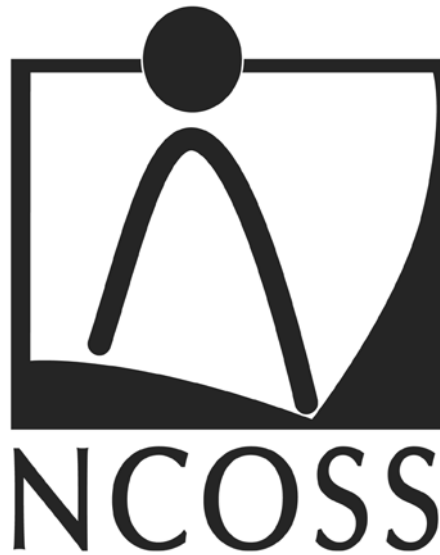


**Council of Australian Governments (COAG)  
What's Going On?**



**An NCOSS Analysis of the COAG Communiqué  
30 April 2009**

May 2009

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 What is the Council of Australian Governments?**

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) held its 21st meeting on the 26 March 2008 in Adelaide. The Prime Minister, Premiers, Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association, were joined by Commonwealth and State and Territory Treasurers. This was the first of four COAG meetings to be held in 2008.

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 Australian governments (for example, National Competition Policy, water reform, reform of Commonwealth and State/Territory roles in environmental regulation, the use of human embryos in medical research, counter-terrorism arrangements and restrictions on the availability of handguns). Issues may arise from, among other things: Ministerial Council deliberations; international treaties which affect the States and Territories; or major initiatives of one government (particularly the Australian Government) which impact on other governments or require the cooperation of other governments.<sup>1</sup>

### **1.2 Why do an analysis?**

Since the start of 2008, as a result of a change in Government, there has been an increasing amount of change being proposed across Australia. Much of this is to be driven through COAG processes. This change is happening quickly and it can be difficult to stay in touch with what is happening.

As part of its commitment to keeping the sector informed and involved NCOSS has produced this analysis of the first COAG communiqué. We have attempted to assess what the announcements really mean (progress, no progress, more meetings of "working parties", possible distractions etc) for NSW.

NCOSS intends to continually update this information as more changes occur and more information becomes available.

More information about COAG can be found at their website - <http://www.coag.gov.au/index.htm>

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<sup>1</sup> From the COAG Website, About COAG, <http://www.coag.gov.au/about.htm>, viewed 7 April 2008.

## **2. Better linking of infrastructure investment and land use planning**

COAG agreed to establish a Task Force to identify ways of better integrating government infrastructure investment in major metropolitan cities with relevant land use planning and urban development strategies.

This is a welcome if overdue move. Recent experience in Sydney highlights the difficulty in properly integrating land use planning under the Metropolitan Strategy with infrastructure investment in public transport, health facilities and community infrastructure. This reflects both shortfalls in the overall level of funding available under the State Infrastructure Strategy and the absence of an agreed long term forward plan for the expansion of public transport in Sydney.

There has been a welcome commitment by the Federal Government to contribute to extra major infrastructure projects via Infrastructure Australia and to community infrastructure via the Community Infrastructure Program and the Jobs Fund. There is still much work to be done, however, to break down the traditional siloed approach within individual Commonwealth agencies and between the Commonwealth and States.

What we need in growth areas like South West Sydney or North West Sydney, is an integrated medium term strategy that links together land use planning, new housing, and new Commonwealth and State investment in both physical and social infrastructure, and jobs and training strategies. If the COAG Task Force can move us down that path it will be a significant breakthrough.

NCOSS would note that growth and infrastructure pressures are not restricted to Sydney, and that a similar agenda needs to be considered by the COAG Task Force for other coastal growth regions.

## **3. Child Protection**

COAG endorsed a National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children "Protecting Children is Everyone's Business" 2009-2020 which aims to deliver a substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect. The Framework does not change the responsibility of State & Territory Governments for statutory child protection but seeks to deliver a more integrated response.

There are 6 supporting outcomes with accompanying strategies and indicators for change. There will be annual reporting of progress over the 12 year life of the Framework. The Framework supporting outcomes and strategies complement the NSW Government's Keep Them Safe Action Plan.

An Implementation Plan is to be developed within 3 months and signed off by the Community and Disability Services Ministerial Advisory Committee (CDSMAC) in August.

The sector has been involved in discussions in the development of the Framework and the Framework recognises the key role of the non-government sector. NGOs will be included in a tripartite Advisory Committee and in proposed working groups.

There have been no specific announcements regarding funding for the National Framework. While many of the strategies relate to existing programs with committed funding, additional resources will be required to ensure the aims of the Framework are delivered.

## **4. Energy**

COAG reaffirmed its commitment to introducing a comprehensive National Strategy for Energy Efficiency to help households and businesses reduce their energy costs. COAG signed a Memorandum of Understanding for energy efficiency, which includes a commitment to consider signing an Intergovernmental Agreement on the National Strategy, including any financial arrangements, at its next meeting. COAG agreed that the Strategy's scope would encompass all areas in the economy where substantial cost-effective energy efficiency opportunities exist - commercial buildings, residential buildings, appliances and equipment, industry and business, government, transport, skills, innovation, advice and education - and agreed in principle to developing a range of new measures in these areas. COAG will consider a final set of measures at its next meeting, following targeted consultation with stakeholders.

COAG agreed to an expanded National Renewable Energy Target (RET), which will ensure that 20 per cent of Australia's electricity is from renewable sources by 2020. The agreement includes annual targets commencing on 1 January 2010.

## **5. Education and Training**

COAG has agreed to a Compact with Young Australians and a National Youth Participation Requirement which portrays education and training both as an "entitlement" and "mandatory" for young people. Young people will be required to complete Year 10 or an approved equivalent and must be in formal schooling or approved training until they turn 17. The "entitlement" to education and training for young people aged 15 to 24 is subject to admission requirements and course availability and participation in education or registered training will be a precondition for obtaining Youth Allowance (Other) and Family Tax Benefit Part A.

The Commonwealth will provide \$100m in reward payments to the States and Territories to support these initiatives. Payments will be tied to evidence of improved Year 10 and 12 school retention rates in 2010 and 2012.

NCOSS has previously supported the move by the NSW Government to raise the school leaving age to 17. We have cautioned however, that retaining young people in school or approved training/employment needs to be meaningful. We have consistently stressed that more support for students and their parents will be required to ensure increases in the school leaving age are effective. Such support needs to start early (well before the child starts school) and continue throughout their school years. These support services need to be properly funded.

ACOSS has also pointed out that for disadvantaged and marginalised young people access to training and education is not enough in itself and needs to be backed by other support to ensure the benefits intended are achieved and ongoing. A forward work plan on the policy directions contained in the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development is to be developed and provided to COAG at its next meeting. COAG also gave in principle support for a national regulatory body to oversee registration of VET providers and accreditation of VET qualifications and courses.

## **6. Housing codes**

As part of its consideration of a wider range of energy efficiency measures, COAG agreed to an increase in the energy efficiency requirements for new dwellings to six stars or equivalent as part of the next update of the Building Code of Australia. It is not clear whether this will require further enhancements to the BASIX system in NSW, which mandates water and energy savings for all new residential buildings and for substantial alterations and additions to existing dwellings.

## **7. National Rail Safety and Regulation**

NCOSS supports the development of national rail safety and rail driver training and regulation. It is important however that this does not simply add another layer of regulation upon the already, heavily monitored and regulated rail system. The Communiqué says that that is the aspiration and the Regulation Impact Statement should be a good tool to review any suggestions for new regulation.

## **8. Rail Access**

NCOSS supports the work of the COAG Reform Council on the Rail Access project and notes the difficulties that the Council is having to get COAG to complete this reform. NCROSS supports the use of the Australian Rail Track Corporation as the body to implement the National Rail Access program. NCROSS also wishes it to be noted that the ARTC should remain as a solely Government-owned Corporation. This system ensures equity of access for all operators.

NCOSS notes that both of these reforms are delayed. NCROSS supports the *National Partnership Agreement to Deliver a Seamless National Economy* for the reasons the agreement was developed – it will create more jobs and opportunities for people working across jurisdictions

## **9. Regulatory Reform**

Regulation of the not for profit sector has been included in the Business Regulation & Competition Working Group (BRCWG) Workplan for 2009. The sector through ACROSS have raised the issue of the regulation, red tape and compliance burden on the sector as one that needs to be addressed. The sector will need to be proactive in ensuring its needs are met through this process which has been very focused on the needs of business to date.

## **10. Road Safety Council**

While achieving better road safety outcomes is a good aspiration, there are a lot of people working on Road Safety at local, state and commonwealth levels. It will be important to make sure that any new road safety body set up at a Commonwealth level does not replicate the work done at other levels or simply become a body that does road safety advertising.

Road safety can become one of those concepts with which no-one disagrees, so it is important that any new body is not set up for the sake of setting something up, It must have a rationale and mode of working that can add to the work already being done.

NCOSS promotes Commonwealth support for the existing local Road Safety programs operated through local government and linking these programs to the rest of the sustainability agenda – active living, reducing travel, using public transport.

It would be possible to use Road Safety as part of the COAG Compact With Young Australians education initiative.

It is sometimes difficult for young people to get their drivers licence - particularly if they are early school leavers and from a disadvantaged background. This limits their ability to participate in the economy by doing such things as getting an apprenticeship. NCOSS would support Commonwealth support for education programs which assist young people to get their drivers licence and to drive safely.

## **11. National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health**

State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments have made a commitment to addressing the issue of social inclusion, including responding to Indigenous disadvantage. This agreement is intended to embody that commitment. However, there are a number of other agreements, such as the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, which are complementary strategies.

There are six targets for closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Aboriginal people across urban, rural and remote areas:

- (a) to close the gap in life expectancy within a generation;
- (b) to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade;
- (c) to ensure all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years;
- (d) to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children within a decade;
- (e) to halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and
- (f) to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.
- (g) To address these issues, this Agreement is centred on five priority areas: tackling smoking, providing a healthy transition to adulthood, making Indigenous health everyone's business, delivering effective primary health care services and better coordinating the patient journey through the health system.

The strategies to do this are through:

- (a) Preventive health: to reduce the factors that contribute to chronic disease through: effective anti-smoking campaigns; and integrated alcohol, drug and mental health services.

- (b) Primary health care: to significantly expand access to and coordination of comprehensive, culturally secure primary health care, allied health services and related services.
- (c) Hospital and hospital-related care: to deliver better clinical outcomes through quality, culturally secure hospital and hospital-related services that include rehabilitation, allied health care and transition care case management.
- (d) Patient experiences: to ensure access by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to comprehensive and co-ordinated health care, provided by a culturally competent health workforce within a broader health system that is accountable for Indigenous health needs, in genuine partnership with the people and communities they target; and to build service reach and influence to re-engage the most vulnerable Indigenous people into mainstream and targeted health services.
- (e) Sustainability: to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the health workforce, reform and improve the supply of the health workforce generally including the adoption of complementary workplace reforms, create sustainable program and funding models, measure performance and ensure that services are responsive both to national targets and local community needs.

It is interesting to note that the performance benchmarks are all about programs and workers, and underlying these are the performance indicators which outline the expected improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

The full agreement can be found at  
[http://www.coag.gov.au/intergov\\_agreements/federal\\_financial\\_relations/index.cfm](http://www.coag.gov.au/intergov_agreements/federal_financial_relations/index.cfm)

**Next COAG Meeting – 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2009, in Darwin**