



NCOSS Response to the NSW State Plan - A New Direction for NSW

In launching the State Plan – A New Direction for NSW, the Premier, Morris Iemma, has signalled a new way of working for the NSW Government. The Plan sets out 14 long term social, economic and environmental goals for the State, highlights 34 priority areas for action and sets out 60 measurable targets against which progress can be judged.

The Plan is for ten years, longer than two terms of government, in itself a major shift away from the short term policy focus that has traditionally hampered a big picture approach to funding and delivering services. It is also a plan that has engaged in public consultation, short though the period of consultation was at just five weeks, and has promised regular public review every 2-3 years.

NCOSS has consistently called on the Government to adopt a measurable approach to its own performance across key portfolio areas and welcomes this long term commitment to both adopting a targeted approach and to making the process a public and transparent one.

A new Cabinet Committee is to be established to drive both the delivery of the Plan and performance against it. Two external appointments have also been made as advisers to this Committee. They are Dr John Stuckey, an economist and management consultant, and Professor Brian McCaughan, a thoracic surgeon who has been involved in the reform of the health system over the past four years. NCOSS had argued for involvement of the Social Justice Reference Group in the monitoring of the Plan but this had not been accepted.

The public will be able to access a State Plan website which will be regularly updated with data and other information about progress against the State Plan. Responsibility for each of the priorities has been allocated to a lead Minister and targets will be written into performance agreements for CEOs of government departments.

What's in the Plan?

The final plan is divided into five themes: Rights, Respect and Responsibility; Delivering Better Services; Fairness and Opportunity; Growing Prosperity across NSW and Environment for Living.

1. ***Rights, respect and responsibility***

NCOSS welcomes the addition of rights to the first theme and the inclusion of a new priority around ***reducing re-offending*** (the target here seems very low at 10%). Other priorities focus on reduced rates of crime, particularly violent crime (10% reduction) property crime (15% reduction), reduced levels of anti-social behaviour and increased participation and integration in community activities. This last priority sits rather uncomfortably with the first three.

It is disappointing that the call many, including NCOSS, have made for the development of a ***Charter of Rights for NSW*** has not been included. The focus is still very much on Law and Order rather than creating safe, vibrant and harmonious communities. NCOSS had argued for the inclusion of community development and intergenerational programs and priority to be given to building social cohesion and community resilience. We had also called for an anti-racism strategy.

New directions:

Although there are no targets around ***domestic and family violence***, it has been flagged under new directions as a priority with the development of a State-wide strategy to deal with the causes and consequences of domestic violence. This is an area to watch.

This theme also flags a new focus on promoting ***volunteering*** but it is unclear what this may entail. It is linked to the priority of increased participation, particularly for Aboriginal people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and to the appointment of a Minister with responsibility for increasing volunteering.

2. **Delivering better services**

This section concentrates on services that are the core business of government – health, education, transport and on “customer friendly services”.

Health

Overall the state plan, in regards to health services and health outcomes, has failed to mention addressing the social determinant of health and has missed a significant opportunity to take a whole of government approach to setting some realistic targets around reducing health inequity. The focus for achieving national benchmarks in health services is on acute and treatment services rather than on prevention and health equity outcomes. Although health outcomes for Aboriginal communities and difficulties in accessing health services for rural communities is recognised, both are within a limited context with no real targets set for a reduction in the health disparities.

The plan has failed to mention oral health services as a key area that the government must address within the next ten years. Access to affordable and high quality dental services is currently unavailable to a large number of people living in NSW with those living in rural and remote communities, Aboriginal communities, and people from low-socio economic background significantly missing out.

There is no mention of the health needs of people from diverse backgrounds and in particular people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds (including refugees). One significant gap is the need for the increased provision of interpreter and translation services for people with disabilities as well as people from CALD backgrounds.

Healthy Communities

Priority S1: Improved Access to Quality Health Care

NCOSS recognises the need for a quality hospital system however would argue there is more to quality health care than the hospital based system. Improved access to appropriate preventative, community health services that reduce the need for acute health care would better link in with the governments stated philosophy of early intervention.

NCOSS is pleased to see that the plan aims to increase the access to health services in rural communities with the implementation of the Better Rural Health Plan. One critical health service not mentioned for rural communities however are oral health services.

New directions

A single referral telephone point for the health system across NSW is a major undertaking by the state government with NCOSS concerned about its effectiveness and usefulness to the people in NSW.

Priority S2: Improve survival rates and quality of life for people with potentially fatal or chronic illness through improvements in health care

This section again fails to mention the social determinants of health and those population groups who are most likely to suffer from chronic conditions e.g. Aboriginal population. Targets could have included reducing potentially avoidable deaths in those population groups with the highest rates rather than across the community generally.

Responding to problems quickly

This strategy provides no real detail on how the health services will expand and how follow up support will be provided and by whom.

It is important to see that rural communities are specifically mentioned as requiring additional services including not just health services for this area but also transport initiatives to ensure access to health services. Transport for Health is one of those initiatives that could be taken up.

Priority S3: Improved health through reduced obesity, smoking, illicit drug use and risk drinking

Again this strategy does not consider those population groups who are most likely to smoke, risk drink etc and consider setting targets to reduce the rates in those population groups addressing

those with the highest needs e.g. people with a mental illness have one of the highest smoking rates in NSW.

Education

Education priorities are focused on students fulfilling their potential. There are two priorities:

Priority S4. Increasing levels of attainment for all students.

This section makes much of existing NSW achievements but sets some targets around improved performance for lower-performing students in literacy and numeracy, and for meeting or exceeding the national proficiency benchmarks.

While the new directions flagged here are important – helping kids start school well, better partnerships with parents and performance improvement for schools – they are light on detail. The plan to provide “curriculum support materials to prepare children for learning” completely misses the point of preschool services, which already operate on a well-regarded play-based curriculum framework. The issue here is about access to services; their affordability; and ensuring that there is enough highly qualified university trained specialist early childhood teachers to run the programs.

Priority S5. More students complete year 12 or recognised vocational training.

The aim here is to increase the proportion of students completing year 12 or recognised vocational training from 82.7% to 90%, a clear and measurable target.

Under new directions, there is some discussion about tailoring educational pathways and increasing the school leaving age to 16 or the end of Year 10. Again this is vague and the implications for resources are not addressed. There is no mention here, for example, of strategies or programs to encourage early school leavers to return to education and/or training; of transition to high school programs or a focus on middle schooling.

Skills development and lifelong learning, with their implications for *TAFE*, are dealt with under the theme of Growing Prosperity across NSW

Transport

The aim in the plan is that “excellent roads and quality public transport complement each other to create an effective transport system.”

The issues of the frequency and capacity of services were consistently raised during consultations, as were cost, the need for equitable and accessible transport in rural areas; the important role of community transport and the importance of Countrylink services.

It is disappointing to note that issues of affordability and transport disadvantage in regional and rural areas are largely ignored. While there are repeated references in the plan to public transport in the regions, there are no details provided on how these are to be achieved and no indication of additional resources to do so. The focus is Sydney-centric.

NCOSS suggested in its response to the Plan that affordability needs to be addressed, especially in relation to the working poor. While the Plan does talk about increasing the number of people who live within 30 minutes of a city or major centre by public transport in metropolitan Sydney, and this is a positive target, it could have addressed affordability issues for those, especially the working poor, who are currently not and may never be in that position. NCOSS had proposed as a target “That working people pay no more than 20% of their net income on transport (10% for people on fixed incomes or low paid employment)”. This policy proposal has since been reframed as the SmartMove integrated ticket as discussed in our election platform, *A Fairer NSW*. Smart Move extends this idea to regional areas as well as metropolitan Sydney.

However, NCOSS does welcome the more explicit targets to increase proportion of trips made by public transport to the CBD and across the metropolitan area.

We also welcome release of sub-regional figures on the proportion of the population that has access to a major centre by public transport within 30 minutes, which is a key target of the Metropolitan Strategy. As expected the areas where there is greatest room for improvement are the North West, South West and North East sub-regions. It must be a priority to bring these sub-regions up to the metropolitan average.

The promised Urban Transport Statement needs to include specific measures to reduce transport disadvantage.

Customer friendly services

This section sets up mechanisms to measure, report and improve customer satisfaction with government services and represents a promise rather than a set of targets. New directions indicate the development of guarantees of service, performance measures around customer satisfaction for CEOs, partnerships with the NSW Ombudsman, the Audit Office and Standards Australia, and the establishment of benchmarks for public and private partners.

3. Fairness and Opportunity

This theme is a welcome addition to the draft proposal and heeds the call by NCOSS and others for a focus on social justice and disadvantage in the State Plan.

In our proposal for ‘A Fairer Society’ section in the State Plan, NCOSS called for strategies to:

- Promote strong and sustainable communities through community development and long term investment;
- Improve the living standards of Aboriginal communities in NSW;
- Overcome locational disadvantage;
- Improve the concessions system to help the working poor;
- improve transitioning from acute services across human services;
- Tackle homelessness;
- Improve recognition and support for Carers; and
- Better protect children and young people from abuse and neglect.

The Government has included the following priorities in the Fairness and Opportunity section of the State Plan:

- Strengthening Aboriginal communities through improved health and educational outcomes for Aboriginal people
- Opportunity and support for the most vulnerable through increased employment and community participation for people with disabilities and improved outcomes in mental health
- Early intervention to tackle disadvantage through embedding prevention and early intervention into Government services, reduced avoidable hospital admissions, increased proportion of children with skills for life and learning at school entry, and reduced rates of child abuse and neglect.

The new and welcome elements here include the focus on Aboriginal communities and the enhanced support for carers, both of which were lacking in the draft.

However, there are still no strategies for:

- Promoting strong and sustainable communities through community development and long term investment;
- Overcoming locational disadvantage; and
- Improving the concessions system to help the working poor.

There seems no recognition of the relatively growing phenomenon of working poor households which an improved concession system should target.

Priority F1: Improved health and education for Aboriginal people

There are two targets identified here, both of which indicate the ongoing difficulty governments have in effectively addressing inequitable outcomes for Aboriginal people. The first target is to “Close the gap between Aboriginal and all students in primary school numeracy and literacy rates by 2016.” This is actually a step back from the commitment made by a previous Minister for Education and Aboriginal Affairs, Andrew Refshauge, to target equal outcomes for Aboriginal students in ten years.

NCOSS welcomes the recognition within the Plan of the significant disadvantage faced by Aboriginal Communities. NCOSS however would argue that bringing Aboriginal Health outcomes in line with health outcomes for the general community is a priority for NSW. The most significant health outcome would be closing the gap between the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Non Aboriginal people (with Aboriginal people’s life expectancy being 17 years lower than other members of the community).

Links are made here to the existing *Two Ways Together* plan which contains further targets and strategies for improving outcomes and well being for Aboriginal people and communities.

Priority F2: Increased employment and community participation for people with disabilities

NCOSS particularly supports the renaming of the section referring to people with disabilities. Support and opportunity must remain the key for more equitable participation of people with disabilities in all facets of life in NSW.

NCOSS welcomes the reiterated commitment to people with disabilities in NSW. The Stronger Together Disability Plan is a ten year Plan containing five years of identified targets and spending measures. NCOSS is concerned that the State Plan identifies no new future directions over its ten years of implementation. NCOSS urges the NSW government to announce a commitment, after appropriate consultation, to new targets and measures for the second five years of the Stronger Together plan.

NCOSS also welcomes the new focus and targets for increasing the employment opportunities for people with disabilities and renewed commitment to improved community participation for people with high support needs.

NCOSS is concerned, however, that there was no mention of improved access for people with disabilities to vocational and other training and qualifications. If the government expects to realise its target of 'closing "the gap in the unemployment rate between people with a disability and the overall community by 50 % by 2016' (Priority F2), then improved access to vocational training is essential.

Priority F3: Improved outcomes in mental health

The plan recognises the linkages required to address the needs of people with a mental illness, and for a range of services including housing and social support to be integrated and delivered

Reducing readmission into acute mental health facilities is important however it must be placed within a context of aiming to reduce unnecessary or preventable readmissions through the provision of preventative and early intervention community mental health services. Reducing readmission on its own can have potentially negative impacts if people cannot access services when and where they need them.

Assisting people with a mental illness to participate in the workforce is a positive step. However NCOSS would be concerned if this target (in partnership with the Commonwealth) results in people with a mental illness, and in receipt of a Centrelink payment, being disadvantaged in any way. Specifically, NCOSS would be concerned if people were 'compelled ' to undertake work or face a reduction in Centrelink payment.

Priority F4: Embedding prevention and early intervention into Government services

The policy framework for early intervention is yet to be developed with targets as far away as 2008/09. While NCOSS supports prevention and early intervention in principle and believes a shift in resources to support programs across a range of portfolios may be beneficial, we have serious concerns about some existing initiatives included in this section, such as Reshaping Public Housing.

This has the potential to entrench and concentrate disadvantage further rather than act as mechanism for improving outcomes and we would not regard it as an example of either prevention or early intervention.

Priority F5: Reduced avoidable hospital admissions

Reducing hospital admissions over by 15% over five years is the measurable target here. Hopefully this signals a commitment to improved resources for community health services and is linked to early intervention principles.

New directions here include health care in the home for older people and people with a chronic illness.

Enhanced support for carers is flagged but is vague on detail.

Similarly vague is the commitment to “investigate options” to increase the availability of midwifery services, especially in rural areas.

Priority F6: Increased proportion of children with skills for life and learning at school entry

The Government has linked this priority to the COAG process which is currently developing a set of national measures and targets. The focus is on existing programs – Families First, ante-natal and post-natal health services, additional preschool funding etc. However, the COAG focus is predominantly on human capital and workforce development so it will be necessary to ensure that what is developed here focuses on the benefits to children as much as on the economic benefits to society.

Much of the new directions section is about programs and resources that are already available or in the process of being developed, so it would seem that there will be little more forthcoming in this area.

Priority F7: Reduced rates of child abuse and neglect

The target here to reduce the underlying rate of child abuse and neglect in NSW over the course of the Plan is a brave but necessary one given the rapid rise in numbers of reports over the past 2-3 years. The underlying rate refers to the level of “referred reports” and it will be a very real test of the Department of Community Services Early Intervention program. NCOSS welcomes this commitment.

4. Growing Prosperity across NSW

The main concern for NCOSS in this section is to ensure that prosperity is inclusive – prosperity for all. This is acknowledged in the introduction to this section.

In terms of the priorities, NCOSS has a particular interest in Priority P4: More people participating in education and training throughout their life. The target here is to “Increase the proportion of the population aged 16-64 participating in vocational education and training from 11.7 per cent in 2005 to 16 per cent by 2016.”

This links also to Priority P7: Better access to training in rural and regional NSW to support local economies.

NCOSS has been consistently advised in rural and regional consultations about the major need to improve training opportunities, aligned to local business/industry needs. This is a key strategy for retaining young people in these communities.

In order to achieve these ends, there needs to be a serious investment in TAFE NSW which, though highly regarded, often struggles to deliver due to under resourcing, the casualisation of its staff and increasing student fees. TAFE is an essential component of the infrastructure of rural and regional communities and its capacity must be maintained and enhanced.

NCOSS would also suggest that as well as having regional coordination management groups to help set business targets, prosperity would also be enhanced and well being improved, by similar structures to develop and monitor regional strategies for the delivery of services, including non-government organisations.

5. Environment for Living

NCOSS called for the State Plan to include a strategy to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the protection of our environment. This has not been included in the State Plan.

NCOSS welcomes the clear target of 15% renewable energy by 2020. However, NCOSS remains concerned that energy remains affordable to low income earners.

We also welcome Priority E5: Jobs closer to home which is a key theme of the Metropolitan Strategy.

The biggest disappointment for NCOSS in the State Plan is the burying of affordable housing and homelessness under this theme, and the lack of action and priority afforded to them.

Priority E6: Housing Affordability

There is no reference to the Premier's long promised statement on housing affordability and no plan to expand the provision of social housing (although extra public housing is promised for the North Coast).

Targets have a narrow focus on land supply and expansion of overall housing stock and there are no affordability targets.

There is still no clarification of the role of the planning system in generating additional affordable housing

While there is a vague reference to a significantly expanded role for community housing (p. 129) there are still no details of the specific means by which the strategy for community housing growth and sustainability is to be achieved.

Welcome implication that community housing in future will not have to be as tightly targeted as public housing has become.

Homelessness

Despite comments by the Deputy Premier saying that our views had been heard, and the Premier's Anti-Poverty week statements about housing and social inclusion, there are no new commitments around homelessness.

The joint NCOSS/SAAP peaks demand for an integrated NSW Homelessness Strategy, led by the Premier, has fallen on deaf ears and the 27,000 homeless people in this State will see no results for them from this Plan.

There is no reference in the Plan to the Premier's undertaking that government agency CEOs will have to report on the strategies they implement to ensure that people who are homeless gain equitable access to mainstream government services.

While there are no specific references to measuring wellbeing, the final priority in the Plan, Priority E8: More people using parks, sporting and recreation facilities, and participating in the arts and cultural activity (with specific targeted participation increases) would generally be regarded as encompassing some of the measures of community wellbeing. It is a start.

Conclusion:

Overall, the State Plan, despite its shortcomings, provides the people of NSW with some clear statements of intent by the Government for which they can be held accountable. It is now up to us to ensure that appropriate resources are delivered to make the Plan work and to ensure that reporting against and monitoring of the Plan is timely and transparent. NCOSS will continue to lobby on key missing elements of the Plan, including a homelessness strategy and substantially more affordable housing.