

The Sustainable Subdivisions Framework: 'how to' guiding the shift toward low carbon communities

Amanda Dodd and Bridie Guy MPIA

The role of Local Government in shaping action on the climate and extinction crisis is well established. Councils have been creating sustainable community centres, sourcing renewable energy, educating the community on sustainable living, and managing land for biodiversity protection and enhancement. As custodians of the planning scheme, Local Government is well-placed to enable the creation of low carbon communities.

Councils' role as responsible authorities and the ultimate owners of many assets and open spaces generated through subdivision planning processes enables a significant opportunity to influence the sustainability of our built environment.

The Council Alliance for Sustainable Built Environment (CASBE) has been impacting the built environment for over a decade with the Sustainable Design Assessment in the Planning Process (SDAPP) Framework for Buildings. In 2020, 19 leading Victorian Councils have adopted a local Environmentally Sustainable Design (ESD) planning policy.

CASBE's work is critical to delivering sustainable buildings. By identifying specific information requirements and standards, SDAPP enables a robust evaluation of the broad sustainability objectives, which already exist in state planning policy. However, this existing policy does not extend to subdivision scale development.

The bigger picture

Across Victoria, many large-scale subdivisions are being planned to cater for the next 20-30 years of Victoria's population growth. These planned developments are our future communities. Their expected lifespan extends over hundreds of years. The initial subdivision design presents an enormous opportunity to create the fundamental conditions for a sustainable and resilient community.

Designing streets to maximise solar access for future dwellings, protecting and retaining biodiversity, planning and establishing open space, and the integration of transport networks, all contribute to the sustainability of our newest communities.

What are sustainable subdivisions?

Sustainable subdivisions are thoughtfully planned to achieve a better quality of life, protect and use resources efficiently, and improve the health of the environment and people.

The Sustainable Subdivisions Framework (the SSF) was developed to address existing policy gaps and equip councils with the tools to facilitate a transition to a more sustainable built environment and low carbon communities.

The project started in 2019, with funding from the Victorian Government and was developed by 16 partner Councils, CASBE, and the Victorian Planning Authority. The focus is to improve the long-term community benefits of a subdivision that can be delivered through the planning process.

The SSF can be applied across the State and was designed for all types of subdivisions, including infill subdivisions. A particular focus is the greenfield subdivision typology, in

which regional and growth area councils are experiencing significant growth.

In these greenfield areas, land subdivision and housing are often separately developed, and housing rarely requires a planning permit. The SSF enables early and more integrated consideration of these two intrinsically linked processes.

The SSF seeks to mitigate the impacts of future climate projection scenarios, creating sustainable and liveable subdivisions that can adapt to the changing climate. The SSF identifies seven categories that can assist in creating sustainable subdivisions: Site Layout and Liveability; Streets and Public Realm; Energy; Ecology; Integrated Water Management (IWM); Urban Heat; and Circular Economy (Materials and Waste)

The seven SSF categories each include objectives and measurable standards to facilitate stronger sustainability outcomes and apply innovation and implementation considerations to all categories. Over an 18-month period, 29 Councils across the State are conducting a voluntary trial of the SSF.

Why planners are critical for the delivery of sustainable subdivisions

It is critical that planners understand that the climate is fundamentally changing. We are experiencing increased climate variability and changes to both extremes and averages. The Climate Science Report projects that across Victoria, rainfall will decrease and the number of days over 35 degrees may double. Planners must take a long-term view and consider the impact of climate change over the entire life of the subdivision.

The SSF trial provides the means for the private and public sector to work together to improve ESD planning practice in mainstream development of our communities. The delivery of more sustainable places requires Councils and the development industry to work hand in hand.

The SSF and trial were developed to harness planners' strengths – as strong multi-disciplinary collaborators, passionate about creating a better future for all. The SSF will assist planners in balancing complex objectives in favour of overall long-term net community benefit. A key component of the trial involves the opportunity to upskill Council staff and to develop a whole-of-Council approach to sustainable subdivisions.

We also invite the development community to learn from the project and work collaboratively to facilitate innovation and lift minimum standards, working towards best practice over time.

But perhaps most importantly, we believe that the application of the SSF will create better places for our future residents. A well oriented site enables more comfortable dwellings with lower energy bills. A healthy urban environment supports local wildlife and offers an engaging public realm. Shared foot and cycle path networks that are safe, comfortable, well-constructed, and accessible allow equitable access to communal spaces. And a greener drought resistant urban environment improves community climate resilience.

A complete description of the Sustainable Subdivisions Framework can be found at www.casbe.org.au/resources/sustainable-subdivisions-resources ●

Amanda Dodd is the Environmental Planning Coordinator at Hume City Council and Bridie Guy is a strategic planner at Wodonga City Council. The views represented here are their own.