

Improving housing accessibility in Australia

Research supports incorporating accessible design features in the construction of all homes

The Summer Foundation urges State and Territory Governments to commit to improving housing accessibility so people with disability have more options for where they can live.

Only 5% of new home builds over the past decade have complied with current accessibility standards, meaning tens of thousands of Australians with disability are unable to access housing that meets their needs.

The undersupply of accessible housing means that people with disability are reliant on post-construction home modifications to ensure they can live safely at home.

But many dwellings lack adaptability and home modifications are not always possible. When people with disability are unable to live safely and independently at home, they are at greater risk of being stuck in hospital or admitted to residential aged care.

The Evidence

A recent [survey](#) by La Trobe University and the Summer Foundation found evidence that supports incorporating accessible design features in the construction of all new dwellings. This will avoid the need for home modifications and ensure people with disability have more choices about where they can live. It will also ensure homes are more adaptable to residents' changing needs over time so they can remain at home.



What does the research say?

144 occupational therapists were asked to rate the importance of 22 design features in facilitating timely hospital discharge and allowing people to age in place.

The survey found the highest priority features to make houses more accessible are:

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

These features are easy to incorporate at the design stage of new builds but cost more and take longer to install post-build.

What needs to be done?

All new dwellings must be built to mandated accessibility standards to increase housing options available to growing families, the elderly and people with disability. Accessibility features are beneficial for all Australians and are in high demand with volume builders as they offer aesthetically pleasing and beneficial features for everyone.

Voluntary standards have not worked. The building industry argued for a voluntary code of practice more than a decade ago with the commitment that all new housing would be accessible by 2020. This approach has failed.

Signing up to the [National Construction Code \(NCC\) 2022](#) is one way to improve housing accessibility in Australia, but it is not enough on its own. The accessibility provisions are based on the Silver Level [Livable Housing Design Guidelines](#) (LHDG) standard. Yet homes constructed to this standard will not be accessible for people with high and complex needs. Accessibility at the Gold or Platinum level requires wider spaces and a shower and bedroom on the ground floor, among other improvements.

State and Territory Governments must deliver housing strategies that meet the needs of the people with disability in their state or territory.

State disability strategies represent a whole of government commitment to changing the lives of people with disability. It is essential that every state disability strategy includes an effective plan for improving housing accessibility and keeping the government accountable to this plan.

There must be disability and social housing strategies that meet the needs of all people with disability and offer choice of home and lifestyle.

A collaborative effort between the disability, health and housing sectors would ensure effectiveness and promote best practice.

What does a good strategy entail?

Commitments that all new homes be developed as informed by the needs and preferences of people with disability:

Most people with disability rely on mainstream housing options meeting their accessibility needs. State and Territory Governments must ensure enough housing is built to meet the demand for LHDG Silver, Gold and Platinum level housing.

Improving existing stock:

State and Territory Governments must conduct an audit of all government-owned stock including old disability housing and SDA, to determine whether it meets the needs of current and future residents. If not, a clear plan for updating and redesigning the properties must be developed. This must be co-designed by people with disability to ensure the developed models meet their housing and accessibility needs.

The redevelopment of old housing will disrupt the tenancies of current residents. It is crucial that State and Territory Governments work together with these residents to ensure they are relocated into alternative housing, on an interim or long-term basis, as informed by their individual needs and preferences. There must be as little disruption to the delivery of support services as possible to minimise risks of harm to residents, and residents must have choice and control over their alternative housing destination to ensure it is appropriate for them.

Engagement with people with disability and the sector:

People with disability are best placed to advise on what is needed to make housing more accessible to them. Many disability housing strategies and housing models have been ineffective because people with disability were not involved in the planning process.

There are advocacy organisations in the sector that have on-the-ground experience of what is needed to improve outcomes for people with disability. In addition to co-designing strategies with people with disability, State and Territory Governments must take advantage of the knowledge and expertise that exists in the sector to ensure any developed strategies are evidence-based and informed by best practice.