, itself, and this hampers education efforts. The Charter will hopefully address this gap in the not to distant future; or otherwise we risk a situation of the “tail [education] wagging the dog.” This is counter-productive and essentially undesirable.

The paper covers a wide range of issues and is a good stimulus for thought. The emphasis on integration is paramount- a need to see issues not in isolation but more holistically. There needs to be greater effort by government to bring different groups and organisations together to tackle issues from a variety of viewpoints and skill bases.

2. Specific Comments Related to the Discussion Paper

Aspirational: The Charter is said to be aspirational but the Discussion Paper fails somewhat in this regard. This might be because it does not propose key Principles, Goals/Objectives and Targets. Perhaps when the Charter itself does this it will be aspirational. The Discussion Paper does pose some features from Sweden and Western

Australian which relate to these and then poses questions about them. It is the view of the AAEE that consultation would have been more effective had draft Principles, Goals/Objectives and Targets been put forward for discussion. The AAEE is of the view that the Charter must be both descriptive/definitional of what we mean by sustainability and aspirational with regard to what targets for sustainability are established.

Other Jurisdictions: The Discussion Paper provides some potted summaries of approaches in other countries and States, but this lacks a comprehensive overview of what is occurring. For example NSW and Victoria are not included in the state summaries and both have done a substantial amount of work in developing strategic approaches. A more comprehensive review would have shown other approaches, goals etc and would have resulted in the tabling of a more comprehensive approach. The House of Representatives Committee and the subsequent Charter should recognise the activities and approaches of other jurisdictions and draw upon these.

The Focus of Sustainability: The Discussion Paper flags an approach that focuses on general sustainability and then five major silo environmental areas – built environment, water, energy, ecological footprint and transport. This silo approach fails to relate the impacts of one area of focus on another, for example transport on built environment. In the Charter itself a much more integrated approach has to be developed. It is no longer good enough just to deal with issues of sustainability in this “siloed” approach. A great deal of in-depth thinking and analysis will be required to make this a reality in the Charter itself.

Principles: It is agreed that the Charter should identify principles for sustainability. These should be drawn from various international and national documents and agreements, but they must reflect a truly Australian reality. They must be principles that:

- Integrate social, economic and environmental sustainability outcomes.
- Acknowledge that Australia is resource rich and that reducing consumption and becoming more sustainable in these circumstances requires significant effort.
- Frame real action rather than just being “parenthood” statements that we can all feel good about
- Drive the Charter forward across Government at all levels
- Embrace the community’s desire to produce a better world for future generations.

Goals/Objectives and Targets: As dealt with elsewhere in this submission, the AAEE is of the view that the Charter must set real and achievable objectives related to goals and targets that benchmark a reduced impact on the environment. At the highest end of this process, the goals identified in the Swedish and WA examples are broadly supported. Specifically the AAEE is of the view that:

- Existing standards [e.g. Water Efficiency Labeling] should be applied as part of the charter
- The Charter must be framed in a way that integrates it into all levels of decision making at each level of government
- The Charter and the State of the Environment reporting process must be linked.
- Measuring cultural and social values and approaches must be a part of the Charter in the same way as it measure economic and environmental values.

3. What is missing from the Discussion paper [Charter]?

A Sense of Urgency: The Discussion paper gives no real sense of urgency to this exercise. It is essential that in Australia we grapple with sustainability with urgency and in depth. This paper does not spell out why we need to care now about our use of resources and the finite nature of the richness of the planet. It does not indicate that a failure to do so will have a significant affect on future generations in this country and on this planet. Some of the drivers for urgency should be outlined in the Charter.

Charter into Action

The Discussion Paper gives no real sense of how the Charter will be translated into action. A document for the shelf is not what is needed at this time. The Charter itself will need to drive action. Perhaps this is by the establishment of clear and hard-edged targets for social, economic and environmental sustainability. Targets to which government and the community are held accountable.

The Role of Education: One thing missing from the paper is the role of education. None of the goals identified in the Charter can be achieved until a reflection on our lifestyle is supported and an effort is made to look at the values and behavioural patterns of the Australian community. There need to look at the individual at home, work and play in this process. Education should be given greater attention and a national education program not only for schools but for society as a whole needs to be promoted. The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development can provide a high level focus for this activity; but it is totally absent from the draft Charter. This is of significant concern.

It is submitted that education programs now need to go beyond the tokenistic worm farm /reduce litter level and move to a holistic approach considering what structures, knowledge, skills and attitudes need to be put in place to help people live and behave more sustainably.

If the Australian community given only unsustainable options to survive in our society then the efforts of people to be more sustainable will be severely compromised. For example if people can in the main, only use energy obtained from coal fired fuels then individuals are limited in their desire to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. If people don't know about sustainability and how to take the "journey" that the Charter alludes to, then no real change will occur. If people have not been prompted to consider their values and behaviour, then sustainability will remain a "word" and not a journey at all.

In summary, in Australia there is a need to educate everyone to consider what new frameworks, infrastructure, knowledge, skills and attitudes are needed to help us live more sustainably. The Charter needs to set the framework where government can progress two crucial roles - develop an education program to prepare people for our future and - plan a new framework and social system to facilitate a **sustainability-based behavioural** change for the community.

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