



# Planning for the inclusion of families with children in apartments

Policy Insights Paper

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## About the author

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## Executive summary

The NSW Government is currently proposing the most significant changes to planning control on new dwellings in decades. Positioned as a solution to housing supply and affordability, higher-density housing is front and centre of the proposed policy. Yet, questions have been raised around this planning agenda's capacity to appropriately respond to the needs of residents at different life stages.

By profiling the experiences of families raising children in apartments, this report demonstrates that alongside the supply of well-located higher-density housing, greater consideration of apartment design, quality and resident experiences is needed. Suggested policy opportunities show that feasible options exist for advancing the NSW Government's strategic goal of increasing affordability and supply, without losing sight of what diverse residents need from their homes. There is an opportunity for the NSW Government to become an exemplar for family-friendly apartment design and development.

Despite families comprising a growing cohort of apartment dwellers, they have been largely overlooked in urban policy and by the development industry. Child-blind design and assumptions that apartments are "temporary", "stepping stones" and "unsuitable for families" have contributed to a landscape where Australian apartments have largely failed to meet the needs and preferences of families with children.

With 1 in 4 apartments in Greater Sydney now home to families with children under the age of 15, it is critical that more attention is paid to family-friendly housing. The increase in families raising children in apartments is shaped by both lifestyle and affordability drivers. Importantly, there is evidence that families are drawn to compact city benefits such as proximity to work, transport and amenity. While this might be viewed as a compact city success, the story is more complex.

This report focuses on the experiences of families at the forefront of this housing shift in Australia, revealing the key challenges they confront including spatial constraints, inadequate storage, poor acoustic performance, a lack of play space, health and wellbeing concerns and inadequate family-friendly neighbourhood infrastructure.

Drawn toward apartment living for affordability and urban amenity, many families are committed to making apartment life work for as long as possible and adopt a range of strategies to do so, however there is only so much that individuals can change. Amidst the challenges and stress of trying to make family life fit into dwellings that are not suitable, families feel excluded from representations of apartment living and many find it difficult to envision apartment living as a long-term option.

A greater proportion of the population now live in apartments, and future generations are more likely to live in apartments across all life stages. Failure to accommodate families' needs in the design and delivery of apartment housing now will have significant consequences for the future success of compact cities.

Written at a critical point in time with major housing initiatives underway, this report provides opportunities for the NSW Government to build a denser city that is inclusive for a diversity of residents. This starts with learning from the lived experiences of apartment residents themselves – and shifting the focus beyond apartment supply, toward apartments as viable long-term homes.

The proposed opportunities for policy reform range from small changes to existing delivery models through to major housing systems reform. This includes greater involvement from the government in delivering suitable housing, improved policy and design, stronger regulation and compliance with best-practice design, support for retrofitting existing dwellings and ensuring local neighbourhoods provide family-friendly amenities and infrastructure.



## Policy opportunities

### 1) **Develop targets and benchmarks for responding to the needs of families, accompanied by detailed action plans and resourcing strategies**

Family-friendly apartment targets should be reflected in amendments to the NSW Government's Apartment Design Guide and Housing State Environmental Planning Policy. In addition, the National Housing Accord presents an opportunity for measures targeting 'unmet need' to address both the need for affordable housing, and the shortage of three-bedroom plus apartments. Local housing strategies, regional and district plans should also nominate targets to ensure an appropriate mix of family-friendly apartments within individual developments and at the neighbourhood scale.

### 2) **Expand government housing and further incentivise non-market housing**

Key mechanisms that the NSW Government and Commonwealth Government could adopt to increase the supply of public and affordable housing include development on government land, mandatory inclusionary zoning requirements and subsidies or support for non-market housing providers who face additional barriers when competing for access to land and finance. Through direct provision of housing, the NSW Government can take a leadership role in increasing family-friendly apartment supply, demonstrating design principles that can be replicated by the private sector.

### 3) **Revise housing policy and guidelines to better reflect the needs of families with children in apartments and higher-density neighbourhoods**

No state or territory in Australia currently has guidelines on family-friendly apartment living, and there is minimal mention of children's needs in broader design guides and high-density housing policy. Updates to the NSW Government's Apartment Design Guide across key areas of size, spatial layout, storage, sound transmission, thermal comfort and communal space are needed. Family-friendly design principles should also be included in endorsed pattern books to ensure an increase in supply equates to an increase in suitable supply. Local governments should be supported to set more ambitious targets in Local Environment Plans and Development Control Plans in response to local need.

#### **4) Improve the implementation of the Apartment Design Guide (ADG) criteria in new apartment developments, to reduce the design-implementation gap**

In order to improve housing outcomes in new market-led developments and reduce the design-implementation gap, alignment with the NSW Government's Apartment Design Guide best practice from assessment through to the development stage must be strengthened. The NSW Government should investigate mechanisms for encouraging better implementation.

#### **5) Encourage and support the retrofit of existing apartment dwellings**

It is important for the NSW Government and local governments to review opportunities for improving residents' experiences of existing apartment dwellings including support and incentives for owners to retrofit dwellings to bring them in line with updated standards. This is particularly important for improving environmental performance and comfort, sound transmission and safety standards.

#### **6) Strengthen minimum standards for rental properties**

Renters often cannot adjust spaces to feel at home, meet their needs, or to enhance the safety of their dwellings. In apartments, this may prove especially so due to the interconnected nature of individual dwellings. Policy reform by the NSW Government (and greater awareness of existing tenancy rights) to empower renters to make reasonable adjustments to properties (e.g. securing furniture to walls for safety purposes or adding additional mounted storage), would go some way to mitigating such stresses. Longer-term leases would also allow families to implement changes to make their apartments more suitable longer-term.

#### **7) Reform regulation of strata by-laws to better protect and support families in apartments**

The NSW Government's reform to better support families in apartments should include prohibiting by-laws that unreasonably restrict children's play. Better enforcement of by-laws on noise and behaviour to protect families who face threatening, angry, and discriminatory actions from neighbours or verbal disturbance such as abuse or banging on walls is also needed. In addition, by-laws should enable the implementation of balcony safety nets.



### **8) Ensure that family-friendly neighbourhood amenities keep pace with housing growth**

Local council planning and engagement teams must ensure apartment neighbourhoods respond to the needs of family households including appropriate provision of green space, safe active mobility routes, social infrastructure, schools, and childcare centres. State planning controls must ensure that they are not designed in such a way that local councils lose control of street interface and public space outcomes. Strategic long-term neighbourhood planning plays a crucial role in ensuring that increased density does not outpace neighbourhood amenity and quality of life.

A detailed outline of these opportunities is provided at the end of this report.

## **The compact city: delivering the numbers but not the diversity required**

Australian cities are currently facing a significant housing crisis, characterised by record-high unaffordability, reduced homeownership, a shortage of social housing and a rental system that is failing the most vulnerable. The scale of the issue and the probability of further deterioration have prompted ongoing calls for reform of housing-related policies.<sup>1</sup>

At the Commonwealth level, housing initiatives currently focusing on increasing supply of affordable housing can be seen in the National Housing Accord (NHA) and the Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF). The NHA, an agreement with state and territory governments, sets an aspirational target of constructing at least one million homes by 2029.<sup>2</sup> Alongside other states and territories, the NSW Minns Labor Government have made housing reform a centrepiece of their agenda, primarily focused on scaling up housing delivery.<sup>3</sup> An increase in medium and higher-density housing, delivered in “well-located areas within walking distance from transport and close to shops and services” forms a key part of this vision, to be backed by significant zoning reform.<sup>4</sup>

The scale of increased density within the proposed NSW planning reforms has caused significant debate, with key concerns relating to adequate infrastructure, loss of heritage and open space, and impacts on sense of place. Several local governments have expressed concern about the “one size fits all” approach and its impact on existing local strategic planning.<sup>5</sup> With the current scale and breadth of proposed planning reform, governments must not lose sight of the importance of good place-making at both the building and neighbourhood scales.

The focus on increasing supply by building up, rather than out, is not new. A more consolidated urban form has been the focus in Sydney since the 1980s. Yet, the growth in higher-density housing witnessed in recent decades (and proposed within current planning reform) is unprecedented, with strategic planning policies “each anticipating more growth than the last”.<sup>6</sup> In NSW, approximately 400,000 apartments have been built in the last 20 years.<sup>7</sup> This supply is largely delivered by the private housing development industry, who currently produce more than 97 per cent of Australia’s new homes.<sup>8</sup> While aligning with strategic planning objectives, research has demonstrated that the delivery of compact housing – increasingly through large high-rise apartment complexes – has predominantly been market-led and is therefore reflective of private sector development, finance, and investment interests rather than planning objectives or public needs.<sup>9</sup>

This raises concerns regarding the suitability and quality of the housing being delivered, particularly when it comes to the needs and preferences of diverse households. An increase in density continues to be framed around “well-located” housing, with less consideration of “well-designed” apartment housing. With housing increasingly viewed as an investment vehicle, the design of high-density housing reflects investor appetite rather than occupier desires.<sup>10</sup> The investor market is thought to be less concerned with amenity, liveability, and design than owner-occupiers. Research and government inquiries reveal that modern building practices, ineffective regulation and the operation of apartment markets and strata governance have resulted in widespread defects, associated with significant financial, social and health costs for residents.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the focus on the exchange value over the use value<sup>12</sup> has led to a mismatch between investor-driven supply and consumer demand, with consequences for liveability and residents’ wellbeing.<sup>13</sup> To ensure apartment dwellings become more suitable for a diversity of residents across different stages of life, we need to see a shift in thinking from focusing on “housing” to a focus on homes.

It is this mismatch and its implications for the resilience of the compact city agenda that forms the focus of this report. By shedding light on the experiences of families raising children in apartments, the report demonstrates that alongside the supply of housing, consideration of what we build and who we build for are equally important to economic, health and social wellbeing outcomes. While increasing housing supply and affordability is a key government priority, it is vital that dwellings meet the needs and preferences of a diverse range of households. Without strong leadership focused on housing suitability (supported by appropriate strategic planning and regulation), a market-led business-as-usual approach risks the delivery of poor-quality apartment housing that fails to address the needs of a significant proportion of residents.

*“To ensure apartment dwellings become more suitable for a diversity of residents across different stages of life, we need to see a shift in thinking from focusing on “housing” to a focus on homes.”*

To ensure apartment dwellings become more suitable for a diversity of residents across different stages of life, we need to see a shift in thinking from focusing on “housing” to a focus on homes. This requires learning from the lived experiences of apartment residents themselves. By exploring what prompts people to live in apartments, what they value, what challenges they face and what their aspirations are for the future, we can gain vital planning insights.

Focusing on families with children as a specific cohort of apartment residents provides insight for policymakers at a critical point in time. The number of families living in apartments in Australia has more than doubled in recent decades. In Greater Sydney, 1 in 4 apartments are home to families with children under the age of 15.<sup>14</sup> Despite this trend, this report presents evidence that apartment housing is not meeting the needs of family households in terms of size, design, infrastructure, quality, and affordability. Families continue to be overlooked in higher-density planning policies, and apartments are primarily designed and delivered with the assumption they will be occupied by households without children.<sup>15</sup>

This report outlines key challenges faced by families including spatial constraints within individual dwellings, inadequate storage, poor acoustic performance, a lack of play space, health and wellbeing concerns and lack of family-friendly neighbourhood infrastructure.

Importantly, it also reveals that despite significant challenges, families are committed to making apartment life work for as long as possible and adopt a range of strategies to do so. This demonstrates that alongside affordability pressures, there is a growing desire for urban family lifestyles.

In the current market, the struggle to find suitable apartments and the challenges and stress that result, lead many families to see apartment living as a transitional rather than long-term option. This threatens the resilience of higher-density housing policies – either families move away from urban centres to achieve more space with implications for urban productivity<sup>16</sup> and sustainability, or they continue living in apartments that do not meet their needs with negative consequences for health, wellbeing, and a sense of home.

This report reveals that adjustments to policies and practice are needed to create apartment homes that better cater to the needs and desires of family households. Children are a necessity for the future of the communities we live in and, therefore, how well cities respond to their needs should be a key measure of success. Failure to address the changing needs of this growing population of apartment residents risks undermining the social and economic resilience of NSW and Australian cities.





## Shifting trends in apartment living

### **Apartments framed as “temporary”, “stepping stones” and “unsuitable for families”**

Australian cities have traditionally been characterised by low-density, detached houses and cultural norms of home ownership. However, urban morphology is shifting with 2015 marking the first year in which apartment construction surpassed the construction of new detached dwellings.<sup>17</sup> Although apartments now comprise a sizeable and growing portion of our housing stock, cultural norms have not kept pace with either the changing urban form or shifting apartment demographics.

Social expectations to live in a detached house are particularly prevalent for families with children.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, apartment dwellings have been viewed as temporary phases, “stepping stones” towards the eventual purchase of a detached house, “appropriate only for people without families”<sup>19</sup> such as singles, couples and empty nesters. As noted by families themselves, “there is still this mindset that this [apartment] isn’t a home, this is just a transitory sort of place.”<sup>20</sup>

Social norms framing apartments as “temporary” and “unsuitable” for families are problematic for those who do live in apartments, impacting their sense of belonging. Qualitative research with parents in this setting demonstrates how they are confronted by these expectations in their daily lives:

*[It’s] such a strong Australian sentiment that, ‘What are you doing to your kids if you live in an apartment? They don’t have a backyard.’<sup>21</sup>*

*My dad was really appalled that we were buying an apartment... He was like ‘why are you spending so much money?’... and implying basically how can you raise a family in an apartment...<sup>22</sup>*

While apartments have traditionally been framed as a temporary phase in the pathway toward a detached suburban house, families in Australia are now increasingly raising their children in compact cities. Future generations are more likely to live in apartments across all stages of life.

## A growing cohort of apartment dwellers

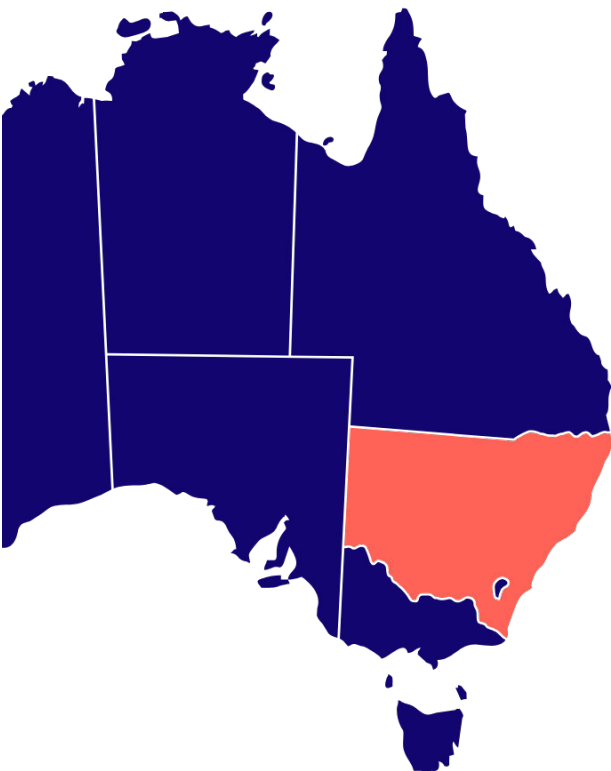
Across Australia, 1 in 5 apartments are occupied by couple and single parent households with children under the age of 15.<sup>23</sup> NSW has the highest number of apartment buildings, home to over 150,000 children living in apartments.

In Greater Sydney, 1 in 4 apartments are home to families with children, and in some local government areas, this figure is as high as 1 in 2.<sup>24</sup>

In 2021, 61 per cent of families in NSW apartments had one child in the family and 32 per cent had two children. Seven per cent of households had three or more children.

At the most recent census, the majority of families across NSW lived in two-bedroom apartments (68 per cent), with 25 per cent in three-bedroom apartments. 37 per cent of families in NSW apartments are owner-occupiers, and 61 per cent inhabit investor-owned properties as renters.<sup>25</sup>

## In numbers: Families in NSW apartments



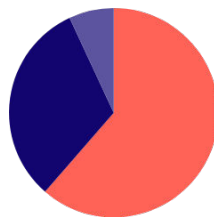
**150,000**

Children in NSW  
live in apartments



**1 in 4**

Apartments are home to  
families with children in  
Greater Sydney



Families in NSW apartments:

**61% have 1 child**

**32% have 2 children**

**7% have 3 or more children**

**68%**



of NSW families lived in 2  
bedroom apartments



**1 in 5**

Apartments in Australia are occupied  
by couple or single parent households  
with children under the age of 15

The increase in families in apartments is shaped by a multitude of factors. For some, apartments are the only affordable and accessible housing option. For others, apartment living results from a combination of affordability pressures and lifestyle factors including: proximity to work, school, transport nodes and amenities, work-life balance, lower maintenance, walkability and a strong sense of connection and community.<sup>26</sup> Interviews with families capture a diversity of motivations and constraints:

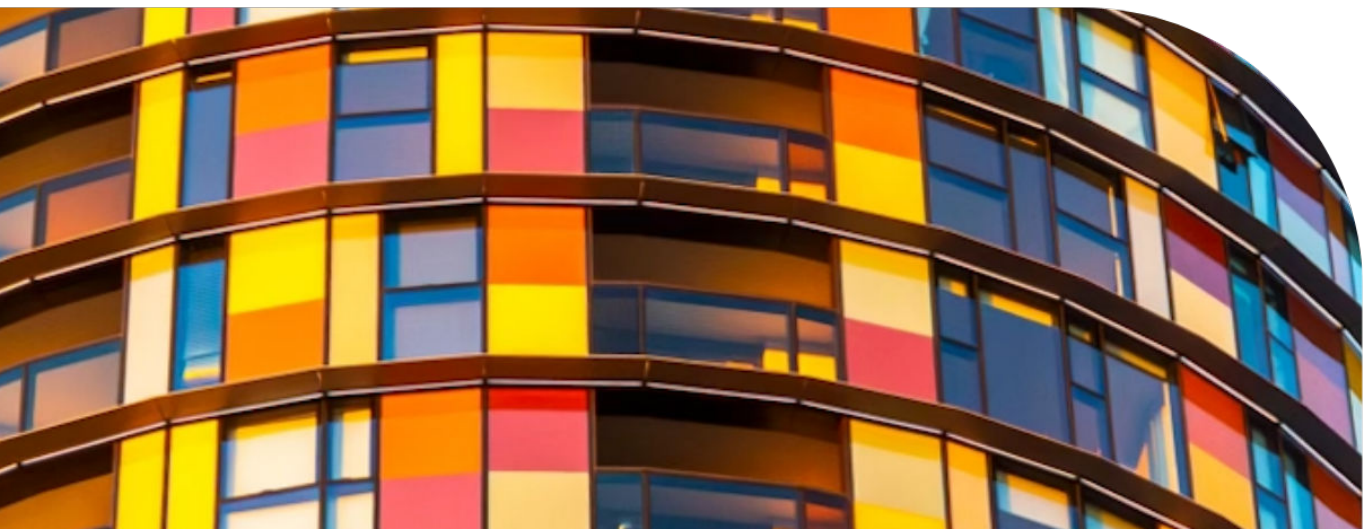
*When you have a new baby... time becomes very precious and so living in an apartment just gives you like a bit more time, per se, because there are less responsibilities and things that you need to do.<sup>27</sup>*

*It is beautiful here – close to the parks, close to the beach, close to the mall... I'd rather be here and in an apartment, than in the suburbs and be in a house.<sup>28</sup>*

*The reality is, if we could afford a house in Cronulla, we'd definitely have a house... But we also prefer to live where we like rather than in a house somewhere we don't like.<sup>29</sup>*

*We looked for a specific location that would be easy for the kids to be going to school without pressure for me being forced to pick them up, that was the priority, being close to the station.<sup>30</sup>*

Whether by preference or constraint, the increasing number of families living in market-led apartment developments represents an urgent planning challenge: “what is best for an investor (or landlord) is not suitable for families”.<sup>31</sup> While parents identify many advantages to living in an apartment (mostly based on location rather than the housing form itself), as detailed in the following section their everyday experience of apartment homes is more fraught and complex.



## Families' experiences of apartment living

Apartment developments designed with a narrow target market in mind (i.e. investor, childless) have resulted in children's needs being overlooked in the planning and design of apartment housing. Mounting evidence reveals how child-blind housing and planning has resulted in key challenges for families with children, including:

- spatial constraints within individual dwellings
- inadequate storage
- poor acoustic performance
- a lack of family-friendly communal space
- health and wellbeing concerns
- adult-centric higher-density neighbourhoods

These factors have consequences for apartment liveability and resident wellbeing and satisfaction. As detailed below, while families devise complex strategies to make family life fit into dwellings that are not designed with their needs in mind, these strategies require significant material and emotional work, prompting some families to question their ability to raise their children in apartment homes in the longer term.

The following sections outline evidence of these challenges thematically, and propose detailed policy opportunities for improvements in design, development and regulation that would enable apartments to better meet families' needs and preferences.

### Size and layout

The size, layout and functionality of apartment space are key to resident satisfaction, with research demonstrating 'a clear positive association between larger unit size and increased satisfaction'.<sup>32</sup> Research focusing on the experiences of families has identified key physical and emotional challenges stemming from the material constraints of apartment living with children. Common design shortfalls include a limited supply of affordable three- to four-bedroom apartments and inflexible and, at times, dysfunctional spatial layouts.

There is a mismatch between demand for spacious apartments versus supply. In a study drawing on analysis of 2016 census data in Liverpool, Western Sydney, 50.3 per cent of Liverpool Central Business District (CBD) apartments were occupied by families.<sup>33</sup> Despite the large proportion of family households living in apartments, most apartments in 2016 were two-bedroom apartments (76 per cent), followed by a significantly smaller proportion of three-bedroom apartments (15 per cent).



The undersupply of three-bedroom apartments in Liverpool is consistent across Sydney. Reflective of an investor-driven apartment market, the vast majority of apartments are one- to two-bedroom dwellings. Families are acutely aware of this shortfall through their own experiences trying to secure suitable properties:

*On our floor, there are ten apartments: there's two one-bedroom apartments, there's one three-bedroom apartment and then there are seven two-bedroom apartments. So, in terms of ratio of apartments, there's really only one family that could live across these ten apartments, which is pretty low... I don't think the buildings are ready for families... [Government] sell off the land, but they don't really then ensure that building developers are creating apartment spaces that are practical for families.<sup>34</sup>*

In addition to supply, affordability of three-bedroom apartments is an issue. Whether because of development costs or real-estate premium due to limited stock, larger apartments tend to come with a price tag. According to recent reporting, the median price of a three-bedroom apartment in Sydney is \$1.3 million.<sup>35</sup> The rarity of obtaining an affordable three-bedroom apartment leads some families to compromise and make trade-offs on other apartment features to secure the desired numbers of bedrooms:

*When we lived in our last unit the Holy Grail was a three-bedroom unit... We started looking at three-bedroom units and honestly, on our budget... there was probably three that came up in a year [in their suburb] 'cause there's just no three-bedroom units in Australia... [We thought] if we don't get this one, we're never going to get [a three-bedroom apartment], we're going to be living in a two-bedroom unit forever. So even though it wasn't perfect and the lounge room's really small and we probably wanted a bigger balcony for the kids, we were like, well this is our chance and so we just did it.<sup>36</sup>*

Beyond the number of bedrooms, size and layout of bedrooms also present challenges:

*There's a lot of places where the dimensions are just wrong... if you're actually spending a lot of time in your apartment, a lot of them are just too small or they just haven't worked out how to use the space... it is actually really hard to find somewhere that is suitable for a family.<sup>37</sup>*

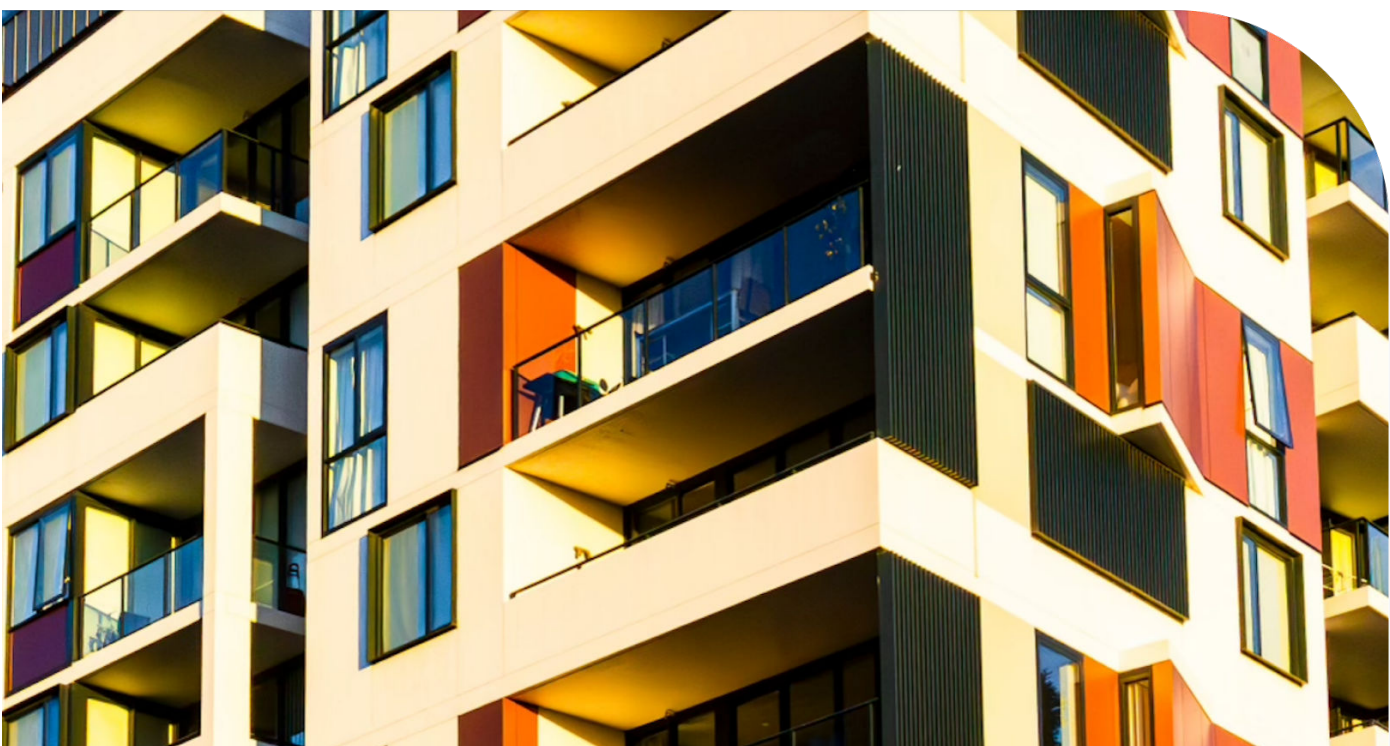
*When it came to building, the builders were trying to build quickly and make as much money as they could from the build without really considering families and people and who would be living in the spaces... To get two beds into the boys' room is actually really awkward... there's not that much space between the two beds and the [built-in] wardrobe. Or we could have had one bed up against the window which, with kids, I don't think ... would have been very safe... and then in the main bedroom, it's the same... In the plans for the apartments, they just have a queen bed in each bedroom....<sup>38</sup>*

Child-blind apartment design also presents challenges with everyday activities and balancing the conflicting needs of various family members, such as washing clothes, cooking, bathing children, entertaining and accommodating guests. Parents report challenges washing and drying children's clothing due to impractical sinks and limited space for hanging washing with by-laws restricting drying clothing on balconies, prioritising aesthetics over practicality.<sup>39</sup> For some households this can result in over-reliance on clothes dryers, raising questions around the sustainability of apartment practices.<sup>40</sup> Design constraints in apartments also force families to compromise on cooking and eating. Key challenges include limited bench space making food preparation with children challenging or dangerous, lack of kitchen storage and lack of dining space for eating as a family.<sup>41</sup> Multiple studies report how apartments restrict families' ability to host guests, challenging parents' satisfaction and clashing with their ideals of home.<sup>42</sup> While some households can use communal spaces to host outside their apartment, this option is not available to all. For some families, the lack of ability to host causes them to feel embarrassed or judged, ultimately leading to a sense of 'house envy' or a desire for more space.<sup>43</sup>

A significant theme emerging in this research is the need for negotiation and compromise between family members. While families in detached houses can achieve privacy and separation between children and adult spaces or activities,<sup>44</sup> physical separation in an apartment is more difficult and may challenge perceptions of ideal family life and homemaking aesthetics.<sup>45</sup> Mothers report feeling “irritable” with family members due to being “cramped” in close quarters.<sup>46</sup>

Another point of tension arises from living rooms being overtaken by children and their belongings due to limited floor space for play in their bedrooms.<sup>47</sup> Working from home creates additional challenges for physical and aural separation.<sup>48</sup>

Families employ complex strategies to transform apartment spaces to suit their day-to-day needs, particularly as families grow and their needs change. This includes using the same space for multiple different purposes, giving children the larger room to accommodate sleep and play and utilising balconies as extensions of the living space. Some families obtain professional advice and make modifications to their apartments to improve efficiency of space. At the more extreme end, other families limit their fertility to remain in their current apartment, aware that the addition of another child would not be possible within the spatial constraints of their dwelling.<sup>49</sup> However, many strategies only work for so long – research has captured parental concern about how their apartments would continue to work as children age and their need for private and study space increases. Stress and frustration emerge when the material form of the apartment does not provide the flexibility to be adapted to families’ everyday domestic practices and desires, causing them to question their ability to remain in their apartments in the longer term.



## Storage

For many families, storage of belongings is often referenced as a challenge in apartment living. Children's items – prams, toys, baby change tables, bikes, Tupperware, boxes of clothing – are often stored across the apartment, not just in designated bedrooms. Managing these belongings requires constant negotiation to avoid clutter and maximise the use of space.

For some families, insufficient storage space or poorly designed storage space is a source of stress:

*It lacks storage room that is the only thing that bothers me. It seems like the house explodes every now and then and there are things everywhere that I don't know how to put away... we don't have places to put things... there is no closet in here, there's no [built-in] wardrobe.<sup>50</sup>*

*The wardrobes are really crap because they're so poorly designed, cheap...because of the lack of space, you can't really get into them... All [my daughter's] clothes are in the playroom cupboard because we haven't got room in the other bedroom for everyone's clothes. And the cupboards are really bad 'cause they're so cramped. Yes, storage is very much an issue.<sup>51</sup>*

Apartment living heightens families' awareness of "stuff", requiring strategies for accumulating things such as one in, one out consumption practices and creative storage solutions. Parents purchase specific furniture with storage capacity in mind. They also develop "sophisticated systems for sorting and storing their possessions to maximise their storage."<sup>52</sup> Bulky items such as prams commonly cause challenges and are left in entry ways, described as "unresolved issues".<sup>53</sup> Lock up garages are valued for their capacity to store overflow of belongings (often more so than as a space for the car). However, as many newer apartments contain car spaces,<sup>54</sup> many families rely on storage cages or units in underground parking bays.<sup>55</sup> Some families also rely on external storage facilities or use parents' houses for overflow beyond their apartment complex.<sup>56</sup>

Despite their best efforts to organise belongings, the inadequacy of space and built-in storage in many apartment dwellings results in some households feeling "inundated" and "crowded and claustrophobic".<sup>57</sup> Trying to manage decisions around storage, consumption and ridding is emotionally taxing and impacts parents' ideal homemaking practices.<sup>58</sup>



One study reported that for some families, “boxes were stacked against walls making small rooms smaller and narrow corridors narrower.”<sup>59</sup> The inability to fit family life and associated belongings into small apartments leads some households to render their apartments no longer liveable, prompting plans to relocate.

## Sound

A common expectation is that a home is a place of peace, quiet and privacy. A “good” apartment neighbour avoids sounds that penetrate neighbours’ homes. However, this is near impossible when children are involved – and particularly when apartments are poorly designed acoustically. Shared walls and floors/ceilings in apartment living create an emotional dilemma between being a good parent and a good neighbour. While parents want to allow children to be children, which comes with play and noise, many families are anxious about annoying the neighbours, resulting in constant stress about the sounds of daily family life disturbing others.<sup>60</sup>

Parents report feeling particularly stressed by children crying at night and running during the day. With children waking in the night, some families received angry letters from neighbours, or heard them call out or bang on walls and ceilings in midnight protests. One mother described the difficult juggling act of an unsettled baby and an upset neighbour:

*[The neighbour] called out ... ‘Pick up your baby!’ ... I was so upset because we are trying our best and we were exhausted ourselves ... [The neighbour] banged on the ceiling really loudly ... When I got back into bed after the shrieking finished and he [the baby] went back to sleep and the stomping on the roof finished ... I just said, ‘I don’t know if I can do that again’ ... they’re hearing it all of course, and we felt terrible.*<sup>61</sup>

Other examples of noise-related tension emerge due to sound emanating from the balconies of other residents disturbing children’s sleep.<sup>62</sup> Parenting anxieties are not limited to the evening and result in parents monitoring kids’ play to minimise noise:

*I always feel like I am constantly telling them 'not in here, not in there, don't do that' ... I'm constantly worried that we are annoying the neighbours. Because they are kids, they are loud. They don't have a volume button.<sup>63</sup>*

*When he [the neighbour] first started complaining, Harry [son] was crawling. Imagine trying to teach a crawler that they are not allowed to crawl... [the neighbour] wanted the impossible and got angry with us when we couldn't*

*deliver that for him... I feel like we have entered this entirely new area of discrimination that I had no idea existed before... It is common among the*

*mothers in my mothers' group ... People just don't like children and they don't like children's noise ... And you know parenting is hard ... So, to have the 'Oh my God I am pissing loads of people off' in the back of your mind as well ... is really uncomfortable.<sup>64</sup>*

Parents devise complex strategies for managing noise, including putting down carpet and foam mats, restricting some activities to rooms without adjoining walls or to sociable hours, closing windows and covering air vents. They change their domestic routines and modify their homes as much as possible. But there is only so much that individuals can change. The wider problem of apartments' poor acoustic design and performance persists. For some, the stress that results from neighbourly tensions has significant impacts on their sense of home and emotional wellbeing.<sup>65</sup>

Problematically, on speaking with architects, researchers found that the issue of soundproofing was not seen as a priority issue – with architects noting that noise-related tensions require perceptions of shared living to change, rather than adapted design.<sup>66</sup> The authors conclude that although “architects see [current] construction standards as sufficient, the feedback from families living in apartments would suggest that this is an issue requiring much further attention.”<sup>67</sup>

## **Communal space**

Challenges also emerge regarding family-friendly communal spaces. Although the provision of shared space can facilitate social connection and help families to overcome “cabin fever” associated with smaller dwellings,<sup>68</sup> often these spaces are not provided or are oriented toward the needs of adults.

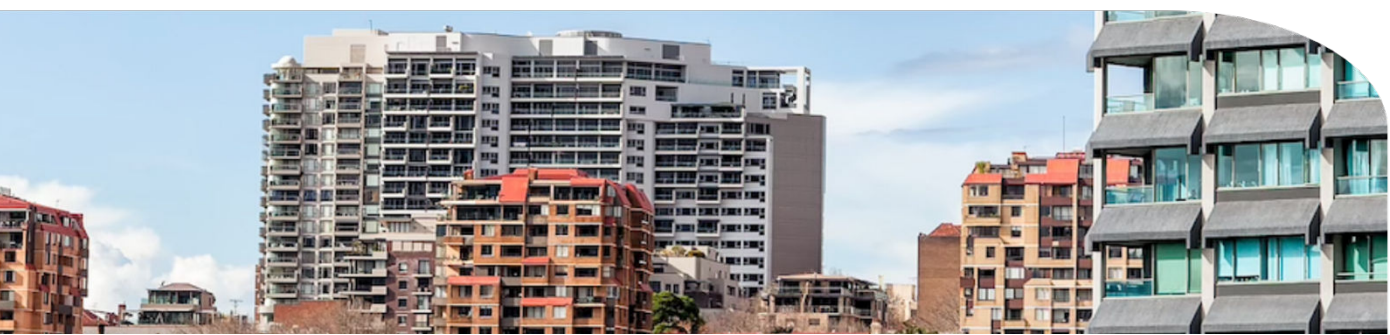
Research has found that parents felt a lack of child-friendly communal spaces negatively impacted their children,<sup>69</sup> while spatial configuration and design of communal spaces can also be seen as a barrier to mothers' social connection.<sup>70</sup>

In addition, families may be excluded from using such spaces due to formal or informal regulations.<sup>71</sup> Recent research documents how social norms about children and the "proper" use of communal space shape neighbourly interactions and by-laws that restrict and even prohibit families from utilising communal spaces in apartment developments.<sup>72</sup> Families report instances of "unspoken rules", awkward social interactions, and policing of children's behaviour by neighbours, which creates discomfort using shared spaces such as pools, courtyards, gardens, and libraries. One participant described the feeling of being watched by her neighbours as *"like having an extra parent around"*.<sup>73</sup>

Some exchanges with neighbours extended beyond awkward social interactions to more direct confrontation. Families shared examples where social regulation of behaviour (i.e. children playing on grass in the common area) resulted in disputes and other more problematic interactions such as damage to property, outright hostility, and threats to parents.<sup>74</sup>

Further research found children were aware their presence in communal spaces was regulated, with an 11-year-old commenting, "people don't like it when you play games and be loud... there aren't many kids in the building."<sup>75</sup> Neighbourly tensions and the sense of their behaviour being monitored prompts some families to resent apartment living – leading to desires for more space and privacy.<sup>76</sup> Others express feeling constantly apologetic and anxious about complaints. While parents shared ideas for making their developments more child-friendly, experiences revealed that getting their neighbours (the strata owners and corporation members) to agree on making communal spaces more child-friendly was extremely complex, both due to the formal process of amending by-laws, and because of neighbours who thought children did not belong on communal property, citing concerns about safety, insurance and property values.

Precedent in countries such as Singapore shows that the standard provision of play spaces within apartment complexes is possible. However, this "requires developers and planners to conceive families with children as potential apartment residents at the design stage" – something that is still lagging in the Australian context.<sup>77</sup>



## Health and wellbeing

Housing quality, affordability and suitability directly impact residents' physical and emotional health and wellbeing.<sup>78</sup> Although safe and adequate housing is widely recognised as being critical to positive health, wellbeing and socio-economic outcomes, there remain challenges in meeting these needs, particularly for lower-income and diverse household types.<sup>79</sup>

Research focused on families' experiences of their apartment homes has explored the implications on children's health.<sup>80</sup> Research has examined safety of windows, balconies, and car parks as well as availability of places to play. Parents in a Melbourne-based study shared photos of dangerous design features including windows that opened from the floor up, apartment entry/exit ways requiring families to walk through carparks and an over-reliance on concrete and other hard materials in common spaces and balconies that required modification to avoid children climbing.<sup>81</sup> While balcony safety nets provide an option for improving safety and thus diverse functionality of balconies, some owners' corporations adopt by-laws that make it legal to refuse apartment residents' applications to install these nets, essentially "prioritis[ing] building aesthetics and property values over children's lives."<sup>82</sup> This example demonstrates the importance of both apartment design and management in shaping families' experiences.

Building quality and performance also have implications for residents' health. Recent research has drawn attention to a range of challenges faced by families raising children in suburban apartments in Sydney, including air and noise pollution, temperature and weather extremes, and bushfire smoke and insects entering apartments.<sup>83</sup> Parents report that their apartments are hot in summer, cold in winter, and prone to mould, condensation, particulate pollution, and noise.<sup>84</sup> Parents shared experiences of children waking up covered in mosquito bites after leaving doors open for cross-ventilation, prolonged sickness due to dampness/mould and difficulty with air and temperature regulation. Elsewhere, scholars have reported that families were forced to compromise either airflow or children's safety due to poorly designed windows.<sup>85</sup> In addition, concern about reduced privacy and surveillance from neighbours leads some families to trade natural light for privacy.<sup>86</sup>

Many of the challenges faced by families could be mitigated via a "low-tech, low-cost architectural paradigm that applies existing technologies to enhance the capacities of suburban high-rise to screen, cool and ventilate", such as flyscreens, ceiling fans, external shading and appropriate insulation.<sup>87</sup>



While not mandated in current design guidelines, addressing such shortfalls, would improve the health and wellbeing of high-rise residents (and have positive sustainability implications through reducing over-reliance on air-conditioners, heating and lighting).

Health and wellbeing implications go beyond physical attributes. Extensive evidence highlights connections between home and identity formation and the sense of belonging.<sup>88</sup> Factors such as safety, belonging, comfort and connection are all critical aspects of wellbeing and can be influenced by tenure, design and dwelling quality. Research has demonstrated that the material and emotional work of making family life fit into dwellings not designed with families' needs in mind, takes an emotional toll on parents.<sup>89</sup>

It is important to note that apartment living is not inherently associated with poor health outcomes and the impact of high-density living on residents' health and wellbeing is context specific. This can be influenced by a range of factors including families' socio-economic status, neighbourhood quality, length of residency, and parenting styles.<sup>90</sup> Apartment living may foster healthy, sustainable practices such as reduced car use and increased propensity to walk. In fact, walkability enabled by living in apartments has been documented as a key factor shaping families' housing choice.<sup>91</sup> For some women, their perceptions of privacy and safety increased when living in high-rise homes.<sup>92</sup> Social networks/connection and proximity to green space are also documented as benefits drawing families to apartment living.<sup>93</sup> However, such benefits are not experienced equally and highlight the importance of ensuring family-friendly neighbourhood amenities are considered alongside increased high-density development.





## Detailed policy opportunities

This section summarises the key changes needed to better align apartment policy, development and management with the needs of apartment populations. This multifaceted planning challenge requires a multifaceted response, ranging from small changes to existing delivery models through to major housing systems reform. Necessary changes include greater involvement from the government in delivering suitable housing, improved policy and design, stronger regulation and compliance with best-practice design, support for retrofitting existing dwellings, and ensuring local neighbourhoods provide family-friendly amenities and infrastructure.



*The opportunities for policy reform reflect a change in priorities, which will require significant buy-in across public and private sectors.*

The opportunities for policy reform reflect a change in priorities, which will require significant buy-in across public and private sectors. It is important to acknowledge the complexity of these opportunities and that identifying how to fund and implement the changes required is not straightforward.

Many of the challenges identified in this report are the result of decades of market-led approaches to housing provision, which have created inequality and dysfunction in housing accessibility and lived experience.

While a market-led system prevails, it will be those with the least control (i.e. renters, lower-income households, marginalised groups) who will be most affected by poor housing outcomes. While families with children are the focus here, these policy opportunities must not be viewed in isolation. The benefits of adjusting policy and practice toward prioritisation of residents' experiences will benefit more than just family households.

At a time when high-density housing is front and centre of government plans to increase cities' housing supply, all levels of government should recognise the specific needs of families with children in this setting to ensure liveability for current and future generations. Good strategic planning is required to ensure that a short-term focus on supply does not compromise long-term liveability for future generations who will inherit this stock.

Opportunities for policy reform are as follows:

### **1) Develop targets and benchmarks for responding to the needs of families, accompanied by detailed action plans and resourcing strategies**

To ensure progress toward addressing families' needs, policymakers must develop measurable targets and benchmarks. Targets i.e. "25 per cent of new apartment developments designed with family-friendly principles in mind," should be accompanied by action plans and resourcing strategies.

Evidence-based decision-making is crucial for improved design and policy outcomes. If the NSW Government is committed to delivering more diverse housing, planning decisions must be informed by evidence on the experiences of different apartment cohorts. Governments should engage with local communities and develop appropriate methods to help assess progress toward family-friendly apartment targets. In addition to quantitative data, state and local government planning decisions should be based on an understanding of the diversity of needs across sub-groups, and the varied choices, motivations and constraints that shape housing outcomes. A variety of methods including large-scale data analysis, audits of built environment features, audit of strata bylaws, as well as surveys, interviews/focus groups should be utilised to monitor resident experiences and demographic trends.

Family-friendly apartment targets should be reflected in amendments to the Apartment Design Guide (ADG) and Housing State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP). In addition, the NHA presents an opportunity for these targets to be built into existing policy provisions that address "unmet need" in housing. This report has demonstrated that alongside limited



supply, affordability of three-bedroom apartments is a key issue. The NHA already has targets relating to increasing affordable housing. The NSW Government could ensure a proportion of those dwellings are delivered as three or more-bedroom apartments. The risk is that without increased supply of larger, better designed and more affordable three- and four-bedroom apartments, these dwellings will be unable to adequately accommodate families with children who wish to stay for the longer term. Other strategies could include targets for family-friendly apartment housing in local housing strategies and regional and district plans.

To ensure positive social and economic outcomes for our cities, targets should ensure an appropriate mix of family-friendly apartments within individual developments and at the neighbourhood scale, to facilitate opportunities for families to move to more appropriately sized housing without having to leave their neighbourhood or city.

## **2) Expand government housing and further incentivise non-market housing**

To genuinely address the scale of housing unaffordability and unmet need, the NSW Government must look to expand the scale of government and non-market housing. Opportunities exist for the government to address multiple gaps in housing stock through this approach. For example, the delivery of affordable, medium-density, family-friendly apartments as an alternative to the majority of new supply (i.e. one- and two-bedroom apartments in high-rise developments or large detached houses on the urban fringe) would make a meaningful difference in increasing diversity and improving affordability.

Key mechanisms for increasing the supply of public and affordable housing include development on government land, mandatory inclusionary zoning requirements and subsidies or supports for non-market housing providers who face additional barriers when competing for access to land and finance.<sup>94</sup>

Through direct provision of housing, the NSW Government can take a leadership role in increasing family-friendly apartment supply, demonstrating design principles that can be replicated by the private sector.



### 3) Revise housing policy and guidelines to better reflect the needs of families with children in apartments and higher-density neighbourhoods

No state or territory in Australia currently has guidelines on family-friendly apartment living, and there is minimal mention of children's needs in broader design guides and high-density housing policy. Guiding principles and specific policies must be reviewed and amended to acknowledge families' unmet needs and determine the priorities in responding to them. By responding to this opportunity, NSW can lead the way in the development of guidelines for family-friendly apartment design and delivery.

Inclusion of family-friendly spaces from the outset when planning consent is provided, would remove the need for families to undertake complex material and behavioural work and adjustments to fit family life into dwellings not designed with their needs in mind. There are three key opportunities for reassessment of policy to better account for families' needs:

**3.1 Updates to the ADG** across key areas of size, spatial layout, storage, sound transmission, thermal comfort, and communal space. The 2021 draft amendments to the ADG proposed alongside the draft Design and Place SEPP, which was removed from the policy pipeline in 2022, provide a good starting point for policymakers. The recommended changes to the ADG included promoting greater housing diversity and choice by including provisions for family apartments (see Box 1) and these amendments should be reconsidered.



## Design guidance for family-friendly apartments

In 2021, a series of recommendations for family-friendly apartments were drafted for inclusion in the ADG. They include:

“Provide 20 per cent of two-, three- and four-bedroom apartments as family-friendly apartments to accommodate the needs of families with children. Design solutions include:

- greater than minimum apartment sizes
- location in lower levels of the development to allow easy access to open space and reduce dependency on corridors and lifts
- multiple living rooms or main bedrooms
- wider than minimum hallways and entry zones to allow for manoeuvring of prams and other bulky children’s equipment
- larger than minimum areas for living rooms and private open spaces, including areas for play that are visible from the kitchen
- consider co-locating family friendly apartments and attached private open space with communal open space on ground level or podiums to allow intervisibility from kitchen to common play space
- for private open space, consider the safety of children, e.g. use integrated planters that eliminate climbing hazards
- at least one bedroom with sufficient size to provide space for furniture like study desks and cribs
- bedroom sizes and layouts that suit various configurations of children’s furniture including two single beds, bunk beds, space for play, and space for desks
- bathroom sizes and layouts that accommodate a parent and child using a bathroom together, and at least one bathroom with a bathtub
- greater acoustic separation between apartments and communal spaces, as well as between bedrooms and living areas”.

**Source: 2021 draft ADG amendments (recommendations made alongside the draft Design and Place SEPP)**

In addition to the list above, the research reviewed for this report has shown other family-friendly amendments to the ADG could include:

- mandating that a proportion of apartments are three-bedroom to boost supply of larger apartments
- improving functionality of kitchens with adequate storage and food preparation space away from stovetops
- providing dining space large enough to enable a family to sit around a dining table
- accommodating laundries large enough for regular washing, containing deep sinks for bulky items and appropriate clothes drying facilities
- providing large, covered balconies that are safe and appropriately designed for children
- improving storage capacity both within and external to apartments with internal storage to maximise floor-to-ceiling space and space for bulky items such as prams
- providing more family-friendly communal spaces indoors (e.g. play opportunities built into circulation spaces, flexible community/activity rooms, libraries) and outdoors (e.g. play equipment or open play areas with soft materials)
- mandating flyscreens and ceiling fans to support adequate airflow, reduce energy poverty and ensure apartments do not lead to adverse health outcomes

### **3.2 Pattern books should include family-friendly apartment design**

**principles** – alongside the NSW Government’s push to increase supply, it is developing a pattern book of endorsed building designs that can be used to guide the creation of new housing with developers to be incentivised via accelerated approval pathways. It is vital that the above family-friendly design principles are included in model typologies and design criteria in the endorsed pattern books to ensure that an increase in *supply* equates to an increase in *suitable supply*.

**3.3 Updating Local Environment Plans (LEP) and Development Control Plans (DCP) to facilitate delivery of family-friendly apartment stock in response to local need.** Local councils should be supported to expand on recommended targets in the ADG by setting more ambitious targets in their LEPs and DCPs.

Examples of this already in practice in NSW Local Government Areas include:

- Canada Bay LEP, which specifies at least 20 per cent of the dwellings in a development will have at least three-bedrooms.
- The Hills LEP, which specifies for development on certain land within the Sydney Metro Northwest Urban Renewal Corridor, that at least 20 per cent of the total number of dwellings in the development are to be three or more bedroom dwellings, and at least 40 per cent of all two-bedroom dwellings contained in the development will have a minimum internal floor area of 110 square metres, and at least 40 per cent of all three-bedroom dwellings contained in the development will have a minimum internal floor area of 135 square metres.

#### **4) Improve the implementation of ADG criteria in new apartment developments, to reduce the design-implementation gap**

A policy audit of national apartment design guidelines<sup>95</sup> identified three key factors that influence whether design guidance is implemented as intended or diluted: (i) the strength of language in the design guidance (e.g., must vs. could/should), (ii) the regulations regarding the qualifications and competencies of the building designer (in NSW this must be a qualified designer i.e. a registered architect), and (iii) the building approval process and whether it allows performance standards to be varied.

In NSW, the ADG exists to guide best practice design and is the most obvious place for the implementation of family-friendly design recommendations. However, the Housing SEPP “does not require a consent authority to require compliance with design criteria specified in the ADG.”<sup>96</sup> Very few aspects are enforceable grounds to refuse a development — therefore, there is a risk of an implementation gap between best practice design criteria and the approval and delivery of apartments.

For example, families’ experiences of sound-related tension in apartments suggest that the current guidelines are either not appropriate or are not widely enforced. So too, while features such as cross-ventilation, building orientation, external shading and adequate insulation are included in the ADG, varied levels of compliance result in adverse health impacts for residents. Research focused on delivering sustainable apartment design has similarly noted discrepancies between the ‘as-designed’ and the ‘as-built’ apartment.<sup>97</sup>



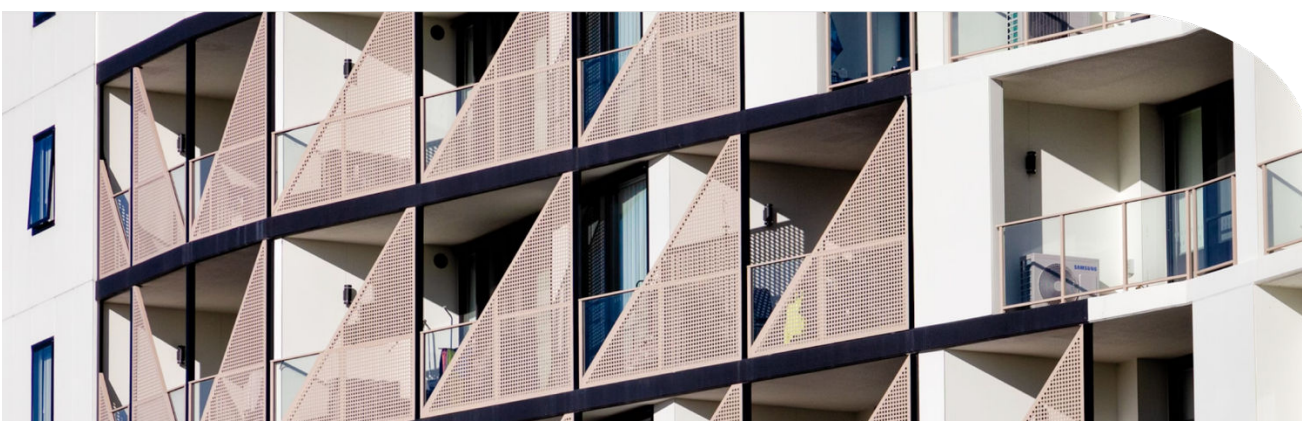
Without a strong regulatory regime, the market will only deliver changes if they are deemed feasible and profitable. If we are to see improved market outcomes, alignment with best practices in the ADG from assessment to development must be strengthened. This is timely, as concern has been raised that proposed planning reforms will be accompanied by changes to the ADG that could lower design standards further.<sup>98</sup>

There are several pathways to implement this recommendation that the NSW Government could investigate. The first involves increasing regulation via the SEPP and ADG and considering whether more elements should become mandatory requirements, such as compliance with an apartment mix. A second approach would be to increase incentives for developments that align with the ADG to foster better uptake of best practice design.

The latter approach would require the NSW Government to investigate mechanisms to incentivise the market to deliver more family-friendly dwellings such as density bonuses; adjustments to planning controls to exclude certain elements from the Gross Floor Area; inclusionary zoning for larger affordable apartments; and taxation benefits. Overseas, various jurisdictions have offered incentives to encourage the private market to deliver larger family-friendly apartments, often coupled with affordability targets. Examples include:

- Portland, Oregon, which offers the “Three-Bedroom Bonus Program” whereby floor-area-ratio bonus of up to 25 per cent is offered for inclusion of affordable three-bedroom units.
- Coquitlam, British Columbia, which encourages a targeted 10 per cent minimum three-bedroom units in projects under rezoning and encourages three-plus bedroom units through the “Rental Incentive Program” – by classifying three-plus bedroom units as priority units.

The most effective roadmap to the implementation of these type of incentives will also require consideration of how to ensure the provision of family-friendly apartments are inhabited by family households.



## **5) Encourage and support the retrofit of existing apartment dwellings**

Most of the housing that residents occupy is existing housing stock. While it is crucial for new stock to take families' needs into account, it is also important for the NSW Government and local governments to review opportunities for improving residents' experiences of existing apartment dwellings.

Further support and incentives are required to encourage owners to retrofit existing apartments in line with updated standards. This is particularly important for improving environmental performance and comfort, sound transmission and safety standards.

While the need for improvements to existing stock is clear, achieving this in the context of apartment dwellings is complex. This is due to the interconnectedness of dwellings that complicates some physical modifications and the collective ownership and decision-making in strata-titled properties.

An example of an effective program promoting retrofits in apartments is the City of Sydney's "Smart Green Apartments" program, which involves working with strata owners to improve the energy and water efficiency of their buildings. This model could be adapted and expanded to provide sound transfer assessments in older stock alongside support to implement upgrades to improve acoustic privacy and performance. However, such a program would be resource-intensive and require additional funding from state or Commonwealth governments to ensure that it can be feasibly implemented at the local government scale.

## **6) Strengthen minimum standards for rental properties**

The majority of apartments in NSW are owned by investors and there are more renters living in apartments than owner-occupiers.

Research examining the homemaking experiences of families in apartments has shown how families alter dwellings where possible to improve their comfort and ability to feel at home. Renters often cannot adjust spaces to feel at home, meet their needs, or enhance the safety of their dwellings. In apartments, this may prove especially difficult due to the interconnected nature of individual dwellings.

Policy reform (and greater awareness of existing tenancy rights) to empower renters to make reasonable adjustments to properties (e.g. securing furniture to walls for safety purposes or adding additional mounted storage), would go some way to mitigating these stresses. Longer-term leases would also provide families with the security of being able to implement changes to make their apartments work for them over the longer term.

## **7) Reform regulation of strata by-laws to better protect and support families in apartments**

Alongside apartment design, strata by-laws and apartment regulation impede families' ability to feel at home. The NSW Government's reform to better support families in this setting should include prohibiting by-laws that unreasonably restrict children's play and better enforcing by-laws on noise and behaviour to protect families who face threatening, angry, and discriminatory actions from neighbours or verbal disturbance such as abuse or banging on walls. Another area in which strata advocacy or reform could be beneficial for families relates to the implementation of balcony safety nets (an issue that often comes down to aesthetics being prioritised over safety).<sup>99</sup>

Signage and by-laws can be adopted by strata-committees that actively welcome families to use communal spaces. By-laws may limit certain activities to windows of time throughout the day in order to balance the needs of non-family households e.g. play spaces can be used between 8am-6pm.

NSW Government strata law reforms in 2015 introduced a requirement that by-laws must not be "harsh, unconscionable, or oppressive". While this represents a step in the right direction, to minimise instances of discrimination and support families' use of space, the regulations accompanying the legislation should provide more guidance on when proposed by-laws might be considered "harsh, unconscionable or oppressive" to certain populations."<sup>100</sup>

## 8) Ensure that family-friendly neighbourhood amenities keep pace with housing growth

With reduced private space within apartments, residents rely more heavily on access to community services and facilities.<sup>101</sup> Access to green space and social infrastructure is increasingly important. Likewise, the walkability and perceived safety of the streetscape surrounding apartment developments have important implications for residents' wellbeing and active mobility. Failure to anticipate families as potential apartment residents has led to a shortage of capacity in certain catchments for school and childcare.<sup>102</sup> Housing and planning policymakers have a responsibility to work together with other public sector departments and actors to ensure that education and amenities keep pace with growing numbers of families raising children in apartments.

Local council planning and engagement teams must ensure apartment neighbourhoods respond to the needs of family households including appropriate provision of green space, safe active mobility routes, social infrastructure, schools, and childcare centres. State government planning controls must ensure that they are not designed in such a way that local councils lose control of street interface and public space outcomes. Strategic long-term neighbourhood planning plays a crucial role in ensuring that increased density does not outpace neighbourhood amenities and quality of life.







## Toward apartments as long-term homes

The ‘compact city’ as a policy agenda has been promoted based on efficiency, sustainability, and affordability. Concerns about the quality and diversity of existing apartments and those being built raise questions around the longevity of this planning agenda and its capacity to accommodate residents at different life stages.

As the NSW Government looks to increase housing supply and affordability across the state, it is vital that apartment dwellings meet the needs and preferences of a diverse range of households. This will require leadership that is focused on housing suitability, supported by appropriate strategic planning and regulation.

In the context of NSW and wider Australia, the needs of families with children in apartments have not been adequately accounted for by policymakers or the development industry, with consequences for resident wellbeing and housing satisfaction, as well as for the longer-term social and economic fabric of our cities. As our urban areas densify and a greater proportion of our population live in apartment housing across all life stages, this mismatch must be addressed.

This report has outlined how the system needs to change to meet the needs of current and future generations. Research into the experience of families reveals that private apartment markets (primarily driven by profit as opposed to unmet housing needs) do not provide the diversity, functionality, flexibility, or adaptability that is increasingly required.

Improving the experiences of families in apartments requires a cultural shift toward child-centric compact city planning. This requires us to reassess who sets the agenda when it comes to apartment design. Instead of a market geared toward what is good for developers and investors, it is imperative to start asking “is this good for families”?

This shift will require governments and the private sector to recognise families as legitimate apartment residents; and for apartment housing to be considered not only as investments or a vehicle to increase housing supply, but also as essential infrastructure and long-term homes.

This report demonstrates that apartment design is falling short of families’ needs in key areas including spatial layout and functionality, storage, and soundproofing. Apartment regulation and the provision of family-friendly infrastructure in surrounding neighbourhoods have also fallen short of supporting family needs. The compact city vision cannot be sold based on an increased supply of well-located housing alone. Even if housing markets provide affordable housing in the ‘right’ locations, this will not solve all housing problems if the dwellings themselves and surrounding neighbourhood infrastructure are not suitable for a diverse range of households.

Considering how people manage everyday life within apartment homes and neighbourhoods, and how their changing needs will be accommodated, is crucial to the success of the housing agenda. This involves learning from current residents’ experiences and not repeating the same mistakes in the development of new housing stock. Apartments must be delivered with greater flexibility and diversity so that residents’ shifting needs across different life stages can be accommodated. The opportunities for policy reform presented in this report show what is required to deliver apartment homes that are appropriate, comfortable and suitable to a diversity of needs.

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