

Submission to the ACT Missing Middle Housing Reforms Consultation

August 2025

Introduction

Dementia Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the ACT Government's proposed Missing Middle Housing Reforms and Draft Major Plan Amendment 04 (DPA-04).

We support the ACT Government's goal to increase housing supply and diversity within the existing urban footprint and encourage the Government to consider the needs of older people, people living with dementia, and those with cognitive disability in its planning and design.

Dementia in Australia

Dementia is the term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of complex neurocognitive conditions which cause progressive decline in a person's functioning.

It is the leading cause of death for women in Australia, the second leading cause of Australians overall and is the leading cause of disability in Australians aged 65 and over. It is not a natural part of ageing and can affect people in their 40s, 50s, and even 30s.

There are many types of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, frontotemporal dementia and Lewy body disease. Dementia is not just memory loss - symptoms can also include changes in speech, reasoning, visuospatial abilities, emotional responses, social skills and physical functioning.

In 2025, there are an estimated 433,300 Australians living with dementia, including an estimated 29,000 people with younger onset dementia. Without a significant intervention, the number of people with dementia is expected to increase to an estimated 812,500 by 2054¹.

¹ Dementia Australia (2023) Dementia Prevalence Data 2024-2054, commissioned research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

In the ACT there is an estimated 6,100 people living with dementia. This figure is projected to increase to an estimated 12,300 by 2054.²

Dementia-enabling design in the missing middle housing design guide

The Missing Middle Housing Design Guide provides good practice guidance for creating well-designed homes and incorporates the adoption of LHA Silver standards as a foundation for accessible design in homes. However, the Design Guide as well as the LHA standards primarily address physical disability and mobility needs. Dementia-friendly housing is an essential component of accessibility. To ensure housing is inclusive of all abilities and life stages, we recommend the Guide be expanded to include cognitive accessibility and dementia-enabling design principles.

A well-designed, dementia-enabling home environment supports people with cognitive impairment to:

- Remain independent and safe
- Engage in daily activities and routines
- Feel oriented and familiar in their surroundings
- Avoid premature admission to residential aged care
- Reduce stress for both people with dementia and their carers

Dementia-enabling environment principles

To assist in the design of dementia-enabling environments, Professor Richard Fleming and Kirsty Bennett developed ten dementia-enabling environment principles. These principles are evidence-based and have been designed to maximise enablement and wellbeing for people living with dementia.

Principle 1: Unobtrusively reduce risks

Principle 2: Provide a human scale

Principle 3: Allow people to see and be seen

Principle 4: Reduce unhelpful stimulation

Principle 5: Optimise helpful stimulation

Principle 6: Support movement and engagement

Principle 7: Create a familiar space

² Dementia Australia (2023) Dementia Prevalence Data 2024-2054, commissioned research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Principle 8: Provide opportunities to be alone or with others

Principle 9: Provide links to the community

Principle 10: Respond to a vision for way of life

Dementia-enabling housing

“Our common goal is the person living with dementia maintains a good quality of life and confidence to maintain their independence for as long as possible. Small (and big) changes around our homes, wherever that may be will achieve this...One thing I have in the back of my mind, is that there aren’t many purpose-built disability homes built let alone those which incorporate accessible dementia principles.” – Carer

Dementia-enabling environment principles are frequently incorporated into the construction or modification of residential aged care facilities. However, as people with dementia increasingly wish to remain in their own homes and avoid transitioning to residential aged care, the availability of dementia-enabling housing stock within the broader community is critical. Housing that is dementia-enabling provides a safer and engaging environment for people living with dementia. It can facilitate participation in daily activities and foster independence. Dementia-enabling housing also supports carers, who can be reassured knowing their loved one is safe.

“It just makes you more independent. My wife goes to work knowing that I’m in a safe environment.” – Person living with dementia

Community connection

Around 70% of people living with dementia live in the community. Our communities need to support people with dementia to live, participate and be included in their own communities. We need accessible environments and communities that support meaningful connection and engagement.

For many people with dementia their physical environment can have a significant impact on their ability to continue to access everyday activities such as shopping, banking or using public transport.

Refer to our **Toolkit for Councils** for dementia friendly design recommendations.

“People experiencing dementia should not feel isolated at home. People living with dementia should be supported within the community. Specific designs should exist within society, enabling people living with dementia, to participate in society...” ~ Dementia advocate

Ageing in place

As medium-density housing increases in established suburbs, consideration must be given to how planning and redevelopment may displace older residents or reduce access to essential supports and services. The reforms aim to “offer flexible and diverse living arrangements” that accommodate “a wider range of household sizes, ages, and income levels” with an emphasis on housing that allows people to choose the “best fit” for their life stage and personal circumstances.³

However, there is no specific reference to ageing in place, accessible housing, dementia or cognitive disability. While the language suggests supporting multi-generational and life-stage-appropriate housing, there is no explicit commitment to accessibility or age- and dementia-friendly features. Additionally, the limiting of parking in RZ1 and RZ1 zones may have consequences for people with dementia accessing essential supports as the draft Major Plan Amendment (MPA) proposes reducing the minimum number of car parks required in these zones.

Dementia Australia recommends that the ACT Government promote housing that enables residents to remain in their communities in dementia-enabling homes, with access to appropriate support services.

Conclusion

The increasing prevalence of dementia, as well as community and government desire for people to age in place and avoid premature entry into residential aged care means that future housing stock needs to include dementia-enabling features. Dementia-enabling features improve quality of life and support independence, function and participation.

The Missing Middle Housing Reforms can shape Canberra’s future housing by ensuring reforms support dementia-enabling design.

³ Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate – Planning. (2025). Draft Plan Amendment 04: Supporting report – Missing Middle Housing Reforms. ACT Government. <https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/missing-middle-housing>