

Submission on the Draft State Sustainability Strategy (Western Australia)

This submission is made in support of a policy, implemented through statutory provisions, that:

1. all new housing should be accessible and/or adaptable as soon as possible; and
2. the existing built environment should be systematically improved in its level of accessibility within timely deadlines.

1. Accessible housing

There are many people who are excluded from visiting their friends, neighbours, family and relatives and community gatherings (eg. book clubs) because little of current housing is readily accessible for people with a mobility impairment. Similarly, there are many people who cannot find appropriate housing, have to wait years before finding it, or permanently having to make do with inadequate and even dangerous housing, for themselves. These problems of exclusion, isolation and even discrimination, both in relation to housing for oneself and also for being able to visit others in their homes, are only going to increase with an ageing population.

A solution which starts to address this issue is for all new housing to be accessible and/or adaptable as soon as possible.

Financially effective

Whether a house is adaptable from the beginning has ramifications for affordability of accessible housing. Because building housing which is inaccessible from the beginning will result in 3 to 30 times the expenditure to modify the housing than what would be required if it was done at the beginning, and these substantial modification costs arise for people usually already on low incomes (Disability Support Pension) or who live on reduced income (eg. Age pension or Carers pension).

There is quite a lot of work showing the cost saving from building adaptable housing, both:

- Australian studies (eg. summary of May 1999 study for Dept of Urban Affairs and Planning -DUAP- NSW, to be found at www.act.gov.au/urbanservices/docs/biah.doc) and
- European studies (extensive research available from Joseph Rowntree Foundation – JRF-, UK, at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/housingtrust/lifetimehomes/>). The February JRF funded report states that savings are due to:
 - Reduced expenditure on adaptations
 - Savings in home care costs associated with heating
 - Savings associated with reduced accidents in the home
 - Savings in cost of removing adaptations in non Lifetime Homes
 - Delaying moves into residential care
 - Reduced need for temporary residential care

- Savings in health care costs
- Savings in re-housing costs

Ecologically sustainable

Design for all, or universal design, reduces the need to modify/ alter buildings with changing needs because the building was designed for a diversity of needs and uses from the beginning. Thus, with accessible housing which is based on universal design principles there will be less waste of materials due to elements of the housing otherwise having to be demolished, less need for new materials otherwise required by the replacement structure (and the energy which is 'embedded' in these materials), and less need for energy otherwise required in demolishing the old and building the new structure.

Personal and social benefits

The benefits in terms of

- much greater social inclusion of people with a mobility impairment
 - shorter waiting for appropriate housing and greater choice,
 - people being able to stay fitter longer and emotionally better through being able to readily move around the built environment independently for longer
- are pretty clear. Also,
- housing design and construction which does not take into account differing and changing needs (including ageing, disability and illness) can often make an already difficult situation in caring for someone more difficult still (whether that be 'informal' or voluntary care, or whether it be public, 'formal' or paid care).

Implementation

To make all new housing accessible and/or adaptable is probably best achieved through amendments to the Western Australian building legislation (relevant Act and/ or Building Regulations). This is due to long delays with the Australian Building Codes Board (ABCB) taking effective action on housing access amendments to the Building Code of Australia (BCA) with a 23 December 2002 ABCB media release suggesting that each State or Territory have to make their own decisions regarding housing access.

Precedents from other countries

Of course, 'visitability' of new housing to reduce the isolation of people with a mobility impairment has already begun in the UK and Ireland: introduction of housing 'visitability' requirements in England and Wales (October 1999), Republic of Ireland (January 2000), Scotland (April 2000) and Northern Ireland (April 2001). Further research in these jurisdictions has already been completed and more is being done to improve on these standards. In any case, England and Wales moved rather late in the piece since some other European countries had begun residential accessibility provisions up to twenty years ago or more. Australia is lagging well behind.

Even if a policy of requiring all new housing to be accessible was implemented immediately, it would take 50 years or more before a majority of housing was more readily accessible for people with a mobility impairment. Every day that such a policy languishes is, therefore, another day in which the opportunity is lost to start to turn the

present situation around and will contribute to increased personal, social, ecological and financial costs in the future.

2. Accessible public areas and facilities

Much of the public built environment remains inaccessible or only accessible with considerable difficulty, more than twenty years after the International Year for Disabled People (IYDP, 1981), passing of State disability discrimination legislation (Equal Opportunity Act) and more than ten years after the passing of the federal Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1992).

The proposed DDA Access to Premises standard now looks like not coming into operation until May 2005, and in any case will only deal with building applications made for buildings after that date. So that the DDA Access to Premises standard:

- will only patchily deal with accessibility to existing buildings that are being altered, and
- will do nothing to improve the current building-by-building, cumbersome, stressful and costly complaint-driven process for dealing with accessibility to existing buildings.

Implementation

To make all existing public facilities and areas accessible is probably best done through a combination of standards and deadlines and a monitoring authority, with both legislation (eg. amending the Equal Opportunity Act) and extending the existing building regulatory framework (eg. building legislation including Building Regulations).

This is not impossible. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) required “readily achievable” accessibility to public areas and facilities by January 1992, and provided for standards and a monitoring authority.

It is worth repeating, that a difficult to access or inaccessible public domain does not only exclude, isolate and discriminate, but it also reduces people’s ability to maintain their mobility and thus maintain their physical and emotional health for as long as would otherwise be possible.

Accessible housing policy and making the existing built environment more accessible, becomes more sensible by the day, as Australia's population including Western Australia is ageing but will also address already existing needs by large numbers of people with a mobility impairment and will in any case benefit everyone.

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