



National Planning Reform Policy

Master Builders' National Housing Council advocates further planning reform to improve local government performance, to sustain economic growth and at the same time to assist in reducing the cost of building and to facilitate greater choice in housing.

Master Builders' National Housing Council is concerned that the current planning framework needs to be re-examined to ensure that it can meet the growing needs of business and the community. It is imperative that responsive and effective strategic planning frameworks be developed that further streamline the planning approval process to increase economic efficiency, increase investment and opportunities for growth and to improve housing affordability and choice.

Master Builders' National Housing Council has identified ten key planning reform principles for adoption across Australia.

1. Increase the use of independent experts in the decision-making process.
2. Create a statutory framework for private sector certification.
3. Simplify compliance with planning schemes (as of right).
4. Improve accessibility and understanding of Planning schemes.
5. Accelerate the use of electronic lodgement and tracking of planning applications.
6. Make mandatory completion of Council planning checklists at the pre-assessment application meeting.
7. Improve Council mediation processes.
8. Adopt standardised planning application information across councils.
9. Streamline referral processes to other approving agencies and authorities.
10. Reduce turnover of experienced planning staff.

1. *Involve more independent experts*

Master Builders believes that Councils should be encouraged to set up panels to assess controversial and complex applications. These panels should include a limited number of councillors combined with qualified experts in the planning, building, architectural and environmental sectors of industry to enable a more consistent, independent decision-making processes. The composition of these panels will add a more transparent process and it will eliminate unfair criticism which often falls on the current Council processes. Councils should also be encouraged to develop models within the Council structure that give delegated authority to staff to sign off on planning applications on behalf of the Council.

2. *Private Sector Involvement*

To reduce processing times Master Builders supports the concept of setting up a statutory framework which allows sign-off by private planning officers who have appropriate qualifications and experience. The work that private certifiers can complete must be limited to applications that can be measured against specific criteria. It is envisaged that the private certifiers will not make planning decisions where performance or judgment decisions are required.

3. *As of Right*

This objective is to allow more 'as of right' development proposals that are known to meet the planning scheme objectives. This system, if implemented, will reduce the number of minor applications to Council and free up Council staff to focus on more significant applications in a timely manner.

An example is where a homeowner in a heritage area wishes to paint the front fence and the heritage overlay will require a permit application to ensure the appropriate heritage colours are used. Master Builders suggests that Councils should list the approved heritage colours within the planning scheme and, if an owner chooses to use one of the nominated heritage colours, a permit would not be required. It would meet the 'as of right' provision of the relevant planning scheme. However, if the owner wanted to use an alternative colour not listed in the planning scheme, a planning permit application and Council approval would be required. It is expected that many other issues could be dealt with in the same way.

4. *More Accessible Planning Schemes*

Planning schemes across Australia should be accessible by internet and be designed to allow more people in the community to understand and interpret the scheme and its objectives. Using plain English principles and more prescriptive words it is Master Builders' view that more consistent and effective outcomes will be delivered. The building industry understands that planning schemes need to have a performance element but these should be supported by prescriptive measures similar to the framework adopted by the Building Code of Australia.

5. *Explore Further Opportunities for Electronic Lodgement*

The concept of making applications to Council electronically is starting to gather pace around Australia. However, there needs to be further promotion of the cost savings and other benefits achievable through electronic lodgement. A further advantage is the opportunity for applicants to track the progress of their application at any time throughout the day. This will also permit an auditing process to understand where time is taken to complete various processes through the planning system. This could provide important information allowing the identification of areas of concern and implementation of mechanisms to improve the planning system.

6. Checklists to be mandatory and completed at pre-assessment application meetings by Council

To clarify and streamline the application process, Master Builders strongly supports and encourages pre-application/assessment meetings. To push this concept further and provide a clearer path for applicants to follow, Councils should have checklists nominating details of what material should make up the application for their consideration.

Senior officers of the Council must nominate on the checklist what specifications, photographs, reports, plans etc are required to be submitted when making the formal application. This short circuits the process and prevents a circular situation developing where not enough information is submitted or other Council officers assessing the application ask for further material to be submitted. The checklist when signed by the Council Officer must be adhered to by both parties. The checklist will be the pre-determined benchmark of minimum criteria which must be adhered to by those wishing to make an application to Council.

7. Mandatory Council Mediation

After advertising, if the Council receives objections it is Master Builders' view that there should be compulsory mediation at this level. Appropriate timeframes need to be put in place (for example, 4 weeks) and if the matter has not been successfully mediated the mediation process should then stop and move into the next phase in the process. Councils that have voluntarily provided discussion and mediation for all affected parties have generally seen quick resolution to issues which then allows the process to move forward smoothly delivering a more timely and cost effective outcome.

8. Standard Information and Application Forms

Information that is provided to those seeking planning approval should be standardised as much as possible. Different types of applications may need to have further material included. Nationally consistent standardised forms are needed for applications for planning approval. These forms could be prescribed under each State and Territory Planning Act or their accompanying Regulations. In addition there needs to be a list of standardised information that must accompany an application. The extent of the material and reports will vary, however the number of plans and the scale of important details required on the drawings can be standardised to reduce delays and add further efficiency to the process.

9. Improve Referral Process

Councils need to put in place agreements with referral authorities that will cover the general needs of each referral authority. The objective is that after these agreements are completed Councils will only refer matters to the referral authorities that require special consideration and response outside the scope of general referrals. This will limit the number of referrals that the referral authorities would need to respond to, and it would be proposed that under this new mechanism if no response from the relevant referral authority was received within 15 working days it would be a deemed consent by that authority. Additional consideration should be given within the system to allow a Council or applicant to make an application for consent to a referral authority prior to formal application being received by the relevant Council.

10. Retain Planning Staff

Over recent years there has been a huge turnover of planning staff at Local Government level. For an effective and efficient planning system within all Councils there must be an appropriate number of experienced planning staff within the Planning Group.

Local Governments need to be encouraged to ensure their planning capabilities are maintained at appropriate staffing levels to deliver a consistent, effective and efficient planning service to its ratepayers.

Where staffing levels cannot be retained within the Council structure, Councils must be encouraged to use private consultants on a contract basis to support existing human resources to ensure that all statutory timeframes are adhered to when processing planning permit applications.

More senior experienced staff must be persuaded to stay within the Local Government system to guide new staff and Council and ensure better visionary and strategic planning systems. Additional staff with demonstrated experience and improved decision making should lead to shorter response times when dealing with applications.

Strategic planning needs a coordinated approach between all State and Local Governments.

Frequently the lack of coordination in the past has led to duplication of systems and policies and varying controls over municipal boundaries in the same city. State and Territory Governments' need to articulate their objectives in strategic planning and engage with Local Governments to develop local strategic frameworks to work within the wider objectives set by State and Territory Governments.

The primary task of any strategic planning must be to plan and direct growth in the appropriate areas to ensure social and environmental objectives are met in a coordinated way.

Employment and infrastructure services must be also linked to the identified growth areas in the same strategic, coordinated approach.