



Victorian Universal Housing Alliance

**Submission to the
Visitable and Adaptable Housing Features
Regulatory Impact Statement**

February 2010

Preface

The Victorian Universal Housing Alliance (VUHA) was launched on 29 July 2008 to promote regulatory measures to increase the amount of universal housing in Victoria. Since its launch the Alliance has called on the Victorian Government to develop a Universal Housing Standard which, at a minimum, includes the following features for every new home:

- a. A clear pathway to a step-free, well-lit entry with access to street/car parking.
- b. Appropriate lighting evenly distributed throughout the house.
- c. Clearly identifiable light switches, controls and handles in easy-to-reach places for someone sitting or standing.
- d. Reinforced walls in the bathroom, shower and toilet.
- e. Wide doorways and corridors.
- f. A straight staircase adjacent to a load-bearing wall.
- g. Slip-resistant flooring.
- h. Open-plan kitchen, lounge and bathroom with step-free shower.
- i. Open-plan room on entry level that can be used as a bedroom.
- j. Accessible toilet and bathroom on entry level.

The Alliance is auspiced by the Council on the Ageing, Chronic Illness Alliance, Housing Resource and Support Service, Victorian Local Governance Association and the Victorian Council of Social Service and has 60 members (See Appendix 1 for a list of current Alliance members).

Introduction

VUHA is very pleased the Victorian Government has recognised the need for new regulation to increase the number of more accessible homes across Victoria. We congratulate the Government for leading the way in Australia on this key policy initiative. Increasing the availability of housing with accessibility features will make a very significant difference to the lives of many individuals and families and the benefits to the community will continue to grow over time.

The projected ageing and growth of Victoria's population will intensify the need for more accessible housing, as rates of disability among adults generally increase with age.¹ The proportion of people in Victoria aged 65 and over is expected to increase from 13 per cent in 2006 to 22 per cent in 2036.² The number of people aged 70 and over is projected to increase from around 0.49 million to 1.2 million in 2036³, placing very particular pressure on the need for more accessible housing. Common perceptions that most older people live in care accommodation are incorrect. In fact, the vast majority of older Victorians (92% in 2006)⁴ live in private homes, despite experiencing increased frailty, reduced mobility and other disabilities and health conditions.

Requiring key accessibility features in new housing in Victoria will greatly assist pro-active planning to meet the significant challenges associated with population ageing. As outlined in the RIS report, accessible features in housing will allow more older people to live in their homes more safely and for longer, and often with lower levels of support. This will result in cost savings to health care, aged care facilities and programs such as the Home and Community Care Program.⁵

Other groups likely to benefit include:

- People of all ages with disabilities and mobility limitations wishing to visit the homes of friends, neighbours and families.
- Families requiring improved safety through level entries for young children and better access for prams and strollers. (In 2006 there were 300,000 children aged 0-4⁶, so there are many families who will benefit.)
- People with chronic illnesses such as arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and Parkinson's disease, which may be episodic, fluctuating or progressive.
- People whose mobility and balance may be impaired temporarily through injuries, ill health or when recovering from surgery who could return home earlier from hospital – thus saving costs to the community from reduced hospital stays or stays in rehabilitation facilities.⁷
- Care professionals such as home care workers and nurses who need to come to a home, particularly when assisting with personal care such as showering

and toileting. Absence of steps, for instance, and the provision of wider halls will also increase occupational safety for people such as furniture removalists and those delivering new furniture or appliances into homes.

VUHA welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the *Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) on Visitable and Adaptable Housing*. The following sections outline VUHA's response to a number of the specific consultation questions outlined in the RIS.

Response to Specific RIS Consultation Questions

Question 1 - The proposed accessibility features

If accessibility and affordability were objectives in the construction of private dwellings in Victoria, what features, and what dimensions of those features, would you consider to be the minimum requirements? You may also wish to give consideration to the proposed requirements for the common areas in Class 2 buildings.

Given that some studio apartments and small apartments may not currently be designed with toilets located in a corner of the bathroom, does the proposed requirement raise any issues for stakeholders?

The RIS proposes four features to improve the accessibility of new housing in Victoria, namely a clear path from the street (or car set-down/park) to a level entry; wider doorways and passages; a toilet suitable for people with limited mobility on the entry level; and reinforced bathroom walls to allow grab rails to be fitted inexpensively if they are needed. VUHA fully supports each of these features as essential minimum requirements.

However, we believe **a fifth minimum requirement should be added**, namely a level entry shower, and also wish to raise some issues about specific aspects of the proposed features.

Proposal for level entry showers as additional minimum requirement

We understand the cost of including a level entry shower is estimated at \$200 for houses (BCA Class I), \$70 for medium density units and nil for units in high-rise apartments with lifts⁸. These are very low additional costs, given the long term community benefit offered.

A level entry shower will particularly improve the safety of homes for older people and for others with disabilities, such as long term or short term mobility limitations and sight impairments, and add to the visitability of homes by family (such as elderly parents) or friends with a range of mobility issues and other disabilities. It will also reduce costs to government for support services as residents would then have less need for assistance with showering. The RIS report estimates that about 25 per cent of users of personal care services provided by the Home and

community Care (HACC) program may be able to shower unaided if a step-free walk-in shower with handrails was available in their home.⁹

Consideration of additional option for placement of toilet

We propose that some further consideration be given to an option that does not require all toilets in bathrooms to be in a corner. For toilets not in a corner, reinforcements in the wall should be provided for pull-down grab rails; this is an approach that is common overseas. It is considered that, in some bathroom configurations, toilets placed away from a corner have the potential to improve the functionality of the bathroom space and may also allow the inclusion of a more functional level entry shower. It is important that the specifications for the wall reinforcements take into account the range of heights of people who may in the future need pull-down grab rails.

Door clearance and passage widths

A minimum clear opening width of 850mm is preferred over the proposed 820mm, as is incorporation of passage widths of 1200mm rather than 1000mm in instances where there are doorways off a passage way. It is acknowledged that the RIS proposals represent important steps forward in regulation to improve accessibility. However they are not sufficient for people using wheelchairs and thus fall short on the Government's policy to *'ensure Victorians with a disability can participate fully in community life'*¹⁰.

Some of the practical issues supporting our preference for wider door clearance and passage widths are as follows:

- Having to widen doors and passage ways has been identified in the RIS as the most costly area for retrofitting¹¹ so it is important to get these basic features right for the future.
- A width of 850mm for doorways would be consistent with the current proposal for public and commercial buildings, as part of the Commonwealth Disability (Access to Premises - Buildings) Standards. Consistent doorway clearance widths between public buildings and new homes would give many people in wheelchairs greater confidence in their environment and spare them the indignity of not being able to get through some doorways.
- While still not meeting the door-width clearance requirements of those with the largest wheelchairs, an increase to 850mm would allow more people using wheelchairs to benefit from the new regulations. This would in turn further assist the Government in meeting its policy objectives to improve social inclusion and participation for people with disabilities.
- As the number of people with disabilities grows in line with population growth and ageing, more people who need accessible housing features will be reliant on rental housing. As it is highly unlikely that private landlords will make

costly modifications to meet the needs of current or prospective tenants, it is important that adequate accessibility features are included at the time of construction. Increasing the proposed minimum requirements for door and passage widths will add to the supply of more accessible rental housing over time for people dependent on wheelchairs.

Exemptions if slope of land greater than one in 14

VUHA is concerned compliance with the regulations is automatically exempted in instances where the natural ground slope along the possible paths to Class 1 and 2 buildings is steeper than one in 14. We accept that there will be a small number of sites in Victoria where the steep slope of the land would make it very difficult from a practical perspective and/or too expensive to reasonably conform to the proposed level entry regulations. However, we think it is reasonable to expect that some requirements are in place for steep sites to ensure due consideration is given to positioning the dwelling and entrances in a way that achieves the best possible accessibility outcome.

Question 3 Application of any mandatory standards on Victoria's new dwellings

Given the Melbourne 2030 policy objectives of a more compact city and given that apartments are an affordable choice for many people who have a disability, what are your views on the proposed application of the features to the BCA building classes?

Please give consideration to:

- BCA Class 1a and 1b (1a single dwelling and 1b boarding house, hostel, guest house etc)
- BCA Class 2 (building containing 2 or more sole occupancy units, each being a separate dwelling); and
- BCA Class 4 (the only dwelling in an office building, shop, car park, or health or aged care building).

VUHA considers that the best outcome for the community will be achieved by requiring as many new dwellings as possible to incorporate minimum accessibility features. The cost estimate outlined in the RIS for the inclusion of the four proposed features in a house, unit or apartment at the time it is being built is estimated at between 0.1% and 0.3% of the total purchase price (depending on type of dwelling). This appears very modest compared to the costs of retrofitting such properties later (some 22 times higher at \$19,400) and the wide and increasing community benefit that will result from such an initiative.

As stated above, incorporating accessibility features in private homes adds significantly to national, state and local government initiatives to improve the accessibility and ease of use of public buildings and other physical infrastructure for people with disabilities and older people more generally.

More specifically our views are as follows:

BCA Class 1a

We fully support the proposal in the RIS to require all new BCA Class 1a dwellings to be constructed in accordance with the minimum accessibility requirements. As Class 1a buildings are the most common form of new housing construction, such a requirement will most quickly increase the proportion of homes in Victoria with accessibility features.

BCA Class 1b

We strongly support a requirement for individual dwellings in Class 1b properties to meet the minimum Victorian standards for accessibility, where they are not already covered by the National Premises Standards. As noted in the House of Representatives *Inquiry into the draft Disability (Access to Premises - Buildings) Standards*:

"...bed and breakfasts, eco lodges and similar small accommodation providers are an affordable, popular and growing segment of the tourism sector. It is therefore important that accessibility should be required in the greatest number of Class 1b buildings as possible¹².

Increasing the availability of accessible holiday accommodation is important, as both older people and people with disabilities are limited by both accessibility and affordability in their current holiday options.

BCA Class 2 medium density

The RIS proposal to require minimum accessibility features only for all ground floor units of medium density housing units with no lift appears to be a common sense approach for these buildings.

BCA Class 2 high-rise apartments with lift

Common areas of Class 2 buildings

We support the access proposals outlined in the RIS for common areas of Class 2 buildings. However, as outlined above, our preference is for doorway clearance widths of 850mm. We note again that the report of the House of Representatives' *Inquiry into the draft Disability (Access to Premises- Buildings) Standards* Report recommends that access to common areas of Class 2 buildings be included in the Premises Standards.¹³

Minimum number of units required to have accessibility features

We believe consideration needs to be given to requiring the minimum accessibility features in more than 20 per cent of apartments in high-rise buildings, and preferably in all apartments. The reasons for this are as follows:

- High-rise apartments are frequently built in good locations near public transport, shops and educational and community services, making them important housing options for people with disabilities and older people more generally. Requiring all apartments to have accessibility features will thus maximise the availability and choice of properties with accessibility features in established and well located areas.
- Apartment buildings are generally more compact spaces, easier to keep clean, with fewer outside maintenance requirements, and often have secure access. They therefore offer important housing choices as people age or their physical capacities become more restricted. While apartment living does not currently seem to have been taken up by as many older people as had been expected, it may gain wider acceptance in the near future. It is now widely accepted that high-rise apartments developed by the Office of Housing have provided very successful living environments for older people.

Only a few decades ago there was a stigma attached to high-rise living in Melbourne, with public housing high-rise buildings virtually the only high-density residential developments in the city. The last 20 years has seen a dramatic change in this perception.

- In a number of locations, apartment buildings are a more affordable housing option (with the bonus of being in good proximity to many services). Given that people with disabilities generally have lower incomes and assets than other population groups, this heightens the need to ensure as many apartments as possible have accessibility features.
- The RIS proposes that access from the street or car park and entrance will need to incorporate the minimum accessibility features, that lifts must be accessible and that passing/turning spaces must be provided in corridors at 20 metre intervals on each floor with lift access. These fixed costs therefore will apply for compliance with the accessibility requirements for common areas of apartment buildings, regardless of the proportion of units that need to have accessibility features.¹⁴

The RIS identifies that the largest cost for incorporation of accessibility features into apartment buildings is that associated with compliance in common areas. The identified cost of incorporating the remaining three proposed minimum accessibility features, plus the level entry shower proposed by VUHA, into individual units is identified as only \$130 per unit.¹⁵ Thus increasing the proportion of units with accessibility features is not likely to be a large additional cost burden.

- If only 20 per cent of apartments have accessibility features, then a number of people in the building may be unable to visit 80 per cent of their neighbours. This would severely restrict their local social options, which clearly does not support important social policy objectives associated with equity and participation.

In the event that only a proportion of dwellings in high-rise buildings are required to have minimum accessibility features, we would propose that guidelines representing good practice be developed to encourage appropriate location of these units within the building. The development of these guidelines should be informed by overseas experience with similar initiatives, as well as through drawing on any emerging Australian experience. The development of the guidelines should be supported by a consultative process involving key stakeholders.

Class 4 buildings

As part of maximizing the availability of properties with minimum accessibility features, it is proposed that single dwellings in a building should meet the minimum accessibility requirements if they are on a ground floor (or other floors that might already be appropriately ramped and effectively provide for level entry) or if they are on a floor accessible by a lift.

Concluding comments

As stated by the Minister for Planning, Justin Madden, in his media release for the *Build for Life* launch in April 2009:

"A well designed house with accessible features means it can meet the changing needs of families, from raising small children, to ageing parents or people with a disability."

Issues of accessible housing or, more often, lack of accessible features in housing, affect many individuals, households and families in ways that are often unexpected. Improving the accessibility of homes is an important community issue needing leadership and action from government in order to more effectively support older, increasingly frail or disabled people to stay living at home for longer and also to meet important objectives of greater social participation, inclusion and independence for people with disabilities. Experience to date indicates that, without regulation, progress on the issue in Victoria has been slow with an estimated 96 per cent of new homes still lacking basic accessibility features.¹⁶

VUHA understands that, in line with earlier government commitments, the objective of the proposed regulations outlined in the RIS is to progressively increase the number of homes in Victoria with minimum accessible features, while also containing costs to minimise the impact on the affordability of new housing.

It is our view that the introduction of the proposed minimum features (incorporating the enhancements proposed by VUHA) represents a very important starting point for better aligning our housing stock with population trends, social policy objectives, and recognised imperatives to address future sustainability and cost effectiveness.

The proposed regulations will result in homes that are safer, more functional and more adaptable to the needs of the varied households that will occupy them over time. Widespread social and economic benefits will arise from safer homes and from homes providing safer workplaces (saving the personal and social costs of injury). Savings will also be made to the cost of care programs which support people who stay living at home for longer and return home more quickly from hospital following injury, illness or medical procedures. The regulations will help address the inequity and exclusion experienced by a growing number of people in our built environment.

Further enhancing accessibility of housing

VUHA considers that further initiatives beyond the proposed minimum regulations are needed to ensure that all future housing meets the requirements of universal housing design¹⁷ and to ensure a clearer plan to address the specific needs of people in larger wheelchairs. The following sets out our particular concerns.

Multi-level dwellings

We are most concerned that, without further strong government leadership, new homes built on multiple levels (such as two storey town houses) will remain less accessible and adaptable. While this property type overall is far less common than single level properties, townhouses are often part of infill developments in areas with good access to a range of services and constitute a sizeable proportion of new housing in some local areas.

The proposed regulations outlined in the RIS will provide for an accessible entry and visitable toilet on the ground floor on multi-level dwellings. However there is no requirement for other features on the ground floor to ensure the property is truly visitable or that it is, in fact, liveable for someone who cannot use the stairs.

Other key requirements necessary to achieve a similar level of visitability to other dwellings are an accessible bathroom on the entry level and an open-plan room on the entry level that can be used as a bedroom. In addition, the requirement for a straight staircase adjacent to a load-bearing wall is a key adaptability feature for multiple level homes.

Additional features to improve functionality, livability and safety

The remaining features of VUHA's proposed Universal Housing Standard are aimed at further improving safety, amenity and functionality of homes. They are: appropriate lighting evenly distributed throughout the house; clearly identifiable light switches, controls and handles in easy-to-reach places for someone sitting or standing; slip resistant flooring; and open-plan kitchen and lounge.

These are important features which need to be included in ongoing discussions and action to improve housing design.

A more specific plan for addressing the accessibility needs of people using larger wheelchairs

It is acknowledged by VUHA that the proposed minimum regulations outlined in the RIS are not intended to fully meet the accessibility needs of all groups. The focus is to improve the general accessibility of new homes in ways that have wide community benefit and respond to the challenges of an ageing population and a growing number of people with a wide range of disabilities.

It is evident that a number of people reliant on larger wheelchairs will not be greatly assisted by the proposed regulatory change. However their needs are

equally important and should be served in the context of the Government's policy commitment to ensure that Victorians living with a disability can participate fully in community life.

Thus, further work is considered necessary to develop improved responses to issues of accessibility of housing for this group.

Increasing building industry and community understanding of the importance of functional housing design

The implementation of the proposed regulatory changes represents a significant first step in ensuring that future housing will incorporate more accessibility features. However, as the Build for Life documentation demonstrates, further measures will better improve the functionality of homes and their capacity to meet current and future community needs.

Ongoing education of both the building industry and the wider community appears necessary to broaden understanding of the benefits of building housing with basic, cost-effective, and functional accessibility features.

We ask the government to identify actions it can take to further enhance the accessibility and functionality of homes and to address the specific issues we have identified.

Further Information

If you require any further information from VUHA or clarification on issues raised in our submission please contact:

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Appendix 1

Victorian Universal Housing Alliance Members

- Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU)
- Australian New Zealand Association of Neurologists
- Australian Vietnamese Women's Welfare Association
- Beverley Garlick Architects
- Borderlands Cooperative
- Blind Citizens Australia
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- Cancer Council of Victoria
- Catholic Social Services Victoria
- Chronic Illness Alliance
- City of Frankston
- City of Melbourne
- City of Port Phillip
- City of Yarra
- Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union
- Council of Single Mothers and their Children
- Council on the Ageing
- Council to Homeless Persons
- Dingley Village Community Advice Bureau
- Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria
- Housing for the Aged Action Group
- Housing Resource and Support Service
- ICLEI Oceania - Local Governments for Sustainability
- Inner South Community Health Centre
- Latrobe City Council
- Mallee Accommodation and Support Program
- Medical Scientists Association
- Melbourne Affordable Housing
- Melbourne CityMission
- Mind (formerly Richmond Fellowship)
- Moreland City Council
- MS Society of NSW/Victoria
- National Disability Services Victoria
- North Yarra Community Health Centre
- Occupational Therapists Association of Victoria/Australia
- Paraquad
- People with Disabilities Australia
- Port Phillip Housing Association
- Prahran Mission
- Planning Institute of Victoria
- Royal Australian Institute of Architects Victoria
- Rural Housing Network
- Shire of Yarra Ranges
- Summer Foundation
- Sunraysia Residential Services
- Surf Coast Shire Council
- Tenants Union of Victoria
- Trades Hall Council
- Travellers Aid Society of Victoria
- UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania
- Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association
- Victorian Council of Churches
- Victorian Council of Social Service
- Victorian Local Governance Association
- Victorian Psychologists Association
- Victorian Women with Disability Network
- Vision Australia
- Women's Housing Ltd
- Wyndham City Council
- Young People In Nursing Homes Alliance (YPINH)

Endnotes

- ¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Australia's Welfare 2009*, AIHW, Canberra pp144-145.
- ² Department of Planning and Community Development, *Victorian Population Bulletin* Issue 16 2009, Melbourne
- ³ Department of Planning and Community Development, *Victorian Population Bulletin* Issue 16 2009, Melbourne
- ⁴ AIHW 2009 cited above p88
- ⁵ Department of Planning and Community Development, 2009, *Adaptable Features in Housing, Regulatory Impact Statement*, Melbourne, see particularly pp72-94
- ⁶ ABS 2006 Census
- ⁷ Department of Planning and Community Development, 2009, *Adaptable Features in Housing, Regulatory Impact Statement*, Melbourne, p9
- ⁸ Ibid p162
- ⁹ Ibid p87
- ¹⁰ Victorian Government, 2007, *A Fairer Victoria, Building on our Commitment*, p46
- ¹¹ Department of Planning and Community Development, 2009, *Adaptable Features in Housing, Regulatory Impact Statement*, Melbourne, p98 Table 4.10
- ¹² Ibid p36
- ¹³ House Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, June 2009, *Access All Areas: Inquiry into the draft Disability (Access to Premises- Buildings) Standards*, Canberra p31
- ¹⁴ Department of Planning and Community Development, 2009, *Adaptable Features in Housing, Regulatory Impact Statement*, Melbourne, p51
- ¹⁵ Ibid Table 4.2 pp67-68 and p162.
- ¹⁶ Ibid p8
- ¹⁷ See Preface of this submission for a list of features the Alliance proposes as central elements of a Universal Housing Standard