



INVESTING IN SOCIAL HOUSING DURING A PANDEMIC

Australia needs a National Housing Strategy, as well as consistent funding and policy mechanisms, to reverse our long-term declines in social housing

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Federal and State governments have injected large sums of money into struggling communities and economies in response to COVID-19, and [large-scale investment in infrastructure projects](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/infrastructure-rebuild-to-form-part-of-post-virus-recovery-plan-20200506-p54qc0.html) (<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/infrastructure-rebuild-to-form-part-of-post-virus-recovery-plan-20200506-p54qc0.html>) is likely to follow.

But one of the best investments a government could make during a pandemic is in Australia's flagging social housing system.



New housing should use durable materials that have minimal effects on the environment. Picture: Shutterstock

It's an investment that would change the lives of thousands of Australia's most vulnerable households and is exactly what our economy needs right now.

WHY SOCIAL HOUSING?

Housing inequalities have always compounded and reflected inequalities in health, wellbeing and productivity. The imperative to stay home during COVID-19 has amplified these effects, highlighting the need for [investment in affordable and stable housing for low income households](https://research.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0029/156386/AHHI-Why-staying-home-during-a-pandemic-can-increase-risk-for-some-Discussion-Paper-V3.pdf) (https://research.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0029/156386/AHHI-Why-staying-home-during-a-pandemic-can-increase-risk-for-some-Discussion-Paper-V3.pdf)

A recent report from the Australia Institute, a think tank researching public policy, highlighted [key criteria](https://www.tai.org.au/content/design-principles-fiscal-policy-pandemic) (https://www.tai.org.au/content/design-principles-fiscal-policy-pandemic) for choosing appropriate fiscal policies in a pandemic.

It recommended targeting populations with a high propensity to consume, activities that create high employment and projects with obvious co-benefits, like improved health outcomes and reduced homelessness.

Social housing meets all of these criteria. The recently announced [HomeBuilder policy](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-04/homebuilder-grants-scheme-construction-explained/12320116), (https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-04/homebuilder-grants-scheme-construction-explained/12320116) that targets middle class homeowners, does not.

The majority of households that are allocated social housing each year are [homeless, at risk of homelessness or experiencing extreme housing stress](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2018/contents/priority-groups-and-wait-lists) (https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2018/contents/priority-groups-and-wait-lists)

. A move to secure, affordable housing is likely to drastically increase their disposable income, as well as their capacity for consumption.



Well-designed and well-built social housing reduces energy costs. Picture: Shutterstock

Further, the construction industry employs more than [one million people](https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6291.0.55.003Main+Features1May%202018?OpenDocument) and contributes [eight per cent to Australia's Gross Domestic Product.](https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/5206.0Main+Features1Dec%202019?OpenDocument)

Investment in social housing helps to keep construction workers employed in an industry that has seen [dramatic reductions in projects](https://www.afr.com/property/commercial/construction-drops-as-covid-19-hits-private-projects-20200403-p54gqa) since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

This investment also supports many businesses that rely on the housing sector, like material suppliers, household goods manufacturers and consultants. It concentrates expenditure on domestic production and procurement policies that can help to ensure that [local content and workers are prioritised](https://localjobsfirst.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/25267/DEDJTR-VIPP-Annual-Report-2017-2018.pdf).

With a backlog of 433,000 homes and [buckets](https://msd.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2800599/Investigating-the-costs-and-benefits-of-the-Melbourne-Apartments-Project.pdf) of [Australian](https://www.ahuri.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0029/39656/AHURI-Final-Report-312-The-business-case-for-social-housing-as-infrastructure.pdf) and [international](http://www.socialvalueuk.org/app/uploads/2016/05/rebel_cba_social_rental_housing_report.pdf) research outlining the co-benefits of affordable housing for low-income households, investment in social housing is a valuable legacy.

Large-scale investment in social housing isn't new.

The Commonwealth and State Governments directly contributed [24 per cent of the total increase in housing stock between 1947 and 1961](https://www.macrobusiness.com.au/2013/09/saul-eslake-50-years-of-housing-policy-failure/). This investment was integral to building capacity in [Australia's burgeoning construction industry](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0811149608551610) at the time.

After the Global Financial Crisis, the \$A5.6 billion [Social Housing Initiative](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/11_2013/social_housing_initiative_fact_sheet.pdf) – part of the [Nation Building Stimulus](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2093/eco_stimulus_stage_two_1sep09/) – saw the construction of 19,700 new homes and the creation of 14,000 Full Time Equivalent jobs.

So, how can we deliver social housing well now?



Local government should be empowered to shape requirements for affordable housing. Picture: Shutterstock

HOMES AND SERVICES TAILORED TO SPECIFIC NEEDS

Around [42 per cent of households living in social housing include a person with disability](http://aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/housing/housing-assistance/social-housing) (http://aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/housing/housing-assistance/social-housing)

. This percentage is expected to increase as more people access NDIS funding for disability support services.

The [housing design needs of people with autism](https://theconversation.com/how-do-you-design-a-home-for-someone-with-autism-57033) (https://theconversation.com/how-do-you-design-a-home-for-someone-with-autism-57033) should be addressed and delivery of tenant services should be adjusted to include improved processes for identification of needs, inclusive modes of communication and effective collaboration with disability services providers to better support people with cognitive and psychosocial disabilities.

It's also crucial to design accessible homes.

Currently, there's a lot of work going on to encourage the mainstream adoption of [liveable housing design principles in all new homes built in](http://www.livablehousingaustralia.org.au/) (http://www.livablehousingaustralia.org.au/) Australia. Houses can qualify for three performance levels – Platinum, Gold and Silver – which are judged against 15 different criteria

Building new units to a minimum [Gold Standard](http://www.livablehousingaustralia.org.au/118/accreditation-levels.aspx) (http://www.livablehousingaustralia.org.au/118/accreditation-levels.aspx) design and an adequate proportion of units to Platinum Standard, will ensure social housing is accessible and liveable for people with physical and sensory disabilities.

These standards will also support ageing-in-place for all social housing tenants, [making future adaptations substantially cheaper](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/SCLSI/Public_Housing_Renewal_Program/Submissions/S139-VCOSS.pdf) (https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/SCLSI/Public_Housing_Renewal_Program/Submissions/S139-VCOSS.pdf)

It's also vital that people with diverse disabilities are supported to have meaningful involvement in the planning and governance of social housing, helping to deliver social housing options that are responsive to needs.



Investment in social housing helps to keep construction workers employed. Picture: Getty Images

Finally, there's a need for location-appropriate housing.

Local government should be empowered to shape requirements for affordable housing, including the tenure composition for new developments – including affordable rent, social rent, shared ownership and affordable homeownership – based on transparent calculations of local housing needs.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL HOUSING DECISIONS

Stable social housing is protective of mental health.

[Our research](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29947789/) (https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29947789/) on Australian social housing tenants suggests that those who frequently move into and out of social housing have worse mental health than those with stable housing.

But there's also physical health.

Here in Victoria, houses can be cold with related issues of mould and damp. Housing with an indoor temperature of less than 18 degrees has been linked to health problems including [asthma, respiratory tract infection, coronary obstructive pulmonary disease, hypertension and poor cardiovascular outcomes](#) (https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/who-housing-and-health-guidelines).

So it's important to build and retrofit housing to ensure healthy indoor temperatures.

ASPIRATIONAL IN DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Social housing should support innovation in planning typologies, housing models, tenure type, physical structures and aesthetic realities. [The 2019 RIBA Stirling Prize for the UK's best new building](https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/knowledge-landing-page/norwich-council-estate-named-uks-best-new-building-2019-riba-stirling-prize-winner) (https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/knowledge-landing-page/norwich-council-estate-named-uks-best-new-building-2019-riba-stirling-prize-winner), Goldsmith Street, is a highly energy-efficient residential development meeting [Passivhaus standards](https://www.passivhausaustralia.com.au/read-more-1) (https://www.passivhausaustralia.com.au/read-more-1), with annual energy costs estimated at 70 per cent cheaper than the average household.



There's a lot of work going on to encourage the mainstream adoption of liveable housing design principles. Picture: Shutterstock

Judges described it as “high-quality architecture in its purest, most environmentally and socially conscious form.”

Key factors that affect quality of life, like space, access and environmental standards, should be reviewed regularly to ensure the highest possible standards are adopted. Fast tracking shouldn't undermine quality and innovation.

Australia's ageing social housing stock [fails to meet today's minimum energy efficiency standards](https://apo.org.au/node/303583) (https://apo.org.au/node/303583) . Well-designed and well-built social housing reduces energy costs.

Simple, high impact upgrades to existing stock, like [installing ceiling insulation, improving airtightness, LED light replacement, upgrades to hot water systems and installing ceiling fans](http://www.lowcarbonlivingcrc.com.au/resources/crc-publications/guide-implementing-low-carbon-retrofits-social-housing) (http://www.lowcarbonlivingcrc.com.au/resources/crc-publications/guide-implementing-low-carbon-retrofits-social-housing) can greatly improve performance.

New housing should use durable materials that have minimal effects on the environment, including renewable materials and those with a large proportion of recycled content.

Social housing also offers opportunities to explore innovative construction approaches and expand growing industries like [off-site construction](https://camph.eng.unimelb.edu.au/) (https://camph.eng.unimelb.edu.au/).

We hope the Federal Government will respond to COVID-19 with a substantial stimulus package for social housing, but a one-off cash splash will not fix decades of underinvestment in an area that has the potential to help so many people.

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