



Sutherland Shire Council Submission

To the

House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Environment and Heritage

Discussion Paper

Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter

Sutherland Shire Council is pleased to provide the following comments to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage in regard to the discussion paper concerning its inquiry into a Sustainability Charter.

Summary

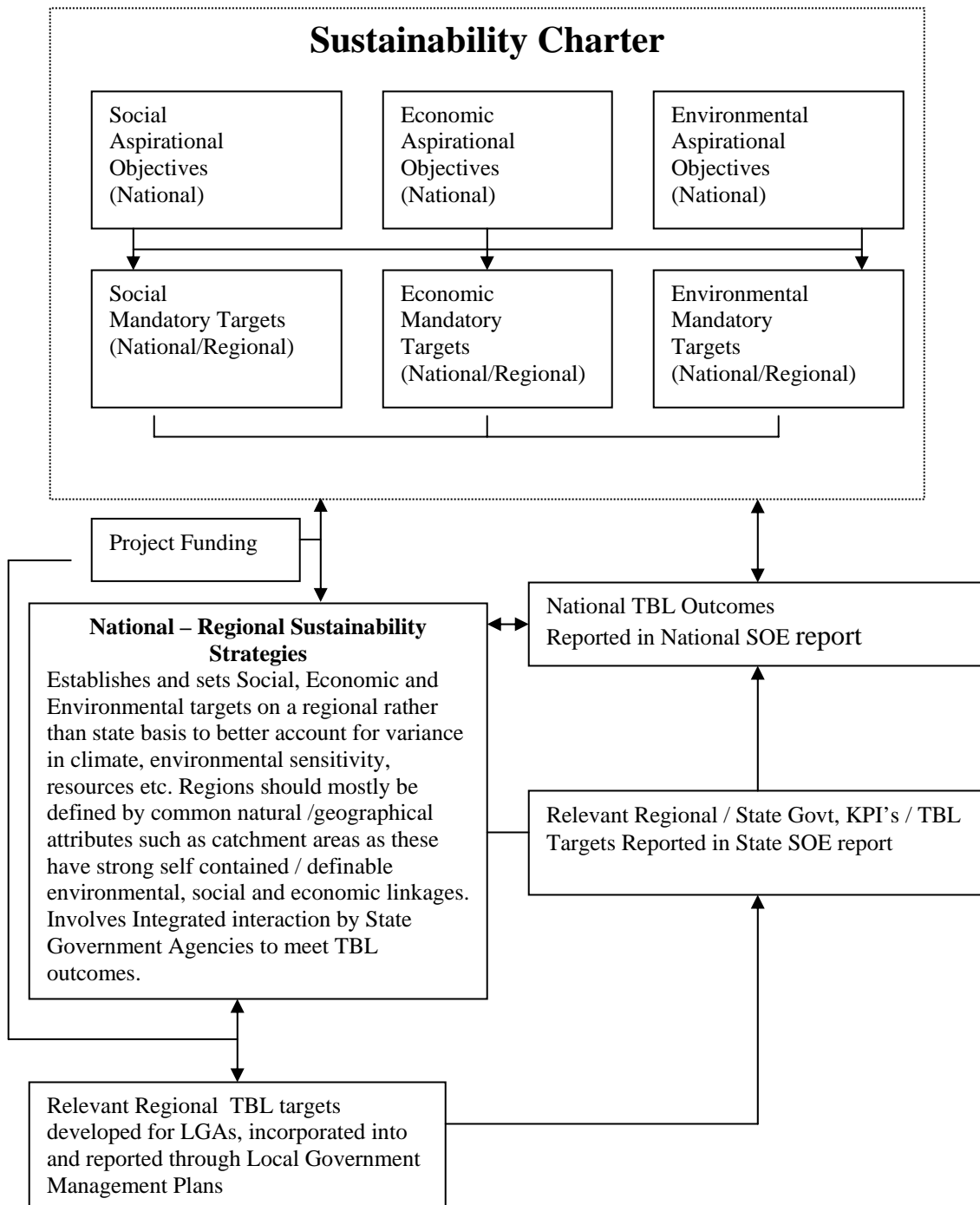
The Sustainability Charter will provide a framework for a national approach to sustainability. However, as a set of aspirational objectives only, the Sustainability Charter will not have the robustness and strength to guide the various levels of government, industry and the community. To ensure greater certainty the Charter requires the inclusion of mandatory targets that are linked to the objectives and specifically address the central elements of sustainability through a balance of social, economic and environmental factors, the triple bottom line (TBL). To compliment the Charter a National Sustainability Strategy needs to be developed that reflects the regional diversity of Australia through regional TBL targets, establishes a conduit for project funding between federal, state and local governments and establishes uniform reporting and monitoring processes.

The Sustainability Charter

A Sustainability Charter is considered a positive step in ensuring the development of a coordinated, consistent national approach to address the need for a sustainable future. With joint federal, state and local government commitment, the charter's objectives and targets will provide a uniform and national framework to achieve sustainable outcomes for government, business, industry and the community. The way in which the charter is formulated will be critical to its effectiveness.

As a guide to a potential framework for a Sustainability Charter the HREHC discussion paper introduces a number of options based on sustainability models used in Australia and overseas. Although the options presented express desired 'sustainable' outcomes they do not provide a robust and definable framework from which sustainable actions can be easily determined and evaluated.

It is therefore suggested that rather than pursue a set of objectives that loosely address the notion of sustainability (as expressed in the Swedish and Western Australian example in the discussion paper), it is more important that the objectives be formulated within a defined structure that is underpinned by specific economic, social and environmental outcomes – a Triple Bottom Line (TBL) Approach. The application of the triple bottom line in the objectives will provide the charter with a stronger identifiable structure of checks and balances that can be linked and tracked from the national through to state and local government level. The chart provided below shows how this may occur.



The objectives of the Sustainability Charter should be aspirational and encompass a ‘Plain English’ format as is the style of the Swedish system noted in the discussion paper. However, the objectives need to focus on specific outcomes such as ‘less CO2’, ‘increase environmental flows for rivers’ and avoid generic global terms such as ‘ecologically’, ‘thriving’, ‘flourishing’ and

‘sustainable’, noted in the Swedish example that may lead to ambiguity and inconsistent application.

Regional Mandatory Targets and a National Sustainability Strategy

To achieve the aspirational outcomes set by the objectives of the Charter, it is vital that mandatory measurable targets and milestones be included in the charter.

The inclusion of mandatory targets will ensure that the national objectives are tangible and the nation’s performance in regard to sustainability is able to be measured and scrutinised. With greater certainty and clarity it is more likely that appropriate and targeted sustainable actions and initiatives will be incorporated into the activities of the wider community, government and industry.

A major problem with setting national objectives and mandatory targets is that it does not account for the regional and local diversity of the nation. Hence the ability to achieve the mandatory targets and goals can be considered unreasonable and be compromised. To overcome this issue Regional Mandatory Targets developed within the context of a National Sustainability Strategy should be developed.

As outlined above a national sustainability strategy would compliment the Sustainability Charter. The strategy would divide the nation into regions defined by common natural /geographical attributes such as catchment areas for example, which have strong self contained and definable environmental, social and economic linkages.

Mandatory targets would be developed for each region based on the TBL platform of the Sustainability Charter. In this structure, actions undertaken to address the sustainability targets can:

- be managed within the particular characteristics of a region
- provide the flexibility in achieving targets by developing environmental / credits / trading arrangements with other areas.
- require greater inter and intra state interaction by Federal and State Government Agencies, acting as a conduit that will drive improved communication networks and integration of activities / strategies.

The inclusion of regional mandatory targets in the charter must identify responsibilities and include timelines to ensure that the outcomes of the Sustainability Charter are realised and that greater certainty, direction and commitment occurs across all sectors of government, industry and the community. In addition, consideration may need to be given to developing regional targets on a sector by sector basis for agriculture and manufacturing for example, where water use and air quality are significant issues.

The targets will need to be defined, have scientific rigour, be quantifiable, easy and cost effective to measure and be consistently applied across the various levels of government, industry and community. In order that these targets are achieved, sufficient flexibility and incentives are also needed to promote and encourage innovative solutions and use of methods of best practice.

Monitoring and Reporting

Monitoring and reporting is critical to the effectiveness of a Sustainability Charter and the development and review of associated national / regional strategies. Central to the measurement of the outcomes will as noted above, be a consistent and quantifiable approach to the measurement of sustainability targets.

There is a strong need to ensure that Key Performance Indicators and associated data collection methodologies are consistent between each level of government so that a more accurate assessment of a region's and /or national response to sustainability can be made. This should also be supported by information that identifies the level of resources that have been applied to address sustainability at the National and State Level. To this end there is scope to utilise and better integrate the National and State 'State of the Environment' Reports, to not only provide information to the community about the environment but also the budgetary demands on the economy and government sectors in addressing sustainability issues. This is already occurring at the local government level where TBL monitoring and reporting is made through the Management Plan.

Ecological Footprint

The proposal to incorporate an ecological footprint as a means of determining the sustainability of a region and or nation is not supported at this point in time. Calculations determining ecological footprints are complex, contain many subjective variables that require constant revision as new data and reporting methodologies arise, leading to a high degree of uncertainty, inconsistent interpretations of environmental impact and difficulty of assessing trends or making comparisons consistently between areas over time.

As an alternative a more basic approach using a small number of key indicators for e.g water, energy and specific resources (coal, iron ore, aluminium etc) could be used to develop a per capita eco-footprint.

Conclusion

The Sustainability Charter will provide greater direction for the nation in developing a sustainable environment. The structure of the charter, its linkages and reporting and monitoring processes should be robust, but also simple so that it can be easily understood and integrated in all facets of government, industry and the community. In principal the need for a charter is considered a positive step and is given in principal support.