

**Developing a Sustainability Charter for
Australia**

**A Submission by the Disability Council of
NSW**

to the Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter

by the Standing Committee on Environment and
Heritage

Introduction

Key comments made in this submission

The Disability Council of NSW urges the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage to adopt a more holistic, multi-dimensional view of sustainability, which includes but is not limited to ecological, environmental and energy concerns.

We acknowledge that environmental sustainability is critically important to discussion about what makes for a sustainable city. It is not, however, the only important sustainability issue that we must consider.

In our view, cities become sustainable only when the people who live in them feel included in the ebb and flow of city life and enabled to participate in city living on more or less the same basis as one another.

The changing demographic profile of the Australian population requires us to re-consider how cities in the 21st Century can become sustainable living places for everyone.

More than 20% of the population of Australia will live with disability in the nation's 21st Century cities. More than one-quarter of the population will be 65 years of age or older.

We ask the Inquiry to respond creatively to those challenges as we seek to renew our common understanding of what Australia aspires to achieve through "sustainability".

About the Disability Council of NSW

The Disability Council of NSW was established as a result of the Community Welfare Act 1987 to advise Government in NSW on issues affecting people with disability and their families. We also give advice to the Commonwealth Government on the effect of policy on people with disability living in NSW.

Council members are appointed by the NSW Governor. They are selected on the basis of their experience of disability and their understanding of issues, their knowledge of service delivery and their ability to reflect and advise on government policy. The majority of Council members are people with disability.

Terminology used in this submission

- The Disability Council of NSW is referred to as Council.
- The Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter is the Inquiry.
- The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage is referred to as the Committee.

What do we mean by sustainability?

Widening the traditional definition

In recent times (the last quarter of a century) the word “sustainable” has come to be understood primarily in terms of energy efficiency and environmental impact. Cities, no less than aeroplane engines, heavy industry or waste management, are increasingly assessed and modified on the basis of their sustainability, which is measured using indicators such as carbon emissions, resource use and/or ecological legacy. The fact that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and development (OECD) has listed climate change, energy and industry as special themes for 2006/2007 illustrates a universal interest in sustainability that was not the case 50 years ago.

In keeping with this view, the NSW Government introduced BASIX, the Building Sustainability Index, to ensure that, in future, homes are designed to use less water and be responsible for fewer greenhouse gas emissions. This was to be achieved by setting energy and water reduction targets for private dwellings. BASIX is promoted as one of the most robust sustainable planning measures in Australia, delivering more equitable and effective water and greenhouse gas reductions across NSW¹.

The Disability Council supports the development of environmentally sustainable cities. How could we not? We see also the good sense of programmes such as BASIX.

We feel strongly, however, that what Australia means by “sustainability” must be expanded if our population, policy-makers and planners are to develop an holistic understanding of living in sustainable cities. Urban life is about people going about their business in large numbers and in close proximity to each other. It is about diverse groups with different experiences which meet and mix in the place we call a city. For some people, we have in mind people with disability, today’s cities can be barely tolerable places in which to live. For a significant proportion of the population today’s cities are not sustainable.

The city environment needs to be re-fashioned and re-organised to fully meet the needs of all the people who use it. Traditionally (and it remains true in many respects today) cities have not been designed or arranged to be inclusive of all city dwellers. Nor have we given sufficient consideration to the changing needs of the population we know will live in our cities in the future. That is not sustainable.

A city is a place where people live, work, and enjoy their environment. It needs to be creatively designed around the needs of all its population, however diverse.

¹ See <http://www.basix.nsw.gov.au/information/about.jsp>

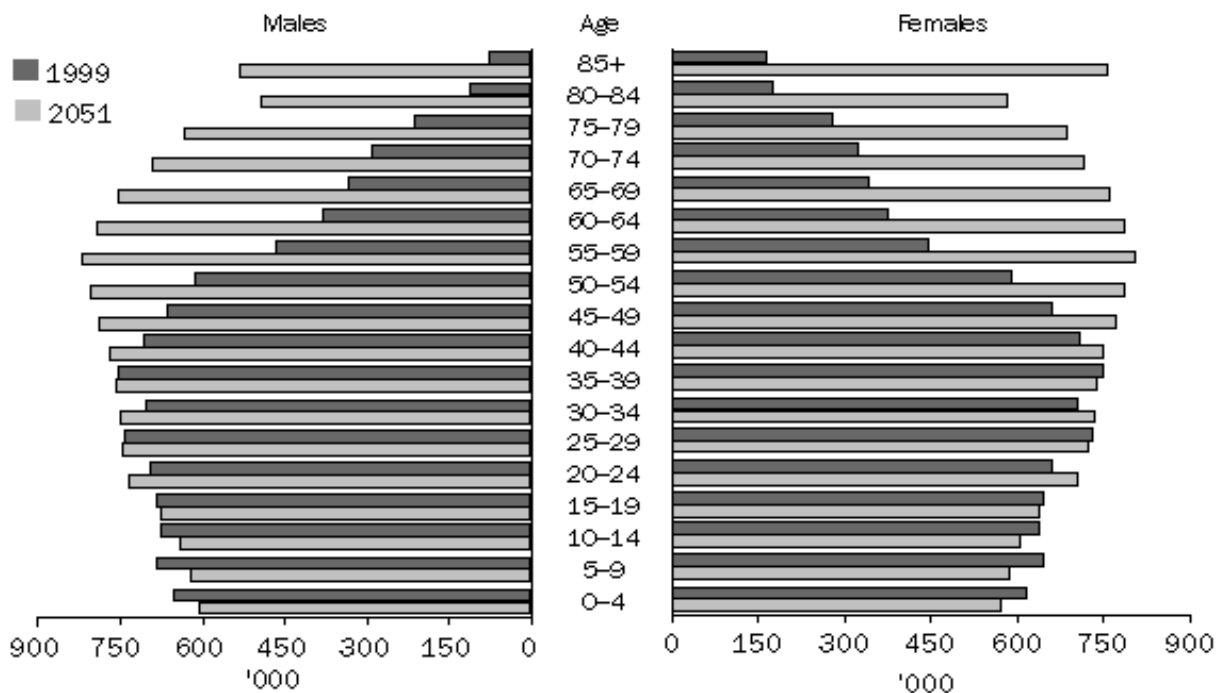
Demographic and social change

A few basic facts illustrate some of the challenges that lie ahead:

- Australia's population is ageing.
- People with disability constitute one-fifth of the total population.
- As people age, the prevalence of disability increases (80% of 80 year olds will have a physical, sensory or cognitive impairment and there will be more than 1 million Australians 80 years of age or over in just 25 years from now).
- All Government policy (State and Commonwealth) is directed toward greater community participation by people with disability of all ages.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has published useful data that illustrates some of the demographic challenges that lie ahead for the concept of "sustainable cities".

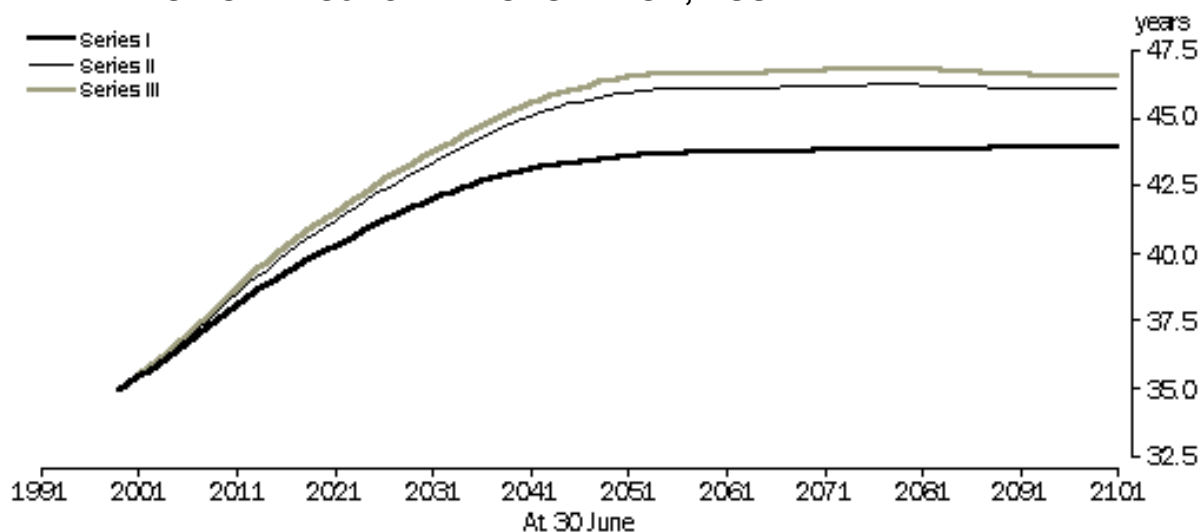
The changing shape of the Australian population²



² Population Projections: Population projections for the 21st century. Australian Social Trends, ABS, 2001

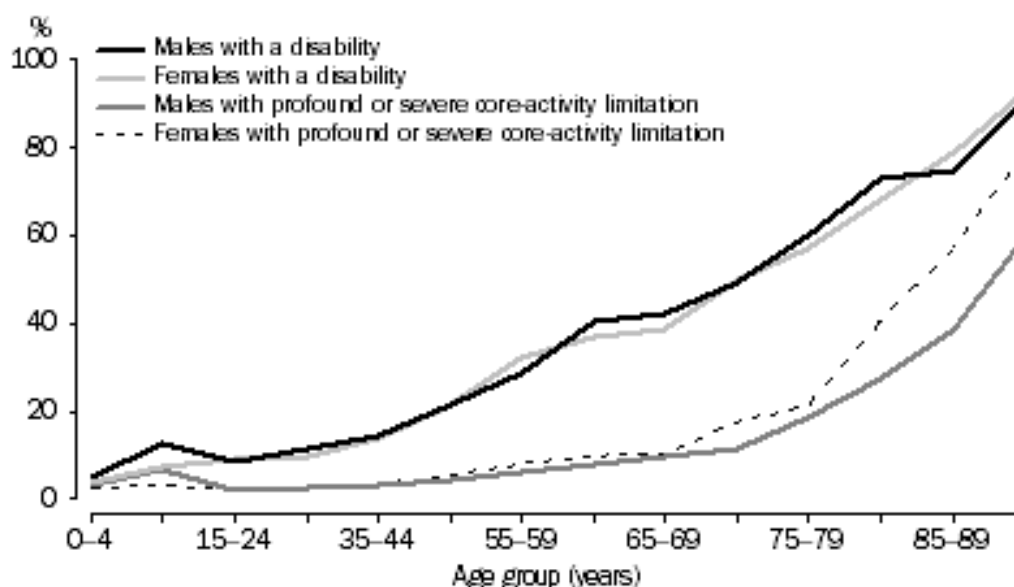
'On average' Australians will get older³

MEDIAN AGE OF PROJECTED POPULATION, AUSTRALIA



Ageing and disability are related

The incidence of disability increases with age⁴



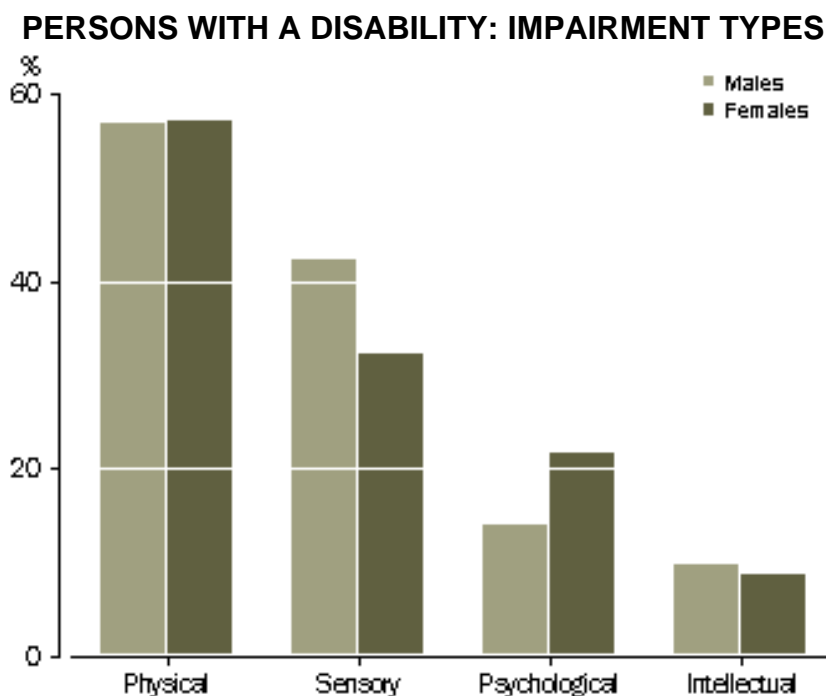
Disability comes in many forms and combinations

“Over half of all people with a disability had a physical impairment, either alone (30%) or in combination with another impairment (27%). More than one-third (37%) had a sensory impairment, around half of these (18%) having a

³ Ibid

⁴ Disability, Ageing and Carers, ABS, 2003

sensory impairment only. Other types of impairment were less common, 18% with psychological and 9% with intellectual impairment.”⁵



People with disability, family life and communities

It was the poet John Donne who first observed that “No man is an island, entire of itself”.⁶ That is as true for men and women with disability in Australia today as it was in England almost 400 years ago.

People with disability live with others in private dwellings in the communities that make up Australia’s cities. According to the ABS, 93.2% of people with a disability (all ages) live in private dwellings in the community. That is less than 6% lower than the percentage of the population with no disability.

Just over 75% of people with disability live at home, in the community, with at least one other person. (The corresponding figure for people with no disability is 89.2%).

Our point is simple: people with disability are social beings with broadly speaking the same family and social connections as the population as a whole. People with disability are parents, sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, grandparents, cousins, aunts or uncles, nephews or nieces and neighbours to other Australians.

Sustainable cities must not only strive to be inclusive of the 4 Million (and rising) Australians with disability. If we are to make possible, encourage and

⁵ Disability and Disabling Conditions, ABS, 1998

⁶ MEDITATION XVII, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, 1624

sustain inclusive social relationships for people with disability, our sustainable cities must be capable of facilitating the engagement people with disability with broad, numerically large and complex networks of other city dwellers from family and neighbours to employers, shopkeepers, and (dare we say it) Members of the House of Representatives.

Sustainable cities: unlimited by design

A city that is designed with all city dwellers in mind is closer to being sustainable than a city that erects attitudinal, physical and/or information barriers, which limit up to one in five of the population and those with whom they live.

More sustainable housing design and construction, for example, is not just about energy efficiency, renewable power sources or waste re-cycling. Housing built with everyone in mind, including people with disability and our less mobile ageing population, would design-out flaws such as poor lighting or contrast: problematic access for people requiring mobility aids (wheelchairs, walking frames etc.) and the plethora of unnecessary steps (including shower hobs) that increase the hazard of slips, trips and falls, particularly among the increasingly large population of older Australians.

At present in Australia, houses that are not unlimited by design to respond to the diverse needs of different individuals are modified to do so (as funds permit). This retrofitting modification has negative economic and environmental consequences.

Houses may be modified at the cost of owners or, as often happens, may be modified at a cost to government (this happens in NSW through the Home Maintenance and Modification Scheme (HMMS)). Refuse from these modified homes only adds to Australia's landfill.

If or when homes are neither designed for inclusion or not modified as the needs of residents change the medical costs, time off work and ongoing personal care commitments associated with falls in the home negatively impact on true costs of continuing to design and build homes with an insufficient regard to more complex definitions of sustainability.

It is Council's view that Australian homes would be more sustainable if built to universal housing design principles. These have been summarised by the Australian Network for Universal Housing Design (ANUHD) as follows:

1. There is a clearly discernable accessible path of travel from the front boundary or car park and throughout the entry level of the dwelling.
2. The entry level has a living and food preparation area, bathroom, WC and bedroom, all of which can be used by a person in a wheelchair.
3. All rooms, when furnished or fitted out, allow for adequate circulation space for a person using a wheelchair.
4. All doorways and corridors are wide enough to allow a person using a wheelchair to manoeuvre into and out of rooms.

5. Door furniture, switches, controls and outlets are within reach of and can be used by all.
6. There is potential for future adaptation to a dwelling with two or more levels for vertical access by a person using a wheelchair.
7. Walls and ceilings are reinforced where assistive devices may be attached.

ANUHD believes universal housing design will contribute to inclusive and sustainable communities by:

- **meeting the housing needs of people of every age and ability**, so they may participate in their community throughout their life;
- **allowing for a diverse range of households to occupy a dwelling** cost-effectively and equitably over its lifetime;
- **providing for people to visit and stay in others' homes** for an extended period at short notice;
- **providing a place in which it is safe both to live and to work**; and
- **ensuring usability and aesthetics are mutually compatible** and achieve broad market appeal.

Similarly, public buildings, public spaces (parks, town squares, shopping malls) many services and recreational facilities are not sustainable urban places for all city dwellers because of poor design, planning and/or construction. Inaccessibility, which reduces the options available to many city dwellers by virtue of their age or disability cannot be sustainable in a country where 25% of the population are 65 years of age or older and 20% of the population has a disability.

When public buildings are not accessible and accommodate potential employers the employer suffers from a reduced labour market and reduced custom. With Australia's verging skill and workforce crisis the sustainability of the economy will require full participation from those who are looking to contribute. Sustainable employment options will include job redesign to suit the capacity of individual employees. This can be done without sacrificing profit margins. The major stumbling block is attitude and employer reluctance to be creative in designing their workforce.

Sustainable city transport is, similarly, not just about fuel efficiency and exhaust emissions. Urban public transport needs to be designed to be accessible and available to all if we are to consider it to be sustainable. This would not only reduce the number of private vehicles on the road and their subsequent exhaust emissions, it would also have a positive impact on people's ability to socialise, maintain employment and transact business.

Several private transport options have been promoted under the banner of sustainability. One example is the *Clever Car* funded by the European Union

and backed by BMW.⁷ While this machine will reduce carbon dioxide emissions it is useable only by a small percentage of the population (the elderly, obese and people with disability excluded). While environmentally friendly the car does not in Council's view do much to ensure a socially sustainable future.

Our leisure environments also need to be designed considering the diversity of the Australian population. A simple example of good practice is Sydney's Olympic Park which was specifically designed to ensure accommodation for people with disability (the Olympics Committee having a Disability Reference Group). From access for people using wheelchairs to signage and barrier-free routes of travel for people with vision impairments or visual and audio information systems for people with a range of sensory impairments, thought has been given to how people use this city space in ways that are sustainable for all. One of the legacies of the Sydney Olympics is a well-used urban space used regularly by people of diverse interests, abilities, ages and cultures.

Council takes the view that to achieve a sustainable society environmental / ecological sustainability is a necessary but insufficient goal. We need more than that alone. All housing, buildings, services, transport options and leisure sites must be available to all if we are to re-build cities in ways that are sustainable for all who live in them and for future generations.

Conclusion

The OECD Public Governance and Territorial Development Directorate (GOV), focuses on the governance aspect of sustainable development, i.e. institutions, policymaking and participation of citizens.

It is Council's view that participation by citizens in moulding such policies is essential.

The sustainability issues that, in our view, must become our goals for the next 20 years are to:

- rebuild communities by replacing sprawl with compact, human scale urban fabric;
- recognize and combat the negative impact of our built environment on physical, social and mental health;
- rethink planning and urban design decisions from the point of view of making our cities more liveable for children, people with disability, diverse cultures and older Australians;
- build multifunctional town squares that, like the ancient Greek agora or medieval marketplace, are capable of regenerating civic engagement and democratic participation;

⁷ See <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/a-clever-green-machine/2006/04/25/1145861350353.html>

- ensure an affordable housing market in our major cities;
- reduce distances between places of work, leisure and homes and ensure the path of travel between these points is barrier free;
- develop participatory mechanisms to include all people in decisions about how these cities are designed.

These issues must be resolved in the next twenty years if we are to rebuild our cities so that they regain communities that are socially sustainable.

We take the view that a sustainability Charter must address both the needs and milestones for an ecologically sustainable future and government directions to build a sociably sustainable environment. This second task will require a greater degree of cooperation across government and industry. It requires us to educate and invigorate people to join the debate in planning their cities' futures. Finally we must agree and use helpful indicators and measures of sustainable and inclusive design against which progress towards a future unlimited by design may be assessed.

Disability Council of NSW
8TH May 2006