

Sustainability charter inquiry

Sustainability in Australia

- 1.1 Australia's national efforts towards advancing sustainability are embodied in the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSES D).¹ The Committee notes evidence received which argues that this strategy is one dimensional, whereas sustainability and sustainable development involve multiple, interdependent dimensions.² The NSES D is written for public policy and decision makers,³ but the evidence to this inquiry indicates that a collective government, industry and community endeavour is required.⁴ Finally, the strategy exists in the absence of a centralised administrative framework⁵ – an arrangement which, according to one submitter, creates little more than a 'wish list'.⁶

1 Ecologically Sustainable Development Steering Committee 1992, *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development*, Australian Government, Canberra, viewed 17 February 2007, <http://www.environment.gov.au/esd/national/nsestd/strategy/intro.html#WIESD>.

2 ARUP, *Submission no. 73*, p. 2.

3 Department of the Environment and Water Resources 2007, *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development*, Australian Government, Canberra, viewed 16 July 2007, <http://www.environment.gov.au/esd/national/nsestd/index.html>.

4 Hydro Tasmania, *Submission no. 24*, p. 1.

5 Crowley, K & Coffey, B 2007, 'Tasmania Together and Growing Victoria Together: Can State Plans Deliver Environmental Sustainability?' *Public Administration Today*, Jan–Mar, p. 49.

6 Australian Conservation Foundation, *Submission no. 93*, p. iv. See also CRC Construction Innovation, *Submission no. 84*, p. 9; Mr Ric Brazzale, *Transcript of Evidence*, 5 October 2006, p. 28; Ms Di Jay, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 September 2006, p. 8.

- 1.2 During the inquiry it became apparent that there is greater industry and community awareness of environmental issues and a desire to adopt more sustainable practices. There is a wealth of existing research, strategies and technologies to support progress in this area. In the Committee's view, a Sustainability Charter has the potential to make a significant contribution towards advancing sustainability in Australia.

Background to and conduct of the inquiry

- 1.3 On 12 September 2005 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage tabled its *Sustainable Cities* report with 32 recommendations. As at 16 August 2007, the Committee still awaits a government response to this report.
- 1.4 While the primary aim of the *Sustainable Cities* report was to examine issues and policies related to the development of sustainable cities, the Committee identified the need for a national policy framework for broader sustainability governance. As a result, the first three of the Committee's recommendations were centred on ways of achieving a coordinated national approach to sustainability, underpinned by an overarching policy framework. The first of these proposed that the Australian Government establish a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed national Sustainability Charter:

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government:

- establish an Australian Sustainability Charter that sets key national targets across a number of areas, including water, transport, energy, building design and planning;
- encourage a Council of Australian Governments agreement to the charter and its key targets.⁷

7 Australia, Parliament 2005, *Sustainable Cities*, (M Washer, chair), Parl. Paper 215, Canberra.

- 1.5 The next recommendation in the *Sustainable Cities* report concerned evaluating new government policy proposals against the Charter, particularly their impact on urban areas:

The committee recommends that all new relevant Australian Government policy proposals be evaluated as to whether they would impact on urban sustainability and if so, be assessed against the Australian Sustainability Charter and the COAG agreed sustainability targets.⁸

- 1.6 The third recommendation in the *Sustainable Cities* report involved the establishment of a statutory national Sustainability Commission headed by a national Sustainability Commissioner to monitor funding and explore the concept of incentive payments:

The committee recommends that:

- the Australian Government establish an independent Australian Sustainability Commission headed by a National Sustainability Commissioner;
- task the Commission with monitoring the extent to which Commonwealth funds and State and Territory use of Commonwealth funds promotes the COAG agreed sustainability targets; and
- task the Commission with exploring the concept of incentive payments to the States and Territories for sustainability outcomes along the lines of the National Competition Council model.⁹

- 1.7 Following the tabling of *Sustainable Cities*, the Committee decided to explore in more detail some of the issues surrounding a Sustainability Charter. On 16 February 2006 it resolved, under provisions of the House of Representatives standing order 215(c), to conduct an inquiry into a sustainability charter.

- 1.8 While there is considerable support for the concept of a Sustainability Charter, there is also much debate about nearly all aspects of developing and implementing one. The Committee thought it would be useful to identify and flesh out some of the more contentious issues surrounding a Charter and to make concrete recommendations. To this end, it has made detailed recommendations, particularly concerning the establishment of a Sustainability Commission and the role of a Sustainability Commissioner.

8 Australia, Parliament 2005, *Sustainable Cities*, (M Washer, chair), Parl. Paper 215, Canberra.

9 Australia, Parliament 2005, *Sustainable Cities*, (M Washer, chair), Parl. Paper 215, Canberra.

- 1.9 While the Committee has given some broad guidance about the scope and elements that should be contained in the proposed Sustainability Charter, it has suggested that the determination of specific details and the setting of targets are tasks that belong to the proposed Sustainability Commission. Sustainability target setting is a highly technical process.¹⁰ The Committee strongly suggests that the Commission seek the assistance of bodies such as the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in undertaking these tasks.
- 1.10 As part of the sustainability charter inquiry, the Committee agreed to review the Auditor-General's report *Audit Report No. 22, 2005–2006, Cross Portfolio Audit of Green Office Procurement*, tabled in the House of Representatives in February 2006. This review provided a valuable snapshot, assessing the actions of Australian Government agencies and departments to minimise the negative impact of their operations.
- 1.11 The review began with the Committee holding a public hearing with the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), where evidence was received about the Auditor-General's findings concerning significant shortcomings in the green procurement performance of Australian Government agencies and departments. As the lead agency responsible for green office procurement, the (then) Department of Environment and Heritage subsequently appeared before the Committee at a public hearing to provide evidence on aspects of the audit findings and action it had taken in response to relevant ANAO recommendations.
- 1.12 The Committee's review of the green office procurement audit report was tabled in the House of Representatives on 4 September 2006, focusing on some of the significant shortcomings identified by the ANAO. The Committee believes that these shortcomings reinforce the need for an Australian Sustainability Charter that provides comprehensive policy, targets and practical guidelines.
- 1.13 After conducting the green office procurement audit report review, the Committee shifted its focus to a series of themed roundtable discussions (and additional public hearings) on the broader inquiry. These themes began with general topics such as the need for, and the nature and scope of, a Sustainability Charter, then progressed to more specific topics such as the built environment and construction, measurement and reporting, energy, economics, waste, transport, social equity and health and community engagement and education.

10 CRC Construction Innovation, *Submission no. 84*, p. 6.

- 1.14 During this phase of the inquiry, the Committee took advantage of opportunities to conduct inspections on sites that put sustainability at the forefront of their operations. The Committee visited the following places:
- Szencorp's six Green Star rated building in South Melbourne, Victoria
 - Roaring 40s' Woolnorth Wind Farm in North West Tasmania
 - Hydro Tasmania's Power Station at Lake Margaret and its Hands On Energy Discovery Centre in Hobart, Tasmania
 - Water Corporation's Water Reclamation Plant and Seawater Desalination Plant in Kwinana, its Beenyup Waste Treatment Plant in Craige and its Gnangara Mound in Wanneroo, Western Australia
 - The City of Joondalup's Yellagonga Park in Joondalup and its Tamala Park Landfill Gas Recovery Plant in Mindarie, Western Australia.

The Committee is impressed with the various sustainability initiatives taken by these organisations

- 1.15 The Committee received 118 written submissions and 26 exhibits to the inquiry (see Appendices A and B, respectively). The Committee appreciates the contribution of all who had input into this inquiry.
- 1.16 The next chapter argues the need for defining sustainability in an Australian context. This is followed in Chapter 3 by an outline of the types of issues on the sustainability agenda that need to be considered when determining the nature, content and scope of the proposed Charter. Chapter 4 covers some of the existing international, national and sectoral sustainability strategies and the final chapter examines a broad enabling framework for the proposed national Sustainability Charter.

