



New suburbs on the urban fringe – more than just housing!



Most of us agree that Australia needs to build a lot more homes – and soon. This need is acknowledged in Australia's National Housing Accord – an agreement between all levels of government, investors and the construction sector – with a target of building 1.2 million new homes over 5 years from mid-2024.

Equally, sustainable urban growth and housing affordability are primary goals of the National Urban Policy. However, new suburbs also need jobs, schools, social services, meeting places, public open space and shops to be truly liveable.

We need to plan for and build complete communities, not only new homes.

Lagging infrastructure and services in new suburbs

Developments with a primary focus on new housing generally lack community infrastructure, services, and public transport. Private sector retail and hospitality services also often arrive later. This means that the 1 in 5 Australians living in rapidly expanding outer suburban areas need to travel long distances for work, healthcare, education, shopping and other daily needs. Yet supporting infrastructure for public transport, walking and cycling is often absent making people dependent on cars. This adds financial burden, and worsens road congestion, further impacting access to activities and leisure time. Finally, so-called 'bumping spaces' – where people can bump into each other and connect – are missing. Without these spaces, it is harder to build a strong local community.

Why should we provide community infrastructure and transport options?

While transport options increase opportunities to get to work and other services, especially for those unable to drive or without access to a car, community or social infrastructure, such as community centres, libraries, sports, educational and health facilities, are essential for immediate and long-term community wellbeing.

When this infrastructure is delayed, access to vital services is limited, hindering community development and resilience, and reducing liveability.

These gaps can worsen issues like loneliness, family violence, substance abuse, and social exclusion. Research shows that early delivery of high-quality public and active transport to growth areas has high benefits (i.e. a very favourable benefit-cost ratio), particularly when considering social and economic participation. Similarly, early social infrastructure provision can avoid longer-term costs in health and social support services.

What are barriers to earlier infrastructure provision?

Infrastructure and services cost money, and early provision is often assumed to be too expensive and not viable for the low numbers of residents in growth areas. For retailers or developers, viability and cash-flow are key considerations. Fringe councils on the other hand, are balancing low levels of existing services, low and capped revenue, and the need to provide services across multiple growth suburbs. Funding is a mix of council resources and external grants, but funding programs are fragmented between tiers of government, and often poorly aligned with construction timelines and the arrival of new residents. State and federal infrastructure delivery is also frequently politicised and contested.

What could be done differently?

More funding and better coordination of transport and social infrastructure is essential.

A base level of social infrastructure should be linked to development approval and then established before residents arrive rather than relying on population thresholds to trigger services. New and collaborative approaches between local government, service providers, retailers and developers can support solutions for viability concerns for early provision.

Planning processes can also be used to sequence development, allowing the establishment of larger populations sooner in an area, thus supporting the viability of services. This helps councils consolidate infrastructure investment due to fewer growth fronts and enables earlier delivery of retail and other services due to larger populations. State infrastructure plans and improved funding mechanisms at state and federal levels can support a more coordinated approach to growth.

Finally, while the value of social infrastructure is widely recognised, its benefits are often excluded from project assessments due to their intangible nature. Factoring in the costs of not providing social and transport infrastructure and services could further highlight their significance. We need to better understand these intangible benefits and consider them more strongly when undertaking cost-benefit analyses of delivery options in growth areas.

These measures can support the development of our new suburbs as complete communities, thereby achieving a more equitable, sustainable and healthier city.

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