

Sustainability by design

The Australian Green Infrastructure Council is creating a scheme to encourage innovative sustainability outcomes in the design, delivery and operation of infrastructure. By Doug Harland.



Infrastructure is a relatively small and often deemed unglamorous area of human endeavour. Yet the major structures and facilities that support our way of life can leave huge environmental footprints across large tracts of land and long spans of time.

On the other side of the coin, infrastructure can be a driver for change if properly harnessed. This includes focusing on infrastructure that lessens our dependence on fossil fuels, delivering more sustainable outcomes for society and future-proofing against adverse climatic change.

Many companies mention sustainability in their strategies and increasingly in their mission statements, but after 40 years in Australian business circles I know most are yet to define what it practically means to their organisation and how to integrate it.

Infrastructure firms are no different. While many are aware of the need for sustainability and some are incorporating aspects into projects, there are few tools to help them assess and prioritise their efforts to build in ecological and social performance from the outset.

This is a key gap in the capabilities of our built environment sector, one the Australian Green Infrastructure Council aims to close by creating the world's first sustainability rating scheme for infrastructure. Similar in concept to the Green Star scheme for buildings, it will establish sustainability performance benchmarks in the design, construction and operation of infrastructure. Unlike Green Star, it will cover both new projects and existing assets.

In conversations during the past 12 months, I have found most concur the scheme has the potential to develop a common national language for the meaningful implementation of sustainable practices in the industry. Indeed, what attracted me to take on the responsibility of CEO of AGIC in the first place was the demonstrated commitment of more than 100 industry professionals working voluntarily to bring the scheme into reality.

AGIC already has over 50 company members and is growing steadily, plus has won support from organisations as diverse as the Queensland EPA and Engineers Australia's Society for Sustainability and Environmental Engineering.

The business case is compelling. Organisations that achieve high outcomes against the proposed sustainability benchmarks will be rewarded by securing their social licence to operate and potentially streamlining approvals processes, by attracting long-term investors such as superannuation funds, and by providing a measure of comfort to insurance companies looking for resilience in a changing climate.

Waving the money wand

AGIC's key focus is on roads and rail, distribution grids, landfills, ports and airports, water infrastructure, telecommunication facilities and coastal management. We're leaving mining out at this stage.

As you can imagine, it was not easy to

GHD, have already started structuring projects and tenders in accordance with the subcategories in anticipation of the scheme's introduction.

But here's the catch – we need \$1.25 million in funding to bring the vision to reality and are currently seeking funds from both state and federal governments.

Every government department we approached has expressed support for the scheme, and officers in Infrastructure Minister Anthony Albanese's office are working to identify the funding avenue. We hope to secure the funds in this current quarter and then take 12 months to develop, peer review, pilot and roll out the tool and ratings scheme.

It's all very well to push the tool, but we also need to develop pull factors

FACT FILE	Green infrastructure indicators	
1. Project Management & Governance 1.1 Purchase & procurement 1.2 Reporting & responsibilities 1.3 Climate change vulnerability 1.4 Making decisions 1.5 Knowledge sharing & capacity building	2. Economic Performance 2.1 Value for money 2.2 Due diligence 2.3 Economic life	5. Biodiversity 5.1 Functioning ecosystems 5.2 Enhanced biodiversity
3. Using Resources 3.1 Energy use 3.2 Water 3.3 Material selection & use	4. Emissions, Pollution & Waste 4.1 Greenhouse gas management 4.2 Discharges to air, water & land 4.3 Land management 4.4 Waste management	6. People & Place 6.1 Health, wellbeing, safety 6.2 Natural & cultural heritage values 6.3 Participatory processes 6.4 Positive legacy for current & future generations 6.5 Enhanced urban & landscape design/aesthetics 6.6 Knowledge sharing, shared IP
7. Workforce 7.1 Safety, health & wellbeing 7.2 Capacity building 7.3 Increased knowledge of applied sustainability 7.4 Equity		

develop a checklist of sustainability risks, opportunities and obligations flexible enough to meet the diverse needs and practices of all these sectors. However, through a series of workshops and iterations emerged seven sustainability assessment categories (see Fact File).

Within that framework, we developed 27 subcategories and in May appointed authors to develop each subcategory. We have drawn up a robust process of peer review and project trialling to practically test and fine-tune the assessment tool.

Each category will be weighted on an overall scoring spreadsheet and contain a series of scored questions and performance criteria.

The rating scheme is proposed to be self-assessable. Some companies, such as

within industry, which is why AGIC is also embracing an education, training and advocacy role. The suite of resources will include a technical manual, a library of good practice case studies and references to assist in achieving sustainable outcomes.

What is needed more than anything is a change in culture as sustainability commitments move us into value-based decisions. Traditional business metrics and key performance indicators can be elusive in that dynamic, but the combination of resources, training and market reward AGIC is developing will be a powerful contributor to the shift.

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