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## **A tip for developers – give residents a say if you want the green light**

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*Our children are less likely to be able to afford to live where they grew up and older people will face few options to downsize within the neighbourhood where they built their lives, **writes Jane-Frances Kelly.***

Contrary to myth and assumption, Australians want a mixture of housing choices not just detached houses.

This was made clear in the first substantial survey since the early 1990s of Australian housing preferences. It was published in June in a Grattan Institute report, *The Housing we'd choose*.

Many want to live in a semi-detached home or an apartment in locations that are close to family and friends, or to shops. The problem is that the market does not provide nearly enough of this housing, especially in the middle and outer suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. There are several reasons why.

Residents who are denied a say in how their neighbourhood develops often feel they have little choice but to oppose all planning applications and all change. Developers point to the barriers that prevent them from building housing in established suburbs.

State and local governments are caught in the middle, and no one wins.

Meanwhile, the population of our cities continues to grow. Residents increasingly face the costs of congestion, high petrol bills, distance from family, friends and jobs. More green space disappears and housing everywhere becomes more expensive. Our children are less likely to be able to afford to live where they grew up and older people will face few options to downsize within the neighbourhood where they built their lives. We urgently need a new approach. A new Grattan report, *Getting the housing we want*, seeks to provide it.

First, we need political leadership to break the deadlock in our cities. Overseas cities that have managed growth well such as Vancouver, Seattle and Portland did so by ensuring that residents had a real say in decision making. People showed themselves to be more than capable of accepting trade-offs, making tough choices, and working with developers and governments to build better cities.

As well as deeper, more meaningful engagement, *Getting the housing we want* proposes two large reforms. The first is piloting neighbourhood development corporations to oversee substantial redevelopment of specific areas. These would allow residents to take an active role in shaping their neighbourhoods, in partnership with the housing industry and government. They would be independent bodies with real powers over planning and delivery.

The corporations should develop new, diverse housing that features good urban design and high environmental standards. They should give developers certainty but also give residents more control over how their neighbourhoods change. Experience overseas and in Australia shows this can be done.

A new federal-state liveability fund would support these corporations by providing funding for new parks, community facilities or local infrastructure in return for neighbourhoods accepting more households.

Yet such corporations will not be right for most parts of the city. We also need to encourage high-quality smaller developments such as those built on one or two lots on a residential street. In many established areas, these developments make up the bulk of new housing and some of the most contentious development for existing residents. Here too we need a mechanism to better balance the interests of current and future residents and of developers.

This would be achieved through a small redevelopment housing code that would establish clear standards for new housing of up to two storeys.

If these standards were met, planning approval would be given within 15 days. In return, the code would ensure that new buildings are better designed, and respect the privacy of neighbours and the character of an area. The code would focus on the things that neighbours worry about most overlooking, overshadowing, the appearance of bulk and privacy in their backyards.

Finally, the report proposes the creation of a new association to enable small builders and developers to build better housing more cheaply.

Many small developers struggle to adopt new ideas or try new building technologies for housing that isn't detached. This can result in housing that is poorly designed, the worst of which is drab and distressing to residents. An association that links them to each other, to architects and to university research could help spread innovation, making this housing cheaper and better designed.

We know our cities will keep growing. If we do not make choices about the way they grow, they will become less sustainable and more polarised, and fewer Australians will get the housing they want. But if we make the right decisions, our cities can grow while retaining the qualities that make them great places to live.

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