

Submission: Focus on the Future: Opportunities for Sustainability in Western Australia

Comments from the Department for Community Development

The Department for Community Development welcomes this important phase in the development of a State Sustainability Strategy for Western Australia and appreciates the opportunity for making input.

Background

The current reform of the State public sector will transform its capacity to respond effectively to the needs and aspirations of all Western Australians and build the capacities and strengths of individuals, families and communities to shape their own lives positively.

The Machinery of Government Taskforce recommended that the Community Development portfolio be created to help achieve this objective. A key objective in creating the new Department for Community Development is to achieve a 'joined-up' approach to government policy and services and to engage all Western Australians in the business of developing and strengthening their communities.

Clearly, the capacity of individuals, families and communities to develop their own solutions, where possible, to issues they regard as important, is central to achieving social wellbeing. It is also important that this approach improves the delivery of traditional safety-net services.

The current predominant focus on welfare and safety-net services in response to problems, is to shift to a greater emphasis on building the capacities and strengths of individuals, families and communities, allowing them to shape their own lives positively. A capacity building approach will be a feature of the work of the new Department for Community Development.

The vision of the Department for Community Development is:

Improved social wellbeing for all individuals, families and communities in Western Australia.

The Department aims to enhance the social wellbeing of all Western Australians by working together to:

- § strengthen communities so that individuals and families are able to meet their needs,
- § achieve self-reliance and contribute to their own solutions
- § promote a just and equitable community enriched by diversity and increased social participation, and
- § support families and communities to provide for the care and safety of their members.

The business objectives of the new department include:

- § Strengthened local communities where people are re-engaged in the business of government and connected to a shared vision for the State;
- § Enhanced capacity of individuals, families, communities and service providers, including providers outside government; and

- § Improved coordination of whole-of-government and inter-sectoral policy, planning development and review.

These objectives are echoed both in the Machinery of Government Taskforce Report (2001) and the Department's new corporate strategy. The Department's strategy also emphasises:

- § the role of community development processes
- § working in partnership with key stakeholders
- § valuing relationships with non government services, and
- § coordinated social policy development through an alliance between portfolio offices representing women, seniors, volunteers, children and young people.

The Department is "to operate a social policy coalition" that:

- § works directly with the community, government service delivery agencies, business, local government and the non government sector
- § collaborates in the development of social policies
- § jointly undertakes groundwork for social goals and indicators based on community input, and
- § supports the work of the Social Policy Unit in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and the Cabinet Standing Committee on Social Policy, which is chaired by the Minister for Community Development.

There is obvious synergy between the Department for Community Development's goals and the social dimension of sustainability, with its across government, inter-sectoral and community engagement approaches. The proposed Sustainable Community Regeneration strategy is an example of a project with a role for the Department for Community Development in helping to facilitate the social goals of the project. The Department is interested to explore ways in which the social dimension of development can be effectively integrated with physical, environmental and economic dimensions.

The portfolio offices, which represent the interests of women, seniors, volunteers, children and young people, have a specialist capability to link with their respective constituencies, to ensure community engagement processes are as inclusive as possible.

The Department for Community Development has expressed its interest in participating in the development of the social dimension of a sustainable community regeneration strategy with State and local government, the community sector and community members.

The Department is exploring opportunities for involvement in community regeneration activities in Gosnells and Mandurah, working collaboratively with agencies at the local level and, in doing so, collaborating across the portfolio offices within the Department which focus on policy relating to their constituencies.

In addition, the Department is involved in other across government social policy development initiatives, such as the Early Years Taskforce which is convened by the Acting Director General. The Taskforce initially comprises Directors General of the Department's for Community Development, Health, Education, Local Government & Regional Development and Housing & Works. Membership will also include the Director General of the Department of Indigenous Affairs, the Chief Executive Officer of the Disability Services Commission and the Acting Executive Director – Policy, Department of the Premier & Cabinet.

This Taskforce is charged with achieving across government, inter-sectoral collaboration and community engagement in the planning and delivery of services for families with young children (0-8 years of age). The Taskforce is currently investigating geographical areas that may be suitable as the starting points for such an approach as well as ways in which the agencies can work together more effectively around social policy issues.

The following detailed comments are made in response to the Government's consultation paper *Focus on the Future: Opportunities for Sustainability in Western Australia*.

Social Dimension of Sustainability

- § We would like to see the sustainability strategy contain a stronger focus on the social dimension, thus giving a balance to the concept of sustainability with an equal emphasis on economic, environmental and social dimensions.
- § The WACOSS Housing and Sustainable Communities Indicators Project Working Paper points out how social sustainability "...seems frequently to fall off the sustainability agenda or to take second place to environmental and economic concerns, despite the fact that it is so critical to the lives of individuals and communities and to the overall health of our society" (<http://www.wacoss.org.au/> Consultation Paper, p6).
- § This WACOSS project defines social sustainability as "...the impact of formal and informal systems, structures, processes and relationships on the current and future livability and health of communities" (Consultation Paper, p6). The paper argues that social sustainability encompasses quality of life, interconnectedness, diversity, equity, and democracy & governance. In a similar vein the World Bank's concept of social sustainability contains the principles of: striving to protect the vulnerable, respecting diversity and ensuring all stakeholders' fullest participation in decision making; of building up rather than destroying social capital; and ensuring that development programs are not socially or culturally destructive <http://www-esd.worldbank.org/html/esd/env/envmat/vol2f96/sustain.htm> .
- § Social wellbeing rather than cohesion is proposed as a key social goal of sustainability. Social cohesion can be a marginalising concept with the risk of not being sufficiently inclusive.

- § Social goals are equally valid within a sustainability strategy, an end in themselves, not only a means of achieving environmental and economic goals. People are a central focus of the sustainability process. The sustainability strategy requires stronger emphasis on the positive social impacts and goals of sustainability projects, including consideration of the particular social goals achieved through specific sustainability projects.
- § Social sustainability strategies need to address four key areas:
 - § development for children and young people;
 - § reduction of inequality in access to wealth, land and other resources - a society cannot be sustained with a permanent underclass;
 - § recognition of the diversity of people and communities in WA;
 - § positive encouragement of volunteer contributions to the life of communities. See some of the initiatives mentioned on the UK's www.sustainable-development.gov.uk website.
- § The principles supporting social sustainability are likely to be quite consistent with those of the Department for Community Development, ie. capacity building, engagement, inclusiveness, a strength based approach, partnerships and coordination.
- § The sustainability strategy offers a range of opportunities to:
 - § better bring together human service agencies with an independent facilitator, eg to provide 'joined up' services at the local level.
 - § encourage government and other organisations, both business and not-for-profits, to demonstrate a greater commitment to sustainable policies and practices, such as in State energy generation, or local government planning standards which restrict, for example, shop-houses, common in many other countries, planning processes which could include incentives to local government for including green areas in planning, restricting infill, encouraging minimum levels of social housing, etc.
- § The social sustainability strategies discussed in *A Just and Sustainable Australia* (Yencken & Porter, 2001, Australian Collaboration) are worthy of consideration.

Social Sustainability Strategies

- § Sustainability requires a "grass roots" upwards community development process. For example, the development in new land releases should engage with the people who will live there. Ways of enhancing community participation clearly link with the work being done by the Citizens & Civics unit in DPC in promoting participation, not only in the business of government, but in the planning and development of all communities and services.
- § Communities need to be central, rather than peripheral to people's lives in order to play a meaningful role in people's lives and not be limited, for instance, to retail and other consumer services.
- § There is a role for government in encouraging developers to adopt good practice in community engagement, eg local services, retention and creation of green belts, walkable parks, not just open playing fields, especially in medium density areas.
- § A review of government regulations to remove barriers to sustainability is another way government can contribute to the sustainability agenda.

- § The strategy should include encouraging business to adopt a greater role in corporate social responsibility. The Department for Community Development, Family & Children's Policy has conducted research which provides evidence of broad community support for such a role for the business sector (Family Attitudes Survey 2001, N=1000). In mining towns, for example, fly-in fly-out practices and 12-hour rostering impact on community and family life. Mining corporations - often multinational companies - could work more closely with the government and community sectors to help develop real communities in these new towns, frequently located in remote areas.
- § Western Australia's sustainability may require a re-allocation of resources in accordance with the proportionate contribution of the State to the national wealth. Adequate resourcing from the Commonwealth would enable WA to address key areas of social disadvantage arising from its particular structure, composition and distribution of the population, addressing the resulting social imbalances.
- § The strategy should not only focus on geographical communities but also take account of communities *of interest* and *virtual* communities as these are sometimes particularly relevant in urban communities.
- § Children and young people play a key role in shaping WA's future. There are many sustainable projects and strategies operating in schools with children and young people, eg Rivers of Blue, WA Curriculum Framework. Children and young people rate the environment highly as an important issue (Youth Media Survey, Youth Affairs, 2000). Ways of involving them in the sustainability strategy should be included (also see Hart, 1997¹).
- § It is suggested that the work of Don Edgar (2001²) be considered in further developing the community partnerships approach.

Outcomes and Evaluation

- § Gains can be measured in economic, environmental and social terms. There is a need to link the sustainability outcomes with indicators that measure change in the short, medium and long term.

In developing this response, meetings were held across service and policy areas of the Department, including policy offices with responsibility for women, seniors, children and young people, and service delivery to families. These discussions have led to the formation of a social sustainability group within the Department which will continue to participate in the further development of social policy in this area.

The Acting Director General of the Department for Community Development and departmental representatives appreciated the recent opportunity to meet with Professor Peter Newman to discuss potential roles for the Department to work with the Sustainability Unit to contribute to the development of the social dimension of the sustainability strategy in WA.

¹ Hart, R. A. *Children's Participation: the theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*, UNICEF, New York, 1997.

² Edgar, D. *Patchwork Nation: rethinking government, rebuilding community*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2001.