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## Funding housing: NDIS payments back new accommodation for disabled youth



"When you're on your own ... you get to learn how to cook and clean and do laundry and all that stuff you weren't able to before": Kim Macintosh moved into her own apartment in February. *Max Mason-Hubers*



by [Michael Bleby](#)

[National Disability Insurance Scheme](#) funding has been used for the first time to develop housing that has moved young people with disabilities out of aged care homes.

Non-profit foundation Summer Housing purchased 10 apartments in a 110-unit building completed by developer BaseBuild in Newcastle's Belmont last year and modified them during construction for clients with disabilities. Specialist Disability Accommodation payments top up the rent that qualifying [NDIS](#) recipients pay and give accommodation owners a secure and commercial income stream.

Summer Housing, chaired by former AMP chairman and 2011 Australian of the Year Simon McKeon, says the funding offers a new way to resolve part of Australia's housing crisis – finding suitable accommodation for 28,000 disabled people, of whom nearly a quarter are young people. The NDIS rental guarantee could free up needed space in old folks homes as Australia's population ages and get younger people capable of independent living out from institutions into the community.

"There's more than 5000 or 6000 people today, young people with disabilities, living in aged care," Mr McKeon said. "How dumb is that?"



Accessibility: The stove in Kim Macintosh's apartment is designed so her wheelchair can fit underneath. *Max Mason-Hubers*

Most of these young people could easily live in the community with the right accommodation and necessary help and the payments to qualifying recipients offer a way for accommodation providers to fund the upfront purchase of apartments that they rent out over the long term.

"The demand is there if the financial structure can be made to work," Mr McKeon said.

Kim MacIntosh moved into Belmont's Belle Apartments in February after spending seven years in an aged care home. Ms MacIntosh, who suffers from muscular dystrophy, a congenital disease that affects voluntary muscles, moved into the old folks' home in her 40s because there was nowhere else someone with her level of physical disability could live.

The wheelchair-bound Ms MacIntosh needs help getting out of bed, but in many other ways the aged care home – where she shared a room with three women who suffered from dementia – was inappropriate. She's able to look after herself, but couldn't in a facility geared up to look after the most helpless of people.

"When you're in a nursing home a lot of stuff is done for you, like your meals, your laundry – all that sort of stuff," she said. "That's what they're there for. It's very noisy, you've got nurses rushing here and there. There's no independence, you're very limited in what you can do. It's not a very pleasant place."



"I wanted my independence back": NDIS funding allowed Kim MacIntosh to move into her own apartment from an aged care home, where she lived for seven years until February. *Max Mason-Hubers*

A quarter of Ms MacIntosh's disability pension goes into rent and she also gets Commonwealth rent assistance. But the NDIS accommodation payment makes that into an income stream an asset owner can count on – and, in turn, borrow against. Summer Housing, which has also purchased 11 apartments in a 77-unit project that Grocon is developing in Melbourne's inner north-eastern suburb of Fairfield, plans to do that.

"Once we've got an income stream from the Newcastle tenant apartments plus the Melbourne apartments, there'll be enough income for us to leverage and purchase further apartments," said Carolyn Finis, a Summer Housing spokeswoman.

Summer Housing is backed and driven by parent organisation Summer Foundation – headed by former occupational therapist [Di Winkler](#), the wife of [BRW Rich List](#) member and MYOB founder Craig Winkler.

The NDIS funding is significant. For a one-bedroom apartment such as the one used by Ms MacIntosh, the weekly SDA payment of \$1600 complements Ms MacIntosh's payment of \$111 and her rental assistance payment of \$44. The funding covers not only the rental income stream, but the specialist disability modifications (costing between \$4000 and \$12,000) needed on each apartment – such as higher benchtops or the ceiling hoist Ms MacIntosh needs to get out of bed – the provision of an 11th apartment for a carer who lives in the same development to help the NDIS recipients – to help Ms MacIntosh get out bed, for example – and the ongoing maintenance and upkeep.



Outside render of developer Grocon's Greenwich Fairfield development in inner north-east Melbourne. *Supplied*

One risk is that while NDIS accommodation payments are intended to run for a 20-year period, to allow the owner to pay down mortgages taken against new developments, the level of payment is not guaranteed to stay the same. It is a risk – the federal Coalition government ended the former NRAS affordable housing subsidy scheme – but Mr McKeon said despite the [NDIS' teething problems](#), this was likely to remain.

"If a government was stupid enough tomorrow to say 'The NDIA is not going ahead after the next review period' or whatever, I guess they can eliminate unemployment benefits as well," he said. "But there are many parts of the private sector take view on the ongoing reliability of government payments. This is going to be another one. And I think we have sufficient evidence to say it's not going to be that easy for a government to just say 'We tried this experiment and it didn't work'."

The new funding coincides with a growing recognition of the need for homes to be accessible, with features that will allow increasingly frail people to age in place. Newcastle's Belle Apartments was built to this standard. New Victorian apartment design guidelines require this in new apartment buildings and including these doesn't have to add to the cost of a project, said Grocon's head of planning, design and development David Waldren who oversaw the firm's medium-rise \$44 million Greenwich Fairfield project that Summer Housing has bought into and which is due to be complete at the end of next year.

"You may have a cost of about \$1500, \$2000 for a bit more reinforcing bracing, or slightly wider doors," Mr Waldren said. "But if you design from day one ... it costs you nothing in space. You get exactly the same yield and you get spaces that are better to live in."



Interior render of Grocon's Greenwich Fairfield development in Melbourne, designed to be accessible. *Supplied*

Including that design in the basic structure of the building, however, made it cheaper for Summer Housing to make the additional modifications needed by their tenants, he said.

"All that stuff was already there – the changes they needed to make were less significant, less costly and it was less problematic to go to very high needs. We've reinforced the walls where the handrails, according to current standards, would need to be installed around toilets or in showers. All you need to do is drill a hole and bolt a handrail on. It's not a radical change to be able to then age in that place as your needs change."

Having the right accommodation for disabled people frees up necessary aged care places and makes a big difference to the individuals.

"I wanted my independence back," Ms MacIntosh said. "When you're on your own, living in an apartment, you get that back. You get to learn how to cook and clean and do laundry and all that stuff you weren't able to before."