

# **Extended Abstract: From niche to mainstream: local government and the specialist disability housing sector.**

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The City of Whittlesea supports one of the fastest growing communities in Victoria. Located in the north east of Melbourne, it has a population of 220,000 and more than twelve housing developers active across the municipality. Whittlesea has a significant population of residents with disability including more than 11,000 people who need daily support to live independently in the community (.id 2020).

In 2016, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) rolled out across Melbourne's north east region, offering substantial investment for Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA). SDA combines accessible design, assistive technology and personal support models to create independent living opportunities for people with extreme functional impairments or very high support needs. Delivered as stand-alone housing, apartments, villas, duplexes and townhouses, SDA is creating unprecedented opportunities for people with significant disability to move beyond institutional living. An estimated 6% of NDIS participants will be eligible for SDA funding, including approximately 200 residents in Whittlesea (NDIA 2016:33; NDIA 2018: 5).

Whittlesea Council first became aware of the emerging SDA market as it began to impact the established supported accommodation sector. Advocates raised concerns that as the sector transitioned to the NDIS, there was a loss of housing options for adults with cognitive, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities who would not be eligible for SDA. Some individuals would now turn to the private rental market when they could no longer be cared for in their family homes. Simultaneously, a range of investors approached Council, seeking support for SDA developments. Some pre-applicants brought innovations in accessible design and integrated living while others satisfied the funding criteria for SDA but not the social intent.

Council recognised the need to engage more meaningfully with the SDA market, to better understand both the potential risks for residents with disability and the opportunities for accessible housing and integrated living across the community.

City of Whittlesea has a strong policy focus on access and inclusion and is one of only four Local Government signatories to the *Australian Network on Universal Housing Design Position Statement* that calls for national regulation to increase accessibility in housing. The Council has also established a range of strategy and policy initiatives seeking to increase the provision of accessible housing across the municipality.

The Whittlesea Access Team established a Disability Housing Project (the Project) to gather local data on the supply and demand for accessible and supported accommodation.

The Project established partnerships with the Strategic, Statutory and Social Planning teams and, over an 18-month period, ran a series of research and engagement activities. A disability housing needs survey was distributed to local disability services and placed online. Nearly two thirds (63%) of respondents reported needing daily support to live in the community and slightly more than one third (36%) wanted to find alternative accommodation that better supported their needs. The key barriers to respondents finding appropriate housing were a lack of accessible and affordable options in the community and confusion about the NDIS and available housing options beyond the NDIS.

Stakeholder interviews were conducted with local planners and developers, disability housing and support service providers and disability advocates and researchers. SDA providers were invited to present to Council's planning teams about issues in the emerging sector, and SDA client and applicant data was collected from housing providers. A key issue for the sector was a lack of market data indicating the level of demand for different types of SDA and the areas with greatest need in the community.

Progressive results from the Project were used to engage local governments and resident networks across Melbourne who had demonstrated an interest in housing. A discussion paper was released internally which informed other Council initiatives and raised potential opportunities in the planning space. In late 2019, the Access Team hosted a disability housing information session for residents and service providers and the strong response confirmed the need for a Council hosted disability housing network.

Through the gathering of local level data, cross-Council and cross-sectoral consultation and strengthening industry engagement, Council was able to identify potential responses to the emerging SDA sector that were consistent with its role and responsibilities.

Local governments are subject to regulatory requirements for housing that are determined largely by federal and state governments, as well as market forces that produce general housing stock. Land use planning definitions and third-party rights of review can stifle innovation and building regulations cannot guarantee that accessible features approved under the planning system will be implemented at the construction stage.

However, through its role as a regulator in the planning and building systems, local government can exert influence on accessible housing supply. One possible intervention is varying the local planning scheme to increase accessible housing as a proportion of the broader housing supply. Another option is that discretionary planning decisions respond to the merits of individual development proposals that deliver accessible housing, including SDA. The City of Whittlesea has utilised both these interventions in its strategic and policy responses to encourage greater accessibility and inclusion across the community.

Planners are not experts in disability housing, and this intervention requires meaningful engagement between the Statutory Planning and Access departments of Council. The collaborative work by Whittlesea's Access, Statutory Planning and Strategic Planning teams has highlighted the lack of planning and building regulations available to prevent poor housing models, including SDA proposals that will not adequately facilitate independent living for tenants.

The current challenge for the Access Team lies in how to integrate the results of the Disability Housing Project within the Council's future policy planning. Notwithstanding, the

Council now has the capacity to evolve a simple policy commitment, to increase accessible housing, into a more sophisticated response to a complex and changing housing sector.

### **References**

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