

DENSITY DONE WELL

AN URBAN AGENDA FOR AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL CITIES

Committee for Capital Cities Policy Agenda for
Productivity, Resilience and Liveability



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Committee for Capital Cities acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia and acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to the people, the cultures and the Elders past, present and emerging.





ABOUT THE COMMITTEE FOR CAPITAL CITIES:

SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL CITIES

WHO WE ARE:

We are a coalition of Australia's committees for capital cities, representing:

- Committee for Adelaide
- Committee for Brisbane
- Committee for Greater Hobart
- Committee for Melbourne
- Committee for Perth
- Committee for Sydney

A collection of not-for-profits, advocacy groups and think tanks that advocate for policy and investment outcomes that shape the future of our respective cities. We are non-government entities, largely funded by members drawn from across many sectors.

OUR MISSION:

To share insights, advocate for collective action and influence policy for the benefit of Australia's capital cities, both now and into the future. As individual organisations and as a collective, we are committed to engaging with Federal parliamentarians and stakeholders on a broad range of issues and topics relating to Australia's urban policy landscape.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2025, at Parliament House in Canberra, the Committees for Capital Cities set out their Six Priorities Policy Agenda for Productivity, Resilience and Liveability. The agenda covered housing, transport, innovation, health and liveability, climate, and skills and migration.

The Committee for Capital Cities and the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors also convened Australia's first Parliamentary Friends of Cities: a multi-partisan group of 33 members of parliament, co-chaired by Simon Kennedy MP, Kate Chaney MP and Senator Richard Dowling.

This paper builds on that agenda. It identifies one priority with the power to advance all six at once: getting density right. When Australia's cities add homes and jobs in the right places, well designed and well served, they become more productive, more affordable, more connected and more resilient.

We call this density done well, and we propose it as the organising principle for how the Australian Government engages in urban policy.

We ask the Australian Government to act on three fronts:

1

Fast-track federal funding to deliver density done well. Bring forward National Housing Accord payments so essential infrastructure arrives with new homes, apply National Urban Policy principles to the sale of federal land, and agree through National Cabinet a national definition and target for social and affordable housing.

2

Replace City Deals with a City Partnerships program. Establish a \$500 million Urban Policy Implementation Fund over five years, overseen by an independent National Urban Investment Board, to fund enduring, strategy-led partnerships between all levels of government.

3

Fund the Committees for Capital Cities. Provide \$30 million over five years so the Committees can serve as research, delivery and accountability partners for the national urban agenda and the Parliamentary Friends of Cities.

DENSITY DONE WELL

A REFINED URBAN AGENDA FOR AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL CITIES

In October 2025, the Committees for Capital Cities presented their Six Priorities Policy Agenda for Productivity, Resilience and Liveability at Parliament House, Canberra. At the same event, Australia's first Parliamentary Friends of Cities was established: a multi-partisan group of 33 members of parliament, co-chaired by Simon Kennedy MP, Kate Chaney MP and Senator Richard Dowling, committed to advancing long-term, place-based urban policy within the Parliament.

This paper builds on that agenda. It identifies density done well as the organising priority with the greatest leverage across all six of the Committees' priorities, and advances it into three specific, costed policy asks: fast-tracked federal funding to deliver density done well, a new City Partnerships model to replace the previous City Deals construct, and dedicated Commonwealth funding for the Committees for Capital Cities as research and implementation partners for the national urban agenda.

<4%

Doubling city density typically lifts productivity by between 1.5 and 4 per cent



Urban form as one of the highest-impact levers for cutting emissions in the built environment

30+

Residential density of around 30 dwellings per hectare or more is needed to support frequent, viable public transport

Density done well is not a trade-off between housing supply and liveability. It is how both are achieved, together with stronger productivity, lower emissions and fairer access to opportunity.

THE FOUNDATION

HOUSING AS ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

SIX PRIORITIES POLICY AGENDA

The October 2025 agenda was the most comprehensive policy statement the Committees for Capital Cities had produced. Its six priorities drew on the Federal Treasury's Economic Resilience and Productivity papers, which identified weak productivity growth, housing shortages, climate pressures and an ageing population as converging challenges that demand structural reform. The Committees' response starts from a simple proposition: capital cities are where national reform ambition becomes real economic and social outcomes.

The six priorities each came with specific actions for the Australian Government, from a nationally consistent definition of social and affordable housing to aligning migration and education with growth industries.

This paper does not supersede that agenda. The six priorities remain the authoritative statement of what the Committees seek from the Commonwealth. What this paper adds is a clear organising lens.

SIX PRIORITIES FOR AUSTRALIA'S URBAN FUTURE



Housing as economic infrastructure

Australia's housing crisis is a fundamental economic challenge, not merely a social equity issue. Build smarter, not just faster. Maintain quality, not just quantity. Make the most of remaining urban land.



Transport that connects and competes globally

Investment should prioritise sustainable, high-capacity public and active transport over car-based infrastructure.



A collaborative national innovation ecosystem

Innovation thrives in well-connected urban precincts. A single national research and development strategy, place-based deployment of innovation funding, and aligned government procurement are required.



Healthy, vibrant and caring places are productive places

The health of communities is inseparable from economic performance. Federal policy must value care, invest in community health infrastructure, and support the cultural and digital economy.



Accelerating the Net Zero Transformation and Building Climate Resilience

Climate risk is urban risk. City-level net zero and climate resilience roadmaps, urban renewable energy zones, and a national home insurance scheme for high-risk properties are required.



Skills, Migration and Inclusion

Capital cities must be places where talent is welcomed, recognised and nurtured. Migration, education and employment systems must be aligned with growth industries and skill gaps.

THE PARLIAMENTARY FRIENDS OF CITIES

The Parliamentary Friends of Cities, established at the October 2025 forum, is a significant development in Australian urban governance. Co-convened by the Committees for Capital Cities and the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors, it brought together 33 founding signatories from Labor, Liberal, LNP, the Australian Greens and the Independents across five states, under co-chairs Simon Kennedy MP (Liberal, Cook), Kate Chaney MP (Independent, Curtin) and Senator Richard Dowling (Labor, Tasmania). For the first time, a formal, multi-partisan mechanism exists to advance long-term, place-based urban policy in the Parliament.

This is an important institutional opportunity, but it needs substantive support to be realised. The Committees for Capital Cities are the natural research and evidence partners for the group, and their capacity to play that role is currently limited by the absence of dedicated Commonwealth funding, which Ask Three addresses.

"Until now, place-based policy has been far too siloed. If we want to achieve an Australia that is economically prosperous, innovative and globally competitive, our cities have to do a better job of working together."

Eamon Waterford | CEO, Committee for Sydney; Chair, Committees for Capital Cities



THE DENSITY DONE WELL DIVIDEND

AN ORGANISING PRIORITY FOR FEDERAL INVESTMENT IN URBAN POLICY

THE CASE FOR AN ORGANISING PRIORITY

When everything is a priority, nothing gets the focus that real reform requires. The Committees' six priorities are each evidence-based and each necessary, but they share a single aim: cities that grow in ways that lift productivity, resilience and social cohesion. That means making the most of existing land and infrastructure, and making sure new growth comes with the services and access to opportunity that communities need. This is density done well, and it is why we propose it as the organising principle for the Australian Government's role in urban policy.

The evidence is strong. As Andrew Leigh, Assistant Minister for Productivity, told the October 2025 forum, research on Australian data shows that when a city's employment density doubles, wages rise by around 1.6 to 2.7 per cent (Meekes, 2022).

He also pointed to a global meta-analysis of nearly 300 studies, which finds that doubling city density typically lifts productivity by between 1.5 and 4 per cent, with an average of around 2.5 per cent (Donovan et al., 2022). These gains compound across a national urban system.

Density done well delivers a dividend not only to the economy, but to communities, through places that are more walkable, connected, vibrant and cohesive.

Density's link to each of the six priorities is not incidental. It reflects well-established relationships between urban form and economic, environmental and social outcomes.

HOW DENSITY DONE WELL ACTIVATES ALL SIX PRIORITIES

Housing as economic infrastructure	Higher density in well-located areas adds homes where demand is greatest, without extending infrastructure to greenfield sites. It lowers per-dwelling land costs, makes social and affordable housing more achievable in accessible places, and lets modern methods of construction work at viable scale.
Transport that connects and competes globally	Residential density of around 30 dwellings per hectare or more is needed to support frequent, viable public transport (Boulange et al., 2017; Giles-Corti et al., 2014). Without it, transport investment underperforms and car dependency persists. Density is a prerequisite for the transport priority, not just a complement to it.
A collaborative national innovation ecosystem	Agglomeration, the productivity gain from firms, workers and institutions clustering together, is the foundation of innovation precincts. Research bodies, start-ups and established firms that co-locate at density generate knowledge spillovers that do not happen when they are spread out (Glaeser, 2011). The innovation priority depends on the conditions density creates.
Healthy, vibrant and caring places are productive places	Well-designed density supports walking and active transport, cutting the chronic disease burden of car-dependent environments. It also makes health services, cultural facilities and green space more viable, because they serve more people within shorter distances.
Accelerating the Net Zero Transformation and Building Climate Resilience	Density cuts per-capita emissions through smaller dwellings, shared infrastructure, shorter trips, lower car ownership and more viable building-integrated renewables. The IPCC identifies urban form as one of the highest-impact levers for cutting emissions in the built environment (IPCC, 2022).
Skills, Migration and Inclusion	Affordable, well-located housing is a primary determinant of whether skilled workers, including migrants, can reach the labour markets that value them. Density near employment centres lowers housing-cost barriers to work, making the skills and migration system more efficient.

WHAT DENSITY DONE WELL REQUIRES

Density is not an end in itself. Density that is poorly located, poorly designed or poorly serviced imposes costs on residents, degrades public space and erodes community support for growth. As the October 2025 agenda put it: build smarter, not just faster; maintain quality, not just quantity; make the most of remaining urban land. Five requirements turn that principle into practice.

Density's link to each of the six priorities is not incidental. It reflects well-established relationships between urban form and economic, environmental and social outcomes.



Location

Development within 400 to 800 metres of high-frequency transport, and within walking distance of daily services: schools, primary healthcare, retail and open space. These location criteria should be conditions of federal funding.



Design quality

Buildings and streets that add to the public realm through appropriate scale transitions, active ground floors, energy efficiency, natural ventilation and access to sunlight. Design standards should be set at a nationally consistent minimum.



Service provision

New density matched by investment in the schools, health centres, libraries, parks and community infrastructure needed to support more people. Federal transport and social infrastructure funding should be sequenced with density approvals.



Planning transparency

Approvals that are evidence-based, time-bound, utilise new technologies appropriately and are publicly documented, giving investors certainty while keeping communities informed. Planning reform should be a condition of access to federal housing and infrastructure funding.



Affordability, tenure and typology mix

Social and affordable housing built into density precincts, not pushed to lower-value sites, so the gains of density are shared across income levels rather than captured by existing owners.

THE NATIONAL URBAN POLICY: AUSTRALIA'S DENSITY DONE WELL AGENDA

The National Urban Policy, launched in November 2024 and agreed by Australia's planning ministers, sets three goals for the nation's cities: liveable and equitable; productive and innovative; and sustainable and resilient (Australian Government, 2024).

It does not use the phrase density done well, but that is what it describes: its three goals and five implementation principles set out clearly what the Commonwealth expects from the future shape and functioning of Australia's cities.

The question now is how those goals and principles are shaping the way the Commonwealth funds and supports new homes, infrastructure and programs.

Density done well is not a nice-to-have. It is a social, economic and environmental imperative, and the Commonwealth is central to delivering it through both funding and vision.



ASK ONE

FAST-TRACK FEDERAL FUNDING TO DELIVER DENSITY DONE WELL

Bring forward the release of National Housing Accord payments to states to fast-track the delivery of well-located homes, using the National Urban Policy as the framework for allocation.

WHY

The Australian Government is focused on housing delivery, yet it holds few of the levers that actually deliver homes. Those levers, planning controls and development approvals, sit with state, territory and local governments. In many markets, new homes are currently unfeasible to build, and neither state nor federal action has shifted that.

To meet the Housing Accord and its own net zero targets, the Commonwealth must use the levers it does have to steer the right kind of housing to the right locations: diverse, affordable homes in accessible places, supported by the infrastructure communities need. Australia's cities will do much of the heavy lifting on housing, and delivering that density well is a social, economic and environmental imperative.

National Housing Accord payments are a powerful lever for delivering new, well-located homes. Bringing them forward to fund the infrastructure communities need from the outset, such as schools, parks, libraries and walking and cycling links, supports residents from day one and improves development feasibility. Bringing federal funding forward will accelerate the impact of density done well.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

- **Bring National Housing Accord payments forward** into earlier years of the forward estimates, to fund early delivery of essential infrastructure for projects that increase urban density.
- **Apply the density done well principles in the National Urban Policy** to the redevelopment of any sites sold through the Australian Government's land asset sales.
- **Work through National Cabinet to:** agree a nationally consistent definition of social and affordable housing; set a clear target for cities; and set a minimum social and affordable housing threshold for projects that receive federal funding.
- **Require urban projects identified on the Infrastructure Australia** Infrastructure Priority List to demonstrate how the project is delivering against the principles of density done well within the National Urban Policy
- **Utilise shared data environments** to monitor delivery and impact to reduce the cost on local governments

ASK TWO

CITY PARTNERSHIPS TO REPLACE CITY DEALS

Establish a national City Partnerships program to facilitate complex, place-based work that needs all levels of government, fixing the structural weaknesses of the previous City Deals model.

WHY

Successful cities are critical to national goals: productivity, industry policy, housing affordability and net zero. Meeting them takes coordinated investment across all three levels of government. The place-based intent of the City Deals model was sound, and the Committees acknowledge it. But the model was structurally flawed in four ways.

City Partnerships would replace City Deals, redesigned around seven principles that address each of the previous model's weaknesses. This is a substantive change, not a rebrand: it reflects a different view of how the Commonwealth can best contribute to cities. A partnership endures; a deal is transactional.

Australia cannot meet its biggest challenges, from housing affordability and decarbonisation to productivity and sovereign capability, without its capital cities. That calls for an explicit focus on the role cities play, and partnership across all levels of government and the private and civic sectors. It will not come from project-led deals, but from shared vision, strategy and effort. The Committees for Capital Cities are well placed to steward these partnerships, through their relationships across sectors and industries.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

- **Establish the City Partnerships program** within the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts, underpinned by seven principles
- **Establish an independent founding reference group** of the six Committees for Capital Cities and the Parliamentary Friends of Cities to advise on the model's development.
- **Establish a \$500 million Urban Policy Implementation Fund** over five years
- **Establish an independent National Urban Investment Board** with Commonwealth, state and territory, and local government representation alongside community and academic members. Its functions would be to:
 - allocate City Partnership investment through a published, merit-based process;
 - commission the State of Australian Cities report and the Density and Liveability Index; and
 - receive and publish independent evaluations of City Partnerships
- **Convene a Ministerial Cities Council**, a cross-portfolio body chaired by the Prime Minister or a designated minister with explicit responsibility for urban policy. It would meet quarterly, include ministers for housing, infrastructure, treasury, climate, social services and employment, and formally engage the Committees for Capital Cities and the Parliamentary Friends of Cities twice a year, receiving policy analysis and providing ministerial briefings on progress.

URBAN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION FUND - \$500 MILLION OVER FIVE YEARS

City Partnerships Program \$300 million	Capital for City Partnership priorities: density-enabling infrastructure, transport integration, social and affordable housing, climate adaptation and innovation precincts. State and territory co-investment required at a minimum of \$1 for every \$2 of Commonwealth funding.
Place Quality Program \$50 million	Competitive grants for exemplary density projects that show replicable design excellence in walkable precincts, mixed-tenure housing and transit-oriented communities. Administered by the Committees for Capital Cities with Infrastructure Australia.
Local Government Capacity \$80 million	Direct funding to local governments in City Partnerships for planning reform, community engagement, infrastructure coordination and Density Strategies. Allocated per partnership, with acquittal requirements.
Research and Accountability \$40 million	Annual State of Australian Cities reporting, the Density and Liveability Index, independent partnership reviews and the cross-city evidence program, administered by the Committees for Capital Cities. Funds the public accountability infrastructure of the fund.



SEVEN DESIGN PRINCIPLES OF CITY PARTNERSHIPS

Strategy-first	Every partnership is anchored to a jointly developed, publicly available long-term urban strategy, aligned to the National Urban Policy's five goals and including a Density Strategy prepared under the National Density Framework. Investment flows from strategy; projects express the strategy rather than define it.
Transparent, merit-based selection	Cities are chosen through a published, merit-based process using criteria drawn from the National Urban Policy's five goals. Selection is run by the National Urban Investment Board, not bilateral negotiation, and decisions and their rationale are published.
Long-term commitment	Partnerships run for ten years, with an independent, publicly available review at five years that may adjust commitments. This lets cities plan across electoral cycles, with the certainty the deal model could not offer.
Tri-level governance with community representation	Local government is a formal signatory and governance partner, not a peripheral recipient. Each partnership is governed by a board of Commonwealth, state and local government representatives alongside community and industry members, with proceedings reported publicly each year.
Mandatory density and climate components	Every partnership must include a Density Strategy under the National Density Framework and a net zero transition component aligned with national and state climate commitments. These are conditions of partnership, not optional extras.
Independent accountability	Each partnership sets independently verified performance metrics at the outset, reports against them publicly each year, and undergoes an independent mid-term review by Infrastructure Australia or an equivalent body. Reports feed the State of Australian Cities report and the Density and Liveability Index.
Benefit beyond the city boundary	City Partnerships are designed to lift national prosperity, not widen the gap between cities and regions. Productivity, housing and supply-chain gains in capital cities flow outward; stronger cities strengthen the regions they serve rather than competing with them for Commonwealth investment. The model is explicitly extensible to regional and peri-urban centres once proven at capital-city scale.

ASK THREE FUNDING THE COMMITTEES FOR CAPITAL CITIES

That the Australian Government provide \$6 million per year in recurrent funding over five years to increase the research and collaboration capacity of the Committees for Capital Cities.

WHY

The Committees for Capital Cities are independent, member-funded civic organisations in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Hobart. They bring together business, academic, government and community voices to develop evidence-based policy and advocate for the long-term wellbeing of their cities. They were instrumental in establishing and co-convening the Parliamentary Friends of Cities and in engaging senior ministers at the Parliament House forum.

As not-for-profits funded largely by members from many sectors, they hold a distinctive position: independent of government, non-partisan, and committed to their cities' long-term interests rather than any electoral cycle or commercial interest. Unlike industry peak bodies, they advocate not for a sector but for the six capital cities that together house more than 15 million Australians, generate around 70 per cent of national GDP, and hold the country's greatest concentrations of housing demand, infrastructure need and climate transition challenge.

The Committees currently rely entirely on member contributions. That model suits their core activities but cannot sustain the research programs, cross-city collaboration and parliamentary engagement their role as implementation and accountability partners requires.

The Commonwealth funds peak bodies and civic implementation partners in health, education, regional development, the arts and other domains, recognising that effective implementation needs institutional capacity the market will not supply at sufficient scale or independence.

Urban policy should be treated the same way, and more so, because unlike these other sectors Australia's capital cities have no dedicated state or federal governance oversight. In that gap, and the absence of a coordinated response to urban issues at city scale, the Committees fill a vital policy and representation role.

Federal funding lets us provide a coordinated voice on the issues that matter to cities: housing delivery, economic development, climate adaptation and decarbonisation, data centre development and transport.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

- **The Committees request dedicated Commonwealth operational and program funding** of \$30 million over five years, equivalent to \$6 million a year across the six Committees, allocated as follows.

FUNDING THE COMMITTEES FOR CAPITAL CITIES

National Urban Research Program \$12 million	Jointly commissioned, publicly available annual research across the six capital cities on housing affordability and supply, density and liveability, transport accessibility, climate adaptation and equity. This forms the primary, centralised digital evidence base for the Parliamentary Friends of Cities and the National Urban Policy accountability framework.
City Partnership Secretariat \$8 million	Dedicated capacity in each Committee to co-design, support the governance of, and help evaluate City Partnerships, including community co-design, local government technical assistance, density strategy support and annual reporting to the National Urban Investment Board.
Parliamentary Friends of Cities Support \$5 million	Research briefings, city visits, independent policy analysis and facilitated engagement so the group can champion urban legislation with analytical depth across electoral cycles.
Cross-city Collaboration \$3 million	The national annual forum, cross-city evidence exchange, joint policy positions and coordinated advocacy to Commonwealth departments and the Ministerial Cities Council.
Administration and Governance \$2 million	National secretariat functions: coordinating the joint Committees structure, governing the Place Quality Program, and reporting to the Ministerial Cities Council and National Urban Investment Board.



CONCLUSION

Australia's capital cities are home to more than 15 million people and generate around 70 per cent of the nation's economic output. They are where the country's biggest challenges, from housing affordability to productivity to the climate transition, will be won or lost. How these cities grow over the next decade will shape national prosperity for a generation.

Density done well is the principle that connects these challenges and points to a shared solution. Building more homes in the right places, designed well and served by the right infrastructure, is how Australia can house its people, lift productivity, cut emissions and widen access to opportunity at the same time. Done poorly, density erodes public trust. Done well, it is one of the most powerful tools the nation has.

The Australian Government already has the vision. The National Urban Policy commits every government in the country to more liveable, productive, sustainable and resilient cities. What is needed now is delivery: funding that arrives when and where it is needed, partnerships that endure beyond the electoral cycle, and institutions with the capacity to turn ambition into outcomes.

The three asks in this paper are practical, costed and ready to act on. Together they would give the Commonwealth the framework, the funding and the partners to make density done well the foundation of national urban policy.

The Committees for Capital Cities, and the multi-partisan Parliamentary Friends of Cities, stand ready to work with the Government to deliver it.



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SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL CITIES

The Committee for Capital Cities looks forward to working with our members, industry partners and all levels and sides of Government to shape the future of Australia's capital cities for generations to come.

