



NATIONAL Growth Areas ALLIANCE

Submission to the Independent Review of Infrastructure Australia

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National Growth Areas Alliance

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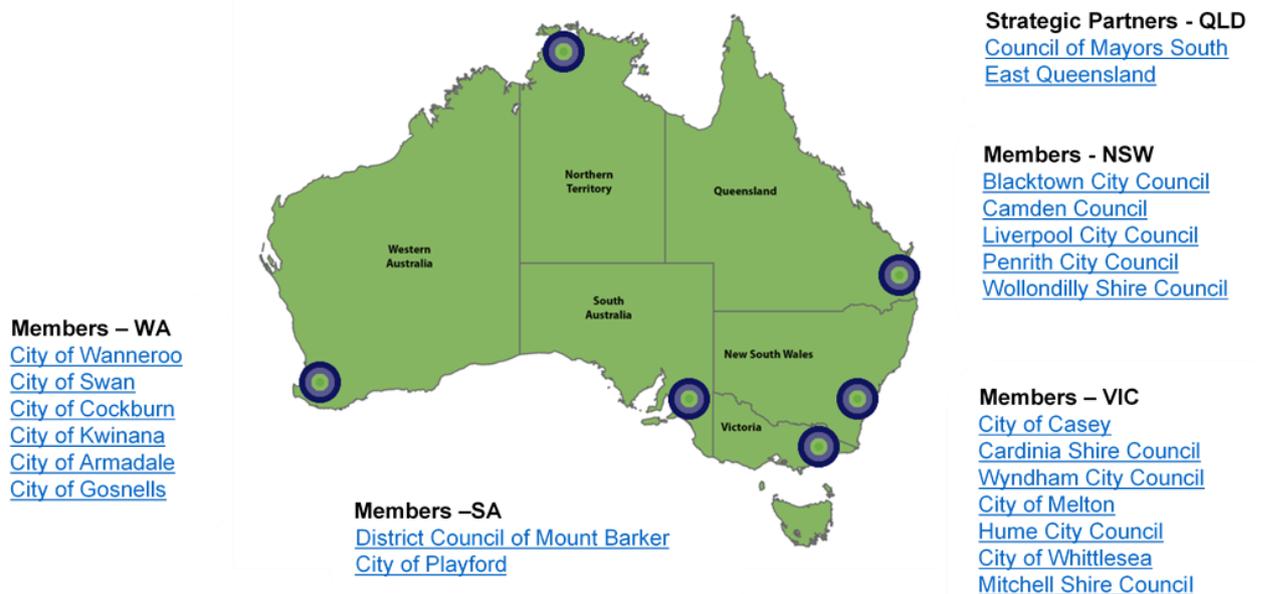
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Australia's fast growing cities, towns and suburbs

More than five million people live in an outer urban growth area around our major cities – that's 20% of Australia's population. The National Growth Areas Alliance (NGAA) represents Councils from these fast-growing areas whose populations have been growing twice as fast as the national average. NGAA members have a shared vision of growing communities that are resilient, liveable and thriving. However, this vision is unachievable until investment in vital infrastructure and services matches the size of the growth areas population.

Every Australian deserves to live in a safe, sustainable and liveable community – regardless of their postcode. Yet, with population growth rates at double the national average, NGAA member councils and their communities are impacted by:

- inadequate transport, health, education, community and social infrastructure to cope with increased demand, and
- a lack of government focus on the health, education and employment prospects of communities in rapidly developed greenfield suburbs.



Growth areas communities and economies have been heavily impacted by COVID-19 and the ensuing economic downturn and cessation of migration. However, they also have a leading role to play in economic recovery.

In the eastern states, outer urban areas were COVID-19 hotspots due to inadequate health infrastructure and service delivery, and ineffective communication to the multiculturally diverse community.

The City of Wyndham in Melbourne's west had the most COVID-19 cases of any LGA in Australia, with more than 2,200 people infected. Other Victorian growth areas recorded the next-worst infection numbers nation-wide, including Hume (1660), Whittlesea (1218) and Melton (1159). Together, Victoria's growth area LGAs account for nearly half of all COVID-19 cases in

the state¹. In NSW the situation was similar with Sydney's outer western and south western growth area suburbs among those with the most COVID-19 infections².

Economically, residents of growth areas across Australia are vulnerable – at a scale unseen in other areas of the country. Our workforce of 2.2 million people continues to record unemployment rates above the national average.

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing disadvantage in outer urban communities. Prior to the pandemic, growth area communities already experienced significant mortgage and rental stress. Mental health services were already under-resourced or non-existent in many growth areas, and health and education services for young people were under-resourced or non-existent.

Yet amongst the challenges, growth areas have a leading role to play in economic recovery. And in 'reimagining' cities, lifestyle and urban development. COVID-19 prompted a significant spatial redistribution of employment, with vast numbers of people working productively at home for short or longer periods of time, dependent on state restrictions.

This localised work model is now proven to work and could be equally applied to the delivery of skills training, higher education and business support – all key elements of outer urban and national economic recovery. However a shift in thinking on the planning and delivery of infrastructure is needed to match this new way of living and working.

NGAA has long called for a rebalancing of Australian cities, where jobs, infrastructure and services are equally accessible to the 5 million people who live in outer urban areas. COVID-19 has kick-started this process. We have a once in a generation opportunity to build on this momentum and shape outer urban development models to the '20 or 30-minute city' model. A sizeable shift to working from home has not only reduced congestion but has also improved the lives of commuters and their families. At the same time, the inadequacy of parks, walking and bike trails, community and recreational facilities in new suburbs has become all too evident.

This review of Infrastructure Australia has come at a time when small changes could make a significant difference, and the opportunity for genuine commitment and collaboration between all levels of government is within grasp.

Infrastructure Australia's role

From the perspective of local government, communities and economies of fast-growing outer suburban areas, the role of IA has never been more important. Growth area councils make up just 7% of all LGAs in Australia but accommodated 49% of Australia's population growth 2016-2021. As at the 2021 Census, 5.3 million people live in Australia's growth areas.

As our populations grow at double the national average, and over 150,000 people move into our LGAs each year, infrastructure planning is the most critical component of ensuring our new towns and suburbs can function, provide not only housing but jobs and services, and contribute to national productivity.

¹ DHHS Coronavirus Data - Victorian Case Numbers by Location at 29/1/2021 <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/victorian-coronavirus-covid-19-data>

² NSW Government, site accessed 29/1/2021 <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/find-facts-about-covid-19#map-of-nsw-covid-19-positive-cases-and-testing-by-postcode>

NGAA's relationship to IA is to contribute evidence and experience to deliberations on infrastructure priorities and other policy development publications to ensure the oft-overlooked needs of this substantial population are given the attention they deserve.

IA's original mandate of advising predominantly on transport, energy, communications and water infrastructure is reflective of a mindset where consideration of the interconnectedness of all forms of infrastructure was not considered and instead a siloed approach across portfolios was taken.

As evidenced in the development of growth areas, various forms of critical infrastructure planning ran in parallel rather than as an integrated approach to the needs of a geographic area, sector of the population or sector of the economy.

NGAA welcomed the focus on place-based outcomes and inclusion of more holistic coverage and structure of the 2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan. A clearer connection between the state infrastructure advisory bodies and the national body would be welcome, as well as a clear commitment from the Federal Government to heed the advice of Infrastructure Australia through the work of the relevant Departments.

NGAA represents a group of LGAs that share the same experiences of insufficient and mistimed infrastructure investment from both State and Federal governments. A national strategic response to these same issues in different states is critical to catching up with the infrastructure deficit in growth areas, using best practices across state borders and avoiding repeating mistakes that have held back community and economic development in the outer suburbs.

A national infrastructure investment strategy, that incorporates local and state government priorities and can deliver solutions for similar challenges across state boundaries would provide the best chance of effectively using resources, streamlining processes and delivering the right infrastructure (transport, energy, communications, water, health, education, community, waste, green, blue and economic) in the right place when it is needed.

Initial findings of NGAA's research on *Benefit evaluation of Australian Government investment in infrastructure in outer suburban growth areas* (to be released 31 August, 2022), shows that early delivery of infrastructure in greenfield developments lessens the negative health and social implications of isolated and under-serviced new communities. It also acts as a catalyst for further investment from other parties, which would not have occurred if the initial infrastructure (such as community or business hubs, public transport or freight access) had not been provided.

For NGAA councils, these types of projects do not reach IA's \$250m value individually, but when combined into a national program the scale of project need in growth areas would surpass that limit. IA could usefully play a national coordinating role in the provision of program advice on these types of infrastructure projects in collaboration with state and local governments.

Infrastructure Australia's Effectiveness

IA's recent Reform Series publications have been a valuable tool for NGAA and we have appreciated the opportunity for IA to focus on specific issues of relevance to growth areas such as:

- *Outer urban Public Transport: Improving accessibility in lower-density areas*
- *Planning Liveable Cities: A place-based approach to sequencing infrastructure and growth*
- *Future Cities: Planning for our growing population*

- *Reforming Urban Water: A national pathway for change and*
- *Capturing Value: Advice on making value capture work in Australia.*

IA has produced a plethora of informed and important guidance in recent years, but it is unclear how the content and purpose of these publications is taken up by the decision-makers at the bureaucratic and political level.

More effective take up of the work contained in these reports, and clearer collaboration or shared outcomes with state infrastructure advisory bodies would be beneficial.

Through NGAA, growth area councils have both contributed to the priority reform papers and taken advice and guidance from the final products. However, absorbing the breadth and depth of the research provided by IA can be a challenge for councils and other organisations such as NGAA for whom IA's work is a valuable addition to an already crowded workspace. Consideration of simplified communication would be appreciated.

NGAA found the 2019 Infrastructure Audit a particularly useful publication and was pleased to be regularly and meaningfully consulted during its development and also during the 2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan process.

We feel that IA produces important guidance that is based on sound evidence and wide consultation, but would appreciate a clearer understanding of the connection between state infrastructure advisory bodies and IA, as well as a clearer commitment from state and Federal governments to base their decisions on the advice provided.

Infrastructure Australia's Threshold

The current threshold excludes many of the infrastructure projects needed by growth areas. While large scale projects are often located in inner-metropolitan or regional areas, growth area projects which require Federal funding are of a smaller scale.

One example where this has been overcome is the Growth Areas of Perth and Peel Recreational Facilities project, which bundles the projects needed in growth areas into a proposal that meets the threshold. It has been a useful exercise for those councils involved to work with IA on the assessment framework, and to engage other funders through that process.

A similar capacity to bundle the large number of sub-\$250m projects across growth areas nationally would help to provide the necessary assessment and engagement for those projects to progress.

Infrastructure Australia and Growth Areas Infrastructure Needs

Place-based for multiple places across the country

NGAA endorses Infrastructure Australia's call for place-based planning to unlock the potential of every outer suburban growth area in Australia³. A place-based approach to planning with targeted funding will make sure money goes to where it is needed, and gives confidence to the community that taxpayer's money is being spent well.

³ Infrastructure Plan 2021, Infrastructure Australia.

Growth area Councils need long term infrastructure investment commitments not short term politically focused funding announcements. Too often Federal and state funding grants and funding rounds require councils to find money to co-invest quickly and with no respect for existing council budgets, capital works programs and statutory obligations.

A strengthened role for IA could help achieve an integrated strategic infrastructure plan which is needed so growth area councils can manage their capital works programs without projects coming from left field from other levels of government. Councils would welcome the opportunity to sit and jointly plan for the medium to long term and advise what their infrastructure needs will be. Growth area councils know their communities, understand changing demographics and need, and can inform and support cost-effective, well planned investment in their communities.

Transport in Growth Areas

IA could assist to achieve connectivity and sustainable movement in growth areas by coordinating investment advice across three levels of government to connect communities through upgraded roads, walkable paths and trails and infrastructure that supports planning and delivery of accessible, high frequency, reliable public transport.

A well-functioning integrated transport network is needed to be planned for and delivered early in a growth area. This includes upgraded major roads, public transport infrastructure and services, walkable paths and bicycle trails that connect to areas of activity such as shopping centres and community hubs and recreational reserves.

The costs of underdeveloped infrastructure, including for active transport, are borne by households who need to buy an extra car or who can't access essential services. Parents at home looking after children and young people need good access to active transport options and public transport so they can participate. The greatest benefit for early investment in active transport infrastructure and public transport is avoided car ownership⁴.

Timely social infrastructure is essential to support quality of life in outer suburbs

Social infrastructure is the facilities, spaces, services and networks that support the quality of life and wellbeing of communities. Social infrastructure assets are the buildings and spaces that support delivery of social services by governments and other service providers. Social infrastructure networks play a nationally significant role in supporting Australia's economy, liveability and sustainability⁵.

NGAA welcomes Infrastructure Australia broadening its understand of the important role social infrastructure plays in building community. Outer suburban growth areas are experiencing rapid population growth, but often without commensurate social infrastructure and services needed to support communities and maintain liveability.

Incorporating these social infrastructure projects into Federal-level advice (using the multiplier factor of the large scale of growth areas) would benefit growth areas and provide an opportunity for IA to paly a coordination role in the gathering of information across three levels of government.

⁴ https://cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/costs-and-benefits-of-early-delivery-of-transport-option_november-2021.pdf

⁵ Australian Infrastructure Audit 2019, Infrastructure Australia