

**Submission
No 58**

INQUIRY INTO APARTMENT DESIGN STANDARDS

Organisation: Commissioner for Senior Victorians

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Inquiry into apartment design standards

Submission



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**From the Office of Gerard Mansour
Commissioner for Senior Victorians
Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention**
e: commissionerforseniorvics@dfh.vic.gov.au
Facebook: www.facebook.com/seniorviccommissioner
LinkedIn: au.linkedin.com/in/gerard-mansour-02518531

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Demographics

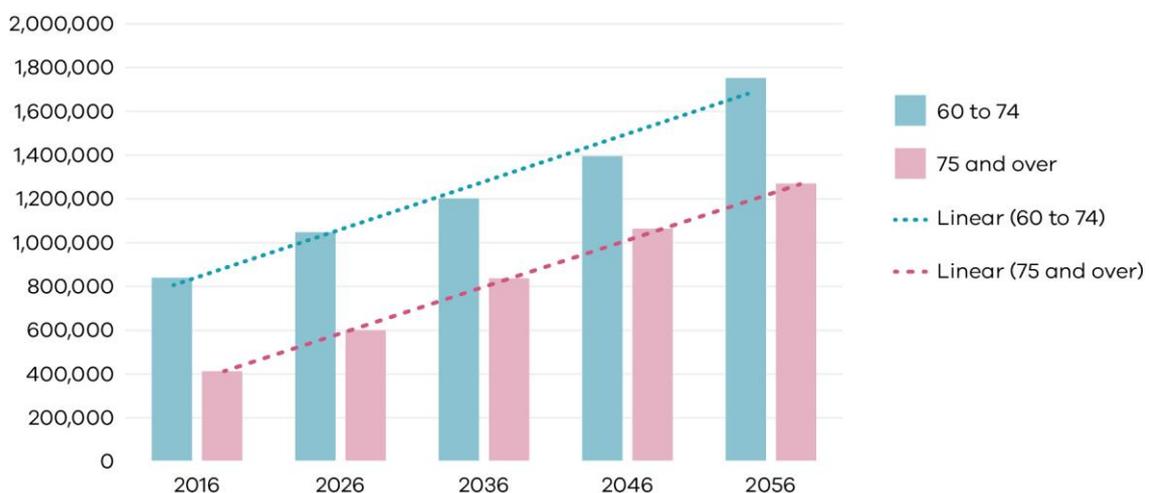
Victoria's population

Victoria's population is ageing and will continue to age for the next four decades, becoming more acute due to the two recent trends – declining fertility and cessation of immigration due to the pandemic.

Current generations of older people are living longer on average than prior generations. The number of people aged 65 years and over is predicted to almost triple by 2051. Those aged over 85 years are the fastest growing population group in Australia.

Figure 1 shows predicted Victorian population growth rates of people aged 60 to 74, and 75 and over, based on the 2016 census. The 60 to 74-year-old population is predicted to grow at an average of 2 per cent per annum over this and the next three decades. The 75 years and over population is predicted to grow at an average of 4 per cent per annum for two decades, slowing to an average of 2.3 per cent per annum for the following two decades.

Figure 1: Victorian population aged over 60 years – predicted growth 2016-2056



Source: Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) *Ageing well in a changing world*¹

Apartment residents

Information provided by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, also based on the 2016 census, states that 505,601 Victorians lived in apartment blocks. Eight per cent of apartment residents (40,594 people) were aged 50-59 years and 14 per cent (71,188) were aged 60 years and over.²

This means that more than one in five people living in apartments are likely to have an active interest in remaining in apartment accommodation as they grow older.

Older people living in apartment buildings are more likely to be renting than older people living in other types of housing (37 per cent compared to 24 per cent in semi-detached houses and eight per cent in separate houses).³

¹ Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) *Ageing well in a changing world*. <https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/services-information/commissioner-for-senior-victorians/ageing-well> p. 8 - accessed 20 April 2022

² Unpublished data provided by Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning – accessed 21 April 2022. Note: this data includes 8,514 tenants of state or territory housing authority owned apartments.

³ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. Op cit.

The growing trend for apartment living, combined with our ageing population, highlights the importance of implementing age-friendly apartment design standards now to meet the needs of future cohorts of older people.

Ageing in place

In November 2020, the Commissioner released his *Ageing well in a changing world* report,⁴ informed by an online survey completed by 4,726 individuals. Ninety seven (97) per cent ranked “having secure housing or accommodation” as a priority issue for their health, social wellbeing and independence. The report noted one of the most deeply held desires of older people is to remain in their homes and in their communities for as long as possible as they age:

*The survey data and other evidence of older people’s housing decisions unambiguously reveal that the majority of older people prefer to “age in place”. This does not necessarily mean never leaving the family home, although housing mobility does decline in old age. For many older people the “rubber band” attaching them to the family home is the desire to remain in the local community.*⁵

Enabling older people to “age in place” is a core policy of federal, state and local government in recognition that as the number of people over the age of 60 increases, there will be a growing need for practical in-home support and care so that people can live safely in their own homes. For example, Commonwealth Government aged care policies and funded programs encourage people to, where possible, age in their own homes and communities with the provision of in-home aged care, rather than be admitted to residential aged care.

What older people want

The importance of options to downsize

Older people moving from living in a suburban house on a quarter acre block or from a farm into town to an apartment are often motivated by a desire for less space to care for outside the dwelling. As well as assisting individuals in their search for suitable downsized housing, availability of appropriate apartment housing can free up valuable housing stock for younger families.

A recent report by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute noted downsizing “commonly defined as the act of older people moving to a dwelling with fewer bedrooms, a smaller land area and a lower value is viewed by Government as a way to address affordability and use the housing stock more efficiently”.⁶

Apartment design that meets changing needs

The ability of older people to ‘age in place’ is reliant on the availability of suitable housing. This includes having housing options to facilitate downsizing, affordable long-term rentals and having design features such as easy entry access and to limit risks of trips and falls. Low and no-cost universal design principles are available for builders and developers build into new housing to

⁴ Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) Op cit.

⁵ Australian Productivity Commission, *Housing Decisions for Older Australians*, 2015, p. 5. – referenced in Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) Op cit.

⁶ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (2019) <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/migration/documents/AHURI-Final-Report-321-Moving-downsizing-and-housing-equity-consumption-choices-of-older-Australians.pdf> - accessed 20 April 2022

avoid the need for later retrofitting. These include items such as bathroom rails, wider doorways, and external design minimising steps to facilitate safe use of mobility devices.

Apartment design guidelines are an important enabler of people being able to age in place. In this respect, important progress was made when the Australian Building Ministers approved the inclusion of Liveable Housing Design Guidelines silver standards for the next update of the National Construction Code, on 1 September 2022.⁷

In addition, the Ministers agreed that the Australian Building Codes Board will publish a voluntary gold technical standard for accessible housing.⁸ Constructing apartments to the gold technical standard rather than the silver level would significantly enhance the opportunity for people to age in place. This would have the dual benefit of enabling those living in apartments to remain there while they age as well as avoiding the need for more costly modifications when these may be required at a later date.

There would be significant benefit in highlighting these changes to the general community as well as the building industry. Consideration needs to be given to ensuring there are appropriate systems of monitoring that the new silver standard is applied in practice to the construction of apartments.

Opportunities for consideration:

- Identify opportunities to both promote and monitor implementation of the Liveable Housing Design Guidelines silver standard when these come into effect on 1 September 2022.
- Identify mechanisms to promote the benefits of the gold standard Liveable Housing Design Guidelines given their positive contribution to the aspiration to age in place.

Optimal space

The size and space available within apartments and apartment complexes are further important factors in facilitating ageing in place and in encouraging downsizers.

Apartment design should take into account a future when residents will grow increasingly frailer and need mobility aids. Ensuring new apartment and corresponding communal spaces are designed to accommodate people in older age can assist with freeing up other housing within the community.

Rooms in apartments, especially bedrooms and bathrooms, and the width of passages, walkways and doors should be able to accommodate equipment such as shower chairs, wheelchairs and walker frames and support workers providing assistance in the home.

Apartment complexes often locate storage space in garage and basement areas, accessed via a lift or stairs. While appropriate for belongings that are accessed infrequently, storage of items such as a large mobility aid in a basement is not appropriate for people using these aids on a daily basis.

Regularly used aids and equipment need to be safely stored in the apartment, not in basement storage. Insufficient storage space in an apartment can create fire and fall risks if aids and equipment are stored in halls or walkways through lack of alternatives.

⁷ Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources, *Building Ministers' Meeting: Communiqué April 2021*. <https://www.industry.gov.au/news/building-ministers-meeting-communique-april-2021> - accessed 4 May 2022

⁸ Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources (2021) Op cit.

Another factor that influences decisions to downsize is the size and number of bedrooms in the apartment. For example, the availability of a second bedroom can have the benefit of providing space for grandchildren to stay, room to store mobility equipment and an option for overnight care.

Well thought through design of communal areas in apartment complexes can facilitate and encourage community gathering, social interaction and inclusion for residents, for example, through a community garden, outdoor barbeque with comfortable seating.

The updated Victorian Better Apartments Design Standards⁹ which came into effect in 2021 include requirements for apartment buildings to provide green open space for residents and contribute to neighbourhood amenity; and to better respond to changing population trends.

These standards provide an opportunity for consideration of guidelines that support ongoing access to communal and open community spaces for people with changing accessibility needs as they age. This may include using equipment such as walking frames, motorised scooters and wheelchairs.

Opportunities for consideration:

- Identify ways to ensure the designs of apartments take into account the various factors that influence downsizing decisions, which include size of rooms, hallways and appropriate storage areas.
- Consider whether the existing accessible minimum requirements for open spaces, pedestrian connections and communal activities are fit for purpose to meet the objective of ageing in place.

Other key features

Design features which are relevant to all residents may have increased relevance for older people.

For example, energy efficiency and affect physical and mental health and wellbeing. Poorly designed apartments that are cold and difficult to heat in winter and/or hot and hard to cool in summer can have detrimental effects on older people's health. The associated heating and cooling costs may be beyond the capacity of some older people on limited fixed incomes, leading to financial stress and possible illness if temperatures in the home cannot be properly regulated

Supporting social connections

Strong social connections are essential to every person's quality of life and wellbeing, and older people are no different. The *Ageing well* report emphasised older people's desires to contribute their time, skills and experiences to their communities and the importance being a respected and valued member of their community.¹⁰

In 2016, the Commissioner released his report *Ageing is everyone's business – a report on isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians*, which estimated that one in ten older Victorians experience significant detrimental impacts from isolation and loneliness. The impacts of loneliness and social isolation include both mental and physical ill-health, and lessened capacity to cope with adversity and stress.¹¹

⁹ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2021) *Better apartments in neighbourhoods* - <https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/policy-and-strategy/better-apartments#documents> accessed 29 April 2022

¹⁰ Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) *Op cit.*, pp. 4-6

¹¹ Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2016) *Ageing is everyone's business*. pp. 12, 22

Many older people can struggle to connect with community in ways that are meaningful and enjoyable for them. Increased frailty, limited mobility and other factors can all contribute to older people becoming socially isolated. The Better Apartments Design Standards will support social connections for apartment residents through improved communal open space including landscaping to provide shade and providing easy to navigate pathways.

End Note

This inquiry provides the opportunity to formulate guidelines to improve the liveability in apartments and apartment building developments, including communal areas so residents of all ages can develop and maintain the social connections and networks necessary for a high quality of life.

Thus, the Committee is encouraged to consider 'ageing in place' as one of the key issues which impacts on the quality of life and wellbeing of senior Victorians.

Appendix 1: Commissioner for Senior Victorians

Gerard Mansour was appointed Victoria's first ever Commissioner for Senior Victorians in August 2013. The Victorian Government created this role as part of its response to the Victorian Parliamentary *Inquiry into Opportunities for Participation for Victorian Seniors*.

At the end of 2016, as part of the Victorian Government response to the Family Violence Royal Commission, the Commissioner was asked to play an additional role as Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention.

In May 2019, the Victorian Government announced the reappointment of Mr Mansour as the Commissioner for Senior Victorians for another four years.

The Commissioner for Senior Victorians provides advice to the Victorian Government on issues relevant to senior Victorians and positive ageing and participation, as well as being an independent public voice to educate the community on seniors' issues, actively promote the positive contribution of seniors and encourage seniors to fully participate in our community.

A key component of the role is to actively advocate for a "seniors' perspective" in government deliberations on issues relevant to senior Victorians including positive ageing, participation, and the needs of vulnerable, at risk and disadvantaged seniors.

The Commissioner meets regularly with seniors and seniors' organisations from across Victoria to discuss a wide range of matters relevant to people as they age, provides an independent public voice to educate the community on seniors' issues including prevention of elder abuse, actively promotes the positive contribution of seniors, encourages seniors to fully participate in our community and seeks to building greater respect for the rights of older people.

In November 2020, the Commissioner's report *Ageing well in a changing world* was released. Background research included an online survey, responded to by 4,726 individuals, who were asked to rank factors that research has identified as being important to independence as one ages.

The Commissioner also promotes community awareness and understanding of other matters such as advance care planning, powers of attorney and loneliness and isolation.

As the Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention, he has provided significant policy advice on the prevention of elder abuse, and the importance of supporting multicultural and emerging communities.