

Sustainable cities? Australia's building and planning rules stand in the way of getting there

Written by Andr  anne Doyon, Lecturer, School of Global, Urban & Social Studies, RMIT University



An outstanding example of sustainable residential building, Breathe Architecture's The Commons apartments in Melbourne won a 2014 National Architecture Award. [Image courtesy of Australian Institute of Architects](#)

Australia's building and land-use policy settings fall well short of what's needed to make meaningful progress toward creating sustainable cities.

You will find environmental sustainability goals and objectives in government strategy documents. But [our newly released review](#) of building and land-use planning policies around Australia has found New South Wales is the only state without serious gaps in legislation and enforcement.

Research [shows](#) a large percentage of new dwellings in Australia fail to meet even minimum building requirements when checked after construction.

There is little legislation and enforcement, with the notable exception of NSW's Building and Sustainability Index ([BASIX](#)). This means neither building codes nor state planning systems are achieving sustainability goals [required for a low-carbon future](#) for cities and buildings.

Further reading: [Affordable, sustainable, high-quality urban housing? It's not an impossible dream](#)

Sustainable cities are among the UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#) . At present, [Australia ranks 20th](#) on progress toward these goals.

Sustainable cities? Australia's building and planning rules stand in the way of getting there

Written by Andr  anne Doyon, Lecturer, School of Global, Urban & Social Studies, RMIT University

So how important is the built environment to Australia's ability to achieve these goals? In fact, it's a significant contributor to anthropogenic climate change.

The built environment accounts for around [40% of worldwide energy use](#) and [one-third of greenhouse gas emissions](#)

. In Australia, the residential sector is responsible for

[12% of final energy use](#)

and

[13% of emissions](#)

.

Stepping into the breach locally

As the national building code is failing to improve sustainability, efforts to do this through local planning systems are emerging.

The Council Alliance for Sustainable Built Environments ([CASBE](#)) in Victoria is one example. This involves local governments working with design and planning professionals to create environmentally sustainable built environments.

In Victoria, there has been debate about the need for [better building design](#) and [performance](#) over the past few years. However, our analysis of appeal cases before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) reveals significant inconsistencies in decision-making. We found tensions between the state planning framework and local government efforts to achieve environmental sustainability design through planning.

Further reading: [*Nightingale's sustainability song falls on deaf ears as car-centric planning rules hold sway*](#)

The work of CASBE highlights the important role of networks in building capacity across

councils and mobilising support for achieving sustainable outcomes in our built environments. Over time, CASBE and other advocates have developed and implemented a range of assessment tools, local policies and decision-making processes.

This is one way to overcome gaps and weaknesses in the planning system. The CASBE network has grown as a result of its members' persistence in the face of state government reluctance to change.

In a growing number of local government areas, Victoria now has strong local planning policies that promote designing for environmental sustainability.

Enforceable standards are essential

The systemic and political obstacles to achieving environmentally sustainable design in our cities are clear and persistent. The voluntary use of tools to assess sustainability as a guide to decision-making is important, but can only go so far. Clear and enforceable standards for environmentally sustainable design are needed in both building and planning regulations.

Our analysis of VCAT data and key cases since 2003 found a continual passing of responsibility between building and planning systems. This problem must be overcome to embed and normalise sustainable design in the built environment. The BASIX system – a sustainability scorecard developed by the NSW government – offers a good starting point for other states.

We also found that where state governments fail to deliver frameworks to improve outcomes, there are other avenues to change and improve the system. Coalitions and networks, including committed local governments and non-state actors, can organise and act to innovate, build capacities and bring about regulatory change.

We must transform our built environments to reduce the impacts of environmental and climate change. This requires a building and planning system that delivers consistently higher standards of decision-making. And for that to happen all levels of government must be committed.

Sustainable cities? Australia's building and planning rules stand in the way of getting there

Written by Andr  anne Doyon, Lecturer, School of Global, Urban & Social Studies, RMIT University

The work of improving the sustainability of our cities is too important to be left to the local groups now working tirelessly to overcome current systemic shortcomings.

Joe Hurley receives funding from the Australian Communities Foundation, and the Australian Government via the National Environmental Science Programme. He a Committee Member with the Planning Institute of Australia, Victoria Division.

Susie Moloney has received funding from a range of organisations including the Australian Research Council and other government funding bodies. This research was supported by funding from the Australian Communities Fund. Susie is a member of the Planning Institute of Australia.

Trivess Moore has received funding from various organisations including the Australian Research Council and the Australian Communities Foundation.

Andr  anne Doyon does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Authors: Andr  anne Doyon, Lecturer, School of Global, Urban & Social Studies, RMIT University

Read more <http://theconversation.com/sustainable-cities-australias-building-and-planning-rules-stand-in-the-way-of-getting-there-84263>