



Spinal Cord Injuries Australia

POLICY BRIEF

Achieving accessible housing in NSW without compromising housing affordability

Key Points

- People with mobility limitations face a serious shortage of housing and challenges to finding (either to rent or buy) housing with basic accessible features.¹
- Research shows that suitable and safe housing is key to healthy ageing and delays the need for institutional care.^{2,3}
- The **NSW Intergenerational Report 2021-22** estimated if people live more of their older years in good health, the projected long-term growth in annual health spending would fall by 0.13 per cent.⁴ This equates to about \$49.2M each year at current levels.
- Action to improve the supply of homes with basic accessible and adaptable features does not have to trade-off housing affordability. Many changes that could be legislated are simple and cost neutral to implement e.g. internal door widths of 820mm.
- Independent costings commissioned by the Australian Building Codes Board indicate that the average cost to incorporate basic accessible features at point of build would cost, on average less than \$4,400.
- Australia is a signatory to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the UNCRPD)*. Article 19 specifically identifies access to suitable housing as a basic human right.⁵
- NSW and WA are the only jurisdictions in Australia to have opted out of the National Construction Codes seven minimum accessibility standards (Attachment A).

1. Introduction

The current housing stock in NSW falls well short of providing homes with basic accessible and adaptable features suitable to meet the needs of the NSW population, now and in the future.

There are currently over 1.5 million people in NSW living with a disability. This number will increase as the population ages – by 2050 an estimated 2.4 million people in NSW will be aged over 65.⁶ The demand and need for housing with basic accessible and adaptable features in NSW is significant and growing.

2. Accessible housing and impacts on the NSW economy

Housing is critical social infrastructure that is with us for 50 or more years, so it is vital to get it right.⁷ Homes with basic accessible and adaptable features are an important policy consideration due to the effects of inadequate housing on the economy:

- With an ageing population, the costs of retrofitting home modifications to include basic accessibility features enabling people to ‘age in place’ will divert significant resources away from more productive uses.
- Housing with basic accessibility features lowers demands on the NSW Health budget by reducing the need for high-cost institutional care and supporting people to be discharged from the hospital setting more quickly. People living with disabilities who are unable to find suitable housing have higher health care needs associated with poorer health outcomes, including mental health issues associated with social isolation.⁸ These further increase healthcare costs.
- Accessible and affordable housing is an enabler for people with disabilities to access employment and contribute talents and skills to the NSW labour market.

As we address the broader housing shortage in NSW, we have an opportunity to increase the supply of homes with basic accessible and adaptable features and deliver long term economic benefits

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Source: The NSW Intergenerational Report 2021-22, NSW Treasury, 2022, p. 75.

3. Universal design offers an efficient solution

Accessible housing is not about specialised accommodation needs. It is about achieving good design so that people can access and use their physical environment to the greatest extent and in the most independent way possible, without the need for adaptations or specialised solutions.

Universal design is the “design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design”.⁹

Universal design reduces the need for expensive changes or retro fits to meet a population’s housing needs through different life stages

Universal design can increase economic participation. It can also overcome the issue of isolation and loneliness that arise when people with mobility limitations are unable to visit family and friends.

Two thirds of people with low support needs and 80 per cent of people with high support needs reported they cannot visit friends and family to participate socially due to homes that are not

accessible.¹⁰ Social exclusion has tangible impacts on both mental and physical health.

“... changing the standard width of doors is a common-sense change that is effectively cost neutral.”

“... well-designed housing that works for people with mobility impairments does not compromise the design of housing for the general population.”

SOURCE | Source: Wrinkler et. al., 2021,

4. Universal design does not compromise housing affordability

An independent report commissioned by the Australian Building Codes Board in 2020 estimated the highest cost per dwelling to meet the NCC's minimum standards was less than \$4,400.¹¹

A 2021 audit of accessible features in new build house plans found that:¹⁰

“Consistently incorporating accessibility features into the building code for all new dwellings would not be a significant cost impost on volume builders of residential housing in Australia. Indeed, the country’s biggest builders are already incorporating most of these features in some new builds because they are consistent with good design”.

The study found internal corridor dimensions often exceeded minimum levels with all of the houses audited having at least four elements complying with much higher accessibility standards (i.e. Gold and Platinum Levels).

The most consistent barriers for people with mobility impairments related to design features that would be near to cost neutral to address: threshold free entrance, width of internal doors (820mm), the dimensions of a ground level toilet

and a frameless shower. Even achieving this would be make a considerable difference to accessibility.

Accessible design is 22 times more cost effective than retrofitting modifications.¹²

Increased life expectancy and the ageing of the population is requiring governments to reconsider their policies to enable people with disabilities to live independently for as long as possible.

To make the general housing market fit for demographic changes and to adapt to the reality and needs of persons with disabilities (including an increasing number of elderly) will become necessary to avoid expensive institutional care.

5. What SCIA is Calling for

All new homes should have basic accessible and adaptable features.

NSW Government Action

SCIA is calling for actions that are budget neutral for the NSW Government.

1. By June 2025, NSW Government makes a decision on the implementation of the National Construction Code’s 7 Minimum Accessibility Standards for all new homes built. **(NSW Minister for Better Regulation and Fair Trading and Minister for Building, The Hon Anoulack Chanthivong MP).**
- At a minimum, the NSW Government implements a trial of the NCC’s Seven Minimum Accessibility requirements for all new residential housing along the light rail network in Sydney and report on this trial by November 2025. **(NSW Minister for Better Regulation and Fair Trading and Minister for Building, The Hon Anoulack Chanthivong MP, and Local Councils along the light rail network).**

The light rail enables people with physical disabilities to seamlessly get on and off transport, unlike buses and rail services. Presently there are few options for accessible housing along these routes.

2. The NSW Performance and Wellbeing Framework – “Housed” theme:

- Include an indicator for the proportion of homes with basic accessibility features in the mainstream housing market. (**NSW Treasurer**, The Hon. Daniel Mookey MLC).
 - Establish a framework for accessible dwellings, including targets, data collection and accountability mechanisms, to enable reporting against the Performance and Wellbeing Framework. (**NSW Minister for Planning and Public Spaces**, The Hon Paul Scully MP)
3. Department of Planning to work with Local Councils to undertake a stocktake of the number of new homes with basic accessibility features in each LGA and publicly report this information by LGA so it is available to the public. (**NSW Minister for Planning and Public Spaces**, The Hon Paul Scully MP and **Local Councils**).
4. Mandate compliance with the NCC’s 7 Minimum Accessibility Standards:
- For all developers building residential properties on surplus public land in NSW, to meet for all homes built. (**Minister for Lands and Property**, the Hon. Stephen Kamper MP).
 - To qualify for access to the accelerated building approval pathway to incentivise voluntary compliance. (**NSW Minister for Planning and Public Spaces**, The Hon Paul Scully MP)
5. Issue an updated *Statement of Priorities* for the **Landcom Board** to include reference to

“accessible” housing and to revise Landcom’s current aim to include **a specific target for universal housing of 100 per cent (with reasons for exceptions to be publicly reported)**.^{13,14} (**Landcom Portfolio Minister NSW Minister for Planning and Public Spaces**, The Hon Paul Scully MP)

6. The **NSW Rental Commissioner** addresses the lack of information on rental homes with basic accessibility features to make it easier for people with accessibility needs to find suitable homes (working with **NSW Minister for Disability Inclusion**, The Hon Kate Washington MP).

Calling on the NSW Real Estate industry, Realestate.com and Domain.com

SCIA is calling for action that is cost neutral for the NSW real estate industry and leading websites, Realestate.com and Domain.com:

7. Access to information on accessible features available for all homes advertised for rent or for sale in NSW.

Better access to available information will:

- Make it easier for buyers and renters to find homes with basic accessible features.
- Support the functioning of the property market; and
- Help incentivise the building of homes with basic accessibility features – after all, this is a growing market.

Real estate agencies are currently not making available important information on accessible features as their client’s properties are advertised. This means homes with basic accessible features are often not found on real estate agency web sites, Realestate.com.au using site accessibility filters or Domain.com.au.

For example, selecting just three of the accessibility filters available in

Realestate.com.au (i.e. a step free entrance, wide doorways, and a roll in shower) showed only two properties available for rent in all Greater Sydney and only 4 houses for sale, as of February 9th, 2025.

Research shows that suitable and safe housing is key to healthy ageing and delays the need for institutional care. This helps avoid the public cost of building new hospitals and age care facilities as the population ages. Home living can reduce the need for care by 47 per cent¹⁵ and lead to a 40 per cent improvement in a person's quality of life.¹⁶

Effectively delaying institutional care by just five years through ageing in place can increase the individual's wellbeing, while reducing the burden to the healthcare system.¹⁷

Domain.com.au does not currently offer a search filter for accessible features in homes they advertise.

Without sharing information on accessible features that is available, it is harder for people living with mobility issues to participate in the housing market and find suitable

accommodation. It makes property searches much more difficult and costly than for the able-bodied population.

Note: This policy brief is underpinned by Australia's international commitments and national policy setting:

- Australia's commitment as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) – specifically, “Article 19 - Living independently and being included in the community” and “Article 9 – Accessibility” which aims “to enable disabled people to live independently ...and ensure disabled people have access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment.”
- Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031, the national framework to which all governments in Australia have committed. The Strategy represents a partnership with all State Governments to “*Increase the accessibility and availability of affordable housing for people with disability*”. The strategy includes the outcome of “Inclusive Homes and Communities” to address housing issues for people with disability, including those with age related disability.

Box 1 Disability Will Affect All Of Us At Some Point In Our Lives

Inaccessible housing can directly and adversely affect the daily lives of Australians who have mobility limitation, use a wheelchair or other mobility aids or who require care from other for self-care tasks, such as showering or toileting, which is provided either formally or informally.

Inaccessible housing can impact economic participation and also have a negative impact on family members and friends providing informal care to their loved ones by imposing restrictions on their ability to provide this care.

Older Australians who strongly prefer to age in place may also be negatively affected by inaccessible housing, which may limit their ability to age in their own home, and instead enter residential aged care earlier than they wanted to if home modifications are not possible.

In trying to find a place to live that meets their needs, people, sometimes hospitalised with disability and older Australians, may face multiple moves which creates financial and emotional stress.

The effects of inaccessible housing on people with mobility or self-care limitations or who are older can extend beyond coping with daily tasks to impacts on mental health and social isolation.

Other members of the community without mobility limitations may also find inaccessible housing creates challenges in their daily lives too; for example, people with temporary injuries and families with young dependants.

SOURCE | Source: Centre for International Economics, 2021

Footnotes and references

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14. Statement of Priorities reported in the *LandCom Statement of Corporate Intent 2024-25* and at <https://www.landcom.com.au/about/who-we-are/governance> (accessed February 2025). The Landcom Board’s current *Statement of Priorities* has no reference to universal (accessible) housing or a specific target. Landcom’s current aim is “to include a proportion of universal housing in each of our projects wherever appropriate”.
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Attachment A

The National Construction Code's Seven Accessible Design Features

1. A safe continuous and step free path of travel from the street entrance and / or parking area to a dwelling entrance that is level.
2. At least one, level (step-free) entrance into the dwelling.
3. Internal doors and corridors that facilitate comfortable and unimpeded movement between spaces.
4. A toilet on the ground (or entry) level that provides easy access.
5. A bathroom that contains a hobless shower recess.
6. Reinforced walls around the toilet, shower and bath to support the safe installation of grab rails at a later date.
7. Stairways designed to reduce the likelihood of injury and also enable future adaptation.