

COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS (COAG) REFORM AGENDA

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia. COAG comprises the Prime Minister, state and territory first ministers and the president of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA). MAV Management Committee member, Cr Geoff Lake, is the current ALGA President and local government member of COAG.

The role of COAG is to initiate, develop and monitor the implementation of policy reforms that are of national significance and which require cooperative action by all Australian governments.

At the most recent COAG meeting in Brisbane on 7 December there were many important issues progressed that demonstrate the need for the sector to be aware of the Australian Government's agenda and the implications for local government.

COAG MEETING OUTCOMES

Health Reform

COAG agreed that national health reform would be a central priority for 2010. Population growth, ageing and an increase in chronic disease and disability, plus the cost of technological advances, are exacerbating existing system pressures.

The recommendations of the recent reform reports were discussed at length, and premiers and chief ministers delivered overviews of particular strengths and opportunities for improvement in health care delivery in their jurisdictions. The Commonwealth has committed to actively engaging with the states and territories on a range of long-term health and hospital reform proposals and intends to put specific proposals to the states in the first half of 2010.

The MAV will ensure that the position of Victorian local government is actively communicated to the Victorian Premier and the Prime Minister's office through the ALGA, and continue to participate in dialogue with both spheres on the reform proposals in 2010. The MAV will hold a consultation forum with councils at the earliest opportunity when specific proposals for Victoria are announced.

Early Childhood Reform

Recognising the central importance of early childhood development to the wellbeing of Australia's children and to the future wellbeing and productivity of the nation, COAG agreed to a new National Quality Agenda (NQA) for early childhood education and care, and outside school hours care. The reforms follow the extensive public consultation on the Regulation Impact Statement (RIS) in July and August 2009, which involved more than 1700 participants in information sessions and more than 340 written submissions.

Key components to be implemented over the next five years include: better qualified staff, lower staff-to-child ratios, uniform national standards and a new transparent ratings system for services.

Given new regulations for children's services were already introduced in Victoria earlier in 2009, the most significant additional requirements under the NQA is the lowering of staff-to-

child ratios to 1:11 for children aged from 36 months to school age by no later than 1 January 2016, and also that most services will be required to have an early childhood teacher in attendance whenever a service is being provided.

The Victorian Minister, Maxine Morand has indicated in discussions with the MAV that these additional requirements could appropriately be phased in from 2013 to 2015, once the current quality improvements are bedded in and the transition to 15 hours of kindergarten has been implemented.

The MAV has communicated to the Minister and DEECD the importance of supporting councils and services to implement the early childhood reform agenda in a coordinated and incremental manner, which continues to be responsive to the needs of families and particular communities. The MAV will canvass further the potential impacts of the reforms with councils early in 2010 for discussion with both the State and Federal Ministers.

Capital Cities Planning

COAG agreed that by January 2012 all states and territories will have capital city strategic plans in place to manage population and economic growth, address climate change, improve housing affordability and tackle urban congestion in line with new national criteria. An expert advisory panel will be established to assess consistency of capital city strategic planning systems with the criteria. Future Commonwealth infrastructure funding will align with the criteria and plans.

These plans will clearly identify priorities for future investment and policy effort by governments and enable effective implementation. COAG is seeking to improve outcomes from government investment and strengthen public confidence in planning systems. To date DPCD has not consulted with the MAV on these initiatives. The national objectives and criteria for the future strategic planning of Australia's capital cities are available at http://www.minister.infrastructure.gov.au/aa/releases/2009/December/aa523_2009.htm

Housing

Housing supply has struggled to keep pace with growing demand, and population growth is likely to mean this demand continues, requiring a supply side focus for cities to adapt. COAG noted progress of Housing Ministers on housing reforms under the National Affordable Housing Agreement and National Partnership Agreements.

As a new initiative, COAG agreed to develop a housing supply and affordability reform agenda lead by Treasurers, through the Ministerial Council on Federal Financial Relations, for consideration in the first half of 2010.

This reform agenda will be set against the broader operation of the housing market and the appropriate role for governments and identify and implement reforms to improve capital city strategic planning, development approvals and utilise the recently completed government land audits.

Nation Building and Jobs Plan

The construction phase of the Nation Building – Economic Stimulus Plan continues to escalate with more than 28,000 (57 per cent) of the major building and construction projects underway and completions rapidly rising. At the end of October 2009:

- of the over 2,700 local projects being undertaken by local councils, 566 had been completed and good progress was reported on the 137 strategic community infrastructure projects
- of the 19,321 new social houses to be constructed, over 2,600 had commenced construction, while 125 had already been completed; more than 41,000 social houses had received essential repairs and over 600,000 homes had ceiling insulation or solar hot water systems installed

- more than 300 road black spot and boom gates for rail crossings were underway
- Of the 14 major road projects, all had commenced pre-construction activities and five were under construction; and
- 15 of the 17 major rail projects had commenced (including one technology trial) and three were complete.

Green Skills

COAG endorsed a new Green Skills Agreement that will deliver skills for sustainability in the Australian training system. The Agreement is a high-level statement of principles and desired outcomes which will lead to:

- national standards of sustainability practice and teaching in vocational training;
- the revision of Training Packages to include sustainability principles and competencies;
- the up-skilling of VET instructors and teachers in delivering sustainability skills; and
- implementation of a transition strategy to re-skill vulnerable workers.

Transport Regulation

COAG has taken several steps towards a nationally regulated transport system with the aim of reducing transport costs and lifting national productivity. It was agreed that South Australia will host the national rail safety regulator.

National Partnership Agreements for single national heavy vehicle and maritime regulators will be considered in the first half of 2010. The National Partnership Agreement for the single national rail regulator will be considered in 2011.

A detailed work plan for delivery of the pricing elements of the COAG Road Reform Plan was also agreed. Under the plan, a feasibility study for alternative models of road pricing and funding will be completed by December 2011, which should include specific consideration of mass-distance location pricing.

COAG further agreed to resolve a number of policy, legislation, governance and funding issues in the implementation stage, including the role of state ministers.

National Youth Strategy

COAG noted the Commonwealth's development of a National Strategy for Young Australians, which aims to enable all young Australians to grow up safe, healthy, happy and resilient, and that the Commonwealth will consult the states in developing key elements of the Strategy to ensure it is appropriately targeted and effective, and complements State action.

MAV COMMENTS

The MAV is regularly consulted on national policy issues through the ALGA. Where time and opportunity permits the MAV will consult directly with Victorian councils on these matters. Victorian councils are encouraged to contact the MAV with feedback or concerns about any of the reform agenda items included in this brief.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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