

OVERVIEW

In its contemporary context the term 'sustainability' is the recognition of a major flaw in modern society. In order for the emerging field of sustainability to be successful it must be self-eliminating. It is unsustainable to indefinitely question if something is sustainable.

However, in the contemporary environment there is a significant role that sustainably-focused professionals must play in facilitating the overall evolution of our society so that, over time, it becomes sustainable. The proposed emissions trading scheme is a specific manifestation of this endeavour, with a focus on the long-term reduction of our greenhouse gas emissions.

In this response there will be little distinction made for issues relating to 'transport' and 'planning' as they are both intrinsic to the built environment discussion. Measures listed in this response relating to 'low emissions opportunities' are equally applicable to the broader issue of creating a sustainable built environment.

ISSUES

The majority of decisions relating to the evolution of the built environment are based on the minimum requirements stated in particular legal standards¹. This is typically due to these standards also representing the least-cost capital investment for the financier. Historically the levels of performance reflected in these standards have related to the safety and usability of the built environment, giving little/no emphasis to any reduction in emissions. In many areas these standards are inconsistent with existing low emissions opportunities and are prohibitive to facilitating any reasonable reduction in emissions by 2020 or 2050.

Once a price is placed on carbon² it is commonly accepted that the market will resolve many issues relating to the construction and development industries, and their associated emissions. Unfortunately while the minimum legal standards remain at such an unacceptable level the market cannot be relied upon to determine the most sustainable solution for addressing the emissions produce from this area of our society. Until these standards are improved and the market adapts appropriately there will be a need for the independent assessment and investment of low emissions opportunities for the built environment.

With existing low rates of attrition – it could take a century to create a built environment that is consistent with even existing low emissions opportunities – it is essential that buildings and their associated infrastructure are upgraded earlier than otherwise would be the case. If this does not occur it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to reach any future emissions targets.

Due to the challenges of Climate Change having no real precedent, many professionals are unable to grasp the magnitude of the situation or how to resolve it. Institutional and industry-based education systems are not yet consistent with the level of inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary cooperation that is required to appropriately address Climate Change.

Much of Australia's urban environment has been created with the automobile as the primary mode of transport. While there is no denying the flexibility and freedom that car use offers the individual, it does not offer equivalent benefits for society as a whole, the economy, nor for the environment. Such mono-mode transport planning has resulted in significant areas where the local population is at the mercy of this single mode of transport, and its associated high levels of emissions³. It is neither reasonable nor sustainable to have such absolute dependence on one mode of transport, regardless of the emissions associated with the particular mode.

If sustainability is to be self-eliminating it must do so over a limited period of time. The issues relating to our excessive emissions must be resolved quickly as Climate Change is only a small part of the overall challenge of creating a sustainable world for our children.

¹ Such standards include the Building Code of Australia (BCA) and state/locally specific planning schemes.

² In addition to all other greenhouse gases listed under the Kyoto Protocol

³ This is particularly the case in areas of low-density residential areas on the fringes of our major cities where some streets do not even have such fundamental elements as footpaths.

OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to assisting disadvantaged individuals affected by the transformation to a low emissions society the funds produced from the sale of emissions permits should be used to:

- To review the existing data relating to the sustainability of the built environment and determine areas where further research needs to be conducted. Assisting, where feasible, in the funding this research.
- Facilitate the establishment of acceptable minimum legal standards:
 - Where the data is available to conduct a review of the Building Code of Australia to establish a consistency between minimum building standards and existing low emissions opportunities.
 - Where data is available to conduct reviews of individual planning schemes to establish a consistency between minimum performance standards and existing low emissions opportunities.
- Upgrading of existing buildings and infrastructure:
 - Facilitate a review of urban transport infrastructure and needs, identifying areas and opportunities for low emissions transport. Assisting, where feasible, in the investment of such low emissions transport opportunities.
 - Facilitate a review of existing buildings and urban environments, identifying areas and opportunities for the integration of low emissions technology. Assisting, where feasible, in the investment in such low emissions opportunities.
- Facilitate a consistency of knowledge and understanding:
 - Conduct a review of the higher education system with the aim of establishing an acceptable level of consistent of knowledge and understanding within, and between various disciplines in relation to existing and potential low emissions opportunities.
 - Conduct a review of industry knowledge⁴ with the aim of establishing an acceptable level of consistent knowledge and understanding within, and between various disciplines in relation to existing and potential low emissions opportunities.

FINAL WORD

Addressing our excessive emissions is the first major milestone for our society to reach on the path towards a sustainable future. Climate Change is a fortunate happenstance in that it provides a clear goal towards which our efforts can be directed.

With Issues of this scale progressive change is essential, but only if it is done with a clear direction and timetable. It will take courage and conviction from our political leaders and primary decision-makers to make the choices today to save the world for tomorrow.

⁴ 'industry knowledge' should include accepted standards as well as the personal understanding of individuals.