

Smart Cities Plan

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Australian Institute of Landscape Architects
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Contact:

Shahana Mckenzie
Chief Executive Officer

Australian Institute of Landscape Architects

[E] shahana.mckenzie@aila.org.au
[P] 02 6248 9970
[M] 0439 555 764

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About the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) congratulates the Commonwealth Government on the release of the Smart Cities Plan (March 2016), and in particular its willingness to embrace opportunities for creating a policy and project environment that focusses on Smart Investment, Smart Policy and Smart Technology. We support the Commonwealth Government taking a leadership and strategic role in the future of Australia's Cities.

AILA is the growing national advocacy body representing 2,500 active and engaged landscape architects, and promoting their crucial role in shaping the world around us. Committed to designing and creating a better Australia, landscape architects have the skills and expertise to solve macro issues with innovative integrated solutions. Landscape architects contribute leadership, creativity and innovation as they strive to collaborate to achieve better health, environmental, social and economic outcomes. From citywide strategies to the redesign of local parks, landscape architects are making places and spaces more sustainable and productive. Communities are demanding more from government and landscape architects are increasingly collaborating with the public and other stakeholders to achieve project outcomes.

Landscape architects shape project outcomes in a variety of ways. They bring a critical eye to the potential opportunities and constraints of a place, site or landscape. The vegetation, soils, and watercourses often navigated by infrastructure projects are but some of the technical issues they bring expertise to. They create the conditions for nature to function and thrive, ensuring that infrastructure puts back as much as it takes from the landscape. They bring together other disciplines, in an integrated way to generate better outcomes. They are active on infrastructure development teams of all types, connecting, facilitating and navigating to help achieve shared outcomes.

Landscape architects are increasingly seen as a profession set to dominate the debates of the next century and lead policy making to deliver fantastic outcomes for cities, towns, regions and their inhabitants. The work of Australian landscape architects is increasingly being recognized worldwide for their unique skills in creating liveable cities, healthy active spaces and sustainable design.

Living/Green Infrastructure for Smarter, Sustainable Cities

The term 'living infrastructure' or 'green infrastructure' describes the network of natural landscape assets that underpin the economic, socio-cultural and environmental functionality of our cities and towns—i.e. the green spaces and water systems, which intersperse, connect and provide vital life support for humans and other species within our urban environments. Individual components of this environmental network are sometimes referred to as 'green infrastructure assets', and these occur across a range of landscape scales—from residential gardens to local parks and housing estates, streetscapes and highway verges, services and communications corridors, waterways and regional recreation areas etc.

Our cities are complex, evolving social-ecological systems which are dependent on the health of their associated natural environments for ongoing sustainability. Our cities and towns are currently the focus of intensive efforts to reduce resource use and maximise efficiency, in response to escalating social, environmental and economic pressures from global development, urbanization, population growth and climate change. How living infrastructure assets are managed, at both local and regional scales, can significantly influence the effectiveness of our responses to such challenges. Living infrastructure is fundamentally different from other aspects of built infrastructure, in that it has the unique, inherent capacity to enhance and regenerate natural resources, rather than simply minimise the damage to environmental systems.

When existing landscape assets are strategically connected and managed in an integrated manner within and beyond settlement boundaries, this regenerative capacity increases exponentially, also delivering significant health and wellbeing benefits, adaptive capacity to climate change, and creating jobs that engage vulnerable populations within our cities (ie. low income residents, the elderly, and youth).

In 2016, AILA led the formation of the Living Cities Alliance, which brings together a united voice

of organizations, sectors, professions and trades that collectively plan, design, build, maintain and guide living infrastructure in Australia. The Alliance represents the public, private and non-profit sectors, and progresses an agenda that is strategic in nature, collaborative in approach and grounded in research.



Image: John Gollings



The Smart Cities Plan Opportunity

AILA is excited about the potential of the Smart Cities Plan. It is a platform for reform, among many things, which can amplify the benefits of investing in greater levels of green infrastructure into our city planning and city building processes.

As the Plan indicates, we can become smarter investors in our cities infrastructure, and create healthier environments for all. The benefits of living infrastructure investment are extensive, and range from significant physical and mental health improvements, provision of ecological services to help maintain the natural systems that provide us with clean air and water, as well as building resilience within our urban environments and helping us adapt to a changing climate.

Building a culture and policy environment of investing in living infrastructure is one of our generation's most important tasks if we are to realise this vision for Australian cities and towns.

Just last month AILA announced Australia's Best Playground – Nature Play at Royal Park in Melbourne – as part of a national competition to search for the best playspace for children of all ages and abilities. The response was overwhelming, with over 70,000 public votes received and highlighted the incredible work that Local Government has been doing in building and managing spaces and places that bring our communities together celebrate nature and celebrate heritage.

With State and Local Government primed for accelerating green infrastructure opportunities at the project development level, national leadership from the Commonwealth Government (through the Smart Cities Plan) would catalyse greater value capture for federally funded infrastructure investments.

Our submission includes recommendations that respond to the intent of the Smart Cities Plan, and highlights some additional opportunities that are cost effective and impactful, in the short and longer term.



Image: John Gollings

Our Recommendations

AILA is excited to offer two strategic recommendations for inclusion in the Plan that we believe are of high value and represent an opportunity for the Commonwealth to show international leadership. These recommendations are provided below.

A Living Infrastructure Investment Framework

AILA supports the Plan's 'Smart Investment' pillar, including the establishment of an Infrastructure Financing Unit and allocation of \$50 million to accelerate major transformation projects.

With the Plan's aspiration to prioritize projects that have broader economic objectives, using funding as an investment, and ensuring more rigorous planning and business case development, AILA is calling upon the proposed Infrastructure Financing Unit to work with AILA to build accountancy, business case preparation and feasibility process standards to enable living Infrastructure to be recognised as an asset class. By facilitating the valuation of living infrastructure during business case development for major federally funded projects, the broader economic objectives are then realised.

This would involve the development of a business case and value proposition for living infrastructure to be articulated and endorsed by Treasury, followed by the development and use of a set of evidence-based living infrastructure criteria used in business case approvals and value capture via Treasury.

Additionally, AILA is seeking the establishment of an investment fund, for the implementation of living infrastructure projects across Australia. This would involve a percentage of all federal government expenditure on 'grey infrastructure' projects (eg. roads) to be placed in an investment fund for allocation to state and local government green infrastructure projects. This fund could be operated similar to the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, which seeks to leverage private sector funding to enhance public benefit outcomes through government investment.



Image: John Gollings

City Deals to drive Living Infrastructure Outcomes

The Plan's 'Smart Policy' pillar addresses some fundamental challenges that AILA supports reform on, namely removal of regulatory barriers and a more structured and integrated approach to Commonwealth investment that strengthens living infrastructure outcomes.

The proposed City Deals framework is considered a unique opportunity to drive a greater allocation of investment in living infrastructure, which can in-turn drive significant health benefits, creation of jobs, and adaptive capacity to a changing climate.

AILA is calling on the Government to embrace living infrastructure metrics from the SITES rating tool for all City Deals negotiated. This action would encourage the greater integration of natural and physical infrastructure within our city-building projects. The Sustainable Sites Initiative (SITES) rating system is the most comprehensive system globally for developing sustainable places, and provides the tools for those who influence land development and management practices, including but not limited to, road and rail development, real estate development, energy and water systems and port development.

Similar to the way the Green Star rating system has been used by governments all across the country to advance green building design and construction, embracing a minimum SITES rating level for federal infrastructure assets can reduce cost, enhance value and create employment opportunities throughout the supply chain. Use of the SITES rating system will further build the resilience of the infrastructure asset, as the criteria within the system responds to a range of urgent global concerns such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and resource depletion.

SITES is used by those who design, construct, operate, and maintain landscapes within urban, coastal and rural contexts, and includes planners, landscape architects, engineers, developers, builders and organisations creating and administering urban and rural policy. AILA encourages the City Deals process to embrace a minimum SITES rating for key projects.

Supporting this, a national incentives package structured within the City Deals initiative is proposed to be aligned with, and delivered by local government to elevate the priority of living infrastructure strategies. A specific condition of an incentives package would be the active removal of barriers (eg. policy, codes etc) and the introduction of positive policies and frameworks to accelerate the deployment of living infrastructure investments.

The package would support the Governments goal of driving regulatory reform, while providing funding to Local Government to accelerate projects that embed living infrastructure strategies such as greener streets, re-establishing networks of public open space and increasing urban tree canopy coverage. This program would also be used to encourage creative living infrastructure funding and implementation strategies, such as density bonuses for greater open space, and stormwater retention credit trading systems.



Image: John Gollings

Living Infrastructure, a Smart Investment

These recommendations are readily implementable, and AILA looks forward to working with the Government to advance them. The 'living infrastructure lens' we have provided for the Smart Cities Plan ensures that infrastructure investments are in line with the emerging needs of the Government – investments that build prosperity, make the most out of existing assets, and create greater cross sector improvements. The ability of Living Infrastructure to enhance asset resiliency, human health, and longterm economic value of infrastructure investments has been clearly identified throughout this submission.

Healthcare expenditure on cardiovascular disease alone remains greater than any other disease group in Australia, and brings a swelling price tag greater than \$10 billion, whilst the total cost of obesity (both financial and loss of wellbeing) is estimate to be \$58.2 billion.

By 2020, the estimated annual cost of unmitigated climate change on Australia's infrastructure is predicted to be 0.5 per cent of GDP, roughly \$9 billion. As a nation, Australia faces a number of significant crises that only integrated Living Infrastructure solutions will help amend. Living Infrastructure is one viable solution.

For these reasons, among others, AILA strongly believes that increasing the nations investment in Living Infrastructure (as described within this submission) is a minor cost that brings significant medium and long term benefit to the liveability of Australia's urban and rural areas. We believe that embracing these recommendations within the Smart Cities Plan is a responsible investment in the nation's future productivity and liveability.