

A patchwork of City Deals or a national settlement strategy: what's best for our growing cities?

Written by Paul Burton, Professor of Urban Management and Planning & Director, Cities Research Institute, Griffith University

Australia has no enduring tradition of having a national urban policy, unlike the UK, from where we sometimes import policies. The Commonwealth government has a long history of intervening in cities, from addressing housing shortages to funding urban infrastructure, but has shied away from a formal national settlement strategy.

Sometimes the Commonwealth claims to have no constitutional case for involvement in city planning. Yet we're comfortable with spatial planning at the local, metropolitan and regional scale, so planning at the national level makes sense too.

We also seem comfortable with the federal government doing investment deals with individual cities and regions – so-called [City Deals](#) . Why not use this fiscal clout to drive a more systematic program of reform? Reform priorities include how our metropolitan areas are governed and how they finance much-needed investment in infrastructure.

Read more: [*Spills and City Deals: what Turnbull's urban policy has achieved, and where we go from here*](#)

To date, [nine City Deals](#) have been announced. These cover [Townsville](#) , [Launceston](#) , [Western Sydney](#)

, [Darwin](#)

, [Hobart](#)

, [Geelong](#)

, [Adelaide](#)

, [Perth](#)

and

[Southeast Queensland](#)

. Could this seemingly ad hoc collection of City Deals become part of a more coherent and

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effective national settlement strategy? And are we up to the enduring challenge of translating these plans and strategies into action?

Are we alone in this?

In the UK, urban policy was for many years based on the principle of “[bending main programs](#)” to focus on areas judged most in need of government assistance. This was sometimes used to justify having little or no new money allocated to urban policy initiatives. However, it also reflected the reality that the main spending programs of national government are often altogether bigger with much more fiscal clout on the ground.

We also need to recognise that there is more to growth and development than investing in hard infrastructure like roads and railways. Schools, hospitals, parks and cultural facilities play a vital role in creating liveable communities at any spatial scale.

When these facilities lag behind the rapid construction of homes, our towns and cities are poorer places to live in. Nor are they places of resilience where we are better able to cope with the environmental changes and technological disruptions of the 21st century.

Why a national strategy?

The UN Sustainable Development Goals, and in particular [SDG 11](#), recognise that having a national urban policy is an important foundation for achieving sustainable urban development. But in Australia we have not established long-term federal funding agreements for the sustainable development of major cities. Nor are there incentives to reform how we govern and deliver public services and infrastructure at the metropolitan scale.

A strategy of establishing metropolitan governance and financial reforms would assist Australian cities to compete and be successful in a 21st-century, globally connected world. At the same time, it would still enable decisions to be based on local preferences and capabilities. This reform could be the central feature of a national approach to partnership with cities.

This national cities partnership could provide a much better framework in which individual City Deals become more effective. An agreement could include national performance outcomes and help drive reforms to metropolitan governance and financing. It could also provide a platform for

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a national settlement strategy that finally gets to grips with where our growing population might live and live well.

By focusing on the metropolitan scale, we will also be better placed to answer difficult questions like “who should serve as Australia’s metropolitan leaders?” and “who represents metropolitan communities and works with them to make hard decisions about their future?”.

Read more: [*All the signs point to our big cities' need for democratic, metro-scale governance*](#)

Currently, we have States and their agencies working at the metropolitan level. We have local governments that, understandably, focus on their local issues. Only occasionally do local councils build cooperative structures at a regional or metropolitan scale. Local government amalgamation is not a solution to this issue, as there remains an important role for local as well as metropolitan-scale institutions.

What would a national cities partnership look like?

Australia has five metropolitan areas with populations over 1 million people. When regional cities with populations over 100,000 are also considered, there are 17 major cities and metropolitan areas that could join in developing a national cities partnership agreement.

Read more: [*Cities policy goes regional*](#)

The core principles for this partnership could be:

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collaboration between different levels of government at scales that make economic sense and are socially meaningful – e.g. metropolitan regions for big cities, and perhaps major regional cities and their hinterlands in rural and regional areas

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reforms to allow for the emergence of city and metropolitan leaders, who can talk on behalf of major urban communities and work with stakeholders such as business and non-government actors

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working hard to engage the public as well as peak bodies in thinking about the future of their region

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translating plans into action, through ongoing community support and concerted and coherent Commonwealth investment programs.

Commonwealth needs to take the lead

Disengagement at this time by the Commonwealth government would be disastrous, so we wish Minister Alan Tudge well in keeping cities on the government's policy agenda.

A business-as-usual approach to federal intervention may not make things worse, but it won't set up the reforms Australian cities need to thrive and grow sustainably.

A strategy to establish a national-city partnership agreement offers a way forward. It would provide a framework to make City Deals more effective. The partnership could enable the emergence of a new breed of metropolitan and city leaders to help elevate public dialogue about the future of our cities and drive financial reforms that would allow them to deliver and be responsible to their communities.

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All of this should appeal to those in government who want to see policy evolve and develop and our cities grow into more prosperous, liveable and resilient places.

This article draws on separate presentations made by the authors at the 2019 [National Congress of the Planning Institute of Australia](#)

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