AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

Understanding and addressing local opposition to affordable housing projects

COMMUNITY OPPOSITION TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT CAN BE ADDRESSED BY INCREASING TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE PLANNING ASSESSMENT PROCESS, OBTAINING POLITICAL SUPPORT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL AND IMPROVING THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING.

KEY POINTS

- The most common concerns among objectors to affordable housing development are parking and traffic, built form, planning processes and concern for neighbourhood amenity, and the types of residents who will move into affordable housing.

- Objectors to affordable housing development can use planning-related issues (parking, built form etc.) to mask their concerns about the characteristics and behaviours of future tenants.

- Six key factors were identified that escalate opposition to affordable housing from a local issue to a wider concern: prejudice, physical change, questions about the legitimacy of planning process, profile (which often leads to political involvement) and a leader or 'provoker' who sustains the action.

- The development of affordable housing may have a negative or positive impact on property values in surrounding areas. However, these impacts are minimal and outweighed by characteristics of the property and its location, such as proximity to water views and access to public transport. The research found no evidence of a correlation between the size of an affordable housing

*This bulletin is based on research conducted by **Dr Gethin Davison**, **Dr Crystal Legacy**, **Dr Edgar Liu**, **Dr Hoon Han** and **Mr Ryan van den Nouwelant** at the AHURI Research Centre—University of NSW, **Prof Peter Phibbs** at the AHURI Research Centre—University of Sydney, and **A/Prof Michael Darcy** and **Dr Awais Piracha** at the AHURI Research Centre— University of Western Sydney. The research explored how community opposition to affordable housing development can be mitigated or addressed through policy measures and practical steps.*

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project and its impact on property sales values.

- Most negative effects of affordable housing development identified were parking related, and to a lesser extent were focused on antisocial behaviour, crime and amenity.

- There is a role for both developers and government in mitigating and addressing community opposition to affordable housing.

CONTEXT

The development of affordable housing is frequently frustrated by opposition from local residents, planners, politicians and the media. This opposition can lead to costly construction delays and amendments for affordable housing developers, and in some cases may even force the abandonment of projects. In the most high-profile cases, the opposition threatens to undermine political and public support for affordable housing provision. The central aims of this study were to improve understanding of community opposition to affordable housing in Australian cities and to consider how that opposition can be mitigated or addressed.

RESEARCH METHOD

Mixed-methods case studies were undertaken in four council areas with varying levels of opposition to affordable housing development between 2007 and 2011. The case studies were Parramatta (New South Wales), Port Phillip (Victoria), Brisbane (Queensland) and Cairns (Queensland).

Semi-structured interviews, hedonic modelling, analysis of written submissions made against affordable housing proposals by members of the public, post-occupancy interview-surveys and focus groups were conducted with various groups in order to address the research questions of the project. These groups included representatives of local and state government (officers and politicians), housing advocacy groups, objectors to affordable housing and developers of affordable housing.

KEY FINDINGS

The policy and housing market context for affordable housing

Most affordable housing proposals are not controversial, but the high profile opposition to a small number of proposals can give the impression that affordable housing projects are universally opposed.

Opposition to affordable housing is highly localised, with most submissions made against affordable housing proposals coming from people living close to the site. The level of opposition to affordable housing development tends to be greater in neighbourhoods that are affluent or aspirational, and where there is already anger and/or fear in the community. Varied planning assessment processes for affordable housing proposals can generate anger and suspicion among community members. However, the extent of public consultation on an affordable housing proposal has a bearing on the level of formal opposition that the proposal encounters. The significant community support for affordable housing development in the Port Philip case study suggests that it is possible to generate support for these types of projects over time through positive local examples.

Affordable housing developers prefer a fast-tracked planning assessment process, but this does not need to result in less community involvement.

Factors underlying community opposition to affordable housing development

The most common concerns among objectors to affordable housing development were parking and traffic, built form, planning process, neighbourhood amenity and the types of residents who would live in an affordable housing project. Objectors to affordable housing development sometimes use planning-related issues (parking, built form etc.) to mask their concerns about the characteristics and behaviours of future tenants.

Most community members had negative perceptions of affordable housing based on media accounts, personal experience, anecdote and their own investigation. The research found there was widespread confusion about what affordable housing is, who lives in it and who manages it. Many people believe that affordable housing is simply another name for public housing.

The escalation of opposition to affordable housing development

Opposition to affordable housing proposals is usually most fierce and widespread early on, usually subsiding as time passes and disappearing once a decision on the controversial proposal has been made. A perception that governments, developers and politicians are dismissive of community concerns about affordable housing development can increase anger and resentment, intensifying the opposition.

There are six key contributing factors that escalate opposition to affordable housing from a local to a wider concern. The research findings suggest that a few of these six can be present in a place without the opposition escalating, but where all six are present, there are the conditions for a 'perfect storm'. Prejudice against potential residents of affordable housing, physical change through the introduction of new built forms to an area (e.g. higher density buildings than the surrounding properties), and questions about the legitimacy of planning process generate the initial opposition. However, it takes the last three (politics, provokers and profile) to escalate that opposition and to transform it from a localised concern into one of wider interest. Politics come into play when objectors find that their interests can be aligned with those of politicians. This can then be bolstered by profile, for once opposition campaigns received media coverage they gained significant political traction and the opposition tended to escalate. Provokers, identified by the researchers as community leaders who co-ordinate oppositional strategies and tactics, also play a large role.

Impacts of affordable housing development on host areas

Most negative effects of affordable housing development identified by participants in interview-surveys were to do with parking, and to a lesser extent antisocial behaviour, crime and amenity. Community opposition to an affordable housing proposal can put future residents in a position where they feel unwelcome or stigmatised. However, of 134 people who participated in post-occupancy interview-surveys around recently completed affordable housing projects in Sydney, only 22 per cent had noticed any negative effects from development, 78 per cent had not.

The development of affordable housing does not have a universally negative impact on property values in surrounding areas. Moreover, the researchers found no correlation between the type of effect (positive or negative) on property sales values and the number of dwellings in that project. When the influence on house prices of proximity of an affordable housing development was modelled, the research found that this proximity can raise or lower sales prices, but usually by minimal amounts. Furthermore, this influence was outweighed by other factors to do with the characteristics of the property and its location, such as the number of bedrooms, proximity to water views and access to public transport.

What the findings suggest is that where an affordable housing project is developed in an area with high levels of amenity (for instance where it is close to services, public transport or water frontages), that project is unlikely to have any noticeable impact on property sales values in surrounding areas, positive or negative.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While the chances of mitigating or addressing community opposition to affordable housing development are greatest where developers and governments work together, both groups play a role.

In the pre-application stage, developers can convey positive messages about affordable housing, seek in principle support from decision-makers, and recruit supporters from local councils and/or the community. They can include likely community response in their locational strategy and attempt to bring onside people or groups who may potentially become opposition ringleaders. In the development application stage, developers should build within planning controls or explain exceptions, and keep local politicians informed. They can listen and engage with community members and should be willing to negotiate with community members, but also establish parameters for that negotiation. Finally, face-to-face contact between developers and objectors can defuse opposition.

Governments can engage in further policy development to ensure compatibility between local and state policies, develop parking standards for affordable housing or explain compromises, and promote community and local government engagement in the development of new policies. Governments should consider whether it makes sense for affordable housing and market housing to have separate planning assessment tracks, but also recognise that community opposition can improve development outcomes and involve residents in development assessment.

It was clear that affordable housing as a concept was not well understood and that many local politicians and planning officers did not distinguish between different forms of affordable housing. Government can help address this by providing education on affordable housing for community leaders and council officers and politicians, and developing a strategic approach to improving the image of affordable housing. More local politicians should be encouraged and supported to make affordable housing part of their agenda. Making affordable housing part of the political mandate could be done by incorporating affordable housing in strategic policy documents and providing support for affordable housing developers where projects encounter opposition.

Not-for-profit (NFP) housing providers can also play a key role in shifting negative perceptions of affordable housing. Emphasis in policy-making should be on encouraging and enabling these NFP providers to expand their development functions, but also encouraging the focus on specific geographical areas, so as to build up an on-going relationship with local communities.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 71007, *Understanding and addressing local opposition to affordable housing projects*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au or by contacting AHURI Limited on +61 3 9660 2300.

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