

Housing Choices, Planning Policy
Environment Planning and
Sustainable Development Directorate
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Dear Sir/Madam

Housing Choices Discussion Paper

I welcome the *Housing Choices Discussion Paper* released on November 2017 for public comment.

I applaud the commitment to support Canberra's evolution as a "sustainable, compact and well connected"¹ city by increasing housing choice for our community. I commend the acknowledgement that housing choice is linked to housing affordability and refer to the recommendations I provided in the submission on 15 September 2015 for the ACT Government's housing affordability discussion paper.

Our community has changing needs and expectations for housing. We have heard that a wide section of the community support increased housing density and want access to a greater mix of housing typologies throughout Canberra.² In particular, older members of our community are seeking greater housing choice as they downsize and seek to age in place. Research by Jane Frances Kelly has identified that the housing types that people want (including apartments and semi-detached houses in middle suburbs) are not being provided in Australian cities.³

There is an opportunity to increase urban density and housing choice in Canberra to meet the drivers of change and challenges identified in the *Housing Choices Discussion Paper*. In support of



¹ Mick Gentleman, Minister for Planning (2015) *Statement of Planning Intent*

² ACT Government (2017) *Housing Choices Discussion Paper*

³ <https://grattan.edu.au/report/the-housing-wed-choose/>, accessed 30 November 2017

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improving housing choice for our community, I provide the following recommendations to inform changes to the ACT's housing policies and planning framework.

Housing Density:

Canberra is experiencing demographic and spatial challenges that impact the housing needs and preferences of our community. Our city is growing and Canberra's population increased 1.8% in the year ending March 2017.⁴ We also have an ageing population with smaller household sizes and an increasing number of single person households.⁵

There has been a spatial trend to develop new housing on the city fringe and this has resulted in urban sprawl. Developing housing on the city fringe increases car dependency and is a contributing factor to Canberra's large ecological footprint (8.9 global ha/person) which is about three and a half times the global per person average.⁶

In response to the abovementioned challenges there is a need to provide new housing in Canberra but limit growth on the edge of our city. This can be achieved by adopting planning strategies and policies that facilitate medium density and infill development. Urban consolidation involves locating new dwellings into established urban areas often through the delivery of medium density housing and mixed use developments.⁷ This strategy provides residents with increased housing options that are close to shops, services, public transport, education and employment opportunities.⁸ Medium density housing development has been linked to social, economic and environmental benefits for both individuals and the broader community.⁹ Advances in transport technology will also influence urban consolidation in Canberra. Electric vehicles perform best for shorter stop/start journeys and can be supported by a compact city and efficient electricity network. This is explored further in the Implementation Status Review (ISR) of ACT Government's Climate Change Policy August 2017.¹⁰

In Canberra there are limited opportunities for urban consolidation as 81% of the ACT is zoned RZ1 (Suburban Zone) which enables development of low rise, single detached dwellings. The RZ1 provides limited infill development opportunities and a mix of housing typologies in established urban areas. In order to address this challenge, the ACT Government should review the distribution of RZ1 and rezone suitable areas in established urban areas to facilitate greater dwelling density and housing choice.

⁴ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0>, accessed 30 November 2017

⁵ Mick Gentleman, Minister for Planning (2015) *Statement of Planning Intent*

⁶ <http://www.environmentcommissioner.act.gov.au/ecological-footprints>, accessed 30 November 2017

⁷ <https://theconversation.com/media-picture-of-urban-consolidation-focuses-more-on-a-good-scare-story-than-the-facts-58044>, accessed 30 November 2017

⁸ http://www.ovga.vic.gov.au/images/Infill_Opportunities_-_Design_Research_Report_-_FINAL.pdf, accessed 30 November 2017

⁹ http://rsa.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08111470500135086?src=recsys#.Wh8_ml-Cy70, accessed 30 November 2017

¹⁰ http://www.environmentcommissioner.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/1116324/CSE-ISR-Report-Aug2017_FA_AccPDF_c2.pdf, accessed 21 December 2017.

Building enough of the right housing is not only important for the individual needs and preferences of Australians, but also for the structure of our cities.¹¹

In 2014 the Victorian Government conducted residential zoning reform to achieve greater housing diversity, whilst preserving the valued character of established suburbs.¹² The Victorian Government introduced three new residential zones - the Neighbourhood Residential Zone, the General Residential Zone and the Residential Growth Zone.¹³ The Residential Growth Zone was developed to “encourage a diversity of housing types in locations offering good access to services and transport including activity centres and town centres and encourage a scale of development that provides a transition between areas of more intensive use and development and other residential areas”.¹⁴ In the residential growth zone, subdivision and construction of more than one dwelling on a lot is allowed subject to permit approval.

In order to meet demographic and spatial challenges, the ACT should consider zoning reform to facilitate medium density housing and provide a greater range of housing options in established urban areas.

Recommendation One: Review and update current residential zones across Canberra to allow for urban consolidation and increased housing typologies in established urban areas.

Housing Design and Quality:

Increased housing choice in the ACT should be supported by medium density housing that is designed for liveability and sustainability. As acknowledged in the *Housing Choices Discussion Paper*, the development of medium density housing in Canberra will need to be environmentally sustainable to meet the impacts of climate change.

Canberra will experience hotter and drier conditions with the number of days over 35 degrees Celsius projected to increase from 7 to 12 per year by 2050.¹⁵

Medium density housing, and in particular apartments, will need to be designed to be energy efficient and reduce energy consumption. Dwellings should be designed to achieve adequate thermal comfort, solar access, natural ventilation and passive cooling in order to reduce residents’ energy consumption. This is especially important for households on low incomes who are vulnerable to fluctuations in energy costs. The CRC for Low Carbon Living provides guidance on best practice policy in this regard.¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid

¹² <https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/policy-and-strategy/planning-reform/reformed-zones-for-victoria/reformed-residential-zones>, accessed 30 November 2017

¹³ https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/32129/Residential-Growth-Zone_Web.pdf, accessed 30 November 2017

¹⁴ http://planning-schemes.delwp.vic.gov.au/schemes/vpps/32_07.pdf, accessed on 30 November 2017

¹⁵ http://www.environmentcommissioner.act.gov.au/publications/special_reports_and_investigations/implementation-status-report, accessed 30 November 2017

¹⁶ CRC Low Carbon Living, 2017: *Best Practice Policy and Regulation for Low Carbon Outcomes in the Built Environment*

Building design directly impacts on people's health and wellbeing.¹⁷ The design of medium density and infill housing should facilitate social interaction and improved health outcomes. Medium density housing should provide residents and visitors with opportunities for social interaction and build a sense of connection and community.¹⁸ This can be achieved through design features such as communal gardens, shared facilities and on-street dining in mixed use development.

*Proximity, mobility and shared spaces are important because, despite other ways of connecting, face-to-face contact remains a crucial way to develop and sustain our personal relationships.*¹⁹

Medium density housing should also be appropriately located and designed to facilitate active travel. Research by Professor Billie Giles-Corti has shown the linkages between walkability and health.²⁰ Higher density housing that is located close to public transport, jobs, education, employment and community services can reduce car dependency and enable residents to participate in active travel, including walking and cycling.²¹ Medium density development should include a range of housing typologies that are flexible and adaptive to meet the needs of residents at different stages of their life cycle. For example, housing should be designed to support older residents ageing in place and be flexible for smaller and single households.

In order to make sure that urban consolidation is both liveable and sustainable, the ACT Government should develop standard guidelines for medium density development. Standard apartment guidelines have been adopted by New South Wales (Sepp 65²²) and Victoria (Victorian Apartment Design Guidelines²³) and this initiative is commended.

Poor construction quality is a prevalent issue for the development of medium density housing in Australia.²⁴ It is important to ensure that new medium density housing is well constructed to provide residents with a good quality of life and achieve environmentally sustainable objectives.

The ACT Government's discussion paper *Improving the ACT Building Regulatory System* advised that adopting an independent design review panel was one option for improving building design and quality in Canberra.²⁵ The ACT Government Architect, Catherine Townsend, will form a Design

¹⁷ World Resources Institute, 2017: *Accelerating Building Efficiency*

¹⁸ https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/137_report_social_cities_web.pdf, accessed 30 November 2017

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ http://www.futureleaders.com.au/book_chapters/pdf/Dancing-in-the-Rain/Melanie-Lowe_Billie-Giles-Corti.pdf accessed 30 November 2017

²¹ <https://theconversation.com/higher-density-living-can-make-us-healthier-but-not-on-its-own-34920>, accessed 30 November 2017

²² <http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Policy-and-Legislation/Housing/Apartment-Design-Guide>, accessed 30 November 2017

²³ https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0030/80994/Apartment-Design-Guidelines-for-Victoria_August-2017.pdf, accessed 30 November 2017

²⁴ <https://theconversation.com/this-is-why-apartment-living-is-different-for-the-poor-82069> accessed on 15 September 2017

²⁵ ACT Government, 2015: *Improving the ACT Building Regulatory System*

Review Panel (DRP) of suitably qualified professionals to provide an iterative review of the strategic and technical aspects of development applications and ensure that best practice building design and quality is achieved. It is anticipated that the DRP will commence in early 2018. Catherine Townsend's vision for the DRP is to *"create an informed conversation between the City and the Proponent, one that supports quality; one that achieves a city greater than the sum of its parts"*²⁶ and interpret both the planning guidelines and the sentiment of the community in order to achieve best practice building design and construction for new developments in Canberra. In addition to engaging with the community, the DRP may also play a role in mitigating negative social perceptions of increased density, which has been documented to exist in the media.²⁷ This initiative is highly commended.

Recommendation Two: Develop standard design guidelines for medium density development to achieve liveability and sustainability. The Design Review Panel should provide comment to achieve best practice for medium density housing and infill development in addition to regulatory measures that ensure new housing is well designed and constructed.

Housing Delivery:

The delivery of medium density housing should be achieved through a range of innovative models addressing the current issue of affordability experienced by renters and those hoping to enter the property market in Canberra.

The latest residential affordability index found that for low income households, Canberra was the nation's second most expensive city to rent.²⁸ This is in part because Canberra has higher medium household incomes than the national average which makes rents higher and exacerbates rental unaffordability for lower income households. Canberra's high house prices act as a barrier to younger people,²⁹ older residents and single income households hoping to enter the housing market.³⁰

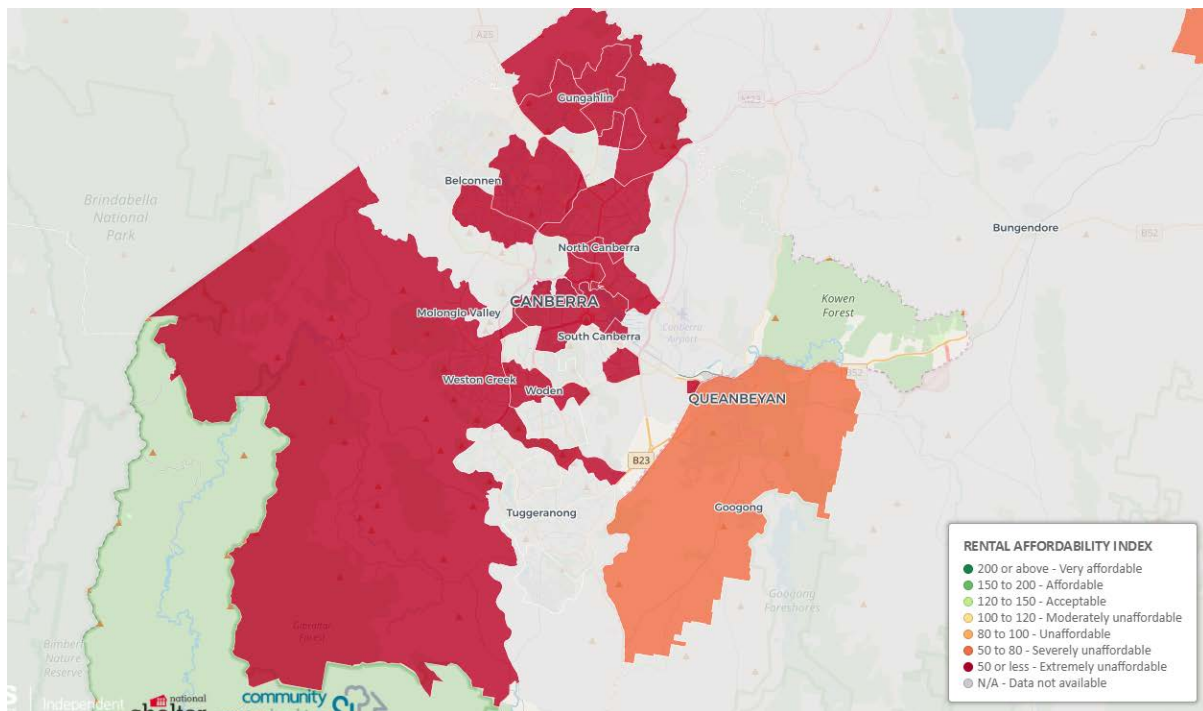
²⁶ http://www.environmentcommissioner.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/1116324/CSE-ISR-Report-Aug2017_FA_AccPDF_c2.pdf, accessed 21 December 2017

²⁷ <https://theconversation.com/media-picture-of-urban-consolidation-focuses-more-on-a-good-scare-story-than-the-facts-58044>, accessed 30 November 2017

²⁸ <https://www.sgsep.com.au/publications/rental-affordability-index>, accessed 04 December 2017.

²⁹ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-02/property-market-great-australian-wealth-gap-in-charts/9007180>, accessed 04 December 2017

³⁰ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-28/housing-affordability-crisis-threatening-older/9204010>, accessed 04 December 2017



Housing unaffordability for a single pensioner on benefits in the ACT in 2017: Source SGS Economics and Planning Rental Affordability Index 2017³¹

The ACT Government should ensure that changes to housing policy and the planning framework support a range of new housing delivery models that address unaffordability for renters and home owners.³² Local and international examples of innovative housing delivery that could be adopted in Canberra are provided below:

1. Located in northwest Canberra, the Ginninderry housing development includes a range of affordable housing options for home owners and renters. Residents that meet specific housing affordability criteria can choose from a variety of affordable housing options which include longer term rental, shared equity arrangements and turn-key housing.³³ The housing options available at Ginninderry support the ACT Government's Affordable Housing Action Plan goal for 20% of dwellings in residential areas to meet a range of affordability criteria.³⁴
2. Mixed tenure and integrated housing development delivered through public and private partnership is one option that should be adopted for future housing development in the ACT. This model has been successful in Sydney where the Communities Plus development provides a mix of social, private and affordable housing. The development has been funded

³¹ <http://www.sgsep.com.au/maps/thirdspace/australia-rental-affordability-index/> , accessed 21 December 2017

³² <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-29/housing-affordability-crisis-to-continue-for-decades-ceda-says/8851560>, accessed 04 December 2017

³³ <https://ginninderry.com/housing-affordability-canberra/> , accessed 05 December 2017

³⁴ https://www.planning.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/139904/action_Plan_progress_report-A.pdf, accessed 04 December 2017

through a joint venture between the NSW Government, the not-for-profit sector and the private sector.³⁵

3. Co-housing can provide older residents and single person households with the opportunity for secure, affordable and inclusive housing. In London, Older Women's Co-Housing Initiative has developed the New Ground project for women aged over 50. The development includes a mix of social and affordable one, two and three bedroom townhouses with shared communal spaces and facilities.³⁶

The abovementioned examples demonstrate a range of new housing models that could be delivered in Canberra through changes to planning policy and the planning framework. These examples demonstrate that innovative housing delivery can be achieved in partnerships between government, the not-for-profit sector and the private sector.

Recommendation Three: Changes to housing policy and the planning framework should facilitate a range of innovative housing delivery models to address rental and housing unaffordability. Housing delivery in partnerships between government, the not-for-profit sector and the private sector should be supported.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to comment on the *Housing Choices Discussion Paper*. My office is happy to be contacted for further clarification if required.

Yours sincerely



Professor Kate Auty
Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment

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³⁵ <https://www.communitiesplus.com.au/> , accessed 06 December 2017

³⁶ <http://www.owch.org.uk/about-cohousing-1> , accessed 06 December 2017