CRC for
Water Sensitive Cities

Program B: Water Sensitive Urbanism | Project B5.1 | Project duration: August 2012 – August 2016

Statutory planning for water sensitive urban design

Overview

Most developments must go through statutory planning processes including approval of structure plans, zoning, development permits and planning appeals. The likelihood of wide-scale adoption of water sensitive urban design (WSUD) could be vastly enhanced if WSUD principles are embedded in statutory planning regulations and processes. The project considers the extent to which WSUD has already been adopted in modern statutory planning frameworks and whether current frameworks are able to maximise the take-up of WSUD opportunities.

The project aims to assess the role of statutory planning legislation, regulation and processes in facilitating or constraining the adoption of WSUD and identify best practice planning legislation and policies to facilitate water resilience in cities.

Key outcomes

The project will demonstrate how synergies between WSUD principles and other town planning policies can be created and exploited in order to minimise the cost on housing and maximise public benefit when implementing WSUD. The project will deliver:

- a set of benchmark town planning policies and standards for applying WSUD to developments of different planning scales (for example greenfield and in-fill)
- better linkages with methodologies for costing WSUD infrastructure in town planning processes (for example, through the use of development levies) as an alternative to relying on funding of large-scale capital items through expenditure of public funds
- recommendations for integration of WSUD principles with other planning policies (for example, links between WSUD and public open space planning policy).

Key findings on current institutional arrangements relating to WSUD

From a regulatory perspective, the most important finding from a preliminary survey is the very strong support for a clearer legislative mandate for WSUD. However, support for mandatory targets is much lower. Local government and community stakeholders were particularly concerned about the need for mandatory targets and enforceable obligations fearing it would foster a prescriptive approach that could inhibit innovation. According to stakeholders, any legislative reform would benefit from clarifying roles, responsibilities and obligations. They thought that the reform agenda should also consider the role of maintenance costs and obligations, whether real or perceived, as a barrier to greater implementation of WSUD practices.

Those involved in the management and funding of infrastructure at a local government level have also expressed concerns and acknowledged a lack of data regarding the costs of decentralised stormwater infrastructure, though examples are known of developers who supported decentralised approaches that were more cost effective. Further research will seek to unearth the experiences of developers and consultants where economic, environmental and social benefits have been revealed through an integrated approach to water.

There are markedly different approaches to WSUD being adopted across jurisdictions. Some states have focused on the development of precinct-based approaches to WSUD, whereas others have policy frameworks which focus on residential subdivision. Other states have established processes which seek to integrate the funding of local water infrastructure with state and regional priorities by allowing price regulators to evaluate the costs and benefits of local infrastructure plans. There are local examples of targeted policies to address specific local issues or environmental values.

The research to date reveals that:

- Governance and institutional arrangements for integrated water management vary widely across states, which is unlikely to assist in the long-term development and implementation of town planning policy objectives related to WSUD. Funding and governance of infrastructure at metropolitan, regional and local scales is fragmented, which presents challenges when dealing with cross-catchment water management and planning.
- Policy frameworks, objectives and standards for integrated water management also vary widely across states, despite there being a high degree of commonality as to the key objectives of WSUD. There are opportunities to reduce red tape through the development of harmonised approaches to best practice integrated water management across jurisdictions.
- At the local government level there is a need for better understanding the costs and benefits of WSUD infrastructure at varying scales. Some states have carried out regulatory impact assessments which provide valuable insights for other states, and which should inform further research.

An Australian Government Initiative

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Project design

Research activities in the first year included high-level workshops with key policy- and decision-makers from state and local governments, urban water authorities, development industry as well as with architects, engineers and consultants who provided baseline information on how planning frameworks are delivering or hindering WSUD outcomes.

The second and third year see a stocktake and literature review of existing laws, regulation and town planning policies relating to WSUD as well as detailed consultation and interviews with key players across the five capital cities Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth around the effectiveness of different statutory planning frameworks and possible options for reform.

In the final year, the project will produce a report identifying best practice policy frameworks for town planning for WSUD and processes that could serve as a benchmark for facilitating water sensitive cities. These will be tested through interviews and workshops with key players in the statutory planning system.

Outlook

This project will identify planning legislation, policies and processes which can enhance urban liveability through WSUD, for example, the planning and management of public open space. Another opportunity is to identify the resourcing and leadership requirements of local government planners and to consider how local government can best work with urban water authorities to deliver WSUD initiatives. A final report on current application of WSUD and options for reform and a recommended model of planning regulation and policy benchmarks for WSUD will be delivered by mid-2016.

About the Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities

The Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities (CRCWSC) brings together interdisciplinary research expertise and thought-leadership from Australia and the world to address current urban water management challenges facing our cities and regions. In collaboration with over 80 research, government and industry partners, it develops and synthesises knowledge into powerful tools and influences key players aiming to achieve sustainable, resilient and liveable water sensitive cities.

Further information

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