

22 August 2022

Mr Morris Edwards
Senior Planner – Planning Services
Victorian Planning Authority

Via email to: Morris.Edwards@vpa.vic.gov.au

Dear Mr Edwards,

Small Lot Housing Code – Stage 2 Standards Review consultation

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Victorian Planning Authority's (VPA) consultation on Stage 2 of the Small Lot Housing Code (SLHC) Standards Review.

Councils are under pressure to deliver land at scale to satisfy the demand and needs of communities and industry. However, in the rush to deliver more homes, we must not forget that we are building homes and neighbourhoods that will last for many years.

We also note that the planning system can facilitate development, but it cannot currently require lots to be released to market. Local government is continually frustrated by instances where developers drip-feed lots to retain high prices, and then use limited supply as an argument for looser regulation.

It is in this context that the SLHC review provides an opportunity to achieve a more compact urban form with more dwellings located close to jobs, public amenities and transport. We support this policy intent. When increasing density in the Greenfields we must ensure that townhouses streamlined through the SLHC do not result in homes with poor environmental performance and amenity.

Embedding Environmentally Sustainable Design principles

Most new homes constructed in the growth areas have not been designed for resilience to a warmer climate, let alone for emissions reduction. Good environmentally sustainable design means more comfortable, healthy homes where residents are resilient to energy price shocks and can live active and environmentally conscious lives. This involves design decisions at lot scale as well as more broadly. Strong State leadership is needed to achieve these required changes.

The review of the SLHC standards is an opportunity to frame the code assessment around amenity and ESD principles to encourage adaptability and durability in a changing climate. New development must move towards rapidly delivering housing that has ESD outcomes such as:

- Aiming for zero carbon housing



- Integrated water efficient systems and services with rainwater capture and re-use
- Green infrastructure, including green rooftops and urban agriculture, to help reduce peak summer temperatures around buildings and reduce food miles
- Effective cross-ventilation and access to daylight
- Design that encourages active transport, is accessible to public transport and facilitates electric vehicle charging

The MAV strongly supports the inclusion of *Standard 20 – Deep Soil Zone* as well as the inclusion of *Standard 37 – Roof reflectivity* as links to improving climate resilience. We see these as significant opportunities to reduce heat absorption in dwellings and to cool and green growth-area neighbourhoods which are some of the hottest parts of the urban landscape. A step further in the code to require planting of canopy trees would ensure cooler dwellings and neighbourhoods.

Small lot sizes with proposed minimum permeability requirements of 10% or less present a significant problem for managing stormwater quality and runoff. An accumulated reduction in site permeability across a development risks undermining the good planning policy work undertaken in recent years to improve the quality of stormwater runoff. Integrated Water Management through improving onsite permeability must seek to reduce runoff and flooding risk.

While updates to the National Construction Code are likely to include EV charging infrastructure, new dwellings should be designed to accommodate convenient bicycle parking to encourage active transport.

We support the Council Alliance for a Sustainable Built Environment (CASBE) submission which provides an in-depth, data-driven analysis of the above issues. CASBE’s expertise drives the implementation of ESD principles in planning schemes across Victoria, and their knowledge of this field will provide the VPA with evidence-based solutions.

Beyond the lot scale, the MAV and councils are calling for reform of the Victorian planning system to make climate change and sustainability considerations in planning binding. Councils continue to push for greater consideration of climate change and protection of the environment within their own planning schemes.

Density Done Well in the Greenfields

A common criticism of higher density developments is that increased density undermines character and provides poor living outcomes for residents. Density done well here means achieving a high quality of both internal spaces and exterior design. We support proposed changes that encourage a mix of materials, prevent repetition to facades, as well as increase overlooking to the street.

The typology of new dwellings in the growth areas is typically geared towards housing delivered by volume builders. Architects are rarely used. This highlights the need to develop standards which provide high-quality outcomes. We support further testing of the code’s minimum standards with industry to avoid poor design outcomes and unintended consequences.

A sense of wellbeing in higher density living extends beyond the lot scale. The VPA should give further consideration to communal and public spaces which enhance a sense of belonging and wellbeing. Fostering connected communities avoids common perceptions that new developments in growth areas are ‘soulless’ and can be isolating places to live. As we deliver more diverse types of housing in the Greenfields as an alternative to the detached family home, the importance of easy and close access to

open spaces and key services increases. While middle-ring and inner-urban areas benefit from expansive parklands as well as local open spaces, community hubs, a range of transport options and diverse services, outer suburban residents often have access to only smaller pocket parks, some larger sport grounds and a limited range of other services. We need stronger planning policy frameworks and PSP processes that deliver a diversity of open space types and community services, as well as a range of public transport options.

Streamlined planning processes

While we understand there is an increasing push to codify and streamline the Victorian planning system, performance-based approaches which pursue better innovation must be pursued. The Victorian planning system must be based on the ability for planning decisions to be made on best-practice planning policy. Any code must strive for best-practice outcomes. This includes providing clearer language to communicate expected standards.

While the MAV and councils support processes that seek to make the planning system more ‘user friendly’ while still delivering high-quality development, codification of planning decisions is not the only way to achieve better planning outcomes. Developers often push the envelope in terms of allowed building form and internal amenity. This means a greater level of scrutiny must be applied, as the potential environmental, social, and economic impacts for the local area and new residents may be greater. Instead of viewing the planning system as a red-tape process that must be cut through, developers should respect and apply the planning policy work done by councils and the state to improve the design quality of their builds. This highlights the need to further test the code to avoid poor design outcomes.

This review must seek to raise the bar and continue the level of oversight provided by the planning system to deliver positive sustainable outcomes for small lot housing.

Review cycles

A review cycle should be built into the Small Lot Housing Code. The next review should seek to, among other things:

- identify and correct any unintended consequences from the introduction of Type C and associated standards
- identify opportunities to further improve internal amenity for residents
- improve resilience to climate change as more data becomes available

Should you have any queries about the above, please contact James McLean, Senior Policy Adviser – Natural and Built Environment at jmclean@mav.asn.au

Yours sincerely



Troy Edwards
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