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Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications

Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics

Review of the National Cities Performance Framework – Final Report

September 2021



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At a glance

- The National Cities Performance Framework (NCPF) dashboard is a statistical resource designed to help measure the performance of Australian cities and inform cities policy.
- In establishing the NCPF the Government committed to review the Performance Framework every three years.
- Stakeholder feedback from this 3-year review indicated that the NCPF is not currently meeting stakeholder needs. Stakeholders were interested in various extensions to improve its usefulness, with time series data and sub city data receiving the most significant support.
- Some of the additional information requested by stakeholders is available in existing or upcoming departmental data products. The Progress in Australian Regions Yearbook is now available as an online interactive dashboard. It has a common set of indicators to compare cities and regions, as well as time series and sub-city data (requested by cities stakeholders). Other information needs raised by cities stakeholders (such as congestion metrics) are being made available through the National Freight Data Hub.
- The Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics (BITRE) has determined that that alternate departmental data and research products better meet the needs of stakeholders and that the Framework should be discontinued.
- BITRE has considered a number of factors in determining the future of the NCPF, including stakeholder feedback, resourcing requirements, the existence of alternate data products, and potential alternate uses of resources. The final update of the NCPF will occur in 2021.
- The discontinuation of the NCPF will allow BITRE to produce targeted research products focusing on issues of the highest priority to cities stakeholders. BITRE will also continue to produce the most frequently requested data from the NCPF (such as population and labour force indicators) as an input to monitoring the progress of City Deals.

Introduction

First launched in 2017, the NCPF dashboard is a statistical resource designed to help measure the performance of Australian cities and inform cities policy.¹ It presents over 50 indicators for Australia's 21 largest cities (with populations above 80 000) plus Western Sydney, and has been updated annually since 2018.

In establishing the NCPF, the Australian Government publicly committed to review it every three years (Australian Government 2017). The Government recommitted to this in 2020 in its response to the *Building Up and Moving Out* inquiry report (Australian Government 2020). This 3-year review has covered:

- The relevance of the NCPF
- The purpose and use of the NCPF
- Structure of the NCPF – particularly of the 'Liveability and Sustainability' theme
- City geographies – including city inclusion and sub-city data
- Improvement of existing indicators
- New indicators for inclusion
- The NCPF platform
- Potential extensions of the NCPF such as time series.

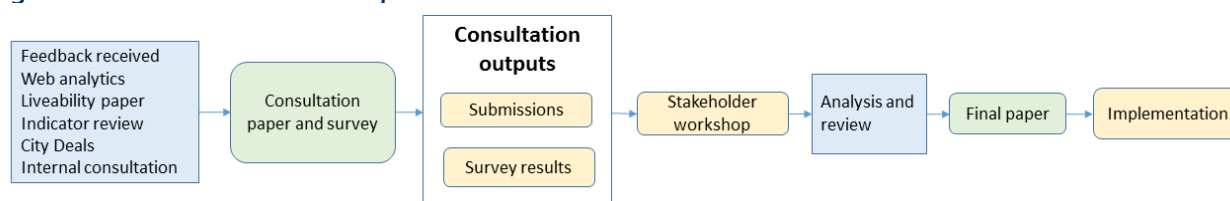
This report discusses the key feedback received from stakeholders during the consultation process. It also discusses the future of the NCPF resulting from the 3-year review process and the consideration of additional factors such as the best use of available resourcing. The report concludes with the decision that the NCPF will be discontinued from 2022 and resources will be redeployed to other projects to better meet the needs of stakeholders.

Review process

The general process for conducting the NCPF review is illustrated in Figure 1.

The Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics (BITRE) published a consultation paper on 12 January 2021 outlining the key issues under consideration in the review (BITRE 2021). The consultation paper covered a variety of issues ranging from the broad relevance and purpose of the NCPF to the usefulness of specific indicators and the delivery platform for the data.

Figure 1 Overview of review process



Stakeholders were invited to provide input to the review by either completing a survey accessible from the NCPF dashboard, or by providing a written submission. Written submissions and surveys could be submitted during the period 12 January 2021 to 12 February 2021.

¹ The NCPF dashboard is available at: <https://www.bitre.gov.au/national-cities-performance-framework>

A follow up workshop was held with targeted stakeholders on 28 May 2021. The key points of discussion at the workshop were whether the current purpose of the NCPF is appropriate and how different extensions would benefit users.

Taking into consideration the input received through this consultation process, BITRE has prepared this final report, which discusses the decisions made about the future of the NCPF and how to best meet the needs of city stakeholders in the context of limited resources.

Feedback from consultation

The consultation process yielded responses from 25 unique stakeholders including local and state governments, industry bodies and universities. Two stakeholders completed both a survey and written submission, 10 completed the survey only, and 13 completed a written submission only. The follow-up workshop was attended by 15 organisations with a variety of interests and subject matter expertise.

The consultation process and workshop provided valuable insights into how stakeholders view the current NCPF product and which features and extensions would be required to improve its usefulness.

Relevance of the NCPF

The NCPF Review Consultation paper (BITRE 2021) asked users to indicate whether they believed there is ongoing value in the NCPF.

The consultation process revealed a range of views on this question. A number of respondents indicated there was a need for a data product such as the NCPF, however there was limited support for the NCPF in its current form. Most respondents who considered the NCPF relevant also wanted to see it improved and its functionality expanded.

Feedback received

Those who saw an ongoing need for the NCPF included several regional city councils, universities and industry groups. For example:

...we see great value in promoting the importance of cities and their social, economic and environmental aspects through a cohesive and accessible dataset such as the NCPF, and we would strongly welcome its extension.

While these users saw value in the NCPF, most were also keen to see it improved and its functionality expanded. For example:

I think the benchmarking is useful, but I would like to be able to drill down further.

There is a need to understand how Cities perform (a pulse check) and the current model is a good start but needs to be more sophisticated...

...we strongly support the NCPF, which provides an essential resource to identify priorities and measure success. However, to deliver on its promise of being a tool for informing the planning and investment decisions of governments at all levels across Australia, the NCPF requires continued investment...

There were also respondents who argued for “a complete overhaul” or the design of a new data product starting from “a blank canvas”. For example:

The data underpinning the dashboard should focus on data not readily available, accessible or affordable to local government. In its current form, the dashboard presents data that many cities already have.

Whole of city dashboards - Melbourne for example - do not break down data to a degree that is useful, so we do not use it.

Although some respondents did not currently consider the NCPF useful, they did not suggest there was no role for government in the city data space. Rather, they suggested the NCPF should be able to

reveal insights that it is currently unable to do, such as information on changes over time or at a sub-city scale.

Awareness of the NCPF

The review revealed that stakeholders had different levels of awareness and engagement with the NCPF. A few survey respondents indicated they visited the dashboard reasonably often (monthly), while a larger number visited more rarely (yearly). A small number of respondents indicated they were not aware of the NCPF prior to receiving an invite to participate in the review. Overall, these responses suggest engagement with the NCPF among key external stakeholders is moderate to low.

Purpose of the NCPF

The purpose of the NCPF, as set out in the original NCPF report is to

...help governments, businesses and communities better understand and measure the performance of our cities (Australian Government 2017, p12).

The NCPF aims to fulfil this purpose by meeting the following objectives:

- helping users to understand the context for the performance of cities
- helping users measure the performance of cities
- supporting the selection, focus and evaluation of City Deals.

The dashboard currently focuses on the comparison of cities using the latest data available.

Feedback received

Users were asked whether the focus on city comparisons should remain or whether there were other more useful focuses for the dashboard. There was strong feedback that stakeholders envisage a broader purpose than was built into the original design. In particular, respondents indicated a strong preference for the ability to monitor how a city is tracking over time and the ability to understand differences between sub-regions within capital cities.

Some stakeholders went further, claiming that the dashboard was not useful in its current form without these extensions. For example:

...we would urge that time series data be presented or made available via the dashboard, as the indicators are not meaningful in the absence of trend data.

The whole-of-city data can be misleading and can be used to obfuscate significant challenges in certain parts of our capital cities.

The consultation process revealed mixed views on whether the dashboard should support the monitoring and evaluation of City Deals. Some stakeholders were opposed to the NCPF being used directly for this purpose because each City Deal has unique outcomes that are not suited to evaluation using a nationally consistent data set. However, others were supportive of the NCPF being used to support the identification of indicators and data sets that may be gathered to monitor and evaluate City Deals.

The Framework has limited applicability to the selection, focus and evaluation of the [City Deal] due to issues relating to causal linkages and boundary areas.

...the NCPF might play an important role in ensuring that selection, focus and evaluation of national city deals occur using an impartial, coherent, consistent and broad based set of indicators (although each would need to be evaluated separately).

There is also the potential for the NCPF to identify those indicators and data sets that should be gathered at a City Deal and project level to evidence and help communicate improvements in performance across all those domains underpinning the NCPF.

A theme across a number of responses was that there is an opportunity for integration between cities policy, City Deals and the NCPF. Several respondents identified a need for a statement about the government's objectives for cities that would underpin and guide the NCPF. A recurring suggestion was that there could be clearer articulation of 'cities performance' and how this was measured by the NCPF. For example:

In the absence of an overarching National Cities or Settlement policy, strategy or plan for Australia, 'cities performance' is difficult to measure ... high level objectives might be implied from the National Smart Cities Plan, but these are not yet at a level of specificity needed to measure performance.

Several stakeholders indicated a need for clearer objectives, targets or benchmark measures to guide performance measurement in the NCPF. In the absence of these, some argued that the NCPF should be recast as a descriptive data set instead. For example:

...a National Cities Performance Framework should not only measure prevailing economic, social and environmental conditions – but measure performance of cities against desired or potential outcomes.

...objectives, targets, and/or benchmark measures against these targets – remains unclear in the case of the NCPF.

...we would urge recasting the NCPF as a descriptive data set to inform strategic funding decisions, planning exercises, or program evaluations.

Other considerations

The development of a new national cities or settlement policy is outside the scope of this 3-year review of the NCPF. Similarly, it is not the role of the NCPF or BITRE to set policy targets.

City Deals are a partnership between the three levels of government and the community to work towards a shared vision for productive and liveable cities. Eight City Deals have been agreed to date (for Townsville, Launceston, Western Sydney, Darwin, Hobart, Adelaide, Geelong and Perth). Each City Deal has its own objectives, tailored to the specific needs of the city.²

The indicators chosen to monitor progress need to be tailored to the specific objectives of each City Deal, with data for local priorities often able to be sourced locally. The monitoring and 3-year review reports for City Deals currently use NCPF data where it is appropriate to the outcomes of the relevant

² For example:

- The Adelaide City Deal is focused on building an innovation economy (including through investment in the Lot Fourteen precinct) and supporting stronger population growth (DITRDC 2019a)
- The Darwin City Deal is focused on revitalising the city centre, promoting visitation, and cooling the city (DITRDC 2018).

City Deal, and will therefore generally contain a mix of NCPF data and other data sources. As a result, there is considerable variation in the extent to which different City Deals have used the NCPF indicators to monitor progress until now.

NCPF extensions

The consultation paper asked respondents for their views on the following four key extensions:

1. Including time series data
2. Presenting data for city sub-regions
3. Extending coverage to include smaller cities
4. International benchmarking for Australian cities.

Of these four extensions, the inclusion of time series data and the presentation of data at a sub-city level received the most significant support from stakeholders (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Stakeholder feedback on key extensions to the NCPF



Reflecting this external feedback, as well as feedback provided by internal stakeholders, BITRE explored the implications of adding time series data or sub-city data to the NCPF.

Time series data

The response to including time series data was overwhelmingly positive. All survey responders answered “Yes” to the question “Should the NCPF dashboard be extended to present time-series data for Australian cities?” The majority of written submissions also expressed support for including time-series data, and none expressed opposition to its inclusion.

While the review process identified strong internal and external support for the inclusion of time series data, this was not at the expense of the current city comparison view. A significant redesign of the dashboard would be required if it is to present time series data as well as the city comparison view, requiring substantial upfront investment. New data processing and quality assurance systems would also need to be set up for the time series data.

More than 20 of the 53 NCPF indicators are currently available in time series from the Progress in Australian Regions dashboard (see *Future directions for the NCPF* chapter for further detail). These are largely sourced from the five-yearly ABS census, rather than annually updated sources. There are a further 11 NCPF indicators for which historic time series data could be collated or derived by BITRE for a ten year period, with some upfront investment. Therefore, subject to sufficient resources being available, compilation of historic time series data is feasible for about two-thirds of the NCPF indicators.

Over a third of NCPF indicators are not currently available on a time series basis. This includes many of the more recently developed NCPF indicators, such as the various access indicators. Some indicators would require major investment to construct in this way, such as Proportion of jobs accessible by car within 30 minutes, Dwellings with access to public open space, Greenhouse gas emissions per capita, and Gross Regional Product.

Sub-city data

The response to presenting data for city sub-regions was also broadly positive among stakeholders, but not as overwhelming as for time series data. Three-quarters of survey respondents answered “Yes” to the question “Should the NCPF present sub-city indicators for the 5 mainland state capital cities?” Around half of the written submissions also expressed support for presenting data for city sub-regions. However, some written submissions acknowledged data quality issues that may arise with this type of data and were more neutral about its inclusion overall.

Some redesign of the dashboard would be required to present sub-city data for the five largest cities in map form, requiring an upfront investment. However, the dashboard design could be left largely as is, with a map visualisation add-on available for each of the five cities.

Only a subset of the NCPF indicators would be available for mapping at a sub-city scale (between 55 and 70 per cent, depending on the preferred sub-city geography).

Producing city sub-region data would be resource intensive over the longer term because it would involve the development of new methodologies and a significant increase in the amount of data published each year. This would require a larger amount of resources for indicator production and quality assurance. The resource implications would be greatest for the first year as new methods and systems were developed, and less in subsequent years.

Resource requirements

The time series extension would likely be more resource-intensive in the short term than sub-city data because it requires a more substantial dashboard redesign, whereas sub-city data can be treated as a simple add-on for selected cities. On the other hand, the sub-city data extension would require more resources over the longer term because of the significant increase in the amount of data published in each annual update. By contrast, annual updates with time series data would involve only updating an additional year of data in a similar way to the current update process.

Liveability and Sustainability

The consultation paper discussed the structure of the NCPF and highlighted issues relating to the Context, Liveability and Sustainability themes. The consultation process revealed broad support for most of the approaches proposed by BITRE on these issues, as well as some additional suggestions for improvement relating to Liveability and Sustainability.

Liveability and Sustainability are important priorities for cities policy and the feedback from the review on these issues is valuable for the future work of BITRE, regardless of the future of the NCPF.

Representing Liveability

BITRE has previously received a number of comments from stakeholders about the need for more Liveability indicators in the NCPF. Liveability is a word popularly used in urban policies, both in Australia and overseas, but rarely explicitly defined. Where definitions exist they are not standardised or linked to theoretical frameworks (Lowe et al 2013). Liveability is often used interchangeably with other concepts such as 'quality of life' and 'wellbeing', or even simply 'community indicators' (Oleson et al 2012). As Chiu (2019) notes, liveability is a relative concept dependent on the needs and values of those doing the measuring, and context is everything. As such, how liveability is defined needs to be driven by the cities policy and programs, which it is being measured for.

Two key indicators proposed in the consultation paper for short term inclusion were Access to social infrastructure and Walkability. Many stakeholders responded positively to these indicators and supported their inclusion. However, their availability at a sub-city scale was considered particularly important. For Access to social infrastructure, there was also a preference for separation into different categories to better assist policy makers concerned with particular issues. Some categories suggested include health, education, culture and recreation.

There was also support for other access indicators, including access to employment and access to open space. Some further indicator suggestions included disability accessibility and drinking water quality.

Visibility of Sustainability

Sustainability does not currently have its own theme in the NCPF. It is currently a sub-theme within Liveability and is not as visible as other topics.³ The feedback received universally supported the promotion of Sustainability to a theme. To separate Liveability and Sustainability, the consultation paper proposed the idea that sustainability is more about time, and is system focused (environmental or institutional), whereas liveability is more about the present and is human focused. This definition of sustainability being related to time and systems covers environmental indicators, as well as any future indicators that are not strictly environment related, and is considered suitable for BITRE's future work.

Stakeholders provided wide-ranging suggestions for new sustainability indicators. Some of the indicators most frequently mentioned were heat vulnerability, canopy cover, and green space. These indicators are closely linked and were noted to have both liveability and sustainability aspects. BITRE is investigating various measures that could be used for future work in this area. The Clean Air Urban Landscapes (CAUL) Hub has published detailed data for canopy cover for three cities – Sydney, Melbourne and Perth (Hurley et al 2020). In addition, the Greener Spaces Better Places website (Horticulture Innovation Australia 2020) has published a canopy cover measure, based on i-Tree, as part of the 2020 Vision project.

Residential energy efficiency was another indicator suggested by a number of stakeholders. This indicator is possibly the most easily accessible with data sources available such as the Nationwide

³ While the full theme title is 'Liveability and Sustainability', on the dashboard homepage this is shortened to just 'Liveability' for reasons of brevity.

House Energy Rating Scheme (NatHERS) and the Green Building Council of Australia's Green Star rating system.

A third indicator suggested by many stakeholders was vulnerability to extreme weather events, such as wind, flooding, drought, and fire. Data sources exist such as the CSIRO Climate Database and Australian Actuaries Climate Index, however, it is challenging to measure and define indicators of this type at the city scale.

The consultation paper discussed the possibility of including a waste indicator in the NCPF. This received some limited support in submissions, but was not seen as a high priority when compared with the indicators mentioned above.

Future directions for the NCPF

The Consultation Paper asked “Is there an ongoing need for the NCPF?” In making a decision on this issue, relevant factors include:

- The overarching message from the consultation process is that the NCPF is not currently meeting stakeholder needs.
- Other data products exist that already provide some of the additional information that extensions to the NCPF would provide.
- BITRE’s resources devoted to the NCPF could be used to produce alternate products that could meet the needs of stakeholders more effectively.

BITRE has considered all of these factors and determined that the production of the NCPF will be discontinued following the 2021 update. This chapter discusses BITRE’s rationale for discontinuing the NCPF by describing some alternate data sources that already provide some of the information requested by stakeholders during the review, and how the redeployment of resources from the NCPF to other projects can more effectively meet stakeholder needs.

Alternate data products

Some of the additional information requested by stakeholders through the review process is available in existing data sources. If time series data or sub-city data were to be added to the NCPF, there would be some duplication of data already available elsewhere. BITRE believes it is a more efficient use of resources to avoid this duplication.

Progress in Australian Regions dashboard

The Progress in Australian Regions dashboard (Regions dashboard) is another dashboard maintained by the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (DITRDC).⁴ Until 2020, it was a PDF product known as the Progress in Australian Regions Yearbook. The new dashboard displays various types of data for the entirety of Australia under the themes: labour force, infrastructure, housing, economic activity, the environment, demography and wellbeing. The indicators selected for inclusion in the dashboard are generally available across all Australian regions, at a variety of geographic scales.

This dashboard has some advantages over the NCPF in that it already includes time series data and sub-city data for a majority of the indicators. The time series covers a ten-year period up to the most recent data point available. Sub-city data is also available at various geographic scales such as SA4, SUA or LGA depending on the specific indicator.

The Regions dashboard does not focus on city-specific issues (such as congestion or access to public transport), instead presenting indicators with relevance for all geographic areas of Australia. However, there is still significant overlap between the indicators in each dashboard. There are currently 26 indicators reported in both the NCPF and the Regions dashboard: 11 of these are measured on the

⁴ The Progress in Australian Regions dashboard is available at: <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/bureau-communications-and-arts-research/our-work/regional-research-and-data>

same basis, while 15 are reported using slightly different methodologies. There are a further 27 NCPF indicators not reported in the Regions dashboard.

National Freight Data Hub

In May 2021, the Australian Government committed \$16.5 million over four years to establish the National Freight Data Hub. The National Freight Data Hub will make high quality and timely freight data more widely available, including freight movements within cities. The National Freight Data Hub prototype website already features indicators of when and where city road congestion occurs, which allows for analysis of its impacts.⁵

Regional Data Hub

The Regional Data Hub is part of the Australian Government's \$13.7 million *Better Data Use to Support Delivery for Regional Australians* program announced in the 2020–21 budget. It will improve the evidence base for regional communities, local leaders, industry and all levels of government by bringing together key economic, demographic and socio-economic data to provide easy access to information about their regions.

The data priorities and design of the Regional Data Hub are currently being determined following a public consultation process that ended on July 2, 2021.

Analysis of city-specific issues

The discontinuation of the NCPF will allow BITRE to undertake targeted research products that focus on city-specific issues of the highest priority to cities stakeholders. This work will be able to offset the loss of important city-focused indicators not in scope for the Regions dashboard, such as Dwellings with access to public open space, Dwellings with access to public transport and Proportion of jobs accessible by car within 30 minutes. BITRE will also continue to directly support City Deals by producing data that is targeted to specific City Deal outcomes.

Targeted research projects

The review process identified a number of issues that are of particular interest to stakeholders, particularly in relation to liveability and sustainability. The discontinuation of the NCPF will enable targeted research on these issues, for public release. Potential topics that BITRE has identified are listed in Table 2. It is important to note that BITRE will be unable to complete all of these projects in the near term and will prioritise those considered the highest priority for cities policy.

⁵ The National Freight Data Hub prototype website is available at: <https://datahub.freightaustralia.gov.au>

Table 1 Potential topics for targeted research projects

Topic	Project description
Liveability: neighbourhood access to services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An analysis of access to services and walkability for Australia's 21 largest cities, as well as an in-depth analysis for selected City Deal areas
Sustainability: Heat vulnerability, canopy cover and green space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An analysis of heat vulnerability, canopy cover, access to public open space and access to green space for Australia's 21 largest cities, as well as an in-depth analysis for selected City Deal areas
Housing affordability and availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An in-depth analysis of recent trends in housing data for Australia's 21 largest cities. Topics may include dwelling construction, affordability of residential property or rental affordability
Working from home: CBD impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An analysis of how increased working from home has impacted on employment levels in the capital city CBDs, and CBD activity more broadly
Working from home: demographic and spatial aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An analysis of how the incidence of working from home varies across different demographic groups and across Australia's cities
South East Queensland: spatial patterns of population growth, jobs growth and commuting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An initial evidence base for the SEQ City Deal, presenting the evidence on current spatial patterns and trends for population, jobs and commuting, and providing a benchmark against which the impact of future initiatives can be assessed

Continued support for City Deals

BITRE's support for City Deals will continue following the discontinuation of the NCPF. Currently, data from the NCPF is only one of a number of inputs used to monitor progress on the specific objectives for each City Deal. Other supporting data includes locally sourced data from City Deal partners, as well as data constructed by BITRE on request that is consistent with City Deal boundaries. BITRE will continue to produce the most frequently requested data from the NCPF, such as population and labour force indicators, as an input to monitoring the progress of City Deals.

In addition, the targeted research projects discussed above will assist the Department's Cities Division with developing and implementing City Deals.

Final update of the NCPF

The 2021 annual update of the NCPF has been progressed by BITRE alongside this 3-year review. BITRE will publish this final update of the dashboard September 2021. In early 2022, the NCPF will be discontinued in favour of targeted research projects and support for City Deals as discussed above. Other data sources including the Regions dashboard and the Freight and Regional Data Hubs will also contribute cities information and analytical products within their defined scopes.

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