

# Submission to the ACT Housing Choices Consultation

March 2018

## About National Seniors Australia

National Seniors Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that gives voice to issues that affect Australians aged 50 years and over. It is the largest membership organisation of its type in Australia.

**We give our members a voice** – we listen and represent our members' views to governments, business and the community on the issues of concern to the over 50s.

**We keep our members informed** – by providing news and information to our members through our Australia-wide branch network, comprehensive website, forums and meetings, bi-monthly lifestyle magazine and weekly e-newsletter.

**We provide a world of opportunity** – we offer members the chance to use their expertise, skills and life experience to make a difference by volunteering and making a difference to the lives of others.

**We help our members save** – we offer member rewards with discounts from thousands of businesses across Australia. We also offer exclusive travel discounts and more tours designed for the over 50s and provide our members with affordable, quality insurance to suit their needs.

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## Introduction

As an organisation representing the interests of all older Australians, National Seniors welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on housing choices in the ACT. It is vital that senior's views are heard as part of any process impacting on future housing options.

As a member-based organisation National Seniors is well positioned to provide insights into the needs and preferences of older people in the ACT.

The ACT is an ageing population. The birth rate within ACT is one of the lowest in Australia and the number of older residents is increasing year by year.

According to the Census there were 49,969 people aged 65 and over living in the ACT in 2016. The proportion of the ACT population aged 65 and over increased from 10.6 per cent in 2011 to 12.5 per cent in 2016<sup>1</sup>.

Given this trend, it is highly likely that the demand for suitable housing for older people will continue to grow rapidly in the future.

This submission has been developed with input from members of the National Seniors ACT Policy Advisory Group and focuses on aspects of the Housing Choices Discussion Paper related to older people in the ACT.

This submission highlights the kind of housing that older people desire and contrasts this with the types of high density housing options being promoted through the current planning scheme.

It recommends that changes to zoning laws be made to promote housing options which are more suitable for older people. This includes encouraging development of single storey dual occupancy in low-density residential areas and mandating the use of universal or accessible housing design principles in all new dwellings.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017. *Census: Quickstats* Accessed online 12 February 2017  
[http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/8?opendocument](http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/8?opendocument)

## Housing preferences of older people

Many retirees choose to stay in the ACT as they age. A significant majority of them are home owners. Evidence suggests that as much as 90 per cent of older people in the ACT own their own home<sup>2</sup>.

Provided they are physically and financial capable, older people generally prefer to stay in their own homes as they age<sup>3</sup>.

Many have lived in their home for a long period of time – 30 to 40 years or more – and would prefer to stay within the neighbourhood/community where they are familiar with the surroundings and services available.

Older people are also likely to have a strong emotional connection to the family home with their sense of identity strongly attached to the family home<sup>4</sup>.

Given these considerations, it is perfectly rational that many older people prefer to stay in their own home as they age and preserve and enhance the practical, aesthetic and financial value of their home and surrounding community.

However, there is clearly a proportion of older people who are actively considering changing their housing in response to the challenges and changing circumstances that ageing present.

A recent Australia-wide survey conducted by National Seniors has shown, for example, that around one-third of home owners aged 50 and over had downsized, one quarter were considering downsizing, with 42 per cent unwilling to consider downsizing<sup>5</sup>.

With such a large proportion of older people downsizing or considering downsizing it is important that the needs and preferences of this group are taken into account.

While older Australians prefer to live in larger dwellings with ample space for leisure and care-giving activities, they may be inclined to downsize to properties with smaller yards to minimise the cost and hassle of maintaining them<sup>6</sup>.

According to National Seniors recent survey, factors such as “not physically able to maintain home/yard”, “costly to maintain home/yard”, “need a single-level house” and “want a smaller place” are nominated as key considerations of those who downsize or plan to downsize nominate<sup>7</sup>.

Affordability is also a key concern.

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<sup>2</sup> According to one survey, 91.1 per cent people aged 60-64 in the ACT own their own home in 2010 Source:

[https://apps.treasury.act.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/154475/population-ageing-ACT.pdf](https://apps.treasury.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/154475/population-ageing-ACT.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Judd, B. 2012. *Downsizing amongst older Australians*. AHURI Positioning Paper No. 150. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Adair T, Williams R, Menyen T. 2014. *Downsizing decisions of senior Australians: What are the motivating and discouraging factors?* National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre.

<sup>5</sup> Rees, K. & McCallum, J. 2017. *Downsizing: Movers, planners, stayers*. Brisbane: National Seniors.

<sup>6</sup> Adair T, Williams R, Menyen T. 2014. *Op cit*.

<sup>7</sup> Rees, K. & McCallum, J. 2017. *Op cit*.

Seniors require more affordable housing if downsizing or if moving into a retirement village.

Housing in ACT is expensive, retirement village housing is more expensive than purchasing a similar dwelling outside a retirement village. Those who do not own their own home face high rents or have to wait for public housing to become available.

Seniors need to be able to purchase a more suitable home for lesser or similar cost. No older person wants to pay more, especially if it is not suitable or in an unfamiliar area.

Yet, often what is being sold is twice the size of that being purchased for the same price. For example, a five-bedroom house on a sizeable block could achieve a sale price similar to a two-bedroom unit in a multi-storey apartment complex or in a retirement village.

Housing affordability is also impacted at the point of sale. The cost of buying, selling and moving can be significant, making downsizing a less than attractive proposition. Also, there is the stress of the move itself.

The costs associated with downsizing could be used to maintain a better quality of life in an existing larger residence to manage such things as gardens and cleaning etc.

More incentives are required to assist seniors to downsize. The current ACT stamp duty concession is appreciated, but more could be done.

Older people who rent in the ACT are struggling with the cost of renting in the private market.

Housing stress among older renters is most pronounced in the ACT when compared to other states and territories. An estimated 33 per cent of Commonwealth Rent Assistance recipients aged 75 years or over were paying more than 30 per cent of income on rent in the ACT. In comparison, the proportion of CRA recipients aged 75 years or over in housing stress across Australia was only 27.7 per cent<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2018. *Report on Government Services 2018*. Canberra: Productivity Commission.

## What do seniors think about the range of housing options available in the ACT

Older people have been encouraged to “downsize” on the basis that it will ensure that they have a home that is better suited to their changing needs and capacities as they age.

To enable older people to move, there has to be suitable housing available.

While older people do not represent a homogenous group, evidence suggests that many older people continue to have an enduring preference for detached or semi-detached housing<sup>9,10</sup>.

Despite these preferences, there has been a significant shift in the type of housing built in the ACT, away from detached and semi-detached housing towards greater reliance on multi-storey apartments and units.

As building approvals data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows (Table 1), the proportion of approvals for detached houses in the ACT fell from 55.8 per cent (in the ten-year period 1998 – 2007) to 34.8 per cent (in the following ten-year period 2008 – 2017).

In comparison, the proportion of building approvals for flats units or apartments increased from 22.5 per cent to 37.6 per cent between the two 10-year time periods.

While there was an increase in approvals of semi-detached dwellings, the larger increase was for dwellings of two or more stories with a lesser increase in the proportion of one story semi-detached dwellings.

Further evidence of the shift towards multi-storey unit and apartment developments in the ACT can be seen by examining changes in the number of monthly building approvals over time (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 compares the monthly number of building approvals for dwellings in the ACT deemed desirable to older people (new houses and semi-detached, row or terrace houses, townhouses) and compares this with the number of monthly approvals for dwellings deemed less desirable for older people (flats, units or apartments). It shows that the number of building approvals for more desirable dwellings declining relative to more desirable dwellings over the past 26 years.

While much of the focus has been on encouraging medium and high-density development/s in very specific planning zones in the ACT, there is little that is being built in these areas which suit older people.

While multi-storey unit developments may provide easy access to services desirable to older people, other aspects of these developments make them potentially unsuitable.

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<sup>9</sup> Annand K, Lacey W, & Webb E. 2015. *Seniors downsizing on their own terms: Overcoming planning, legal and policy impediments to the creation of alternative retirement communities*. Melbourne: National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre

<sup>10</sup> Adair T, Williams R, Menyen T. 2014. *Op cit*

	<b>Jan 1998 to Dec 2007</b>	<b>Jan 2008 to Dec 2017</b>
<b>New houses</b>	55.8%	34.8%
<b>Semi-detached, row or terrace houses, townhouses (1 storey)</b>	4.1%	5.9%
<b>Semi-detached, row or terrace houses, townhouses (2 or more storeys)</b>	6.6%	11.8%
<b>Flats units or apartments (1 or 2 storey block)</b>	2.8%	3.5%
<b>Flats units or apartments (3 storey block)</b>	8.2%	6.4%
<b>Flats units or apartments (4 or more storey block)</b>	22.5%	37.6%
<b>Total residential</b>	100%	100%

**Table 1: ACT Building approvals by type of dwelling Jan 1998 – Dec 2007 and Jan 2008 – Dec 2017<sup>11</sup>**

Multi-storey unit or apartment blocks are often being built for the rental market. Multi-storey units and apartments are being built in large complexes, which are being purchased by investors for rental purposes. These units and apartments are often rented by younger people, without children, who have different lifestyles to older people.

Some older people are concerned about lifestyle quality issues such as safety and noise, which are directly impacted by this type of housing.

Multi-storey unit or apartment blocks mean more traffic in the area, more noise and more shading of adjacent buildings. Older people with mobility issues may be at risk in multi-storey buildings if there is a fire, as lifts cannot be used.

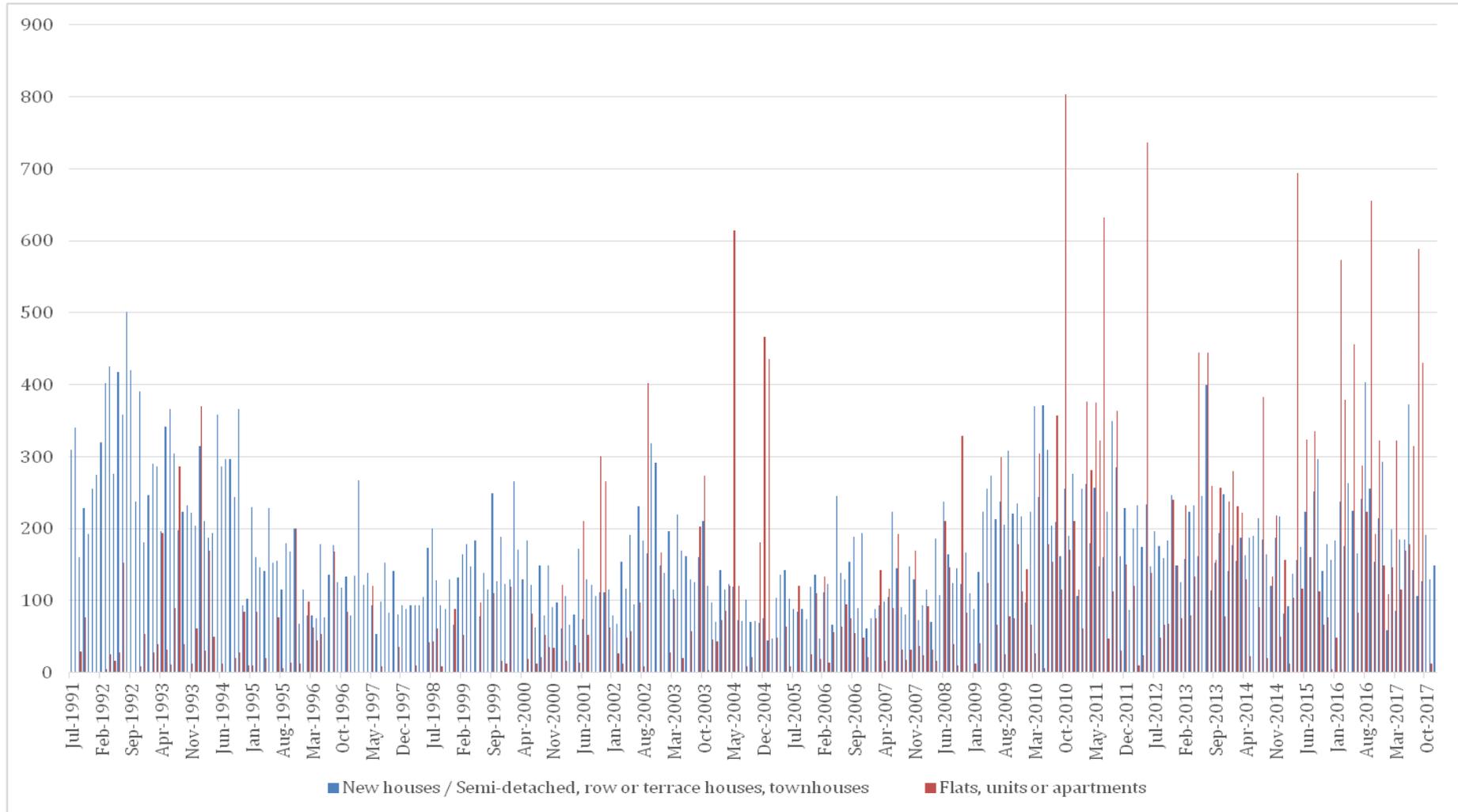
While these types of developments may be more appealing to those approaching retirement or in the early part of retirement, they may not be as appealing as they get older. As such, they are not necessarily supporting ageing-in-place.

Given the strong preference for detached and semi-detached housing among seniors it would appear the supply of new housing is not necessarily meeting these underlying preferences.

Most older people would also prefer to stay close to neighbours they have known over a long period of time than move to an area where they need to “start again”.

<sup>11</sup> ABS 2017. *Building Approvals, Australia Dec 2017* Cat No 8731.0 TABLE 29. Dwelling Units Approved in New Residential Buildings, Number and Value, Original - Australian Capital Territory

Figure 1: Monthly building approvals, ACT July 1991 to Dec 2017<sup>12</sup>



<sup>12</sup> ABS 2017. *Op cit*

## What do you think about the current range of housing options in the lower density suburbs?

Unfortunately, the current planning scheme has focused development in specific areas where medium and higher density housing types now dominate.

National Seniors believes that this provides limited options for older people wanting suitable housing in their local area.

Older people have indicated they will not move because there is not sufficient, suitable, affordable housing for them, either presently existing or being built<sup>13</sup>.

While semi-detached housing, such as townhouses may be desirable to older people, there are few for sale and many are unaffordable.

Suburban infill is necessary, but has to be well designed to keep the character of the ACT. It is important, for example, to keep as much open space as possible to preserve the ACT as “the bush capital”.

There is a strong case for reviewing the current zoning regulations.

There is not the diversity of housing necessary to suitably house older people. As people age and would like to downsize there is a broad expectation they should be able to stay in the same area in which they currently live, i.e. age in place.

Currently, there does not seem to be planning for this type of housing. Ideally suburbs should have a mix of housing types so the suburb houses people of all ages. Many areas, which are close to facilities, have many multi storey complexes. Most townhouses (if not all) being built are two-storey.

The regulations and zoning should allow more dual occupancy dwellings in the older suburbs. The older suburbs, which are close to the city, tend to have large, well established trees, wide streets and generally more regular bus services than the outer suburbs. Many of these blocks are large and would be suitable for two or more dwellings.

Currently the plot ratios and zoning in ACT are not conducive to this happening on the scale necessary to house the growing number of older people who want to stay in an area which is familiar to them.

The current zoning rules can prevent, for example, a person living in a large house on a large block from either developing a dual occupancy, subdividing into two or more smaller blocks, unless they are located within the specified zone. If this were allowed it would limit urban sprawl.

For example, it is not possible for dual occupancies to be titled and sold separately in the RZ1 zone. This creates a disincentive for older people thinking of creating a dual occupancy on an existing site. This has flow on impacts for the provision of services in these areas because the lower density makes this less feasible. In contrast, higher density zones (RZ2, RZ3, RZ4 and RZ4) provide greater access to services but not the type of housing that is desirable.

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<sup>13</sup> Rees, K. & McCallum, J. 2017. *Op cit.*

So long as planning laws continue to protect the general character of lower density areas, it may be beneficial to make changes to zoning regulations to enable dual occupancies in lower density zones. Regulations should allow more single level, dual or small multi-town house complexes to be built in the older suburbs so seniors can downsize in their community. Ideally, these dual occupancies should be single level and designed to suit future health and mobility needs.

This would allow older people to stay in the area with which they are familiar, have their social contacts and access the services they require.

If older people are to be housed in new areas, the necessary infrastructure should be in place prior to the dwellings being occupied. Why, for example, would an older person move from an area with services to an area without?

National Seniors knows of at least two retirement villages in the ACT, for example, that do not have a bus service available within easy walking distance. With Canberra's extremes of temperature, this is unacceptable for older people, who may have health and mobility issues.

Retirement villages are a key housing option for seniors which address many of the needs and preferences of this group. However very few retired people in ACT live in retirement villages.

There are a number of reasons why retirement villages are not popular:

- the number of retirement villages built in the ACT are few, and the places within them are limited.
- contracts are complex and difficult to understand and are not uniform between different retirement village operators and even within the different complexes run by the same operator.
- some retirement villages are very poorly designed, do not take into account orientation, do not have close public transport, adequate storage facilities, do not have current fixtures for disabled people, e.g. grab rails, hobless showers, suitable cupboards, wider doorway widths throughout.
- The price of a residence within a retirement village is often substantially higher than prices for similar dwellings outside a retirement village. While this is partly due to the community facilities and additional infrastructure within the retirement village, it nevertheless limits the options available.
- Ongoing fees paid to live within a retirement village can be substantial and also the loss of capital from deferred management fees, can mean financial stress for those who later need to enter aged care.
- Many older people would prefer to live in mixed age communities, rather than in retirement villages where everyone is a similar age. These seniors should have the opportunity to live and enjoy their lifestyle in such communities.

This makes the retirement village option impractical or undesirable, restricting the options for older people.

There should be a requirement for more uniformity and simplicity in contracts for retirement villages and high care accommodation.

There should be low cost legal assistance for older people to examine retirement village and high care accommodation contracts.

## What is good housing design? What elements make a good residential building or development?

This is perhaps the most important issue for older people, particularly those who have limited/restricted mobility or other health issues.

Housing should be specifically designed to meet older people's needs. Ideally, all housing should be designed with future mobility issues in mind.

However, there is limited focus on designing and building housing which is suitable for older people unless it is custom designed to do so.

Voluntary standards, such as those set by Liveable Housing Australia, have failed to encourage the use of basic universal design principles in the construction of new dwellings.

It has been reported, for example, that only 9300 projects were planned or built to the Liveable Housing Australia silver level or above as at December 2014 (with no contemporary data available). It has also been suggested that voluntary standards will meet less than five per cent of the aspirational 2020 target of all new housing set by the National Dialogue in 2010<sup>14</sup>.

While the construction of accessible housing is lacklustre, there is clearly demand for such dwellings.

When consulted, National Seniors members in ACT have expressed, not only a desire for accessible housing design, but also a desire for housing that incorporates other design elements, such as environmental sustainability.

Desirable design options identified by National Seniors members in the ACT include:

1. **single level**, ground floor preferably, on a flat block of land
2. **no steps** to get into the home, no steps within the home
3. door and corridor widths to suit **wheelchair access**
4. **correct orientation** to suit Canberra climate of extremes in temperature – ie north facing windows
5. **low maintenance** in the choice of materials used for various surfaces to ensure ease of cleaning, technological aids, ceiling heights for changing light bulbs
6. at least 2 bedrooms, **preferably 3 bedrooms** (for couples)
  - a. (many couples sleep in separate bedrooms due to health issues, e.g. sleep apnoea, people in retirement have time to pursue their hobbies and need an area to facilitate this, many ACT older people have children and their families who live interstate or overseas and they need room for them to visit to make it affordable)

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<sup>14</sup> Australian Network for Universal Housing Design and Rights and Inclusion Australia *Proposal for change National Construction Code Series Accessibility in housing*  
<https://aduhdblog.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/accessibility-in-housing-abc-b-proposal-with-insets.pdf>

- b. Some would be able to “cope” with one bedroom – but is “coping” really “living”?
7. **ensuite bathroom** and an additional bathroom to ensure privacy
  8. **all bathrooms, toilet facilities and ensuites** to be large enough to allow wheelchair manoeuvrability, to have grab/assistance rails, shower with no hob, basin/vanity at a height to allow wheelchair access, non-slip floor finishes
  9. **separate laundry** – not just a cupboard/laundry
  10. **outdoor drying facility**, i.e. not reliant on clothes dryer
  11. **kitchen, dining and lounge area** as open plan (kitchen should be designed to allow a person with mobility issues to work in the kitchen, e.g. sliding drawers, suitable bench heights, no very high or very low cupboards, appliances etc)
  12. **Adequate storage and cupboards** throughout
  13. Power points and light switches to be large and at a height accessible from a wheelchair
  14. efficient, effective, affordable **heating and cooling**
  15. preferably with **solar water heating, solar power and battery storage**
  16. **well insulated**
  17. **small, level, easy care garden and covered outdoor area** (water tank for garden use – water costs are expensive here in ACT)
  18. **double attached garage with internal** access if possible (this is to allow for a workshop area and storage area)
  19. **security system**, particularly if the home is not within a retirement village
  20. **privacy** from neighbours – may be achieved by a courtyard arrangement

Many older people are very concerned about the environment, those who can afford it and are in their own homes have invested in solar.

Unfortunately, solar is lacking from most retirement villages. Many houses are incorrectly oriented and designed, necessitating costly heating and cooling.

Areas which have high density living have little space for trees, which can help with temperature control. Shading from adjacent buildings can be a problem in winter.

National Seniors believes that the ACT Government should require developers to put age friendly infrastructure in place prior to new developments being completed.

National Seniors also believes that there should be compulsory accessibility standards for all new dwellings to increase the number of accessible dwellings available to older people. Adherence should be strictly policed.