



Ten ideas for the next Greater Sydney Region Plan

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Committee
for
Sydney



Rendering of Parramatta Square
Source: - BG&E

Introduction

The Metropolis of Three Cities (MO3C) defined a vision for Sydney that caught the public's imagination and framed debates about growth since its publication in 2018.

It directed government's attention to the west and expressed Sydney's essential polycentrism in a modern way. It created the conceptual framework that all of us have worked within since.

The next version of the Greater Sydney region plan provides an opportunity to build on the successes of MO3C, as well as everything we have learned since then, so that Sydney can take another big step forward in terms of quality of life, decarbonisation and economic inclusion.

With the recent announcement that the Greater Sydney Commission will be recast as the Greater Cities Commission, with a mandate to think about Newcastle, the Central Coast, and Wollongong, the opportunity now exists to truly think at the larger scale of the megaregion.

The next region plan will be the first chance to show how planning at this scale works.

In this paper, we are putting forward 10 ideas for inclusion in the next plan:

1. Plan at the scale of the megaregion
2. Channel growth into town centres
3. Set a goal for growth within walking distance of rail stations
4. Provide stronger standards for greenfield development
5. Address the problem of land supply
6. Adopt a target for social and affordable housing
7. Place climate change at the centre of land use and transport strategy
8. Present a transport vision at a high level
9. Further develop the Parkland City idea
10. Do more to bring quality jobs to the west.

1. Plan at the scale of the megaregion

In 2018, the Committee published its first report on the Sandstone Megaregion, encompassing Sydney, Newcastle, the Central Coast and Wollongong. We argued that strengthening the connectivity across this geography would be good for the environment, the economy and liveability.

Last month, the NSW Government made a major announcement that the Greater Sydney Commission (GSC) would be recast as the Greater Cities Commission, encompassing this exact geography.

We believe the next region plan should be a strategic plan for the entire Sandstone Megaregion, rather than separate plans for Greater Sydney and other areas. This does not mean other cities are somehow 'merged' into Sydney; they are distinct places with their own ambitions. But the GSC, whatever it is ultimately renamed, is uniquely positioned to think about relationships between places at this scale.

The opportunities are clear. The Central Coast, Newcastle and Wollongong are very attractive places for growth to go. They will need careful, thoughtful planning to ensure the growth is handled properly to improve liveability and economic performance.

To enable this emerging megaregion to gain all the benefits of scale and accessibility, a series of key transport links need to be upgraded:

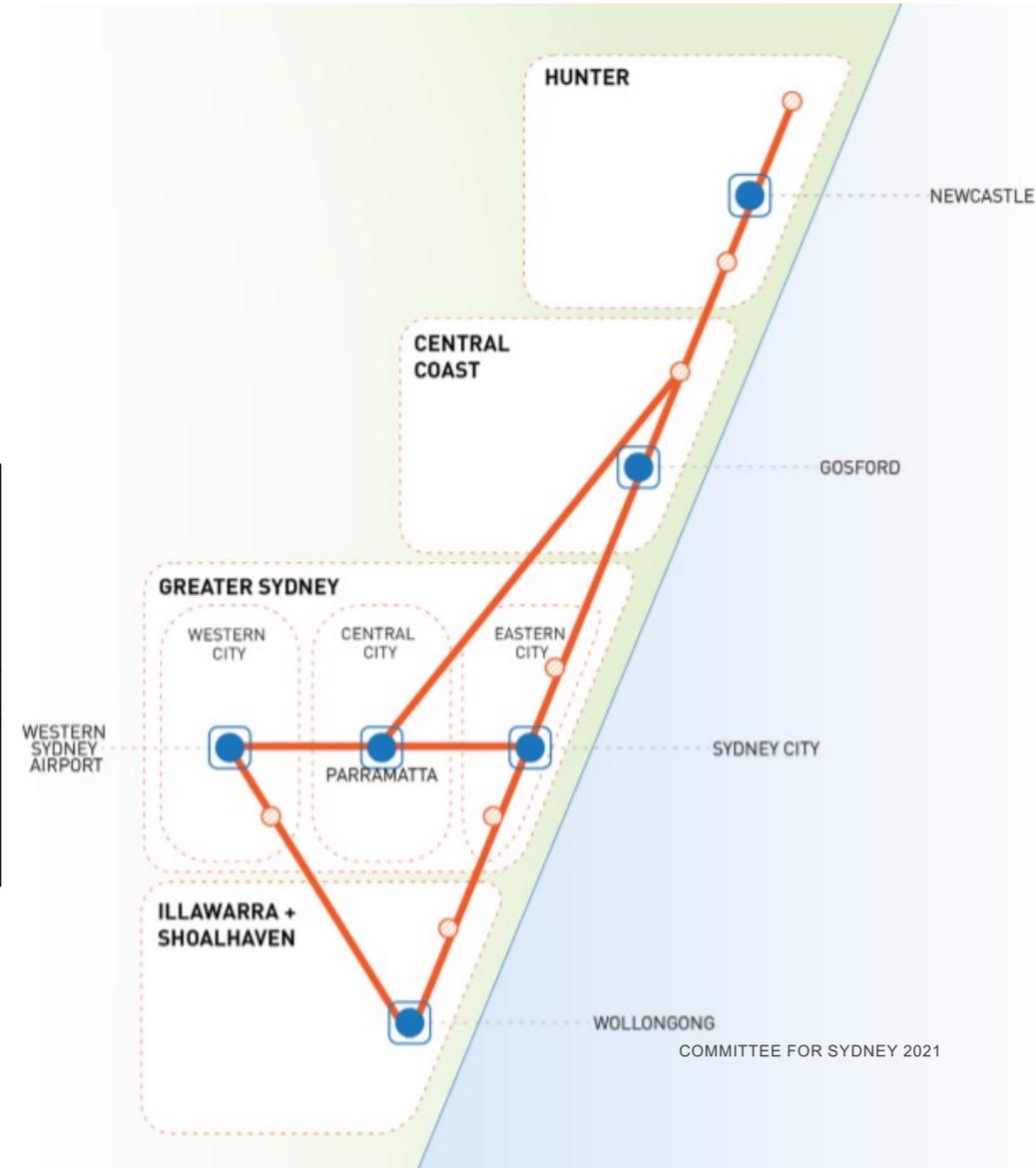
- Fast rail between Sydney and Newcastle, defined as a one-hour connection
- An inland rail link from Sydney to Canberra via Campbelltown
- Upgraded connections between Sydney and Wollongong.

The next region plan is an opportunity to think about all of this.

A conceptual map of fast rail links across the megaregion

Fast rail would halve the current travel time from Sydney to Gosford, and Wollongong to Liverpool

Source: *Committee for Sydney – Cox Architecture*



2. Channel growth into town centres

While the metaphor of three cities succeeded in directing attention to the west, it has at times been misinterpreted as a call for more residential sprawl, which will lock residents into permanent car-dependency, without the ability to access jobs or amenities locally.

We believe the historic town centres across Sydney, referred to in the plan as Metropolitan and Strategic Centres, provide a logical place to focus growth — places like Liverpool, Campbelltown, Blacktown, Penrith, Bankstown, Kogarah – and, of course, Parramatta, which has truly emerged as the ‘second CBD.’

These older, already established cities tend to have urban street grids with small blocks and frequent intersections, as well as existing public transport connections and key assets such as health services. They have the potential to be built up into more significant centres over time while maintaining their core characteristics and liveability. Moreover, these areas could form the template for future centres.

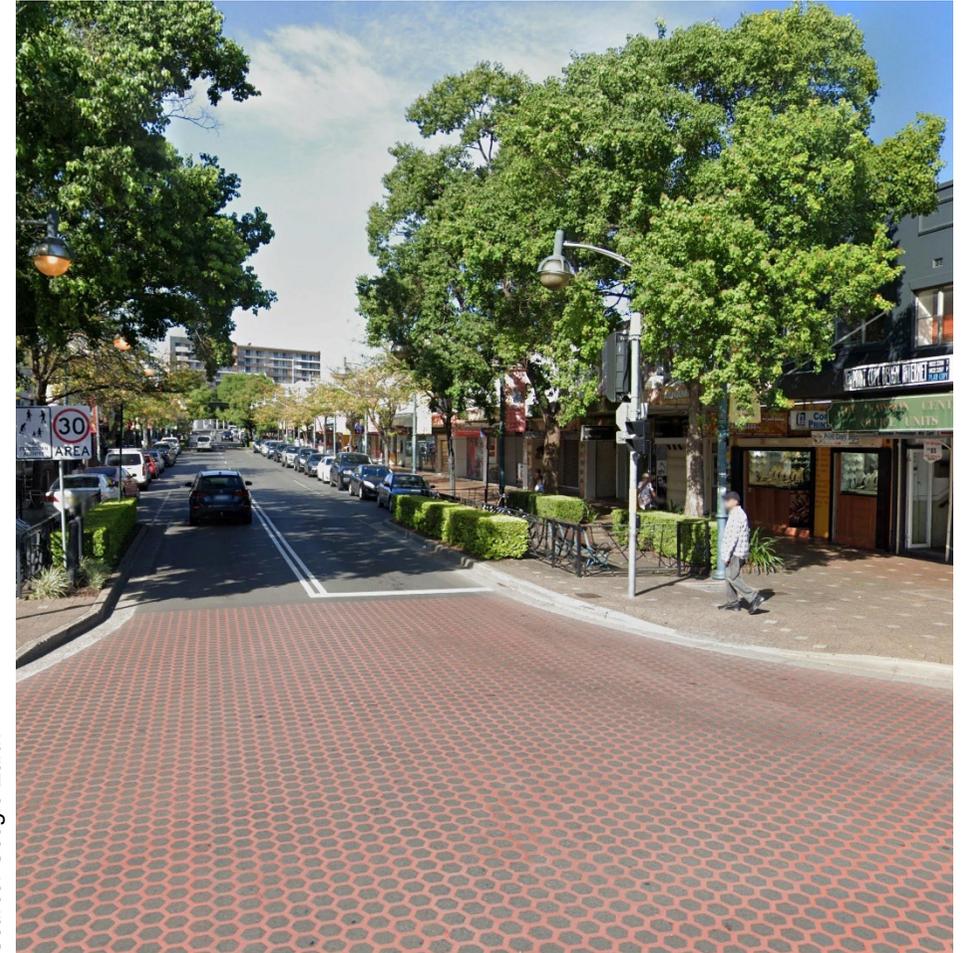
In this context, Bradfield would not be ‘The CBD’ of the Western City, but rather a major centre among other major centres. By the same token, Macquarie Park, Randwick and Botany Bay are important centres in the east.

The long-standing logic of Sydney’s metropolitan form is to have major nodes of density that are linked by rail transport. Sydney’s future growth can and should build on this tradition, with both infill and greenfield versions that extend the model to new locations.

As we think about the broader megaregion, this concept applies equally strongly. The existing city centres should be reinforced.

Macquarie Street, Liverpool CBD

Walkable urban street design in the Western Sydney suburb of Liverpool



Source: Google Earth

3. Set a goal for growth within walking distance of rail stations

In a sustainable transport system, local trips will be made largely on foot and bicycle. But when people need to leave their neighbourhood, the goal should be for grade-separated rail lines to be the default, primary mode of choice.

The land use element of this is essential: if growth is focused around rail stations, then over time more and more people will have the ability to make longer trips on a high-quality public transport service.

A goal in the GSC's region plan, for how much of future population growth should be accommodated within 2km of a train station, will drive policy through state rezonings, LSPs, and the rest of the planning process.

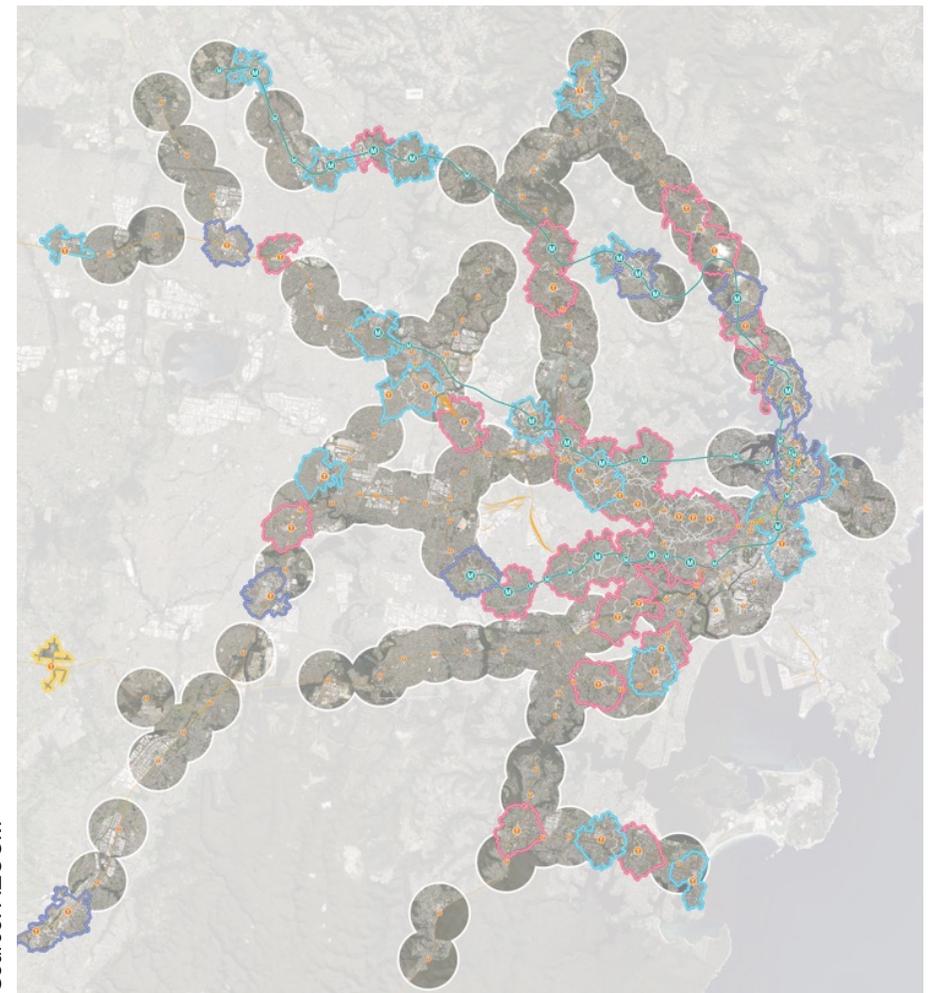
Making this a core – perhaps the leading – focus for growth management will help drive infrastructure planning and public realm decisions to support it, to ensure that neighbourhoods surrounding rail stations are walkable, high-amenity locations that support a full range of activities. Moreover, focusing growth in this way creates a virtuous cycle of increasing patronage, which in turn will support the business case for further investment and enhancement in our public transport system.

A significant proportion of Sydney's population growth over the next 20 years could be accommodated in these locations – a number that will go up over time as more Metro and light rail lines are delivered. A similar calculation could be made for the proportion of jobs that can be accommodated near rail stations.

One of the big answers to Sydney's growth challenges is sitting right in front of us, and it is to make greater use of the rail network.

Map of pedestrian catchment zones around Sydney rail stations

From the Committee for Sydney's upcoming report Rethinking Station Precincts



Source: AECOM

4. Provide stronger standards for greenfield development

New greenfield development will continue to be built in Western Sydney and other places, but the current settings are not delivering a high enough quality in terms of walkability and amenity.

A look at Bringelly Road is instructive: the area is not being built to be walkable in the future.

We wonder if there is a role for the GSC to establish stronger goals, guidelines and metrics – either directly or by calling on the relevant agency to enact them:

- Minimum densities
- A revision to the street design guidelines to generate walkable neighbourhoods
- Guidance on subdivision patterns
- Minimum tree canopy coverage
- Minimum public transport service and access levels.

The Region Plan could provide an overarching framework, which could be implemented through a dedicated greenfields section in the Urban Design Guidelines, currently being prepared by the Government Architects office.

The GSC can also consider the functional connection of greenfield developments to existing Metropolitan Centres – making sure there is a way for people to access the services, jobs, and amenities of the larger centres.

Unwalkable, car-dependent sprawl along Bringelly Road
Greenfield development in Sydney



Source: Google Earth

5. Address the problem of land supply in a more sophisticated way

The debate over affordability continues as always: is it a matter of insufficient supply, or is it 'financialisation' driving demand and therefore the price of housing (things like tax settings, RBA interest rates, etc)?¹

We believe the answer is both.

Financialisation helps explain why housing in Australia is expensive, but it is less able to explain why housing in Sydney is more expensive than Melbourne.

In addition, the levers to deal with financialisation of housing are largely controlled by Commonwealth Government. The levers involved with supply are the ones the GSC, along with agencies like DPIE, can more easily influence.

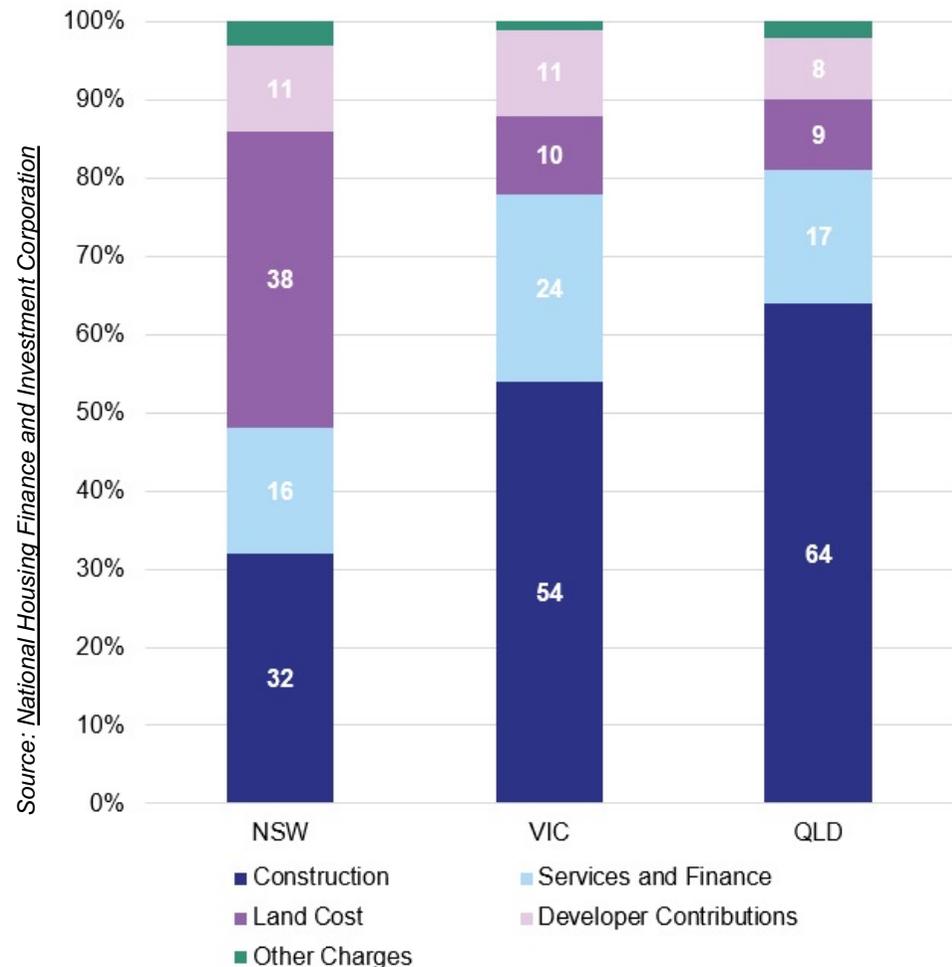
It is instructive to note the difference in land prices. The National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation finds land costs make up 38% of the greenfield development cost stack in NSW but only 10% in Victoria. This is the "smoking gun" – the part of overall housing costs that planning policy can address.

It should be an overarching goal of the planning system in NSW to reduce that land component of housing delivery in Sydney.

Fundamentally, that means creating an over-supply of developable land – both in greenfield locations and in existing urbanised areas. This is what allows developers to 'go shopping' for sites and acquire development opportunities at a lower land cost.

1. Another term could be "assetisation" in which housing is viewed as an asset to generate capital gains rather than a secure place to live.

Land cost in NSW is significantly higher than Victoria and Queensland
Greenfield Development Cost Stack



Other countries, most notably the Netherlands, have the ability to regulate the sale prices of undeveloped land directly, which we do not see as an option in Australia.

High land costs for development are a sign of planning system failure.

Note that what matters here, from the perspective of land prices, is the overall amount of 'permission to build' relative to the demand — in places that actually have the infrastructure to enable housing to be built. Parcels that are zoned for residential development but are missing sewer connections or roads don't count as realisable.

The supply of permission to build can come in the form of high density as well as low density formats. The point is to drive down the land component of each unit delivered.

To improve the planning system's capacity to solve this problem, we suggest the GSC creates a policy framework to help us all understand when there is 'enough' realisable zoned capacity.

If the goal is to make land for residential development more affordable, there needs to be perhaps 10 years of realisable zoned capacity in place at any given time. A monitoring system that looks at traded land prices can help alert everyone as to when the realisable zoned capacity has fallen behind.

We understand that the former UDP — Urban Development Program, within the former NSW Department of Planning — once performed this role; however, it appears to have been discontinued around 2005.

Today, the Metropolitan Development Program provides useful supply data, but it does not include overall planning capacity targets that should be maintained to keep vitality in land markets.

The GSC is in a position to think about both the best places for the growth to occur and the sequencing of the infrastructure, which in some cases is the real barrier. The GSC may also be in a position to help convene the necessary players to simplify the overall planning system to facilitate housing.

6. Adopt a target for social and affordable housing

This year's [NSW Housing Strategy](#) was a plan without numbers. Perhaps the GSC's region plan can rectify this partially.

Fixing the housing market is essential for the middle class. But there will remain many people who will not be able to afford housing in the market.

We suggest that a target for social and affordable housing is important for Sydney to make progress on the urgent problem of affordability – the strategy that sits alongside an effort to deal with supply and demand issues.

Right now, about 4% of Sydney's housing stock is social and affordable – even since 2016 it has declined significantly.

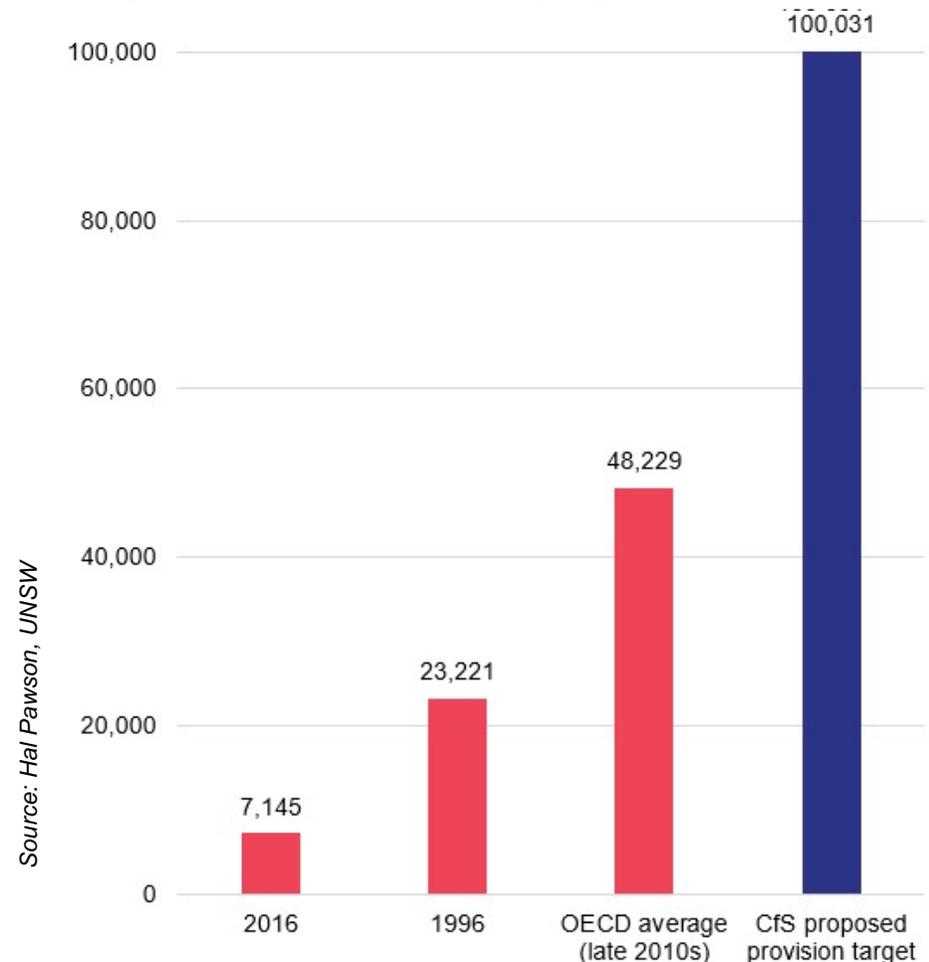
We propose a goal of increasing that number to 10%. To illustrate what this would involve, the graph on the right shows the number of additional social and affordable dwellings that would be needed to reach our target today (10%). Even regaining the proportion of all housing recorded in the 2016 census would mean adding 7,145 dwellings. Similarly, Sydney is 48,229 social housing units short of the number needed to achieve the OECD average (7.1% of all housing).

The GSC already has a goal of 5-10% of new development being social or affordable.

We are advocating for something different – a goal for how much of the overall housing stock should be social or affordable, along with a high-level strategy to get there.

Greater Sydney shortfall of social and affordable dwellings

Calculations based on ABS census data show the shortfall of social/affordable dwellings in Sydney compared to the OECD average and the Committee for Sydney target.



Source: Hal Pawson, UNSW

7. Place climate change at the centre of land use and transport strategy

Climate politics have finally shifted: people want action now. We suggest the GSC's next region plan is a critical way to connect the global imperative of climate action to decisions about land use and transport here in Sydney.

On the mitigation side, Sydney needs a mode shift in mobility from private vehicles to walking, cycling and public transport — even if we make the switch to electric cars and other vehicles.

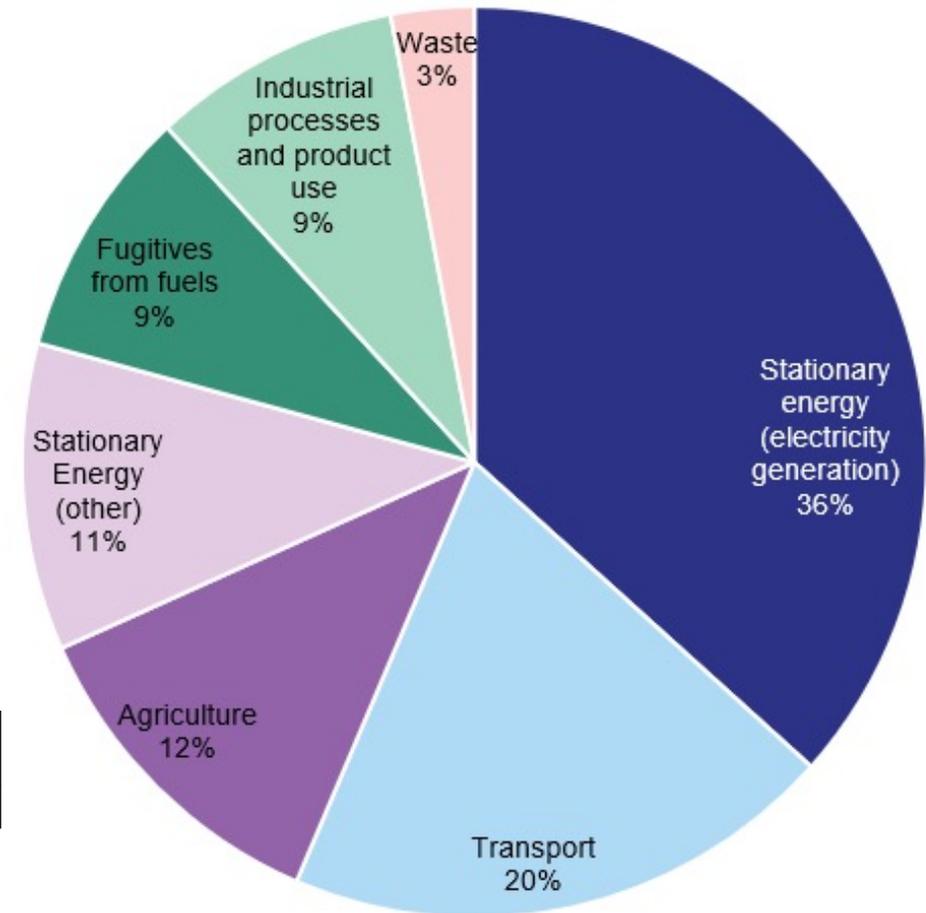
A mode share target, which would sit across the long-range plans of the GSC, Transport for NSW and Infrastructure NSW would help align policies and investments.

A series of land use and transport strategies then flow from an objective of decarbonisation, including how we plan and deliver the energy infrastructure to enable our net zero goals.

On the adaptation side, extreme heat, fires, floods, storms and sea level rise are already affecting communities. We suggest the next region plan should take up the challenge of adaptation in a stronger way by:

- Identifying areas that should not be developed due to current and future climate risks, and recognising the potential for managed retreat from high-risk coastal and floodplain zones
- Providing a framework for making decisions about infrastructure investments that recognises current and future climate risk, and building and maintaining robust assets to create a reliable infrastructure network
- Identifying opportunities to take a place-based approach to future proofing Sydney from climate induced disruption.

Electricity generation and transport are the biggest emitters
Percentage of total greenhouse gas emissions in NSW by sector



Source: AdaptNSW

8. Present a transport vision at a high level

While the transport vision and plan lives in Transport for NSW, we think the highest-level strategy should also live in the GSC's region plan, in order to help mobilise a whole of government effort.

Our vision works at two primary levels:

1. At the neighbourhood scale, Sydney provides high levels of amenity and walkability focused on town centres and high streets. Here, the emphasis is on walking and cycling
2. At the metropolitan scale, Sydney provides a core network of grade-separated rail lines that serve as the best, default way to cover longer distances.

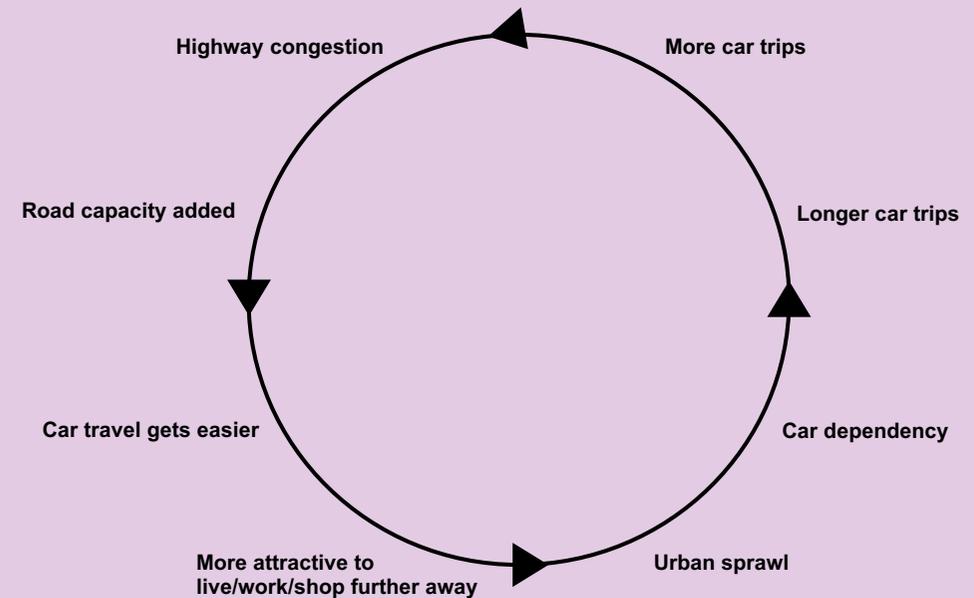
Cars will continue to be accommodated in large numbers, but in a manner that does not disrupt those two primary objectives. A mode share target should be established to ensure appropriate planning is undertaken for a shift towards public and active transport over time.

We would like to see the GSC take a bigger role in calling for transport changes that support liveability:

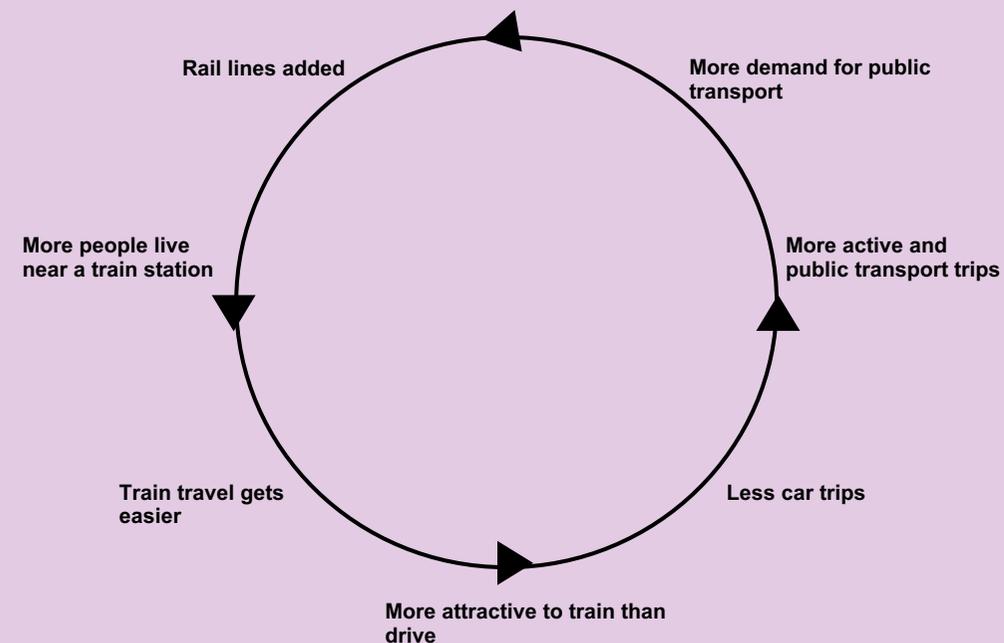
- Reclaiming and reviving high streets from traffic
- Adopting a more visionary motorway logic, which allows Sydney to reclaim surface streets for public life whenever a new motorway is built
- Changing street design standards to support walkability.

In short, we think there is scope for the GSC to explain what it needs from the transport system to achieve overall goals for liveability, sustainability and economic performance.

Vicious cycle of highway investment



Virtuous cycle of rail investment



9. Further develop the Parkland City idea

The Parkland City is a compelling vision for Western Sydney, and one of the most enduring ideas from MO3C. We would like to see the GSC develop the idea further in the next region plan.

What will it really take to make this vision a reality? What has gone wrong such that in the time since this idea was first proposed, new development in Western Sydney has not really lived up to this concept?

Part of this involves the rules and guidelines on new development – as per Recommendation 3, earlier in the paper. What do the subdivision patterns, street sections and density minimums need to be?

Another part involves landscape-scale planning for open space to preserve water in the landscape. Creeks and tributaries are essential for cooling and for recreation, not simply stormwater management assets. Where exactly does land need to be preserved from development, and when will it be acquired?

How can the Parkland City capitalise on the amenity of some of the existing centres like the river cities of Penrith and Liverpool, and the diversity of the strategic centres of Blacktown and Campbelltown?

And finally, part of it is a proactive program to invest in the waterways, open spaces, tree canopies that the vision of the Parkland City calls for.

Everyone was inspired by the idea of the Parkland City. The Draft Western Parkland City Blueprint will be a huge step in the technical and programmatic implementation of the idea and an input to the next GSC metro plan. We hope the GSC continues to move the vision of the Parkland City toward realisation.



10. Do more to bring quality jobs to the west

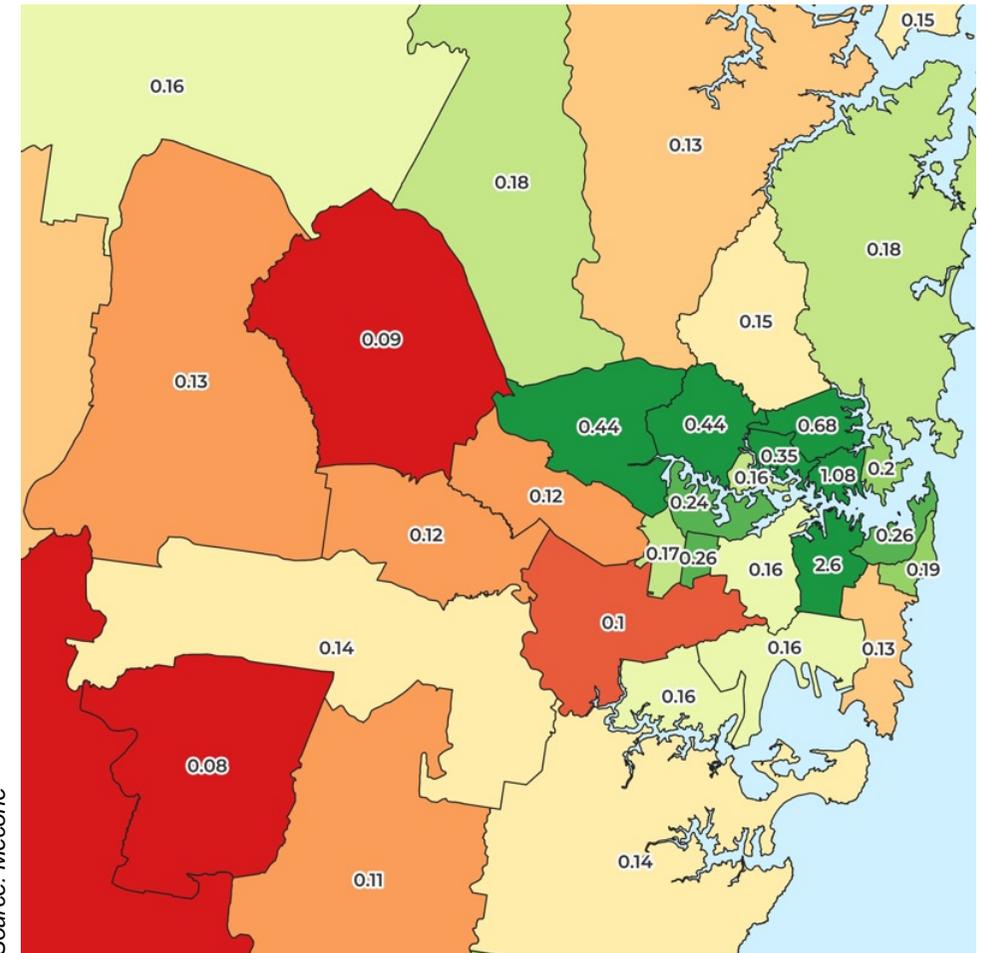
The social justice imperative of bringing high quality jobs to Western Sydney was a big part of MO3C, but thus far jobs have lagged behind population growth, especially jobs beyond those that merely follow population.

Is the current set of strategies sufficient, just requiring more time to implement, or is something else needed?

We don't know the answer but would love to see the GSC's view on this – and if nothing else we hope to keep this idea in the region plan as a major priority.

Knowledge jobs and workers are concentrated in Sydney's East

The workforce to jobs ratio for knowledge intensive jobs in Sydney



Source: Mecone



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