

Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand

Submission to the Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage

Introduction

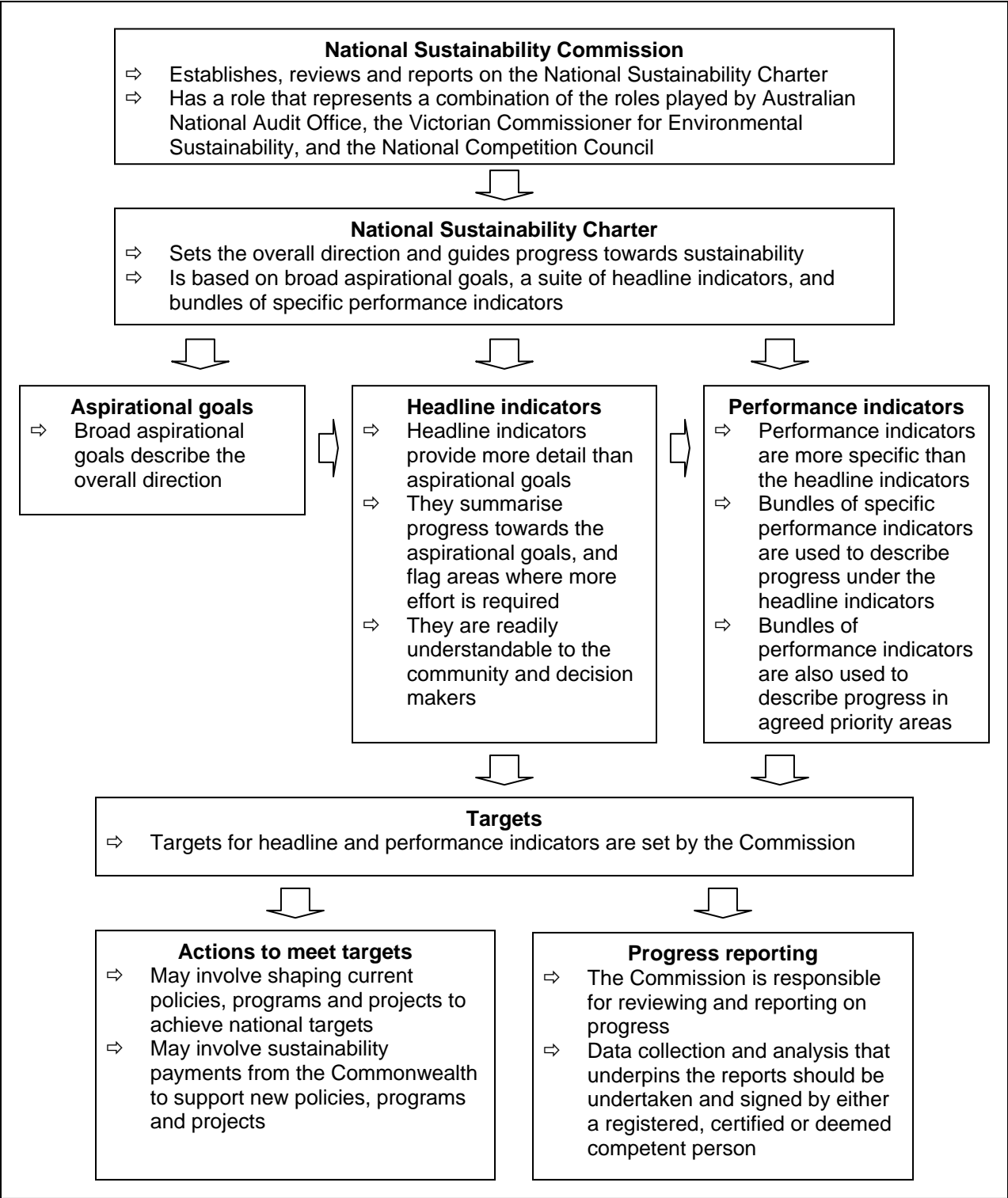
The Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ) supports the establishment of a National Sustainability Commission and a National Sustainability Charter, as proposed by the Committee.

We welcome the opportunity to provide our comments on how the Commission and Charter could help Australia progress on its journey to sustainability. We have provided overall comments on the establishment of the Commission and the Charter, and more specific comments in response to some of the questions raised in the Discussion Paper.

The Institute is the peak professional body in Australasia for environmental practitioners, and promotes independent and interdisciplinary discourse on environmental issues. The Institute is of the view that our transition to a sustainable society depends on good environmental outcomes through continuous capacity building and ethical environmental practice. On all issues and projects the Institute advocates best available environmental practices to be delivered by competent and ethical environmental practitioners.

Comments on the Commission and Charter

EIANZ believes the Commission and Charter would be most effective if organised as shown in the following chart.



Comments on specific issues raised in the Discussion Paper

General

The sustainability charter should consist of aspirational goals, supported by headline indicators and specific performance indicators. Four to six aspirational goals, covering the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability, should be agreed by the Commission. The principles of ESD set out in the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development, could guide the development of the aspirational goals.

Headline indicators are used to describe progress towards the aspirational goals. They should be selected to summarise or act as a surrogate for a dimension of overall progress. For example, the health and vitality of certain fish stocks may be used to summarise the availability and quality of inland waters. Similarly, household energy use may act as a surrogate for sustainable livelihoods, because the efficiency of energy use signals a willingness to reduce the personal ecological footprint. The UK Government uses Framework indicators in this way¹.

Specific performance indicators would be grouped into bundles to provide more information on progress under a headline indicator. For the above examples, performance indicators may be agreed for turbidity, the area of salinised land, and the frequency of floods that stimulate migratory spawning, to support the fish stocks headline indicator. The uptake of products with high energy efficiency ratings, prevalence of Green Power electricity tariffs, and rating of installed grid-connected solar photovoltaic systems could be used to support the household energy use headline indicator.

The Institute believes in selecting indicators consideration should be given to the need to integrate results in such a way that they can be used to meet the needs of multiple processes, such as SoE reporting and reporting progress against meeting Australia's obligations under international environmental agreements.

EIANZ believes the success of the Sustainability Charter depends, in part, to involving community, government and industry stakeholders in the development of goals and indicators. The Institute accepts that research will play a role in informing stakeholders and there is already considerable technical discussion around many of the questions raised by the Committee. For a national initiative of this magnitude considerable resources and a reasonable time frame should be dedicated to generating consensus.

The Charter should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure it remains relevant.

Role of the Sustainability Commission

The Institute believe the Commission will require a level of authority that will ensure its views and recommendations are acted on, not just "taken into account". It would have an influencing role, an auditing role and a reporting role – much like the UK's Sustainable Development Commission.

¹ See <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.au/progress/framework/index.htm>

Over time the Institute believes there may be scope for the Commission to have a role in educating Australians about the national sustainability journey, by ensuring communication of ideas on how Australia can achieve the various goals and targets incorporated in the Charter.

Scope of the Sustainability Charter

The Sustainability Charter should be a written document that shows the journey Australia must take as it sets out along the pathway to becoming a more sustainable nation. That is, it must describe how we intend to “keep going” and continue to construct buildings, use water, generate power, travel and move freight, and so on, while at the same time negating our impact upon ecological processes and systems, and strengthening our community and economy.

The Discussion Paper identifies the built environment, water, energy, transport and ecological footprint as the proposed key elements of a sustainability charter. EIANZ supports the inclusion of these elements, but believes the sustainability charter should have a broader scope that encompasses the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

In relation to the environmental dimension the Institute believes additional elements should be atmosphere, biodiversity conservation and land degradation.

Over time the scope of the Charter could be expanded to address and improve the sustainability of policy and planning processes, and the sustainability assessment of matters of national significance.

Data collection and management

EIANZ believes the Australian Bureau of Statistics should lead the collection and management of performance data. All data used to assess performance against data should be subject to independent verification. The Institute believes all data collection and management activities should be undertaken and signed by either a registered, certified or deemed competent person.

State of the Environment Reporting

The use of SoE Reporting as the basis for reporting performance against the sustainability charter appears problematic to EIANZ because:

- SoE Reports present a detailed report-card on the state of the nation’s natural environment, and do not cover the social and economic dimensions of sustainability
- SoE Reports tend to be published every five years, whereas progress reporting against the sustainability charter should be undertaken every two years.