

Project Independence Submission

Organisation Details

Project Independence Ltd
2 King Street Deakin ACT 2600
PO Box 231 Deakin ACT 2600
T +61 2 6203 9500
enquire@projectindependence.com.au

Contact Details

[REDACTED]

Project Independence consents to the publication of it's feedback with the organisation's name.

Purpose of this submission

The purpose of this submission is to address the complex challenges in providing safe and quality social housing in Australia, as well as present the Project Independence approach and highlight some other approaches that may assist in relieving the current housing and homelessness crisis.

Several issues contribute to these challenges, including a shortage of housing supply, affordability concerns, variations in housing quality, and difficulties in accessing preferred locations. Specific challenges are also faced by different groups such as people with disabilities, Indigenous communities, and those fleeing domestic violence.

The recently released Royal Commission report into People with Disability has devoted a section of their report to housing for people with disabilities. Recommendation 7.33 of this report states that the Australian Government, along with state and territory governments, should make it clear that people with disabilities are a top priority when they work on housing agreements and plans.

Key findings of this report include:

- People with disabilities are more likely to experience housing insecurity than people without disabilities.
- People with disabilities are more likely to live in social housing, which is often of poor quality and located in disadvantaged areas.
- People with disabilities are less likely to own their own home.
- People with disabilities face discrimination in the private rental market.
- People with disabilities who need supported accommodation often have to wait long periods of time for a place.

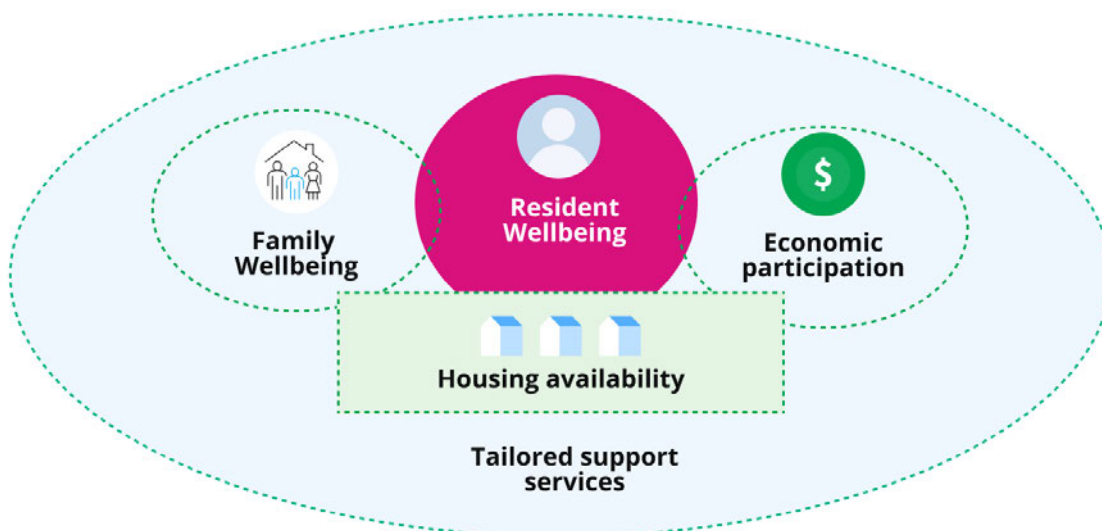
The main challenges to providing safe and quality social housing for those who need it

Providing safe and quality social housing in Australia, as in many other countries, faces a range of complex challenges. In Australia these challenges, when it comes to providing safe and quality social housing for those who most desperately need it, include:

- **A shortage of supply:** This shortage is due to several factors, including a lack of government investment, rising housing costs, and population growth.
- **Affordability:** Housing can still be unaffordable for some people on low incomes. This is due to stagnant income levels in Australia over many years and a rapid increase in rents. These two factors have led to financial instability and housing insecurity.
- **Quality:** The quality of social housing varies widely across Australia. Much of Australia's social housing stock is aging and in need of maintenance and modernization. This can lead to issues with safety, energy efficiency, and sustainability.
- **Location:** Social housing is often located in disadvantaged areas, with high crime rates and poor access to services. Resistance from communities and homeowners who do not want social housing developments in their neighbourhoods can be a significant barrier. This can lead to zoning restrictions and delays in the approval process.

In addressing these challenges, the focus should not just be on the **physical provision** of housing but also on the overall **social impact**. The following diagram shows housing availability as being only one of the priority areas that need to be addressed.

Social impact priority areas



Social impact key priority areas

1. **Resident Wellbeing** - Levels of health, happiness, relational ability and social inclusion.
2. **Family Wellbeing** - Levels of health, happiness, and quality of relationships particularly with child and support services provided.

3. **Social networks** – Being close to existing family, social and employment networks.
4. **Housing Availability** - Ability for people to access appropriate housing that supports their independence.
5. **Economic participation** - Ability to engage with meaningful work, education and training programs that support their ability to access economic resources.
6. **Tailored support services** - Access to services that support participation in individual and group activities that enhance growth towards greater independence, based on individual needs.

An example of an initiative that is working well to address these challenges – Project Independence

The purpose of Project Independence is to support people with an intellectual disability to become more independent. We do this through an innovative approach that enables people to buy their own home in a designed community environment that empowers them to step further into an independent life.

Project Independence is a not- for- profit social housing model that provides a place for people with an intellectual disability to grow their independence, both financially and socially, with guidance and support while living within a sustainable, safe and caring community.

The Australian Government Solicitor's office conducted an independent review of Project Independence against the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities and found that not only did it meet the requirements of the UN Convention, but it also supported them.

Project Independence has now completed three developments in Canberra – designed to be safe and accessible. Each development has a live-in resident coordinator to support the residents for daily meal preparation, weekly cleaning and maintenance. A fourth complex is being refurbished in Melbourne and Project Independence has partnered with a developer in Sydney to secure a property for disadvantaged groups, including both people with an intellectual disability and older women with no superannuation or savings. This property is scheduled for completion in 2026.

Project Independence is effectively a stepping stone to home ownership. Residents pay an initial deposit and when that proceeds to an offer to join a Project Independence development, residents move in for a 12 month 'try before you buy' before being offered a permanent place.

Under the Project Independence model, rather than pay rent, participants pay for equity in their unit as a step towards independently living in their own property. Project Independence utilises a proportion of their disability support pension as payment on equity against an interest-free loan.

Each Project Independence property has up to ten residents living in their own individual units with access to shared spaces. This fosters an inclusive and supportive environment that instils a sense of belonging and allows each resident to learn new skills, and experience supported decision making. Each development has a live-in resident coordinator (LIRC) to support the residents with daily meal preparation, weekly cleaning, and maintenance. The LIRC works alongside the residents' family and other external supports to meet individual goals of safety, contribution, and growth.

Social impact in action

The whole approach of Project Independence is centred around the person. There is a deep care for the needs of the individual, supported by the changing relationship of the families as independence is enhanced, together with balancing the needs of the collective community. It is an interconnected system that is unique. It is one of the only models based on working with the individuals to provide an opportunity for them to buy their own home and to develop the skills to become independent in daily living.

The **tailored support system** that is provided through the Live-In Resident Co-ordinators (LIRC) and the Operations teams help to ensure individuals are guided towards independence in ways that are tailored to

them. The LIRC lives full-time at the housing complex, providing dinner Monday to Friday, cleaning the main areas and most importantly being a presence to listen to the residents, talk through any issues and support them in their steps towards achieving more of their independence goals. Part of this service is supporting them through the many opportunities to learn while living with a community of 10 residents. This opens doors to developing more social skills, engaging with daily living skills in a community environment and practicing behaviours that enable each person to grow and develop at their pace. This leads to enhanced **resident wellbeing**.

It is recognised that the families are key to supporting the transition to independence. Part of assisting the parents 'release' process is provided through **tailored support services**. Just as each individual needs different levels of support, so does each family. When this balance is in harmony, it contributes to families being able to grow and develop in different ways. From a social impact perspective, this may allow parents to return to the workforce, downsize their homes (thus releasing further housing stock into the market), take holidays and release pressure on siblings to take on the responsibility of the primary carer role. All these elements work towards greater levels of **family wellbeing**.

Economic participation is demonstrated in numerous ways. The foundation of this initiative is creating **housing availability**, that is safe and secure and opens the door to home ownership for people with a disability. This delivers a different financial opportunity that has not been accessible for people with a disability. A key element that is applauded by parents is the 'try before you buy' scheme. This allows people to get a taste of what it is like living at Project Independence and ensure it is the right fit. When combined with NDIS and other external support services, residents start growing in confidence about their ability to undertake further training or employment. This is where the multi-faceted approach comes into its own from a social impact perspective.

Return on Investment

Rigorous financial analyses by both EY (2015) and KPMG (2020) have concluded that not only is the Project Independence model financially sustainable, but that it offers an attractive ROI for investment by Government. In October 2020, KPMG undertook an analysis of the return on investment of Project Independence to Government relative to three existing housing options for individuals with an ID. The analysis highlighted a substantial ROI from the Government's perspective, due in part to individuals with an ID no longer being reliant on social housing (requiring substantial ongoing Government funding). Specifically, the Government's ROI (when providing a representative plot of land to Project Independence) was calculated as follows:

- Project Independence compared to living at home and to community housing: 2.43.
- **Project Independence compared to public housing: 3.84**

What actions should be in a National Housing and Homelessness Plan to Improve Planning, Development, and the Sustainability of Housing

A diversity of solutions need to be considered that include affordable rental and affordable ownership. All solutions considered need to consider the following principles developed by Housing First, which include:

- people have a right to a home;
- housing and support are separated;
- flexible support for as long as it is needed;
- choice and self-determination;
- active engagement without coercion; and

- social and community inclusion.

Addressing the housing stock crisis requires a multifaceted strategy, focusing on both the development of:

- affordable rentals; and
- ownership.

Affordable Rentals

To assist in the alleviation on the housing stock crisis several issues need to be considered:

- Development of new housing stock; and
- Effective use of existing housing stock.

Development of New Housing Stock

Negative community reactions can hinder the development of new housing. These reactions are often driven by concerns about increased traffic, noise, and changes to the neighbourhood's character. The following strategies can be used to increase the development of new housing stock:

1. Mitigating Negative Community Reactions:

- Implement community engagement programs to educate residents about the benefits of new housing developments.
- Foster collaboration between developers, local authorities, and communities to address concerns and find mutually beneficial solutions.
- Streamline the planning approval process to expedite the development of social housing projects. This can be achieved through measures such as creating fast-track approval processes for affordable housing projects, reducing unnecessary regulations, and providing incentives for developers to build affordable housing.
- Transparency through providing clear and accurate information about proposed developments can help to reduce uncertainty and build trust.
- Designing social housing that is compatible with the surrounding community can help to reduce opposition.
- Establish expert panels to review and make decisions on contentious developments.

2. Rezoning and Releasing Land:

- Rezoning underutilised or vacant land for residential development, particularly in areas with good access to public transport and amenities.
- Releasing government owned land for housing development, including surplus land held by various government agencies.
- Converting industrial or commercial land to mixed-use developments that include residential components.

3. Cost Reduction Measures:

- Introduce incentives and subsidies for developers engaging in social housing projects to alleviate some of the financial burdens.
- Explore public-private partnerships to fund and execute affordable housing developments.
- Provide tax breaks or credits to developers involved in projects that focus on affordable rental solutions.

Effective Use of Existing Housing Stock:

In addition to developing new housing stock, it is crucial to make effective use of existing housing stock to maximize its potential for long-term rental. There are number of properties that could be in the long-term rental market but are not due to the number in short rentals or are speculative vacancies.

1. Balancing Long-Term vs. Short-Term Rentals:

Short-term rentals, such as those facilitated by platforms like Airbnb, can reduce the availability of long-term rental properties.

There are several things that can be done to make long-term rentals more attractive to landlords than short term rentals, including:

- Taxation changes: Removing negative gearing for short term rentals and speculative vacancies would reduce the financial incentives for these investments.
- Regulation: Governments can regulate short term rentals to reduce their impact on the long-term rental market. For example, governments can limit the number of nights that a property can be rented out as short-term rentals per year.
- Financial incentives: Governments can offer financial incentives to landlords to rent out their properties to long-term tenants. For example, governments could offer tax breaks or rental subsidies.
- Establish zoning regulations that limit the concentration of short-term rental properties in residential areas.

2. Addressing Speculative Vacancies:

Speculative vacancies refer to properties that are left vacant by owners for investment purposes rather than being made available for long-term rental. These vacancies further reduce the availability of housing for those in need. Regarding Speculative Vacancies the 2021 Census data identified that 9.6% of Australian properties (1,043,776 homes) were vacant on census night - during a pandemic that required most people to stay in place.

- Introduce a vacant property tax to incentivise property owners to either occupy or make their properties available for long-term rental.
- Implement a registry for vacant properties, facilitating better monitoring and management.
- Utilise data analytics to identify trends and patterns of speculative vacancies, enabling proactive policy adjustments. Prosper Australia have low water usage data to identify long-term vacant dwellings across the greater metropolitan area of Melbourne. This approach has also been used by Queensland authorities to identify long term vacancies.

3. Taxation Changes:

- Reevaluate negative gearing policies to remove incentives for property owners who keep properties vacant or engage in short-term rentals.
- Introduce progressive property taxes that increase with the duration of property vacancy.
- Collaborate with tax experts and economists to design a taxation system that promotes the long-term use of residential properties.

Comprehensive Legislative Reforms:

1. Legislation to Encourage Affordable Rentals:

- Enact laws that prioritise affordable housing in urban planning and development.
- Establish rent controls to prevent unjustifiable rent increases and ensure affordability for tenants.
- Create a national housing strategy that aligns federal, state, and local policies to address the crisis cohesively.

2. Monitoring and Adjusting Policies:

- Implement a regular review process for housing policies, ensuring they remain effective and adaptive to changing market conditions.
- Utilise data-driven insights to assess the impact of implemented policies on housing affordability and adjust strategies accordingly.

A holistic approach, combining legislative reforms, financial incentives, and community engagement, is essential to effectively tackle the housing stock crisis. By addressing both the development of new housing stock and the efficient utilisation of existing properties, policymakers can create a sustainable and affordable rental market for the benefit of the community at large.

Affordable Ownership – extension of Project Independence Model

The success of Project Independence working with people with an ID has demonstrated that the model could equally apply to other disadvantaged groups. The ongoing development of Project Independence social franchising model will consider the extension of the Project Independence model to other groups within the community that experience severe housing stress and disadvantage. Groups identified by Project Independence for future inclusion include women and families escaping domestic violence, older women without savings or superannuation, homeless veterans, and other significantly disadvantaged homeowner groups.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the challenges in providing safe and quality social housing in Australia are multifaceted, encompassing issues of supply, affordability, quality, and location. These challenges are further complicated when addressing the specific needs of various vulnerable groups. However, this submission underscores the importance of not only focusing on the physical provision of housing but also on the broader social impact.

The example of Project Independence serves as an inspiring model that successfully addresses these challenges. By empowering individuals with intellectual disabilities to become homeowners within a supportive community, Project Independence demonstrates a unique and effective approach. The emphasis on resident wellbeing, family wellbeing, and economic participation highlights the comprehensive impact of such initiatives.

Moreover, this submission showcases the financial sustainability of the Project Independence model, as evidenced by return-on-investment analyses. This not only attests to the viability of such programs but also emphasizes their potential as attractive options for government investment.

In essence, the challenges in social housing are significant, but innovative and socially impactful initiatives like Project Independence offer tangible solutions. By incorporating these models into a comprehensive national strategy, Australia can make substantial progress in overcoming the complexities of providing safe and quality social housing for all.

Additional Information

Click on the following link [Project Independence | Independent living and home ownership for people living with intellectual disabilities | Canberra ACT Australia](#) to access the following reports:

- Social Impact Report 2022 ·
- Social Impact Report 2018 ·
- KPMG ROI Report

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