

**Submission
No 56**

INQUIRY INTO APARTMENT DESIGN STANDARDS

Organisation: Yarra Ranges Council

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SUBMISSION

Inquiry into Apartment Design Standards

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yarraranges.vic.gov.au

TO: The Committee Manager
Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Yarra Ranges Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Apartment Design Standards for Victoria. This submission has been prepared by Council officers and is not a formal position of Yarra Ranges Council.

Yarra Ranges is the largest metropolitan Council in terms of land size in Melbourne. As an interface Council, Yarra Ranges plays an important role connecting urban and rural Victoria. The Inquiry into Apartment Design Standards provides an important opportunity for Council to provide feedback into the impact that apartment design and construction, is having, and will have on the urban areas within the Yarra Ranges. With over 50 town centres within the Yarra Ranges which include major activity centres (Lilydale; and Chirnside Park), large centres (Belgrave; Monbulk; Seville; Kilsyth; Mooroolbark; Mount Evelyn; Yarra Glen; Healesville; and Yarra Junction), as well as various small, local, and convenience centres situated throughout the municipality, Yarra Ranges is well positioned to provide unique insights and feedback to inform this inquiry.

The proposed changes are a positive approach, in the form of guidance, to improve the liveability for apartment development within Victoria, and in turn the Yarra Ranges. This submission is supportive of the current apartment living standards in Victoria. However, we also agree that improvements can be made to the liveability in apartments, and apartment building developments, including communal areas which are essential to creating apartments that can be lived in by all.

Please see Yarra Ranges Council response on the following pages which contains our response to the terms of reference.

Regards



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1. Council Profile

Yarra Ranges offers a mixture of urban and rural communities. Yarra Ranges is home to over 150,000 people and covers approximately 2,500km². The municipality stretches from the densely populated outer suburbs into the foothills, agricultural valleys and forested areas of the Great Dividing Ranges.

Around 70% of our population lives in urban areas, which represent only 3% of the Yarra Ranges landmass. The remaining population is distributed throughout rural areas. There are over 55 suburbs, townships, small communities and rural areas within the Shire, making it one of the most diverse of any municipality in the State. The municipality is home to significant natural reserves and boasts popular areas such as the Dandenong Ranges and the Upper Yarra Valley.

2. Introduction

The Inquiry into Apartment Design Standards provides an important opportunity for Yarra Ranges Council to provide feedback into the impact that apartment design and construction, is having, and will have on the urban areas within the Yarra Ranges. With over 50 town centres within the Yarra Ranges which include major activity centres (Lilydale; and Chirnside Park), large centres (Belgrave; Monbulk; Seville; Kilsyth; Mooroolbark; Mount Evelyn; Yarra Glen; Healesville; and Yarra Junction), as well as various small, local, and convenience centres situated throughout the municipality, Yarra Ranges Council is focused on creating apartments that can be lived in by all.

This submission presents key themes that Yarra Ranges believe are currently either underutilised or are not a focus of the Apartment Design Standards for Victoria but are relevant to creating places and local communities that are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. These key themes are presented more broadly within the responses to the terms of reference for this inquiry, and include:

1. Apartment locations within town centres
2. Staying in Place - Living in Place
3. Affordability



Lilydale Major Activity Centre

3. Terms of Reference

a) Current apartment living standards in Victoria

Apartment locations within town centres

The current Apartment Design Guidelines (Guidelines) and the Better Apartments in Neighbourhoods Standards (Standards) do not provide guidance on the preferred locations for new apartment buildings within urban areas, and specifically within town centres. The Guidelines focus on the individual site through Section 1 Siting and Building Arrangement, and the Standards in Clause 55.01-2 seek design response regarding the neighbourhood character and site description.

As neither the Guidelines or the Standards explore the ideal locations for apartments within urban areas, other mechanisms such as Structure Plans are required to provide direction of the future urban form, including appropriate apartment locations. This works for Metropolitan and Major Activity Centres which are more likely to have completed structure plans or be in the process of completing structure plans. However, other town centres including large centres, small centres, local centres and convenience centres are unlikely to demand investment required to undertake a structure plan. As such it is important that the Apartment Guidelines and Standards provide appropriate direction and insights into the preferred location and typology for apartment buildings.

The Guidelines do present the broad relationship between apartment typologies and context (Central City – Tower and Podium; Activity Centres; Neighbourhood Centres; and Residential Neighbourhoods). However, the Guidelines would benefit by going further to explore the relationship between the more detailed town centre typologies (metropolitan activity centre; major activity centre; large centre; small centre; local centre; and convenience centre) and the apartment typology preferred. The Standards also reflect this approach focusing on neighbourhood character and site description requirements which emphasise neighbouring properties rather than where in the neighbourhood that the apartment is best located.

Staying in place – Living in place

Yarra Ranges Council has a median age of 40, which is somewhat higher than that of Greater Melbourne (36), Victoria (37), and Australia (38). It is important that the Apartment Standards and Guidelines reflect the desire of an ageing population to remain living within the Yarra Ranges. The current Standards do touch on ‘accessibility’ in several Standards. However the guidance on providing diverse, inclusive, safe, and resilient apartments that allow all people, including those who wish to remain in the same area as they age, areas that they are familiar with, where they can access and service the majority of their needs, is critical to improving the liveability of apartments in the Yarra Ranges and Victoria.

Affordability

One of the most critical factors driving the ability for people to remain living in place is affordability. From the perspective of Local Government affordability is driven primarily from two areas: the cost of construction; and the cost of the apartment (either to rent or buy). Council invests significant effort and time in assessing apartment applications and is focused on ensuring that quality design and built form outcomes can be delivered and are affordable for our local communities, and within our local areas. In our experience we are often confronted with the challenge that applicants (developers) have with the burden of new standards and this often results in ongoing conflict regarding additional costs incurred by such standards. Our preference is to support applications that are well designed, of high quality, sustainable, deliverable, and affordable (for both developer, and purchaser).

b) Improvements that can be made to the liveability in apartments and apartment building developments, including communal areas

Apartment locations within town centres

The Guidelines and Standards could be improved to present specific apartment typologies (for example the block, the tower, courtyard apartments) as well as variants (for example tower with podium, shop top...) of these typologies and how relevant they are to particular urban areas and land forms. With Yarra Ranges home to over 50 town centres including major activity centres (Lilydale; and Chirnside Park), large centres (Belgrave; Monbulk; Seville; Kilsyth; Mooroolbark; Mount Evelyn; Yarra Glen; Healesville; and Yarra Junction), as well as various small, local, and convenience centres situated throughout the municipality diverse and context specific housing options are required to create apartments that suit the local site conditions and can be used by all.

The majority of town centres within the Yarra Ranges can be classified as small, local, and convenience centres and as such shop top apartments options will be particularly relevant within the context of these town centres. Shop top apartments can intensify uses within town centres where they have the most access to goods and services to support higher density living. In addition shop top housing can utilise existing development sites, rather than relying on vacant land to become available, which can increase risk locating apartments on inappropriate sites in unsuitable locations. In turn locating apartment buildings within these centres would also serve to activate these centres outside of business hours also adding to increased liveability with a mix of uses and users maximizing the benefits provided within these high amenity town centres. Shop top apartments locate housing directly within high amenity centres where residents have direct access to desired services necessary to facilitate liveable communities.

Staying in place – Living in place

Staying/Living in place is a term used to describe a person living in their preferred residence, for as long as they are capable, as they age. This includes being able to access services or other care they might need, over time as their needs change. Apartments can provide the dwelling types capable of providing Yarra Ranges residents with the ability to remain living in places of their choice where they can have the things that they need while maintaining their quality of life.

“Positive and informed attitudes to and by older Australians are fundamental to a successful ageing nation. Artificial and real barriers to older people’s participation in economic and social life need to be removed. This will require a different mind set about new infrastructure eg. housing design, location and availability, transport services, communications technology, etc that is age friendly for all members of society. Some rethinking of the suitability of existing facilities to meet the changing needs of a greater number of older people will also be required.”

(National Strategy for an Ageing Australia, 2001)

For apartments to be liveable they must be accessible. Universal Access is key to increasing the liveability of apartments, with the ability to access apartments of varying scales, sizes, and floors essential for residents who must also be comfortable when doing so. Universal access needs to be considered across apartment typologies, providing access to a range of apartment options for all residents who require universal access. The introduction of communal areas within the Standards is strongly supported with these spaces essential is providing access for residents as well as additional social and health benefits.

Well-designed high-density apartment buildings are critical to providing high quality and high amenity housing to create positive health outcomes for residents. Several apartment design features can have a significant impact on health outcomes. For example, noise from traffic and neighbours is a common issue

in apartment buildings that can be mitigated with good design practices improving wellbeing and vitality. Orientating rooms away from sources of noise can also mitigate negative health impacts. Communal spaces help encourage social contact and reduce isolation and loneliness among residents, with the added benefit of providing play spaces for children and adults alike. Gardens and green spaces can have a range of benefits, including improved mental health, improved quality of life, and enhanced community connection. Also, designing building lift lobbies to encourage residents to linger can also facilitate social interaction between building residents.

Affordability

62% of Yarra Ranges households are either couples with children (35.8%) or couples without children (26.2%) which when considered against that only 6.1% of the dwellings are medium or high density, compared to 33% in Greater Melbourne (<https://profile.id.com.au/yarra-ranges/dwellings>), highlights that families and older couples are not choosing to live in apartments within the Yarra Ranges. There are of course several reasons that lead to this outcome, however liveability and affordability would be two reasons that are driving this outcome. When apartments can cost just as much, if not more, than single dwellings on a lot it is difficult for prospective buyers, and for that matter renters, to choose apartments. Improving housing affordability, and liveability is critical to making apartment living more attractive and increasing the percentage of Yarra Ranges residents who live in medium or high-density dwellings.

In Yarra Ranges Council 46.4% of households had a mortgage compared to 34.3% in Greater Melbourne with renting in Yarra Ranges making up 14.1% compared to 28.8% for Greater Melbourne (<https://profile.id.com.au/yarra-ranges/tenure>). Yarra Ranges residents are more likely to choose to purchase (and have a mortgage) their home and less likely to choose to rent. Housing affordability is essential in reducing financial stress on households. To encourage increased apartment numbers within the Yarra Ranges new apartments must be high quality, designed to accommodate a range of household types including couples with, and couples without children, be liveable, and ultimately be affordable.

The Planning and Environment Act 1987 defines affordable housing as ‘housing, including social housing, that is appropriate for the housing needs of very low, low and moderate income households’. Social housing is housing that is provided to eligible households, with rents subsidised to ensure that households pay an affordable rent.

(<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/delivering-social-housing-affordable-housing-contribution>)

Apartment affordability will take cooperation among all partners in the apartment development process: developers; architects; builders; and policy makers at all levels of government to achieve success.

c) Initiatives undertaken by other states or nations that have improved apartment design standards

- Auckland Design Manual (<https://www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz/>)
 - Apartment Building Design (7.2 Apartment Building Types)
- Moreland Apartment Design Code (<https://www.moreland.vic.gov.au/globalassets/areas/amendments/amendmentslib-7208/c142/madc-reference-doc-september-2015.pdf/>)
- National Strategy for an Ageing Australia (2001) (<https://ifa.ngo/wp->

content/uploads/2012/11/062_Australia-2001-National-Strategy-for-an-Ageing-Australia.pdf)

- Heart Foundation - Healthy Active By Design (<https://www.healthyactivebydesign.com.au/design-features/buildings>)
- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>)
 - Goal 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities