

17 September 2021

## OPINION PIECE

### **It's time for action on our regional housing crisis**

It's every Australian's dream to live in a house of their choosing, in the location they desire with access to amenities and green space. But as time goes on, and we are continually pushed out of the market, this has only become increasingly difficult especially and other regional areas where affordability is becoming a challenge.

It is time we have a holistic and concentrated effort to make regional housing a priority. NSW needs policy solutions that will make housing more accessible right across the market. While the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our economy is still unknown, we know that many of our regional centres are unequipped to meet future housing needs.

Housing supply and affordable housing were already critical issues across the state, and especially for our region, but COVID-19 has now created an even greater urgency for policy levers to be quickly and strategically used to ensure future supply of residential housing.

Understanding the barriers to planning for and delivering housing in regional areas is critical if we are to get the delivery model right. We acknowledge the government's commitment to pursuing this important issue and the implementation of the NSW Regional Housing Taskforce, but urge the government to take a more holistic approach on housing that looks at both the 'buyers market' and 'rental market' to set us up for future success.

The challenges in regional areas are unique and even distinctive to their own patches of land. There must be consideration given to these nuances as well as getting the projected population targets right, delivering a diversity of housing supply, removing the bottlenecks in the planning system, and ensuring an integrated approach to infrastructure planning and funding.

Regional strategies and housing strategies are typically structured to meet population forecasts, but these forecasts are conservative, and as we have seen with significant COVID-19 driven regional migration, they are in many cases outdated.

Strategies flowing from these outdated forecasts lead to significant undersupply of housing in regional areas. It would be beneficial to implement a regular review process for local councils in regional communities to ensure forecasts are accurate for each region and align with those forecasts outlined in state and regional plans.

As populations in regional areas continue to grow and age and at the same time, there is also a real need for planning policies that override local politics and are aimed at the greater good, which would enable the delivery of new forms of housing to meet the changing needs of regional communities and especially our ageing population.

Unfortunately, the willingness of each council to address housing supply and affordability is variable across our region. With such a variability in willingness across regional councils to tackle housing supply and affordability, it becomes increasingly difficult to deliver diverse housing typologies and more affordable housing which is so desperately needed.

Another challenge with addressing housing supply and affordability is that many local councils do not have a clear distinction between the 'buyers' market' and 'rental market' when considering housing strategies and initiatives to address housing challenges. This often causes confusion across local councils and the development of housing strategies.

Many community housing organisations are willing to partner and work with local councils, but we need clear guidelines around this and distinguish the importance of 'affordability' in the rental market – this is also key to addressing the housing affordability challenges in regional areas. With this in mind we need affordable rental options in the regions, alongside the residential buyers' market.

If this can be achieved, then little by little we can start to see improvements that people are so desperately crying out for. We all deserve the choice and opportunity to either own our own home or have access to renting an affordable home, and this means we need to change the way we look at housing in our communities. We need to as a first step make regional housing an absolute priority, and then the rest will follow.

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