

Improving housing accessibility in Australia

A survey of occupational therapists identifies highest-priority accessible design features

A survey run by La Trobe University and the Summer Foundation presents evidence to support the implementation of the 2022 National Construction Code (NCC).¹ According to 144 occupational therapists (OTs), the highest priority features to make houses more accessible are:

- Step-free pathway to home
- Step-free home entry
- Step-free shower entry
- Larger shower
- Shower on ground floor
- Toilet on ground floor
- Bedroom on ground floor

What is the problem?

In 2018, 4.4 million Australians identified having a disability, including nearly 2.9 million people with a mobility limitation. This number is projected to almost double by 2060, caused partly by an ageing population.² Australia has an insufficient supply of accessible housing to meet current and future demand.³

State and federal governments acknowledge the undersupply of accessible housing. In early 2021 building ministers added minimum accessibility standards to the 2022 NCC.³ However, not all states and territories have agreed to these standards, which will lead to unequal implementation across Australia.

Despite the need for more accessible housing, it is unclear which specific design features are the highest priority. Decision-makers need to be informed by evidence-based research.

Why survey OTs?

OTs frequently conduct home assessments to determine levels of accessibility. OTs evaluate whether a home will enable people to be discharged from hospital safely or allow the elderly to 'age in place', in their own homes.

Therefore, their expertise is vital to understanding which features will most impact housing accessibility. A national survey asked OTs to rate the importance of 22 design features on housing accessibility.⁴ In total, 144 OTs completed the survey, of whom 45% were senior clinicians.

OTs were provided with a list of 22 design features, and were asked to rate their importance in facilitating:

- Timely hospital discharge
- Allowing people to age in place

The features were subsequently ranked according to their average ratings to identify which features are most important to support hospital discharge and ageing in place.



What are the main findings?

The 7 highest priority features according to OTs are listed in table 1 below. Interestingly, out of the 22 design features, OTs identified the same high priority features for supporting timely hospital discharge and ageing in place (although the specific ranking differed slightly).

OTs provided reasoning for their ratings, with one commenting that a step-free entrance to homes "reduces cost for modifications, allows clients to remain at home, reduces falls risk, [and] enables access to community."

Similarly, the need for a bathroom and bedroom space on the ground floor would not only accommodate wheelchair users, but allow "older people to stay in their own home longer [age in place]," than if they had to climb stairs regularly.

Table 1 – Highest priority accessible design features

	Hospital discharge	Ageing place
Design features	Rank	Rank
Step-free home entry	1	4
Step-free shower entry	2	1
Step-free pathway to home	3	5
Larger shower	4	7
Shower on ground floor	5	3
Toilet on ground floor	6	2
Bedroom on ground floor	7	6

What are the policy implications?

To address Australia's undersupply of accessible housing, Building Ministers agreed in April 2021 to include mandatory minimum accessibility standards in the NCC. However, some states and territories have not committed to implementing these standards.

This study provides an evidence base about the impact of specific design features on hospital discharge and ageing in place.

Results of this survey emphasise the importance of external access to the home and internal access to bedroom and bathroom facilities, with remarkable consistency across hospital discharge and ageing in place. Findings also indicated the inefficiencies of relying on post-build home modifications instead of including accessible features during the design phase of housing construction.

Notes

1. Wellecke et al. (2021). 'Accessible design features and home modifications to improve housing accessibility.' *Disability and Health Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2022.101281>
2. CIS (2020). 'Consultation RIS: Proposal to include minimum accessibility standards for housing in the NCC.' <https://consultation.abcb.gov.au/engagement/consult-ris-accessible-housing/>
3. CIE. (2020). 'Proposal to include minimum accessibility standards for housing in the National Construction Code.' <https://consultation.abcb.gov.au/engagement/consult-ris-accessible-housing/>
4. Features derived from the Livable Housing Australia Design Guidelines.