

Draft Submission on the draft Greener Places Policy

February 2018

Opening

Local Government NSW (LGNSW) is the peak body for local government in NSW, representing all NSW general purpose councils and related entities. LGNSW facilitates the development of an effective community based system of local government in the State.

LGNSW welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Government Architect's Greener Places Policy which establishes an urban Green Infrastructure Policy for NSW.

This is a draft submission awaiting review by LGNSW's Board. Any amendments will be forwarded in due course.

Purpose

The Policy intends to guide the planning, design and delivery of green infrastructure in urban areas across NSW. It defines green infrastructure as a network of green spaces, natural systems and semi-natural systems including parks, rivers, bushland, recreational spaces including playing fields and private gardens that are strategically planned, designed and managed to support the quality of life in an urban environment.

Key elements of the policy include the creation of a healthier, more liveable and sustainable urban environment by improving community access to recreation and exercise, supporting walking and cycling connections and improving the resilience of urban areas.

The NSW Government is seeking feedback on the draft policy and intends to develop a final policy in 2018.

Response

LGNSW welcomes and supports the need for a strategic, coordinated approach to the protection and enhancement of green infrastructure in urban areas. As urban areas are under increasing population and development pressure the protection of existing green spaces is an imperative along with their enhancement and the addition of new areas.

The Policy clearly articulates the challenges facing NSW including biodiversity loss, health, climate resilience, population growth, changing demographics and lifestyle, and infrastructure and urban renewal. It provides state level guidance to enhance green space in urban areas to address these challenges and create more liveable and resilient communities, reducing the urban heat island effect and improving biodiversity outcomes.

It identifies the challenge in coordinating the management of green infrastructure development and protection due to the number of stakeholders involved in the process, and advocates for shared responsibility across the range of stakeholders which include state and local government, the community, professionals including architects, landscapers and designers, developers, planners, engineers, builders, businesses and land and asset owners and managers.

This response supports the provision of state level guidance on enhancing green space in urban areas, as well as the principles identified to achieve this including: integration, connectivity, multifunctionality and participation.

The success of the policy is dependent on its implementation, which will be the focus of this submission.

Implementation of Greener Places

While LGNSW supports the strategic vision for green infrastructure, the challenge will be to implement the policy. The Policy is clear that the integration of green infrastructure into the NSW strategic and statutory planning framework is essential, however collaborative action from other stakeholders and appropriate funding are also needed to support this approach.

Resources for local government

LGNSW advocates for further advice and examples on mechanisms to achieve this collaboration including the release of the additional manuals currently being developed on:

- open space for recreation;
- bushland and waterways; and
- urban tree canopy.

Councils should be considered a partner in this process, rather than a stakeholder. As an owner of major green space assets, councils want a joint approach to the development of the manuals and tools identified in the policy.

Councils are prepared to assist in the development of these guides, however if this early input and collaboration is not possible, councils expect the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the drafts. Councils seek a collaborative approach given their extensive experience in managing green space, and ongoing roles and responsibility in this area.

This experience includes the protection of existing areas and enhancement of green space across natural systems such as bushland and rivers, and semi natural systems such as parks and privately owned and managed gardens. Tools used include: Biodiversity management plans, regional biodiversity plans, Climate Change Adaptation Plans, Plans of Management for community land (including bushland and parks and recreational areas) and planning decisions and rezonings. The flexibility to build on existing council experiences and approaches is supported.

The guides need to consider green infrastructure across different contexts including metropolitan areas and regional and rural town centres. Many of the benefits of green infrastructure including reduced urban heat are just as compelling in non-metropolitan settings.

The proposal to develop model council DCP clauses is one example of the type of support sought by local government, and councils with expertise in these issues would be interested in contributing to this process.

The proposed audit of funding programs to identify potential funding sources, together with the development of new or enhanced funding sources, is supported.

Recommendations:

1. To involve councils in the development of guidance material and manuals planned to assist local government in the implementation of the Greener Places Policy, including the manuals under development: open space for recreation; bushland and waterways; and urban tree canopy.
2. To provide training, resources and support to councils to integrate the Policy across their existing systems.
3. That the policy commits to the development of a detailed implementation plan.

We note that the final policy will include more detail on implementation with actions, timelines and responsibilities, evaluation and monitoring measures and funding options.

Safeguarding and protecting green infrastructure

Existing open space is frequently viewed by state government agencies, such as Roads and Maritime Services (RMS), as 'available' for road widening, slip lanes, new roads and motorways at a cheaper cost than private land. The policy must consider safeguarding land for green infrastructure, especially open space, in infill/renewal areas or place a far more appropriate monetary value on any loss.

Green infrastructure assets

While the rationale for green space across urban areas is clear and well supported, green infrastructure does need to be recognised and valued like any other managed asset. Natural asset management is an emerging area of practice and further advice and examples on valuing natural assets is sought by the local government sector.

Funding models to integrate green infrastructure into urban development are an important consideration to leverage investment. The policy should commit to a review of the strengths and challenges of current funding mechanisms (not just an audit), with recommendations to be detailed in the implementation plan. Enhancing the use of existing mechanisms, such as Voluntary Planning Agreements (VPAs), to deliver green infrastructure should be supported by the Greener Places Policy.

A key issue of concern is where a developer may invest in green infrastructure as part of their assessment and approval process. This may provide adequate resources to create the green space asset, however there may not be funds for ongoing maintenance. This is a significant concern as natural assets need ongoing investment to be maintained and these additional and ongoing expenses should not be transferred to the land manager – which may be local government or in the case of a private development, a body corporate.

Recommendations:

4. The Policy should set out the case for green infrastructure to be recognised by the NSW Government Treasury as an asset class with equal standing to buildings, roads, services and the like.
5. Provide further advice and guidance on including natural assets in councils' asset management planning and reporting processes.
6. Develop models for funding the development and ongoing management of green infrastructure to be used by stakeholders.

Monitoring and reporting

The proposal to display live and updated maps and data on the Green Grid and urban canopy changes is welcomed. Access to contemporary information can inspire stakeholders to 'do their bit' to add to the grid or urban canopy.

Relevance to non-metro urban environments / Relevance state wide

While the policy provides a state-wide framework for green space in urban areas much of the guidance, funding support, and the resources identified are aimed at the greater metropolitan Sydney area. The Policy also provides an opportunity to encourage action and investment in non-metro urban environments which should be strengthened through regional examples or case studies and further reference within the Policy.

Conclusion

The local government sector welcomes state level policy to guide protection and development of green infrastructure in NSW. This submission supports the intention of the policy, the principles identified, and the outcomes to be achieved. The development of further guidance materials to assist in delivering this state level policy is welcomed and this submission includes recommendations to ensure that the local government sector is supported in the implementation of the Policy.

LGNSW and the local government sector look forward to working with the NSW Government to implement the Greener Places Policy to ensure both greater protection and connectivity of existing green space and creation of new urban green infrastructure.

For further information, please contact Kirsty McIntyre, Senior Policy Officer – Environment on 02 9242 4055 or kirsty.mcintyre@lgnsw.org.au