

## **Edited Transcript**

Universal Design Conference

Sydney Town Hall (Lower)

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Day 2

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## HOUSE AND HOME

**Session Chair: Assoc Prof Diana Olsberg**

**Shawn Neilson and Joel Elbourne: Banyule City Council - Liveable Housing Guidelines "Improving housing for people across their lifespan"**

*Synopsis: Shawn and Joel outline the process of engaging with developers to encourage the uptake of the Council's Liveable Housing Design Guidelines in new housing developments.*

ASSOCIATE PROF. DIANA OLSBERG: Welcome Shawn Neilson and Joel Elbourne from Banyule City Council in north east Melbourne. (Applause).

SHAWN NEILSON: We're going to talk to you today about our municipality, to improve homes and have liveable homes for people in our community. We will talk about our Liveable Housing Guidelines throughout our presentation, which are slightly different from Livable Housing Australia. Obviously it's complementary to the work they do, we chose the term liveable housing simply because it makes sense for what we're trying to achieve, homes liveable for people across the lifespan.

Our goal is really about having homes that work for people within Banyule. Banyule is a suburb or municipality north east of Melbourne, about 10 km from the city. It's an interesting place - lots of trees, quite an established population. We have areas that are very hilly varying topography, areas that are flat. We have a real mixture of people that live in our municipality. 33% of our population are over 50 and 37 in between 25 and 50. We have an ageing population, like much of Australia.

80% of our houses are separate houses, it's quite an established area, and another 18% are medium density, so four, five or so units, dwellings, per development. We see increasingly in certain areas, especially in activity centres, more higher density happening over time and a lot of our separate houses there, what we've seen recently one home is becoming three or four homes, being redeveloped for that purpose. So we've considered the landscape of our development and how we've thought about our project. Really what we want to talk to you about today is about making homes better.

JOEL ELBOURNE: What are our foundations? From my perspective, it was really the Victorian planning policy for development and that's the limitations here. Every permit we issue is perhaps a missed opportunity to actually make some improvement in this space. So what do we have in the Victorian policy? We've got RE code, our state standard for multi-unit developments. We also have a local objective in the housing policy in Banyule's planning scheme.

What does it talk about in Res Code, encouraging dwelling entries at the ground floor and residential buildings to be accessible, able to be easily made accessible to people with limited mobility. So there is not much depth to that. It's perhaps a missed opportunity there. Our local policy certainly is encouraging the right thing. This is one of hundreds of competing local policy objectives that the

planners need to balance up when they're making a decision on applications. We also had a drive from residents and identified from one of our councillors, an appreciation that people are wanting to age in their own homes and they simply can't.

SHAWN NEILSON: So acknowledging the foundations that we had and the limitations but also opportunities, we had to think about our design, how we'll design a project to reach our outcome. To do that, we thought about liveable housing features, and we tried to come up with a set of guidelines that apply in our municipality that are consistent and reference the other standards such as AS 4299 and the Livable Housing Guidelines. We haven't chosen all the standards, but we've tried to consider the types of developments we're seeing in Banyule, the likelihood of those new features being implemented, so how to be reasonable. But we know about the developers we're working with and we know what we could get implemented in local homes and we also wanted features that work for people, obviously.

We're dealing with doorway widths, layouts of bathrooms and showers. One key thing I wanted to talk about - this applies a lot to Banyule - we see heaps of developments with bedrooms upstairs, three or four townhouses on one block, one of the key features for us was bringing a bedroom to the ground floor. That has been an interesting feature to talk about really changing the landscape of design which we're seeing in Banyule a little more.

The key thing I'd say with our design of the project was thinking about features that were simple to understand for developers and for our planning officers, and easy to conceptualise how they would look in a new home, as well as consistent guidelines. When you have a loose kind of provision in your planning policy which talks about homes that meet the needs of people, it's a little bit loose to understand what that means. So we've tried to come up with a consistent set of guidelines that are quite specific and easy for people to understand.

JOEL ELBOURNE: Okay, so we've designed our house. How do we build this? We have 7 simple ways of achieving liveable housing outcomes. How do we get it happening on the ground? The implementation we think is the most critical and the most successful outcome of the project so far. On reflection, we think we're starting to foster a genuine appetite among designers and developers to improve housing accessibility and we've provided support for our planners and the designers in the tools that they need to achieve this.

We think we've got buy-in from the development community and our planners. How have we done this? From the planners' point of view, we've already got a planning process. We don't need to create a new one. In our approach, we suggest that it's easier to convince the market that this is a good thing to do, rather than ask the State Government to do it for us, waiting for two years for a planning scheme amendment or changes to the building regulations to maybe get a no at the end of that. Perhaps our approach is a little bit bullish. We're saying this is easy, guys, why don't you just do it? We haven't been challenged at the tribunal yet and I think it would be unlikely that somebody, having 99% of the boxes ticked, would dig their heels in because they're not willing to reinforce a particular component of the house to comply with our guidelines. It's low risk under the existing policy hooks that we have.

We also had an expert to assist the planners and the designers. From the designers' point of view,

we promoted the work that we're doing. We warmed them up, we held their hand, we coached them through the changes that we were implementing. We had a forum, which I guess celebrated the guidelines three months into their implementation.

We feel that our approach is flexible. We're only asking for this to occur for developments of three or more dwellings, and even then we're only asking for a minimum of one to comply. We don't think we're beating people over the head with this at this stage.

We think it's a common-sense approach and I can verify this. Michael is an architect I've dealt with for ten years, we talk monthly, he'll ring me up, we'll have conversations about him banging his head against the wall, what are your planners doing? He actually suggested that this makes sense and that's pretty high praise from a tough customer.

In terms of the market, we think we're adding housing diversity and we think we're starting to convince the developers of this. We're adding real value. We've talked today about the costs of retrofitting. We say that it's 22 times cheaper to our developers to incorporate the guidelines at the design phase rather than the retrofit. we're 15 months into implementation now, how are we going?

SHAWN NEILSON: We are planners, so we don't build houses, we approve applications for new homes, and we've been using this new approach since April last year. We're a small council in Victoria, we have a limited number of applications. But over that period of time, we've achieved about a 22 to 23% of applications for new dwellings that will incorporate our Liveable Housing Guidelines, which we think is quite successful. That's talking about applications for three to nine dwellings, we ask for one of those, and applications for 10 or more, we ask for a minimum of 20%.

It's good to keep in mind that it takes about two years from the planning process to construction. So we've yet to see the real on the ground outcomes, but what we have got is developers coming to the party and telling us how they're making their homes more liveable and we think that's a pretty good achievement over the past period of time.

Just a little bit of an indication of that, we've had applications for 1229 individual dwellings in that period of time, since April last year, for 3 or more dwellings. 276 of those will be liveable, which we think is a pretty good outcome in a short period of time. What I wanted to illustrate is for two dwellings, just for two dwellings, we promote our guidelines, we don't ask for them to be incorporated. We highly encourage it and our planners are now very competent in talking to developers about the merits and benefits of liveable design. But we had 296 applications for two or more dwellings. If we achieved half of those, half incorporation, you can see what a big impact that makes across a year.

So just thinking about those figures for one year and then across five years or ten years, with a pretty simple approach we think that our goal of actually impacting homes in Banyule for our community is something that is well and truly on track and achieving good things.

I think what we've tried to tell you a little bit today is that it is doable and we're a small local government who have been able to perhaps be a little bit cheeky, perhaps test the barriers of the

policy environment in Victoria, but what we've learnt is that people are coming along for the ride. I think when things are simple and easy to understand and when you engage the market, and engage our planners you can get success. There are some limitations which I'm sure you've heard a lot about over the last couple of days and there are definite options for solutions for regulation and so forth. As John mentioned, we didn't feel we wanted to wait for that. We wanted to try something and see what was happening. As we've covered today, we think that's been pretty successful.

We wanted quickly to lay out some of the opportunities of where we're going, some things we haven't done but we're interested in and concerned about. One is getting the homes built into the right hands. We're calling this liveable housing. We're not just designing for people with a disability or older people, we're designing for everybody. If we're limited and we're only achieving - only is one way to put it - 23% of homes, how do we ensure they're in the right hands? That's an interesting problem for us going into the future. The right hands could be anyone's hands from the point of view of universal design, but how does it get to the people in most need?

Marketing potential is interesting with this. We don't do a lot around the marketing of the end product, but we think that that's a real opportunity. As I said, our guidelines are consistent with those of other standards and the work of Livable Housing Australia. We think that that's an area of interest, how we make sure if people are coming along, which they are, but they get the maximum benefit out of being able to market products.

We're just about 12 months in on the project and it is no longer supported by any specialist officer. It just runs through our planning department. But perhaps in time we need to review how we could do more, increase the requirements a little bit, both in terms of design features but where we ask for them. That's something we're thinking about into the future.

Thank you. (Applause).

DIANA OLSBERG: So if we can possibly just have one question to start us off.

DELEGATE: This is a comment on all of the presentations and obviously there has been quite a bit of discussion about the difficulty of moving forward and that Government is not likely to regulate and that the other real potential driver is social pressure and pressure from consumers. Discussion at our table has been along the lines of what we need is either social media or someone like The Block to come in and do a universal design

JOEL ELBOURNE: We're certainly very interested in seeing the first one that will be built. We actually had a special episode of The Block filmed in Banyule. I'm not sure if it was an accessible outcome. But absolutely celebrating the outcomes when they are achieved.