

How to get the housing we need: Healthy, affordable and resilient to climate change

September 5 2024, by Lyrian Daniel, Emma Baker, Ian Hamilton, Michaela Lang and Peter Phibbs



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Imagine coming home after a long day at work. It is winter. You step inside your home. It is warm, quiet and dry.

A storm is forecast to blow in tonight. Unprecedented rainfall, they are saying. But you are not worried. You know your house will stay warm, and the roof and gutters will cope with the fourth "once-in-100-year" rainfall event this season.

Come summer, too, you know your house will stay cool, even through any blackouts.

Since moving into your new home, you no longer have to worry about the next electricity bill. Your house is designed well, so it takes very little [energy](#) to keep warm in winter and cool in summer.

The house also never gets that musty, moldy smell. Your child's asthma has improved greatly. Your own mental well-being is better and your risk of heart and blood vessel disease is low.

Imagine if all Australian homes were fit for purpose: healthy, affordable to run and climate-resilient. This is the [housing](#) we need, but for many it is not the housing we have, nor is it the housing we are building.

Our [new research](#) casts a critical eye across the quality and condition of the Australian housing stock and the policies that govern it. The results were stark. We don't have much information on the state of our housing stock, but what we do have paints a worrying picture.

'Patchy' data, but we know enough to be concerned

Australians hold about [A\\$11 trillion of their wealth](#) in their housing. While we're very good at calculating our housing's value, we don't know much at all about what our [11 million dwellings](#) are like to live in. Data to describe the warmth, [energy efficiency](#) and healthiness of Australian homes are best described as patchy.

If we look across this patchwork of information, though, there is a lot to be concerned about. For example, we find:

- a large gap between the energy efficiency of new and existing homes
- older homes are in poorer condition than newer homes
- older homes are more likely to be cold homes.

Australia is lagging on the policy front

We reviewed energy efficiency policies from across Australia. We then compared the findings with an International Energy Agency [framework for energy-efficient buildings](#). Australian policies fall short in terms of regulation, information and incentives, with a reliance on voluntary rather than mandatory measures.

New buildings and major renovations are regulated under the National Construction Code ([NCC](#)). In 2022, the code was updated to include a 7-star energy-efficiency rating, lower than the 9-star rating experts recommended. We know building codes and mandatory energy-efficiency [standards are effective](#) for improving energy performance, saving on energy costs and battling [climate change](#).

While the NCC is a national code, it is enacted by states and territories. They [agreed to the updated code](#) of 2022. But adoption of the new standards [has been slow](#).

Tasmania and the Northern Territory have decided not to adopt the energy-efficiency standards. New South Wales and Western Australia are not adopting the Liveable Housing Design standard that was included in the code in 2022.

There is a national plan for improving existing buildings to achieve net

zero emissions. However, policymakers recognize that [current policy settings are not sufficient](#) to achieve net zero.

Essential policies, such as mandatory disclosure of the energy performance of homes and minimum standards for rental properties, have not been widely adopted.

Information and incentives for improving existing buildings are mostly voluntary. The ACT is the only state or territory that requires disclosure of energy-efficiency ratings. Rebates for things like [solar panels](#) differ in different parts of Australia and change over time.

Change is political, but not impossible

With Australia so far behind, we sought to understand how and why political change occurs. Or doesn't. We drew lessons from two [case studies](#) discussed in our report.

The first looked at the adoption of the [Liveable Housing Design Standard](#). It took over a decade for the standard to progress from a voluntary measure to inclusion in the 2022 National Construction Code.

The case study revealed the influence of the property lobby in hampering the adoption of the standard. At a broader scale, many experts we spoke with for the research noted the high political stakes of intervening in housing policy.

The second case study reflected on the powerful role of a decades-long program of empirical research and strong narratives for change in realizing [Healthy Homes Standards](#) for rental properties in Aotearoa New Zealand. It also showed the importance of a reformist government and ministers that were able to leverage the research evidence to enact change.

Australia needs to move, quickly and with big steps

On the global stage, Australia is lagging in both its recognition of [adequate housing as a human right](#) and its [commitment to action on climate change](#).

We so desperately need national leadership, a national vision, and a national plan to achieve the housing we need, for all Australians.

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