

Edited Transcript

Universal Design Conference

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Day 2

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HOUSE AND HOME

SESSION CHAIR, ASSOCIATE PROF. DIANA OLSBERG: I'd like first to welcome Dr Margaret Ward, who is co-convenor of the Australian Network for Universal Housing Design. (Applause).

Synopsis: While major industry players support the Livable Housing Design Guidelines, their implementation in mass market housing is not yet evident. This presentation takes the perspective of the Australian Network for Universal Housing Design and plots the history from the setting up of the National Dialogue for Universal Housing Design, to the development of the Livable Housing Design Guidelines, and the achievements to date of Livable Housing Australia. It asks the question – what more can be done to progress universal housing design in Australia?

Universal Housing Design: Let's get going!

DR MARGARET WARD: Today I'm speaking as the co-convenor of the Australian Network for Universal Housing Design. The story so far: in the National Disability Strategy, the Australian Government wrote "housing is a prerequisite for a happy and stable life". There is evidence that people with disability experience substantial barriers in finding a place to live, especially in the private market. The greater the take-up of universal design features, the more open the community is. This provides greater choice about where to live and also more social opportunities for visiting friends and family." Page 32.

In 2010, the National Dialogue for Universal Housing Design, or the national dialogue as I'll call it today, met at Kirribilli House in Sydney representing government, the housing industry and the community sectors, and I'd like to acknowledge Amelia Starr's particular work in that area, as she was then the convenor of the Australian Network for Universal Housing Design. Prior to that we had really come to a stalemate that no-one was listening, energy was low and a new tack had to be taken.

So with Bill Shorten, Amelia was able to bring these stakeholders together to work towards a national agreement. In this national agreement, they agreed to a voluntary transformation, systemic transformation, of housing practices with an aspirational target of all new housing providing minimum access features by 2020. Interim targets were also set and Liveable Housing Australia, a not for profit company, was charged with the task of implementing the agreement in 2011 and was funded by the Australian Government for the first four years.

The National Dialogue agreed that progress towards the achievement of the targets would be reviewed in 2013. In the absence of any review being undertaken, the Australian network for universal housing design, one of the original signatories to the agreement, with RI Australia, took this initiative.

So today I present the findings of this review, a report card as best we could do, and suggest that the Australian Government has three options in meeting this commitment as outlined in the National Housing Strategy.

As background, there have been many attempts to encourage the housing industry to improve their design to be more inclusive, and I'll describe this list. The Australian Standard, which Mark Relf talked about at length; there is also the MBA Housing for Life booklet in 2001, that was the ACT MBA; the Smart and Sustainable Homes program in Queensland, which was very well funded and built display homes across Queensland, not only demonstrated that universal design was possible, but also they included environmental sustainability features. That was defunded in 2009. New South Wales Government's Landcom produced an extremely good guideline in 2008. The ULDA in Queensland provided the Accessible Housing Guidelines in 2009 and the Victorian Build for Life campaign and website in 2009, and of course WA likes to do things differently, they have a Liveable Homes program that they established in 2010.

So we have a long history really of voluntary programs. But what made Livable Housing Design and this agreement at Kirribilli House different? First of all, it was an agreement with a number of sectors in the community. Not only was it the industry, but also the community sector.

Second, it was a national guideline and it had three levels in it. It was very comprehensive and drew from the experience of those other guidelines in the last decade. And the third is that there was a commitment for an open and transparent process where there would be measurable targets across the program. So we knew where we were going and how well we were doing, and I use "we", because Australian Network of Universal Housing Design was one of the signatories, so we had a real commitment to ensure that this was going to work.

So what were those targets? For all housing, it was 25% of all new housing being built - that's around 140,000 dwellings a year, so that's 35,000 dwellings by 2013, up to 35,000 each year by 2013. Now, that was ambitious, but heading on to 50% by 2015, I think it's 75% by 2017 - to 100% by 2020. So we see a growth over time.

For the social housing sector, the targets were more ambitious: 100% by 2011. That means that all social housing would have basic access features for visitability at the silver level; 50% gold by 2014, et cetera; to 100% gold level by 2019, ahead of the 2020 target. So we're all pretty pumped up by that and headed off.

Now, who were we? I'll just go through this. There were 13 participants that weren't government or observers. So there's the HIA and the MBA, both real heavy hitters in the housing industry; there were three large developers, that is Stockland, Lend Lease and Grocon; and the Property Council of Australia; and of interest here is the Australian Human Rights Commission; COTA Australia; and the Australian Network for Universal Housing Design; the Australian Local Government Association; and the Real Estate Institute of Australia. And also a representative from the National People with Disabilities and Carers Council, which now no longer exists.

As Amelia has often said, these are the heavy hitters and we could not have pulled together a more comprehensive and influential group if we had tried.

The strategies that Livable Housing Australia identified through the strategic plan of this National Dialogue was, first of all, leadership, took leadership, showed by doing, spoke out as needed; a

comprehensive certification program right across Australia; advocacy within government to influence government programs; and education of the industry and buyers. There are the four arms as outlined and there is more detail on the LHA website.

So what are the achievements? This is what we have seen to be the achievements at this point. First of all, there is a recognised brand now across Australia (Livable Housing). They have corporate support from a number of large developers and recently Meriton has come on board. There is a certification system across Australia with I think the latest figure I have is 31, or over 30, certifiers across Australia ready to go. And there's support from all levels of government picked up through the COAG process this agreement at Kirribilli House. So you will see in lots of documents now across Australia at the State and local government level with references to Livable Housing Australia and these targets.

So four years on - that's now, 2014, after the agreement was signed - there was meant to be, and perhaps may still be, a series of ongoing reviews, with the first in 2013 to identify areas of successful application, any barriers to uptake, and any need for other incentives. So really in the spirit of it being an open and transparent process, there was this commitment for ongoing review. So all the signatories knew exactly where it was going.

However, there was no review and perhaps this was because Bill Shorten, who was the instigator of the National Dialogue, was no longer in power. So at this point the Australian Network for Universal Housing Design decided that we would take the initiative.

So we wrote to Livable Housing Australia and we asked them for their results to date. Now, the only results that they have definitely documented are those that are from their certification process and these figures were given to me by Andrew Aitkin on 19 August. There are 109 platinum provisional - that means the buildings aren't built, but they're on plan at this point; 148 at gold level; and 28 at silver provisional level. But what has been built is 35 platinum level and 26 of these are from the Supported Accommodation Innovation Fund, which is a fund for specialist housing for people with disability and they're primarily in clusters, so there are no dwellings certified at gold level and there is one certified at silver level.

So in the email Andrew also said this, "There are currently 547 other dwellings registered for certification that have not been certified yet" - so they're registered waiting for certification, and I'm not sure whether that's dwellings or whether they're plans. Notwithstanding this result, Livable Housing is hopeful for increased figures, and I'll read again what he said, "We have seen a rapid increase in project registrations since the new website and online assessment portal was launched. Our self-assessment tool is being used on approximately 10 to 15 new dwelling assessments every week and we are continuing to refine our new systems to improve usability and update content. Recent media attention and social media activity has resulted in many more visits to our website and we have plans to enhance that activity to build brand awareness. We are finalising registrations for a couple of large projects that are expected to significantly change the number of plans yet to be built" - so not built, but plans - "and momentum is really starting to build up".

So we're hopeful there's action. Given that there are significant teething issues with LHA and in this process, we decided to look at these figures. So we added up all the certifications, built and unbuilt,

and we doubled the figures because we felt that there was most probably dwellings that hadn't decided to certify or that didn't know about Livable Housing, so we thought what the heck, we'll double the figures. And here is the graph depicting the situation.

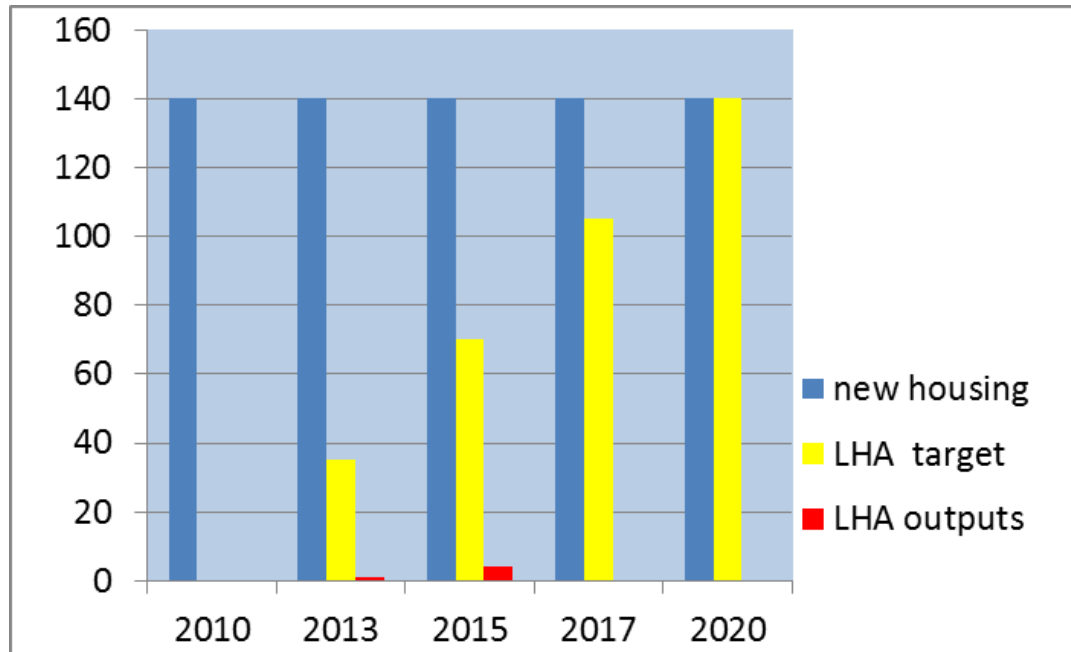


Figure 1: Number of visitable dwellings built compared to annual housing supply (,000)

The blue shows the average new dwellings built every year - that's around 140,000, a conservative figure. The HIA boast 160,000, but the Housing Supply Council speaks slightly less than that. So let me say there's wiggle room there, but around 140,000 shouldn't offend anybody.

The yellow shows the aspirational targets that this program, which is endorsed by the National Disability Strategy, hopes to reach, these are the targets. And the red is the achievements to date. I guess this shocks me. Unless we have an epiphany of some significant effect, we're in trouble.

So where does the Government stand on this issue? Well, the national disability strategy still stands, even though we have a new Government, apparently it's being reviewed but I have not seen the latest review. We have Aged Care Reforms rolling out and in the Productivity Commission's Report of 2011 there is a strong reference to Livable Housing Design and the National Dialogue being the key strategy to provide housing for older people in the future in the community.

We have, as I said before, a large number of State and Local Government policy documents that cite the National Dialogue's aspirational targets and Livable Housing Design, and we have the National Disability Insurance Scheme, which is about to release a paper on housing. We're all waiting, we've been waiting for a long time, those who have been waiting for it with me. However, in listening to Bruce Bonyhady at a number of events, he has also cited Livable Housing Design and the National Dialogue and the targets as the key strategy for providing Livable Housing Design in the long term for Australia.

Last of all, the Government has funded Livable Housing Australia and at this point holds the baby, so everyone has put it into the hands of Liveable Housing Australia to solve this issue.

So the Australian Network for Universal Housing Design, which is a group of volunteers who get on the phone once a month - and I do quite a lot of writing at 6 o'clock in the morning, to keep the communication going - we decided to move ahead with a report within the best capacity that we had. So what we did was we sent a letter to all the members of the National Dialogue and we asked them four questions: what are the barriers facing Livable Housing Australia in implementing the National Dialogue's strategic plan; what do you consider is required to reach the dialogue's 2020 target; what action does your organisation intend to take in the next three years to reach the target; and given the poor results to date - this was a little bit cheeky - what do you think about regulation?

Now, can I suggest we weren't overwhelmed with a response? The five representatives from the National Dialogue that responded were the Australian Institute of Architects, the Property Council, Master Builders Association, the National People with Disabilities and Carers Council and COTA Australia. The others didn't respond. I got some personal emails that were asked to be kept personal, but I wrote back and said "I'm sorry, that's no use to me, this is a public document and we would like you to answer the questions".

We got some lovely responses from those five. The four who are on the board of LHA all supported LHA, which is fair, I'm glad for the board that they were all supportive, and the National People with Disabilities and Carers Council representative, and can I say this no longer exists, so they really didn't have authority to speak, but it's the best we could do, said they wanted regulation, that the community was inaccessible for people with disabilities who were having a shocking time finding housing, as were older people, and we needed to get off our arse and do something. So it was a pretty strong letter - not quite those words, but yes, to that effect. So four one way, one the other.

But of concern is the lack of response from the three developers - the HIA and the Human Rights Commission. The other smaller players didn't respond either, the Real Estate Industry Association and the Australian Local Government Association.

We also held some consultations. The first consultation in Canberra in November 2012; the Sydney forum in 2013; and a Brisbane forum in May 2014. I'll go through the three consultations now.

The first one is - it's a bit rich, I guess, for us to bring this in. But it was a general forum around housing for people with disabilities and access and we hadn't decided to run this report card at this point, but I did pull out this key recommendation from that forum, which was "Whilst voluntary codes may assist governments and some developers, the general building industry requires a mandatory, regulatory process to ensure implementation". So there was a clear message from the forum that a voluntary approach was not going to work systemically.

The Sydney forum asked a much more pointed question: How do we get to the 2020 target? It wasn't an open forum, we asked key players - that's all the National Dialogue members, 30% government, 30% people who use housing, and 30% who are building, so we tried to get a cross-section. Our team in organising this was RI Australia, the Australian Network for Universal

Housing Design, and it was funded by Stockland. Stockland were enormously helpful here and gave us a fabulous lunch, fabulous venue, and a wonderful facilitator. And Livable Housing Australia also contributed.

Again, there were three top priorities out of that. The first was to provide regulation; the second was develop incentives; and the third was to educate builders and consumers.

The next one in Brisbane was more about how is this going to happen, what are we going to do? We had a big response from sponsors. We had 11 other organisations beyond ANUHD and RI Australia, so there appeared to be a growing interest in this issue. The outcomes were to get a comprehensive cost benefit analysis done, bringing in aged care reforms and the NDIS; actively lobby for regulation, we can't wait for the Government to get it; continue to support the work of LHA, it was fundamental work that needed to continue to happen to set the benchmark high; and to call the National Dialogue members to account. If you're going to sign this agreement, you've got to mean it.

So the conclusions: The Government at this point prefers a voluntary strategy. They're not going to go anywhere near regulation at this point. LHA are working as hard as they can within their capacity and they have done a marvellous job. The National Dialogue has lost interest - they're missing in action, particularly the industry, when asked to be called to account. And the current strategies are insufficient to get to the 2020 target.

So Australian Network for Universal Housing Design feels a little bit like this, the little kid that says "The king has no clothes on" and the Government is not really interested in hearing us.

So we think that there are three options here that the Government can take. The first is to forget the targets, and I would suggest that this under this Government is most probably what will happen, and the disinterest from the housing industry will only be overcome by pressure from the buying market at this point is our assessment. The second is that the Government should look at some financial incentives, either through the First Home Owners Grant or the last home owners grant and if they're committed to a voluntary approach, then incentives will be necessary, financial incentives. It has to be worth their while. Right now goodwill and education doesn't appear to be enough. The last, of course, is to regulate in the National Construction Code and if they're convinced that the targets must be met, then regulation will be the only way to get it there.

So our recommendations are to the Australian Government because it is ultimately their responsibility through the National Disability Strategy to make this happen. We're asking them to continue to support the 2020 target. We're going to ask them to accurately measure the progress of the voluntary approach. Now, just doubling figures is very poor research. There are people here who know of dwellings that reach those standards, but nobody knows about them, certainly users don't know about them, government doesn't know about them. It's a mishmash out there, and LHA is doing their best to track these, but all they can do is use their certification strategy.

If the 2015 target is not reached - that's 50% by next year, which is a little cheeky of us because it's going to take an epiphany to do that - we're asking for the Government to perform a cost benefit analysis of mandated access features and then regulate under the National Construction Code. So a full copy of the report is available on our website. So thank you. (Applause).

ASSOCIATE PROF. DIANA OLSBERG: I really would like you to address questions to Margaret. Who would like to start off?

DELEGATE: I assume it's not possible or you would have done it, but does local government - are they in a position to provide data on the amount of the 10% in new developments that is allocated to social housing or whatever that has to be adaptable, a lot of it? Are they in a position to provide any of that data to you or are they not bothering to keep it?

DR MARGARET WARD: We haven't done it to date. Our next step is to contact all the State Governments around what data they have around their social housing programs, but we need to remember that that's 4.7% of our housing and there's very little building actually happening now. So we had that as a second priority.

I think one of the dilemmas with the voluntary approach is that unless you have a certification strategy, you don't really know whether they're accessible, or what is there. Everyone here can tell you a story of when they thought something was accessible and it wasn't. So in that regard the certification process of Livable Housing Australia is a very important strategy because it's one way for consumers or users or buyers to know if a certain standard has been reached.

If the Government is going to rely on this program, they have to know what is out there, and they have no idea. I mean, it's all smoke and mirrors. It's all rhetoric. They have no idea really what's going on underneath.

DELEGATE: Look, I'm very aware of that, in that context I need to say even what they think is there won't be because there are private certifiers who sign off on things like access to premises who don't know what they're doing, so I think it's even worse than people think.

ASSOCIATE PROF. DIANA OLSBERG: I'll be able to take just one more question.

DELEGATE: I want to quickly get back to the actual builds that occurred versus the number of intended builds, because I think there are some interesting suggestions for government. You had 26 builds out of 35 you said I think were done under a particular government program.

DR MARGARET WARD: I'm not sure, but I guess that was part of the contract they had to be fully accessible.

DELEGATE: What I think is interesting and promising here is your group brought the horse to water and you actually identified the conditions that need to be present and one of them, the 26 out of 35, seems to be some kind of financial incentive or some kind of subsidisation.

DR MARGARET WARD: It's a contractual requirement.

DELEGATE: Right. So, second, some kind of national harmony, COAG, disappeared, no momentum. Third I guess is certification, so a voluntary means of encouraging the private sector. But fourth - this is really important - the continuing dialogue. That's why your group is so important,

that it has got all these people together, got the horse to water, and maybe those in the room who can have impact on the other factors can take a lesson from what you've already done. Apart from regulation, which is the most extreme, do you think significant progress could be made through financial incentives?

DR MARGARET WARD: Look, I don't know enough. In my research - I'm going to switch hats - that also came up as a possibility. In my research I stood in the shoes of the housing industry to hear what they had to say and they were very nervous of incentives because of two things – one is read tape, and the other that the goalpost shifting. It was for some political reason or some policy reason, and then when that policy went off the boil, the incentives left. A very good example of this is around the water tanks in Queensland, when there was a drought, they brought in incentives for water tanks and now there is not a drought, they've pulled the whole thing.