

Australian Network for Universal Housing Design

PO Box 666 STRAWBERRY HILLS 2012

SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION ON THE REFORM OF BUILDING REGULATION

Introduction

Australian Network for Universal Housing Design (ANUHD) is a national network of people and organisations working towards the adoption and implementation of universal design principles in housing for Australians of all ages and abilities.

The Australian Treasury has recently reported that the proportion of Australia's population aged over 65 years has grown from 8% in 1970-71 to 13% in 2001-02. Over the next 40 years, the proportion of the population over 65 years will almost double to around 25%.¹

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998) identified 19% of the population had a disability, 30% of those have a musculoskeletal condition (85% with an arthritic condition). The ABS Statistics also reported that 2.3 million people over 65 (976500 75+ years) 54% with a disability.²

In the absence of a national strategy to meet the housing needs of this population, **ANUHD is calling for access provisions in the Building Code of Australia for all new and extensively modified housing, based on universal design principles.**

ANUHD believes these access provisions will contribute to inclusive and ecologically, socially and economically sustainable communities by:

- meeting the housing needs of people of every age and ability, so they may participate in their community throughout their life;
- allowing for a diverse range of households to occupy a dwelling cost-effectively and equitably over its lifetime;
- providing for people to visit and stay in others' homes for an extended period at short notice;
- providing a place in which it is safe both to live and to work; and
- ensuring usability and aesthetics are mutually compatible and achieve broad market appeal.

Established in June 2002, ANUHD has:

- Gained the support of over 300 people with disability and older people, family members, professionals, government officials and industry representatives;
- Developed a position statement and performance requirements for the proposed provisions³;

- Worked collaboratively with the Australian Building Codes Board and the Victorian Building Commission to establish a research project on the need for accessible housing in Australia;
- Researched related initiatives throughout Australia and internationally in order to be well positioned to provide excellent advice and direction to any government or industry body that is able to further ANUHD's goal.

ANUHD's response to the Terms of Reference

In this submission ANUHD will concentrate on c, d, and e in the Terms of Reference.⁴

- c. whether the Inter Government Agreement is providing efficiency and cost effectiveness in meeting community expectations for health, safety and amenity in the design, construction and use of buildings through nationally consistent building codes, standards and regulatory systems*

The accepted national policy direction for the support of people with a disability and older people is through their active inclusion in regular communities for as long as possible and their "ageing in place". The availability of ordinary housing (that is, people's homes) which is safe and accessible is a fundamental building block of this policy direction. ANUHD cannot comment on past initiatives through national building regulation regarding accessible housing as there has not been any previous work in this area, beyond the references in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) Access to Premises consultations. **To date, no government or industry based initiative to increase the availability of accessible housing has successfully addressed the existing or future need.**

Since 1999, the Queensland Department of Housing has encouraged the private industry to adopt their Smart Housing guidelines. These include provisions for universal access. Similar strategies have been developed in other States, including ACT and Western Australia. All rely on the education and awareness-raising of the housing industry and the consumer. In spite of these excellent efforts, there has been minimal increase in the availability of housing for people with a disability or older people when and where they need it.

The only legislated provision for access in housing is in South Australia where one in twenty units in any development are required to be accessible. The industry has consistently avoided this provision and there has not been any significant increase in supply.

The experience of other developed countries can predict what strategies are likely to work best in Australia. Sweden has had an accessible housing standard since 1976, progressively strengthened since then. England and Wales (Part M) (Oct. 1999), Republic of Ireland (Jan. 2000), Scotland (Apr. 2000) and Northern Ireland (Apr.

2001) have introduced access requirements more recently. Already, further improvement on the Part M visitability regulations has been announced by the Building Regulations Minister in March 2004. This extension of the 1999 British regulations responds to criticism “that Part M as it stands is totally inadequate for housing” (Royal Institute of British Architects adviser). The Minister stated, “There will be financial benefits too for reduced expenditure on adaptations or moving people into residential care and further possible savings in health care and re-housing costs.”

The 1994 Japanese ‘Gold Plan’ set a series of ambitious targets for specialised aged housing through incentives. The targets weren’t met. In particular, the target for “care housing” fell short, with fewer than 7,000 of a planned 100,000 units built. An updated ‘New Gold Plan’ was issued. Regulations now require that all new housing, about one million units, should be built for 30 years of ‘liveability’, to universal design standards

Most comprehensive strategies in developed countries for the provision of accessible housing have been through national regulation. Alternative strategies such as education, awareness-raising or incentives typically have not persuaded housing providers to meet either the existing or projected need.

Given that voluntary and incentive-based attempts at accessible housing provision in other countries have failed and most developed countries have supported regulation, it is clear that the mechanism supporting the Inter Government Agreement will be the most efficient and cost effective means for achieving a meaningful outcome for Australia. Therefore, ANUHD supports “*building codes, standards and regulatory systems*”, as the best available mechanism “*in meeting community expectations for health, safety and amenity in the design, construction and use of buildings*”.

- d. *the need for on-going national co-ordination of the Building Code and related reforms;*

In the absence of any strategy by the Australian or State Governments to adequately address the need for accessible housing for the ageing and disabled Australian population, a number of local councils have considered strategies within their purview. This has led to a plethora of different initiatives, incentives and guidelines. The eventual outcome is likely to be a complex and frustrating environment for the housing and service industry and the consumer.

The Office of the Australian Building Codes Board has identified this development and has shown foresight and leadership in funding independent research (with the Victorian Building Commission (VBC)) to identify the best way forward. ANUHD supports this research and has offered to work collaboratively with

the Australian Building Codes Board and the Victorian Building Commission towards an outcome which will meet everyone's needs.

ANUHD recognises the importance of a national approach to building regulation not only for the industry, housing providers and consumers, but for the development of policy and service for the older and disabled Australian population. ANUHD supports the role of the Australian Government *"in the ongoing national co-ordination of the Building Code of Australia and related reforms"*.

e. the effectiveness of the Australian Government's current role in building regulatory reform.

ANUHD believes that the broad social issues to be addressed in building regulatory reform require a national approach and the involvement of many interests beyond the building sector. The proposed access provisions for housing will be influenced by national policy directions for older people, people with a disability, workplace health and safety provisions of workers and the support for families and other informal carers. A key national interest will be the escalating health and welfare budgets.

The Australian Government has recently demonstrated its effectiveness in its current role in building reform through its recent work on the DDA Access to Premises Standard. The Australian Building Codes Board was able to take a national leadership role and work with other national government bodies; in this case, the Attorney General's Department and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. The Australian Building Codes Board was also in the position to liaise effectively with national industry and consumer bodies.

ANUHD believes the recent development of the DDA Access to Premises Standard has amply illustrated *"the effectiveness of the Australian Government's current role in building regulatory reform"*.

¹ Australian Treasury The economic implications of an ageing population 2004

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, Disability, Ageing, and Carers 1998

³ **ANUHD recommends the following performance requirements for these provisions:**

1. There is a continuous accessible path of travel from the front boundary or car park and throughout the entry level of dwelling.
2. The entry is on the main level which has a living and food preparation area, an accessible shower, hand basin, WC and bedroom.
3. Living areas and bedrooms, when furnished, allow for adequate circulation space for a person using a wheelchair.
4. Doorways and corridors are wide enough to allow wheelchair users to manoeuvre into and out of rooms.
5. Door furniture, switches, controls and outlets are within reach of and can be used by all.

6. There is potential for future adaptation to dwellings with two or more levels for vertical access by wheelchair users.
7. Walls in WC and bathrooms are reinforced to enable future fixing of grab rails.

⁴The Commission is to Investigate progress in building regulatory reform in the building and construction sector since 1994 and the need and scope for further regulatory reform post-2005, including:

- a. whether the Inter Government Agreement on building regulation reform of 1994, as revised, is achieving its objectives;
- b. whether the Inter Government Agreement is producing gains for the industry and maximising net benefits for the Australian economy;
- c. whether the Inter Government Agreement is providing efficiency and cost effectiveness in meeting community expectations for health, safety and amenity in the design, construction and use of buildings through nationally consistent building codes, standards and regulatory systems;
- d. the need for on-going national co-ordination of the Building Code and related reforms; and
- e. the effectiveness of the Australian Government's current role in building regulatory reform.