



Australian Network
for Universal
Housing Design

7 June 2020

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability

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To whom it may concern,

ANUHD submission to the Rights and attitudes Issues paper

Australian Network for Universal Housing Design (ANUHD) is a national network of people that believes that the homes we build today should create inclusive and accessible communities.

We previously submitted our concerns about the failure of the voluntary industry agreement to provide Livable Housing Design (LHD) in all new housing by 2020. We acknowledged that, as a result of community advocacy, the Building Ministers Forum (BMF) now have a Regulatory Impact Statement underway for consideration of an access code in the National Construction Code in 2022.

The Commission's call for submissions to the Rights and Attitudes Issues Paper provides an opportunity to tell the story behind this industry failure and the subsequent actions by the BMF. We attach a paper, which outlines how:

- COAG abrogated responsibility for Livable Housing Design to the private housing industry and then ignored their failure to act;
- The Attorney General's Department misrepresented the progress (or lack thereof) to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in achieving the agreed targets; and
- The Australian Government showed scant regard in the implementation of the National Disability Strategy for what people with disability had to say about this failure, amongst other issues, and the consequences for them.

The paper suggests that the voices of people most affected and least able to speak for themselves are more likely to tell the truth, because they have most to gain from the truth being spoken.

We recommend that the Commission call for reliable recurrent funding for independent disability and community advocacy organisations to provide an alternative voice to that of government on all human rights issues for people with disability.

Yours Sincerely,

Margaret Ward PSM/David Brant, Convenors

Universal design in housing: Reporting on Australia's obligations to the UNCRPD

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Abstract

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) obliges Australia, as a State Party, to embrace the concept of universal design as a guide for its activities. The UNCRPD triggered significant changes in the last decade directed by the 2010-2020 National Disability Strategy (the Strategy), with its vision for an inclusive Australian society that enables people with disability to fulfil their potential as equal citizens.

This paper reviews Australia's national and international reports on these obligations over the last decade focusing on Australia's response to the Strategy's commitment in 2011 to support the 'National Dialogue agreement', a self-regulatory approach to incorporate universal design in housing.

It argues that the both the Australian Government and the housing industry largely disregarded the National Dialogue agreement, and misrepresented to the United Nations the progress made in achieving accessibility within the housing stock. It evidences the importance of advocacy and a direct line of communication to the United Nations from people with lived experience, something the United Nations relied on to discover that the National Dialogue agreement had failed, responding with a recommendation in September 2019 that Australia amend the National Construction Code with mandatory rules on access for all new and extensively modified housing.

Given that the National Dialogue failed, and the formal process of considering a minimum access standard for all housing in the National Construction Code is now well underway, the question remains whether a net benefit to society will be found to be of greater priority than the self-interests of the private housing sector and the political vagaries of government. Again, it will take the voice of people with lived experience and those who represent them to make the argument.

Keywords: UNCRPD, universal design, accessible housing, Australia, regulation,

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) (UNCRPD) obliges State Parties to embrace the concept of universal design as a guide for its activities (Article 4). This paper focuses on how Australia, as a signatory, responded to this obligation about universal design in housing over the last decade.

The UNCRPD (2007) brought a focus to the broadly accepted right to social inclusion by promoting the right of people with disability to access all aspects of the physical and social environment on an equal basis with others (Article 9). The cross-cutting nature of the UNCRPD not only directs how housing assistance is offered; (that is, people have the right "*to choose their place of residence and where and with whom they live on an equal basis with others*" and so forth (Article 19)), but it also challenges how housing should be designed; ("*the design of . . . environments, . . . [should] be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design*" (Article 4f)).

In 2009, the Australian Government called together housing industry, community and human rights leaders to address the fact that "*most homes in Australia have not been designed or built*

in a way that can easily accommodate the changing needs of households over their lifetime” (NDUHD 2010:2). Called the National Dialogue on Universal Housing Design, the group agreed to a national guideline and a strategic plan (National Dialogue agreement) with the aspirational goal that *“all new homes will be of an agreed Universal Housing Design standard by 2020 with interim targets to be set within that 10-year period”* (NDUHD, 2010:2). The Australian Network for Universal Housing Design (ANUHD) was a signatory.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) then endorsed the National Dialogue agreement as a key commitment in their 2010-2020 National Disability Strategy (the Strategy) (COAG 2011). The Australian Government granted one million dollars seeding grant in 2012 to Livable Housing Australia (LHA), a not-for-profit company established to implement the agreement. LHA was expected to attract private funding thereafter from the housing industry. The National Dialogue agreement was to be monitored by a series of ongoing reviews at two to three-year intervals across the 10-year period from 2010-2020.

The first of these reviews was planned for 2013 *“at which time areas of successful application, any barriers to uptake, and the need for other incentives or measures to stimulate adoption of universal design could be identified”* (NDUHD 2010:6). No review was done in 2013 and by 2014, due to a lack of reliable financial support, the LHA board dismissed its staff and effectively closed operations. By 2017, the LHA board had diverted its attention to the lucrative NDIS Specialist Disability Accommodation program.

These were clear indicators that both the Australian Government and the housing industry leaders had little interest in following through with the National Dialogue agreement, including meeting the targets. The paper now turns to how the Australian Government reported on their commitment to the National Dialogue agreement to the United Nations and to COAG.

Reporting

On becoming a signatory to the UNCRPD, Australia agreed to monitor its implementation at both international and national levels. At the international level, implementation is monitored through the reporting, communication and inquiry procedures of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN Committee). The Commonwealth Attorney General’s Department (AGD) is responsible for these reports. Two reports were submitted in ten years.

At the national level, The Department of Social Services (DSS) is required to establish and maintain the Strategy, including one or more independent mechanisms, as appropriate, to promote, protect and monitor implementation of the UNCRPD. The Strategy included reports on its progress to be submitted to COAG every two years. Two implementation and two progress reports were submitted in ten years. (See Table 1 below.)

Table 1 Reporting on the 2010-2020 National Disability Strategy

Year	What was planned	What occurred
First round of reports		
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publish plan for first implementation phase 2011–2014 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First implementation strategy: ‘Laying the Groundwork 2011-2014 (Department of Families 2012) First Australian Report to UN Committee (AGD 2012a)

Year	What was planned	What occurred
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Australian Report to UN Committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concluding Observations (UN Committee 2013)
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First two-yearly progress report • Scheduled year for the second Australian report under the UN Committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First progress report (DSS 2014)
Second round of reports		
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish plan for second implementation phase 2015–2018 	
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second two-yearly progress report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second Implementation Plan: Driving Action 2015–2018 (DSS 2016)
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commence review of second implementation period 2015–2018 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List of Issues from the UN Committee delivered to AGD (UN Committee 2017)
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Third two-yearly progress report • Scheduled year for the third Australian report to the UN Committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australia's combined second and third report under the UNCRPD (AGD 2018) • Second progress report (DSS 2018)
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish plan for third implementation phase 2019–2020 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent review of the implementation of the Strategy (Davy et al. 2019) • Concluding Observations on Australia's combined second and third report under the CRPD (UN Committee 2019) • Consultation report to help shape the next national disability strategy (DSS 2019b)

As part of the reporting requirements to the UN Committee, Australia is obliged to ensure that people with disability and their representative organisations are involved and participate fully in the monitoring process. These alternative reports to the UN Committee are known as *Civil Society Shadow Reports* (Australian Civil Society 2019, 2012).

First round of reports

The first international report to the UN Committee omitted to mention the National Dialogue agreement at all (AGD 2012b). The first shadow report (Australian Civil Society 2012), on the other hand, noted that the poor design of housing were key barriers to people's social inclusion (2012:127) and recommended that Australia makes “*a significant investment in enhancing universal design standards and regulations governing accessibility and affordability of all private and public housing*” (2012:137).

The first national report to COAG was vague about the commitment to the National Dialogue agreement, stating that “*states and territories continue to undertake work to support the inclusion of liveable [sic] design features*” (2014:87) and made reference to the 2020 target. It

reported on achievements in the social housing sector only and did not acknowledge that it made up less than 5% of Australia's housing stock (AIHW 2014).

The UN Committee (2013) chose not to comment at this stage; however, researchers (Franz et al. 2015; Ward 2013; Kelly et al. 2012) and activists (ANUHD & RI Australia 2015) began to question whether the National Dialogue agreement would or could drive any systemic change.

The Strategy's implementation plan in 2016 also omitted any mention of the National Dialogue agreement, and focused on the DSS' priorities at the time; that is, indigenous inequality, access to employment and the roll-out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Disability activists raised concerns at the time that the Strategy had lost sight of the mainstream issues, such as housing and transport, which underpin the viability of any specialist disability programs (The Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2017).

Second round of reports

In 2017, the UN Committee forwarded to the AGD a list of issues prior to the submission of the combined second and third periodic reports of Australia. Their request regarding the National Dialogue agreement was specific: *"Please provide information on efforts to ensure an adequate supply of accessible housing and on whether the 2020 targets for universal housing design are being met"* (2017:3).

The AGD's first draft again omitted to report on the National Dialogue strategic agreement. ANUHD (2018) contested the draft report, claiming that the housing industry had not met any of the interim targets, and, without Government intervention, less than 5% of the 2020 target would be met. The AGD appeared unaware at the time that the Building Ministers Forum, (BMF), a committee under COAG, was already considering regulation, in response to the failure of the National Dialogue agreement. The Australian Building Codes Board (ABCB) is currently developing a Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) for an access standard for all housing in the National Construction Code.

The AGD's amended report (2018) acknowledged the 2020 target, yet omitted that interim targets had not been met, and government intervention, if any, would not occur before 2022.

The second shadow report (Australian Civil Society, 2019: 29), answered the UN Committee's request. It referred to ANUHD's work (2015) that estimated less 5% of new housing construction would meet the standards by 2020 and recommended government intervention, in the form of amendments to the National Construction Code to mandate minimum access features for all new and extensively modified housing.

The UN Committee's response in their Concluding Observations (2019) noted the lack of mandated national access requirements for housing in the National Construction Code and recommended that it be amended *"to include mandatory rules on access for all new and extensively modified housing"* (UN Committee 2019:5).

The Attorney General's Department failed to make this report publicly available on their website until March 2020. ANUHD had to make a request directly to the Attorney General for them to do so.

Seven years after the Strategy was launched, the second progress report to COAG acknowledged that the National Dialogue agreement had failed and that people with disability wanted government intervention:

Affordable, accessible housing for people with disability was identified as a key area where improvements have not been achieved. People with disability

believe that regulatory intervention through the National Construction Code is required to achieve change. (DSS 2018:27)

Preparing for the new national disability strategy

To prepare for the new national disability strategy, the DSS commissioned a desktop review of documents about the implementation of the Strategy and some targeted stakeholder consultations (Davy et al. 2019). The review called for greater response to issues identified by the disability advocacy sector and contemporary media, including, the shortage of accessible and affordable housing. The consultation report (DSS 2019b:33) considered accessible housing to be a priority and that the new strategy should “*enable more to be done to strengthen building codes, standards and requirements to ensure housing is accessible into the future*” (DSS 2019b:37).

At time of writing, the reports to the UN Committee and their Concluding Observations had not been referenced in either the DSS website (2019a) or their report from stakeholder consultations (2019b). The lack of reference to specific recommendations in the Concluding Observations in the desktop review (Davy et al. 2019) may simply be a matter of timing. They remind DSS of its obligations under the UNCRPD, and of the expectations of the UN Committee in the development of the new strategy.

Discussion

The reports on Australia’s obligations under the UNCRPD regarding universal design in housing reveal two troubling indicators: the first is COAG’s intentional abrogation of responsibility for universal design in housing to the housing industry; and the second is the scant regard the Australian Government holds for these obligations and what ordinary citizens with lived experience have to say. These are now discussed:

COAG’s intentional abrogation of responsibility

COAG’s abrogation of responsibility for universal design in housing was first evidenced by transferring the key activities in the Strategy to the housing industry (Ward & Jacobs 2016). With the benefit of hindsight, the purpose of the National Dialogue agreement was to placate the resistance within the housing industry to regulation (HIA 2018) and to manage the growing disquiet about inaction at the same time (Shorten 2010a). The National Dialogue agreement also resolved two issues for COAG: it was seen to take tangible action within its commitment to the UNCRPD; and it convinced key economic policy advisors, such as the Productivity Commission (2011a:277-281; 2011b:213) that universal design in housing could be done with little cost or political fallout.

The National Dialogue agreement effectively jettisoned the problem into the next decade, and the lack of review or reporting assisted the National Dialogue members to overlook their commitment to the targets. ANUHD struggled to call its fellow signatories to account. The support for regulation came, not from any obligation to the UNCRPD, but rather from a mounting indignation from a broader constituency, including, local government leaders, older people, women, and home-based support services, who had their expectations raised and then let down.

Ward and Jacobs (2016) argue that the National Dialogue agreement was destined to fail. The housing industry appeared to be supportive, but was not; there was ample evidence that a voluntary approach had little chance of success in Australia’s current market (Dalton et al. 2011; Bringolf 2011; Crabtree & Hes 2009). Government leaders successfully avoided political fallout at the time and had other challenges (such as the roll out of the NDIS) that took their attention. Community and human rights leaders acceded because they were promised a

transparent, accountable process and were convinced this was the best deal they could reasonably expect.

The National Dialogue's ten-year timeline was also supported because the UNCRPD obligation affecting housing design was progressively realisable; that is, Australia could work to meet it over time. Any progressive action, however, should match the resources a nation has at its disposal to make the change (PWDA 2010:16).

While the instigator of the National Dialogue, the Hon Bill Shorten MP, saw the agreement as "*a great example of collaboration*" (2010b), Bill Moss (2010), a renowned disability activist, saw the agreement as an unholy alliance. He wrote: "*This is... another example of a powerful industry lobby dragging its feet and of a spineless government and craven disability rights advocates letting them get away with it*". Moss has since been proven correct in his prediction that the National Dialogue agreement would do little more than "*fuel the anger of grass roots lobby groups*".

Perhaps, the members of the BMF would have come to realise through formal reporting channels that government intervention was necessary (BMF 2017). This is unlikely, given the absence of any reporting on the National Dialogue agreement. Certainly, the Australian Building Codes Board (ABCB), did not consider it their role to advise a policy change (Savery 2016). The failure of the National Dialogue agreement was brought to the attention of the BMF by ordinary citizens who had suffered the consequences of inaction, and who had little to lose (Ward & Bringolf 2018).

Scant regard by the Australian Government for the UNCRPD processes

This paper reveals a history of indifference by governments and the housing industry to the progress of the Strategy with regard to accessible housing and serves to question their level of regard for Australia's obligations in this area to the UNCRPD. This is substantiated by the findings of the Senate inquiry (2017) and the final review of the implementation of the Strategy (Davy et al. 2019). Advocacy from the community sector has been necessary to ensure the UN Committee's Concluding Observations (2019) are publicly available, and (one hopes) considered in the development of the new national disability strategy (DSS 2019a) and the Consultation RIS.

Conclusion

Most debate about universal design in housing has now been reduced to what an access standard for housing in the National Construction Code will mean. The ABCB have redacted the terms 'visitable', 'adaptable', 'livable' and 'universal' in favour of 'accessible' to "simplify matters for its stakeholders" (ABCB 2018:4).

When the meanings of high-order concepts within the UNCRPD, such as universal design, are diminished, the obligations they bring are also diminished. The idea of universal design in housing, that is, "*usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design*" (UN 2007:Article 2) has now been reduced to a low-level debate on the costs and benefits of minimum access requirements mandated in a building code, rather than a way of thinking about design that includes everyone.

Given that the RIS is now well underway, the question remains whether a net benefit to society will be found to be greater than the immediate financial costs to the housing industry and any political fallout to governments. The debates on best practice in universal design in housing are likely to be advanced, not by government and housing industry leaders, but again by ordinary citizens fighting for inclusion.

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