

Good design and amenity

Good design is a critical ingredient for the successful delivery of housing and the enjoyment of a neighbourhood. Good design provides not only better places for people to live but creates safer, more vibrant, more inviting communities. Embedding a commitment to good design throughout our strategies and policies will elevate the quality of Banyule's built environment and filter down to our processes and guidance materials.

As ways of living have changed, we realise that housing needs to be designed with a range of considerations in mind, from layouts that are functional and easy to understand, to scale and forms that respond contextually to the places we love and use materials that are more sustainable, durable and efficient. Today we know more about how good design ensures homes that are enjoyable and comfortable to live in, but also, supports health and wellbeing, security, and improves productivity for the individual. At a community level, quality design contributes to a society that is healthy, inclusive, equitable and economically productive, and provides for neighbourhoods with a sense of place and identity.

WELL DESIGNED HIGHER DENSITY HOUSING

Much of the resistance to housing change is centred around a concern about the impacts of higher scale development. However, a higher scale development (compared to single detached dwellings), when done well, can create vibrant, safe places that are cherished by the community. The transformation brings investment in the area as well as the improvement and expansion of public infrastructure. When it is done poorly, change is seen as a negative which is bringing no or limited public benefit. In these scenarios, public perceptions can often see change as a 'free-for-all' where development occurs in a haphazard fashion, without a clear collective vision and with their arrival bringing no obvious benefits to the existing community.

Elevating good design outcomes in mid- and higher density housing developments is best approached as a program which approaches change in a range of ways:

1. Supporting an organisational culture that is committed to good design.
2. Providing transparent process and expectations for how good design will be valued and achieved.
3. Celebrating high quality outcomes of good design.

Supporting good design within Banyule requires providing additional training to planners and other relevant staff on what good design is, and how to achieve it. There is also the opportunity to better utilise existing, though not well known, resources. The State Government provides some design assistance through the Office of the

Victorian Government Architect (OVGA) and the Design Advisory Service (DAS). These services are especially useful in seeking design advice early in the design process from the Victorian Government Architect on major residential or mixed-use development projects. Both the developer and Council officers can access the service.

Externally, if developers and permit applicants are aware up front of the design expectations, it is more likely to be included at the earliest stage of the process, rather than as an afterthought later in the process. Additional resources which clearly define what Council's expectations are can help achieve this. Banyule is in the process of creating a design guide for the public realm (currently referred to as the *Draft Public Realm Strategy*). A similar document can be created for the private realm, focusing on mid- and higher density residential developments. Once the Housing Strategy and Neighbourhood Character Strategy documents have been updated, a mid- and higher density development design guide will be created to fill in the gaps.

Council could also support better design outcomes by running good design forums. The good design forum would be open to the development industry and community members who want to better understand Council design requirements for planning permit applications. It could also be an opportunity to celebrate good design outcomes achieved.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Positive social connection is important to individual wellbeing, generating social values and increasing trust and cooperation within communities. The way housing is designed can have big impact on the number of opportunities a household has to connect with their community, and a badly designed home can increase loneliness, social isolation and have significant negative health consequences (such as increased risk of cardiovascular disease or depression).

The need for social connection was emphasised through the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exposed the vital role that social connections play in mitigating feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and stress. The shared experience of navigating the pandemic together highlighted the significance of community support, emphasising that social connections are not just niceties but essential components of our collective ability to endure and overcome challenges.

The built form of both our public spaces and the interface with private property has a significant influence on social connection – the building and landscaping can either facilitate informal social connection or remove the possibility of casual encounters. High walls and hedges, blank facades, garage doors, security shutters and bedrooms facing streets with closed curtains, all remove the possibility for informal social connection.

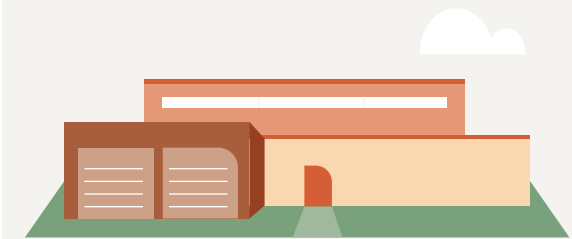
Conversely, there are specific design aspects of housing that can increase possibility of informal social connection:

- **Low or no fences** – While high fences can create a sense of privacy and isolation, low or no fences can allow for visual connectivity and easy interaction between neighbours. A low fence can create the sense of a boundary and sub-consciously increases sense of security, without impacting on the ability to see what's happening on the street or inhibiting casual interactions.
- **Verandah/porch that is a useable size** – The presence of a useable outdoor space increases the chance that a person spends time outside, and therefore increases the opportunities for informal interactions.
- **Living (public) rooms facing the street** – A private room like a bedroom facing the street means that the occupant is more likely to have their blinds closed. On the other hand, living rooms and kitchens provide an opportunity for windows which are more likely to be used and the occupants can know what's happening in their street. The ability to see the street from a house is known to increase the occupants' feeling of safety.
- **Use of vegetation and eaves** – While living room windows facing the street leads to a positive connection between occupant and the street, if the windows are too bare, it could lead to the occupant retreating e.g. with blinds. Landscaping and eaves provide a level of privacy without taking away the connection opportunity.

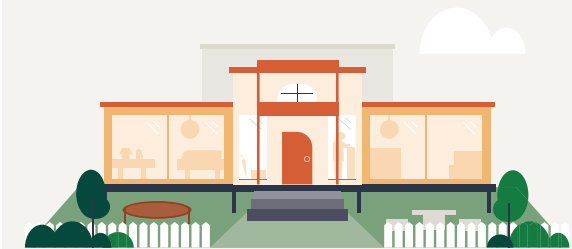
- **Minimising presence of driveways and garages facing the street** – Creates a more pedestrian friendly environment and creates a more aesthetically pleasing streetscape so that people are more willing to walk in their neighbourhoods.

All of these components of the public-private interface can contribute to a better social connectivity and form a positive interaction between the public and private realms.

Example: A home that reduces the possibility of social connection



Example: A home which enables social connection



CLIMATE CHANGE

Banyule, like many other municipalities in Australia and throughout the world, is at risk of the impacts of climate change. In 2019, Council declared a climate emergency in response to declining environmental conditions in Banyule. Council is also a member of the Council Alliance for a Sustainable Built Environment (CASBE) which advocates for planning reform for environmentally sustainable built environments.

Council has obligations under the *Local Government Act 2020* under Section 9(2)(c) to provide for the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the municipality, including mitigation and planning for climate change risks.

Whilst responding to the impacts of climate change cannot be addressed by the Housing Strategy alone, there are ways in which the Strategy can contribute to more environmentally sustainable design outcomes in Banyule. For instance:

- Encouraging the retention and planting of canopy trees and understory planting to improve shade and temperature control and minimise the urban heat island effect.
- Encouraging the use of eaves to improve the regulation of internal temperatures.
- Encouraging the use of lighter coloured wall and roof materials over darker colours that absorb more heat.

SUSTAINABILITY

Housing that is not appropriately designed to take into consideration the climate emergency will perform poorly environmentally and waste resources in the long term. Through thoughtful design we can ensure that our housing is contributing to long-term sustainability in Banyule and providing home environments that can cope with a changing climate and the changing demands of life.

The construction industry (and by association the housing industry), is a significant contributor to Australia's overall greenhouse gas emissions, contributing 18.1% of Australia's carbon footprint. Meanwhile, development often sees a reduction in existing tree canopy cover as development trends lead to increased site coverage from larger homes. There is a critical need to ensure that the housing growth Banyule experiences over the coming decades delivers more sustainable homes that perform well in the changing Australian environment and have a more positive impact on the environment.

Improved building performance and efficiency is critical to achieving this. The vast majority of Australia's building stock was constructed prior to the introduction of national minimum energy efficiency requirements which were first introduced into the National building code in 2005. More than 1 in 4 Australian households experience energy poverty, in part due to the poor thermal performance of housing. Often the performance of buildings can be significantly increased through passive design elements rather than active with thoughtful building orientation and site planning.



With Australian houses being some of the world's largest, more compact housing typologies that retain larger areas of land for permeable surfaces are vital to supporting the growth of the urban canopy and reducing stormwater impacts on rivers and infrastructure.

Sustainability has long been a priority in Banyule. At the direction of the *Housing Strategy (2009)*, Banyule, along with five other Councils, was one the first Councils to prepare an Environmentally Sustainable Design (ESD) Policy. The ESD Policy was embedded into the Banyule Planning Scheme in 2015 and was a part of a wider plan for addressing sustainability in housing development, including best practice standards, the Built Environment Sustainability Scorecard (BESS), and fact sheets covering 10 key sustainable design components.

The BESS is an assessment tool which helps permit applicants and Council understand how the development can best achieve sustainability outcomes at the planning permit stage. A BESS report can be attached to a permit application to demonstrate how the proposed development addresses the ESD Policy.

As technology and knowledge advances, the standard for best practice sustainability response must advance as well. In 2022, Banyule joined a group of Councils seeking to further elevate sustainability requirements in the Planning Scheme. The proposed new policy would require new developments to:

- Produce net zero carbon emissions.
- Reduce household bills by making buildings more energy efficient.
- Provide a healthier and more comfortable environment for building occupants.
- Better manage water quality, use and collection.
- Protect and enhance greening and biodiversity.
- Be more resilient to changing climate impacts.

We must continue to update and improve the sustainability of our new and existing residential areas.



SUSTAINABILITY REQUIREMENTS OUTSIDE PLANNING

The sustainability requirements of the Building Code of Australia (BCA) aim to improve the environmental performance of new housing. The universal application of the Code to all new housing development means that its influence is more extensive than the Banyule Planning Scheme, the latter of which, can only control development when a planning permit is required.

The disadvantage of relying solely upon the Building Code is that it does not necessitate the consideration of environmental sustainability at the site analysis stage of development. Neither does it apply holistically to a multi-dwelling development. It is further noted that the BCA focus is on energy efficiency and thermal performance requirements and other areas of sustainability are not well represented. As such, there remain opportunities

for the planning system to make a positive contribution to regulating better environmental performance outcomes.

The National Construction Code (NCC) was adopted by the states and territories in May 2023. It sets out requirements for the design and construction of buildings in Australia. It also sets minimum requirements for the energy efficiency of new homes, which aim to make homes cheaper to run, more comfortable to live in and more resilient to extreme weather.

In practice, the new energy efficiency requirements of the NCC can be difficult and expensive to achieve through building envelope performance alone. Siting and solar access has a significant impact on energy efficiency and there are opportunities to address this early in planning subdivisions and site layouts to ensure requirements can be achieved without undue financial burden on development.



Figure 11: Left: Infill development on individual suburban lots: note the duplication of driveways resulting in reduced open space, increased impervious surfaces and limited flexibility in dwelling siting. Right: Infill development on two-lot consolidation: Greater flexibility is provided to explore more innovative site planning and access arrangements, improved landscape outcomes with no loss in dwelling yield.

INFILL REDEVELOPMENT

Banyule is an established urban municipality. As a result, many of the locations identified where future housing growth will take place will require the transformation and renewal of the area over time. These new houses will not be delivered as part of a greenfield development but will need to be inserted into an existing context and community.

The development of infill, mid-scale housing within established areas is the redevelopment of single dwelling lots into two or more dwellings. While higher scale development such as apartments is becoming increasingly more common in and around activity centres within the municipality, development in infill areas will support a large amount of Banyule's anticipated housing growth.

The challenge presented by mid-scale infill development is that it is often seen as piecemeal

and opportunistic, lacking a clear strategic direction that major activity centres enjoy. Communities are unclear on the overall vision for their local area and design quality often varies calling into question consistency in the planning decisions. Establishing a clearer framework for how infill redevelopment should be undertaken, the expectations on design outcomes and the preferred typologies will provide an opportunity to regenerate our suburbs through a scale of change that is more strategic, sensitive, and sustainable.

GREYFIELD RENEWAL

Greyfields are residential areas where homes are aging, yet land values remain high. The existing subdivision pattern can be a key limiting factor in the delivery of housing typologies appropriate to the level of change envisaged within a neighbourhood. Many suburban lots are deep but relatively narrow. Higher density typologies

can struggle to be achieved without significantly impacting the amenity of adjacent properties in terms of overshadowing and overlooking.

Greyfield renewal is the process of lot consolidation and development of the new, larger lot which can handle mid-and higher scale housing better with improved off-site effects. Greyfield renewal opens up opportunities for improved development and design outcomes including more flexible approaches to site layout, access/ crossovers and increased opportunities for canopy coverage on site. Incentivising lot consolidation as a key pathway to unlocking housing typology and scale is important in helping deliver the right types of housing in the right places.

Banyule has residential areas which could be suitable for Greyfield renewal in Heidelberg West and Bundoora. There may be additional areas which are suitable and further work is required to identify these areas.

ACCESSIBLE HOUSING

Accessible housing is a term used to describe housing which is built to an 'accessible' standard, meaning its design is easy to move through, adaptable, and visitable to people of all abilities and life stages. This can include features such as step free entries to dwellings, wide corridors and doorways, slip-resistant flooring and accessible toilets and bathrooms.

Banyule's population is ageing. Our housing preferences are also leaning towards single person homes. Many older people have shared that they would like to continue to live in their current neighbourhoods when considering downsizing, but there are limited options for their needs. We have an opportunity to increase the supply of accessible housing in Banyule to accommodate the changing needs of our community.

Accessible housing design features need to be incorporated into the design and development of new housing, to minimise the requirement and cost associated with renovating and retrofitting existing dwelling stock.

The National Building Codes have mandatory accessible design standards. Many new homes must incorporate design features for people with mobility issues, such as step free entry and easy access bathrooms.

Banyule also has a 'Livable Housing Design Guidelines' document which aims to explain accessible design expectations in Banyule. There is opportunity to update this document and promote it more broadly through Banyule's development industry.

RETROFITTING

Retrofitting and adaptive reuse of ageing buildings should also be encouraged where appropriate. Adaptation rather than demolition of existing buildings can provide a significant contribution to sustainability and support the retention of heritage and local character, through clever utilisation of the existing fabric. Reuse of existing buildings can also result in substantial development cost savings. While retention of a building should be supported, not all buildings are suitable for retrofitting to housing. It is important that the resulting housing is 'fit-for-purpose', suitable for contemporary housing needs and future proof in terms of building performance and efficiency.

There are many examples of unused office spaces or warehouses being retrofitted for residential uses. However, another version of retrofitting is when a large house is turned into two or more dwellings, within the same large house and existing building footprint. This provides opportunity to deliver housing diversity without losing valued aspects like neighbourhood character and vegetation.

WASTE MANAGEMENT

With populations set to increase over coming years our waste services will also need to increase to meet the growing community, including collection household, commercial and construction waste. Kerbside collections are also impacted by different dwelling types, on-street car parking and objects/planting on the nature strip. New residential developments need to ensure appropriate consideration of waste management requirements.

An emerging issue for higher density developments in Banyule is how we best plan for safe and clean waste management. Waste management must be considered as early as possible in the design process and systems should maximise source separation and recovery of recyclables and organics. Waste systems should also be designed to minimise amenity impacts and improve the liveability of apartments.

