



PUBLIC HOUSING: THE RISKS AND REWARDS

Allocating \$6.4 billion for public housing was designed primarily to stimulate the economy. But it may also result in several thousand people with disability being properly housed for the first time in their lives. However, the initiative will only succeed writes **Geoff Barber** by paying close attention to the design and the needs of people with disabilities.

While some of the Federal Government's economic stimulus measures have been controversial, the allocation of \$6.4 billion for building 20,000 new houses and refurbishing a further 2,500 existing dwellings for disadvantaged Australians, not only addresses massive gaps in public housing but will also deliver a much needed boost to the building and construction industry.

The initiative is the first significant move towards meeting the aims of the National Affordable Housing Agreement: "all Australians having access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing that contributes to social and economic participation".

The first priority of the initiative is to provide Australia's large homeless population with decent, affordable accommodation; the government also anticipates the scheme will reduce pressure on public housing waiting lists (expected to halve) from age and disability pensioners,

Indigenous people and women with children escaping domestic violence. The numbers of low-income households currently spending over half their income on rent are also expected to drop.

By December 2010, 75 per cent of the new dwellings will be completed and the refurbishment of 2,500 places, once unfit for occupation, will swell the availability of public housing even more.

Increasing the number and range of accessible houses for people with disability is a very welcome opportunity, but there is the potential for things to go awry.

What can go wrong?

In the rush to get houses built we run the risk of good accessible design being overlooked and some past mistakes being repeated. So for example, care needs to be taken to avoid outdated housing designs and dense groups of houses that result in large pockets of socially disadvantaged people being disconnected from the broader community: mini-institutions in effect, rather than domestic accommodation.

It would be too bad if at the end of this stimulus project, government officials brushed their hands together and said "building good homes for people with disability was too hard! We just had to get houses built."

This is critical stuff. Houses have a lifespan of 30 years or more, and factors such as structural design, location and construction materials, if not thought through adequately can be a major barrier for people wishing to live as independently as possible and connecting to the community.

Unless the details of the design are attended to properly, people have to rely on others for assistance. Some critically important design features are things like wider than usual door frames, putting light switches at the right height so that someone with a mobility restriction can operate them, or using contrasting colours on kitchen bench tops for people with visual impairments.

Purpose-built accessible houses take no more time to build than standard homes. Sometimes the design features mean they cost a bit more but seriously, it's not a lot more, especially if it's done at the outset.

States and territories are obliged to ensure social housing tenants can participate socially and economically in community life and that means making sure houses are located close to transport, services and workplaces.

State, territory and federal governments have an unparalleled opportunity to work closely with accessible design consultants and developers to build homes for people with disability that reflect contemporary domestic housing design.

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Basic rules of thumb

As well as governments and developers, the following principles are a useful guide for people with disability who are considering building or looking for a suitable place to move into.

1. Locations with any significant gradient should be avoided. When people can't get out and about independently, they become reliant on others for assistance with the basics of life.
2. Avoid houses located near existing institutions or 'facilities' – these often reinforce negative stereotypes about the occupants.
3. When special access features are required they should be designed and installed to maximise the 'ordinariness' of the house where possible so it looks like a regular house in a regular street. First and foremost the design should be focused on the needs and aspirations of the tenants, then appropriate consideration given to the needs of medical and support staff.
4. Is the building located in an area that contributes to the tenant's connection to the community or is it located in the back blocks or a commercial area?
5. If the number of tenants and staff in a house is so large that tenants can't introduce themselves easily or be introduced to visitors, there are too many people living and working there! Let's not lose sight of the objective: the primary purpose of the dwelling is to be someone's home, not the support worker's workplace or a "rack 'em and stack 'em" facility.
6. Avoid a concentration of specific housing in one suburb. If the street is full of support worker' cars and the neighbours refer to the development as those "disability houses" rather than "Frank's house" or "Jenny's place", then a pod of exclusion has been created.

Quality, affordable, accessible housing is key to giving those living with disability a fair crack at life. Many governments are starting to ask the right questions, but I repeat, good housing design is all about the details, and these can be all too easily overlooked in the rush to deliver. Accessibility, done properly, benefits everyone. ∞