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**People's Commission into
the Housing Crisis**

Abundant Housing Network Australia | April 2024

WHO WE ARE

The Abundant Housing Network Australia is a national alliance of independent, grassroots campaigners working to build a new vision for housing and cities—one that's more sustainable, liveable and affordable for everyone.

Our members — Greater Canberra, Greater Brisbane, Sydney YIMBY and YIMBY Melbourne — came together in 2023 to forge a new urbanist politics that brings together renters, homeowners, planners, transport advocates and all lovers of cities.

We represent thousands of people across Australia who want to see their cities grow and mature, who want secure and affordable rentals and who want to live near their families, friends and communities — but who feel drowned out by a debate dominated by a few loud voices.

We believe housing abundance—**building more homes where people want to live**—is key to solving the housing crisis and building the kind of cities people love.

Abundance gives everyone greater choice in where they live, gives renters better bargaining power, encourages better use of public infrastructure, and is more environmentally sustainable than sprawl.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Abundant Housing Network Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We would like to pay our respects to their Elders, past and present.

A broken housing system hurts First Nations people more sharply than others and housing equity is a step on the path of justice and reconciliation we have failed to take.

We acknowledge that we are on stolen land and that sovereignty was never ceded.

This always was and always will be Aboriginal land.



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
1 UPZONING NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT	4
Greater protections are needed	6
2 EXCLUSIONARY CONSULTATION	7
3 FEUDAL LOCAL DEMOCRACY	9
Feudalism encroaches on broader democracy	10



INTRODUCTION

Everybody's Home has been a strong advocate and ally in highlighting the imperative of increasing Australia's ambition to build more community and public housing—which is often referred to via its umbrella term, social housing (SH). Much ink has been spilled in underlining how dire the housing crisis is and how little help all levels of governments have provided through the direct provisioning of housing to those who need it the most.

In our submission, we wanted to call attention to some fundamental barriers that threaten the wide provision of social housing that is often missing in the mainstream discourse:

1. Broad upzoning's effect on social housing
2. Community consultation reform
3. Renter democratic deficit in local democracy

1 | UPZONING NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

Broad upzoning is necessary, but not sufficient, for solving the housing affordability crisis. It however is a necessary precondition for any long-term strategy to bring down housing prices.

Whilst we, and much of the existing evidence¹, suggest that broad upzoning puts downward pressures on rents and house prices via the rapid building of market-rate housing, this section will primarily focus on a less discussed element of these reforms—the positive relationship between broad upzoning and social housing.

We only need to look across the pond to Aotearoa/New Zealand to see this flourishing relationship. Their state housing agency, Kainga Ora, was a vocal advocate for planning reform arguing for broad upzoning and the abolishment of overly restrictive heritage protections and low-density zoning throughout Auckland.² The positive outcomes of their advocacy work were highlighted in a recent working paper which found “the proportion of housing starts issued to government-controlled institutions has increased from 3.1% over the ten years prior to the [upzoning] reform, to 9.9% over the six years after”.³ This has primarily stemmed from the Auckland reforms increasing their 30 year housing capacity in the region from 213,000 to 422,000 additional dwellings—this higher yield per site significantly reduced their land costs per dwelling giving the state agency greater returns.

Closer to home, community housing providers and other advocacy organisations support many YIMBY reforms. Greater Canberra’s Missing Middle Canberra coalition is backed by multiple community housing providers, renters’ rights advocates and social services peak bodies.⁴ As a part of this coalition the CEO of YWCA Canberra, Frances Crimmins stated “increasing the supply of ‘missing middle’ housing in convenient and central locations must be on the table for planning reform if we are to address the increasing levels of housing crisis and homelessness among a growing cohort of Canberrans.”⁵

It’s worth noting that both Kainga Ora and its predecessor, Housing New Zealand, are beholden to local planning rules like that seen in NSW and ACT. However, in Victoria and Queensland⁶, their state housing agencies and/or community housing providers have streamlined processes that can bypass local planning rules. These bespoke planning processes are meant to shield social housing projects from restrictive zoning, however, they do little to insulate them from the political backlash provoked by vocal

¹ [Peter Tulip 2024](#)

² [Housing New Zealand 2016](#) (see page 30)

³ [Ryan Greenaway-McGrevy 2024](#)

⁴ [Missing Middle Canberra](#)

⁵ [Missing Middle Canberra](#)

⁶ [The State of Queensland \(Planning\) 2023](#)



minorities. Thus the relationship between the state's capacity to build SH projects and upzoning is less direct but still strong.

Examples of this are littered all over the website of Homes Victoria, Victoria's housing agency. Beginning in 2016, it took five years of 'community consultation' and another two months of 'additional community consultation' to even start building 178 affordable and social homes in Ashburton. In Prahran, a similar story: community consultation for 445 new social and private homes began in 2016 and ended in 2021, with completion estimated for 2024. These sorts of excessive delays not only mean those who need urgent housing need to wait longer, but it can add hundreds of thousands to project costs related to redesigns, wages and land holding costs. We'll revisit community consultation in a later section.

Tensions are often inflamed when the gap between the ambition of a social housing project strongly contrasts with exclusionary low-density zoning in inner-to-middle city suburbs. It is often unclear how much of the justifications of the opposition stems from genuine concern about perceived poor urban planning outcomes or post-rationalisation of suspicion of difference stemming from race and/or class prejudice.⁷ The prevalence of localism⁸ in Australia suggests the latter.

This is where broad upzoning via strategic planning is critical. Strategic planning processes allow broad community consultation to be inputted into metropolitan or local government-level plans. This creates clear, universal, and predictable rules, rather than decision-making on an arbitrary development-by-development basis where heavily localised and temporary and discriminatory opposition makes SH projects generally more difficult to execute than identical market-rate developments.

Another key benefit is that this allows SH providers to proceed quicker and more clearly when embarking on new projects. Understanding the final yield of a site at early stages such as at land acquisition is vital to ensure the viability of the project—this is more so important in community housing projects assisted by the government rather than fully public projects.

Furthermore, it's low-hanging fruit and a change that is entirely within the power of state/territory governments to enact quickly. A vast majority of urban planners⁹ and economists¹⁰ are in agreement about the various benefits of higher-density living from environmental to liveability.

⁷ [Fennell 2006](#)

⁸ [Manville et al 2021](#)

⁹ [Georgia Pozoukidou and Margarita Angelidou 2022](#)

¹⁰ [Matt Williamson 2024](#)

Greater protections are needed

We also urge for National Cabinet to come to a consistent national framework regarding SH projects. Representative community consultation—which will be explored in detail later—should be the primary basis for engaging with the local community, not local planning rules.

An egregious example is what happened with YWCA Canberra's YHomes Ainslie project which was to provide housing for older women experiencing homelessness or women fleeing domestic violence. Persistent objections by the Ainslie Residents Association cost YWCA over \$250k in legal expenses for a 9-unit medium-density development and ministerial intervention was required to get it built¹¹. These sorts of unnecessary delays only serve to make worse outcomes, not better ones.

At the bare minimum, all states and territories should protect SH projects from third-party appeals (where they exist) and exempt SH projects—with government involvement—from local planning rules.

Recommendations

1. The Commonwealth and states/territories should work together to broadly upzone Australia's main cities and around public transport corridors to assist in the increasing supply of non-market and market housing.
2. Implement a national approach to taxing windfall gains tax from the resulting upzone-induced increases in property values. The tax should remain on a state level and have a minimum of 70% hypothecated to non-market housing.
3. Social housing projects need to be protected from third-party appeals (where they exist).

¹¹ [Canberra Daily 2022](#)

2 | EXCLUSIONARY CONSULTATION

Diffuse benefits and concentrated costs lay at the heart of many of the failures leading to Australia's housing crisis—social housing is no different. In attempting to gain a social licence, SH developments usually go under extensive community consultation as a means to appease the demands of local homeowners. These consultation periods often lead to these projects being reduced in scope.

However, mounting evidence suggests that community consultations and optional democracy initiatives, particularly hyperlocal forms that permeate our planning system, are unrepresentative.¹² Our bureaucratic, overly technical planning system privileges the voices of older homeowners with the civic skills and networks to navigate it.¹³ This comes at the expense of renters, young families and aspirational residents who by chance of fate or privilege happen to not live in wealthy, desirable areas already. In essence, it is those who benefit the most from SH that are left out of the decision-making, whilst those with perceived costs dominate it.

A recent example of these exclusionary consultation practices comes from Ku-Ring-Gai Council in NSW when they attempted to engage with the community to provide feedback about NSW Government's announced housing policies. The results were stark. 77% of Ku-Ring-Gai are homeowners—whilst they made up a whopping 95% of the respondents. Renters make up 20% of the local community—whilst they only made up 4% of the respondents. This is just one of the many examples of the community consultation process being dominated by homeowners at the expense of renters—this feudalistic-type democracy will be expanded upon in a later section.

It is important to recognise that despite the dire need for more social housing in places where people want to live, it is often these neighbourhoods that contain the demographics that are *most* hostile to denser housing and SH projects. Research on Victoria found that objections and third-party appeals were correlated with areas with higher socio-economic advantage.¹⁴

Yet again we point to our sister nation, Aotearoa/New Zealand, for a case study in good representative consultation processes. Hutt City Council has been engaging in a representative citizens panel to complement their traditional opt-in consultation processes. When engaging with the community about council-wide upzoning their findings were consistent with the existing literature on self-selection bias with opt-in processes. The representative panel had 69% support for medium-density zones whilst the opt-in submissions found 44% support.¹⁵

¹² [Sightline 2022](#), [Vancouver Sun 2024](#)

¹³ [AHURI 2012](#), [Taylor 2013](#), [Einstein et al 2018](#)

¹⁴ [AHURI 2012](#)

¹⁵ [Greenaway-McGrevy & Maltman 2024](#)

Critical to underlining why short-term localised backlash should not be prioritised above the needs of the broader community is that interview-surveys of residents living near recently completed, but controversial, affordable housing proposals found that 78 percent of the respondents found little or no effect from the development.¹⁶ These sorts of findings suggest that objections are often rooted in fear of difference of tenants or fear of change. However, with the current social housing system these perceptions are increasingly threatened to be bought into reality as self-fulfilling prophecies. Rowland Atkinson and Keith Jacobs summed up perfectly in 2008:

Since admission to [social] housing is conferred by low income or high needs this has created pockets of exclusion and disadvantage, the worst off have been selected and gathered together.

This process has tended to be lost in public commentary which mistakes cause and effect and sees public tenants as welfare 'dependant' or uninterested in economic opportunities.

[Social] housing has created a system that collects the excluded, but further excludes residents from opportunities because of the secondary impacts of exclusion played out by the media, prevailing social values and the lack of accessible opportunities.¹⁷

We must address the structural issues in our planning system that empower the few actors that have vested interests or inherent biases before we can embark on ambitious SH programs.

Recommendations

4. During the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement negotiations, the Commonwealth should require the states and territories to switch all non-market housing projects to representative consultations, including community and expert panels for large projects and exempting small projects that comply with neighbourhood strategies supported by representative surveys of the community at large. Representative consultation processes should also be adopted for all strategic urban planning processes.
5. Encouraging state governments to create pilot programmes to facilitate the same for market housing over a certain value to create a strong dataset on bias in unrepresentative consultations.

¹⁶ [Davison et al 2013](#)

¹⁷ [Atkinson & Jacobs 2008](#)

3 | FEUDAL LOCAL DEMOCRACY

This is largely due to the democratic boundary problem which is concerned with the inherent conflict between boundaries as defined geographically and how people relate to each other and power.

In this case, the problem relates to how we define the city and how we elect those who make decisions over the future of it. The city as understood intuitively by most people is the metropolitan boundaries, most easily defined as the urban growth boundary—but no elected decision-makers represent that metropolis.

Australian urbanists have coined the term metropolitan disenfranchisement to describe how geographically small councils, particularly those that no longer represent a clear community of interest, systematically and often unconsciously privilege existing residents over future or aspirational ones.

In fact, councillors in the proper execution of their duties cannot privilege future or aspirational residents.

This results in a situation where economic pressures like rising rents or house prices displace someone further out of the city—but that dislocated person has no political influence over the council they were forced to leave in order to pressure that council to take steps to avoid similar displacement happening to others or to facilitate changes that would allow the dislocated person to return.

For example, a young family in the outer suburbs wanting to move closer to work in the city has no way to influence an inner urban council to facilitate more affordable housing for them. Nor can a renter from the inner city who is forced further from the city, their work and their community influence their local council to permit changes to their urban fabric that would prevent their friends being forced out too.

Rather, we elect state representatives who are concerned with a much larger area, or local councillors who are concerned with small (and shrinking with the states that have mandatory single-member wards) councils that reflect historic communities of interest rather than current ones. Research from the United States has shown that moving from at-large or multi-member districts on councils to single-member districts suppresses housing construction by as much as 25 per cent—even more so for apartment developments, an effect exacerbated by the district having a higher proportion of homeowners resident.¹⁸

This is indicative of the institutional power that homeowners have over local government which plays an important role in the conflict over SH projects. It's often these homeowner-dominated local governments that spearhead the backlash at proposed SH. Whilst this is a lethal combination in regions where SH is beholden to

¹⁸ [Mast 2020](#)

local planning rules, this regressive dynamic still plays a role in other regions. For example, in Victoria, the City of Boroondara has actively lobbied against SH projects and their planning rule exemptions numerous times over the past decade.

It's imperative to overcome these systematic issues. We believe the state and territory governments need to radically reconceptualise how our councils are designed in order to improve the democratic inclusion for the currently-alienated groups like renters and young families.

In particular, we echo the ideas proposed by the Municipal Association of Victoria and the Planning Institute of Australia¹⁹ in replacing our existing structure of atomised and unfit-for-purpose local councils with a single city-wide government or the systemic amalgamation of smaller councils.

These models are common around the world with many major cities like London, Barcelona, New York and Auckland—and closer to home in Brisbane and Canberra.

The Commonwealth government could help lead this reform by bringing it to National Cabinet and providing funding to help state and territory governments make the transition from fragmented local councils to metropolitan-wide governments.

Feudalism encroaches on broader democracy

We've previously called for a national renters' voice²⁰ and want to reiterate this call. This voice should be an ombudsman, a regulator and a reform commissioner all in one — for the simple reason that renters cannot reasonably be expected to advocate for themselves and to enforce their own rights when the reward is mere compliance and the risks are eviction, rent rises or blacklisting.

We also believe that renters are often excluded from decision-making spaces, whether those are government boards and advisory bodies, roundtables, consultations and surveys or indeed Parliamentary inquiries.

A critical part of rebalancing the exclusion of renters from the decision-making process would be to provide funding to the National Association of Renter's Organisations (NARO). They are an unfunded federation of State and Territory-based Tenants' Unions and Tenant Advice Services across Australia. NARO's membership comprises Tenants Queensland, the Tenants' Union ACT, the Tenants' Union of New South Wales, the Tenants' Union of Tasmania, the Tenants' Union of Victoria, Tenancy WA, the Darwin Community Legal Service, and Shelter South Australia.

Remedying the disenfranchisement of renters from our larger democratic systems will be a long journey but these recommendations offer a pathway to its restoration.

¹⁹ [The Age 2023](#)

²⁰ Abundant Housing Network Australia, [Submission No. 64 to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs](#) 2023 5-7 and 21-24

Recommendations

6. The Commonwealth pursues an agreement with National Cabinet to pursue the amalgamation of local metropolitan councils to create metropolitan-wide governments across Australia in the vein of Brisbane City Council.
7. National Cabinet adopt a national renters rights accord to set a minimum standard for rental regulation in Australia that improve renters' security, access to information, and conditions without the need for expensive or prolonged administrative processes initiated by renters.
8. Renter's voice models then should be adopted by the states/territories so renters can be included in decision-making processes.
9. That the Commonwealth Government fully fund the National Association of Renters Organisations (NARO) to allow them to properly represent tenants' interests across the country.

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