



THE CANBERRA FORUM

Final Report 2023

Introduction

We are a group of diverse citizens convened by the Federal Member for Canberra, Alicia Payne MP, to discuss, develop and recommend solutions to complex problems. We are not policy experts. We are active, concerned citizens from different walks of life who believe that diverse views can lead to productive discussions.

The Canberra Forum, the first of its kind in Australia, aims to assist Members of Parliament to better connect with their constituents, understand diverse views, build trust and make informed decisions that reflect the true heart of the community. In collaboration with Alicia Payne MP, this trial enabled us to test effective ways to select topics, deliberate in a way that worked flexibly for participants, assist the group to form consensus and best support MP's to connect to their communities.

The Canberra Forum is a prototype for a new democratic engagement tool, designed by democracyCo using the powerful principles that underpin the field of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy seeks a diversity of views, building understanding and knowledge, allowing time and seeking reconciliation of views. Australia's democracy is based on representative principles, and we seek to test whether we can enhance that with the introduction of deliberative elements.

Deliberative democracy, as evident in our experience of the Canberra Forum, can help identify priority areas and shift the debate on issues of public importance. In tackling complex issues, deliberative democracy represents a platform for citizens to engage in informed and respectful deliberation. Deliberative democracy can also help to build consensus and develop shared values and goals to inform and guide policy development and reform, as the Canberra Forum has sought to do in this report.

This report has been prepared by the members of The Canberra Forum, with the assistance of democracyCo to ensure the ideas and intent expressed in our deliberations have been authentically represented. Throughout this report, where we refer to affordable housing, we are referring to the scope of our remit – how to improve access to affordable home purchase and private rental.

Project Scope

Our MP, Alicia Payne, empowered us to select an issue of local and national importance for deliberation and recommendations for action.

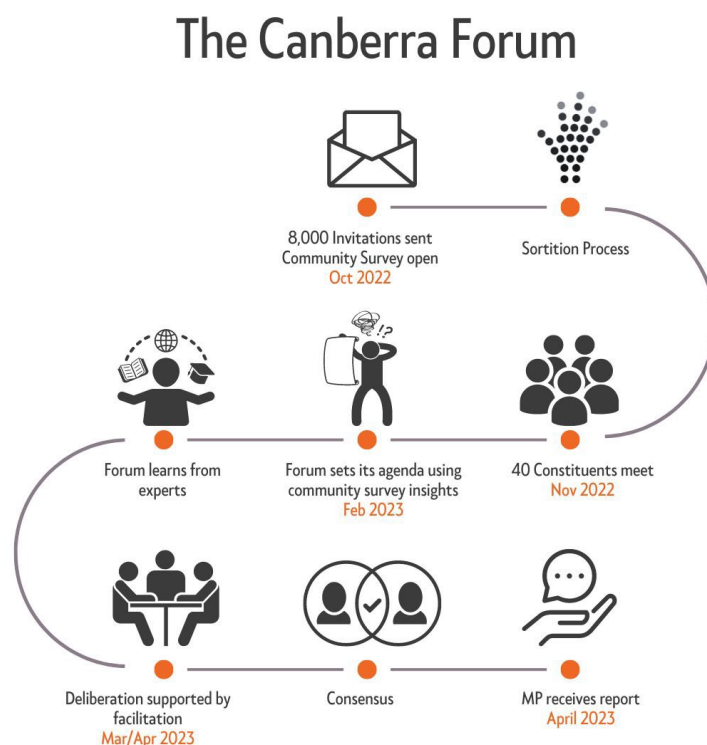
This exploration was guided by input from Government and non-Government experts, research, and our own lived and living experiences. This report is the product of our deliberations and work.

Alicia has committed to do the following with this report:

- Make representations to the Federal Parliament about the Forum's work;
- Advocate for our community through the Federal Labor Party Caucus;
- Publish the Forum's advice on her website - in full and unchanged; and
- Write to relevant Minister/s to advise them of the views of her electorate on specific recommendations.

An overview of the process

The Canberra Forum is the first trial of its kind in Australia. The final recruited random sample of The Canberra Forum was 40 people representing the diversity of the Canberra electorate, with 20 participants completing the process. At the time of writing this report, analysis was underway to understand the attrition rate.



Prior to our first session, a broad scale community survey was undertaken to identify topics of community importance, with over 1500 responses.

We began our work in November 2022, and completed our report in May 2023. We have each committed 25 hours to the process across 9 sessions plus additional reading and research out of session. Of these sessions, 4 were dedicated to determining the topic we would focus on.

We were seeking a topic that was important to Canberrans, sat within Alicia's role and scope of influence, and was challenging or complex.

We narrowed our choice down to three topics: affordable housing, equitable clean energy transition and improving community voice in the work of Government. In a final vote we chose to focus on affordable housing.

Our deliberation topic was:

“What should the Federal Government do to improve access to affordable home purchase and private rental?”

We heard evidence from:

- The Hon Julie Collins MP, Minister for Housing,
- Prof Hal Pawson Professor Housing Research and Policy and Associate Director at the City Futures Research Centre, UNSW
- Emma Greenhalgh CEO National Shelter
- Michael Hopkins CE Master Builders ACT
- Joel Dignam Executive Director Better Renting.

In addition to this, we considered key reports and research. We used an online platform to share insights, documents and to develop our thinking between sessions.



Recruitment

The Sortition Foundation conducted the recruitment to ensure the group was as representative of the broader community as possible and included a diversity of the electorate.

8,000 invitations were sent to people on the electoral roll. Every community member had an equal chance of being selected - whether they were teachers, doctors, builders, students or retirees. The invitations asked people to register their interest in being involved, and sought base demographic information about themselves. This allowed the Sortition Foundation to select a group diverse in age, gender, location, ethnicity and level of educational attainment, as per the 2021 Census. The demographic that was hardest to achieve was that of educational attainment and hence the group was not representative in terms of this strata.

The statistical graphs which capture the recruitment target and selected groups are attached at Appendix 1.



What is important to Canberrans

An annual community survey was conducted across the Canberra electorate during October and November 2022 as Alicia has done for since her election, to seek a broad range of views to understand her electorate. 1,707 responses were received from the community survey.

Data from the community survey was used to help inform the topic that the Forum worked on. Below is a snapshot of the top 10 issues which emerged from the community survey.

	Issue	No of responses
1	Climate Change	391
2	Poverty & Inequality	87
3	Cost of living	74
4	Integrity in politics	73
5	Housing	62
6	Healthcare	60
7	Environment	50
8	Education	49
9	Economic Management	44
10	First Nations Policy	27

The topic for our deliberations was selected based on three criteria:

- **Importance** - What's important to Canberrans;
- **Impact** - On what topic can we have impact / topic that our MP can act on and;
- **Polarisation** - On what issue is policy / progress is stuck

Alicia's annual survey was conducted to capture a broad-brush view of the Canberra electorate. The survey gave us an indication of the topics that mattered to the community, which guided us, but on our assessment were not the most fruitful ones to pursue.

As a consequence, we went through a process to identify the issues and develop them into three questions to explore. These were:

- **Affordable Housing** - What should the Federal Government do to improve access to affordable home purchase and private rental?
- **Community Voice** - How can community voices better influence policy making and the reasoning behind Government decisions be made more transparent?
- **Equitable Clean Energy Transitions** - How do we ensure nobody gets left behind as we transition to clean energy in Australia?

The Canberra Forum then applied our criteria to these three issues – and through a consensus process, selected the affordable housing topic.

It was a hard decision and there was a lot of support for exploring each of the questions, but we agreed that housing would benefit the most from our deliberations.

The remainder of this report reflects our deliberations and consensus view on what the Federal Government should do to improve access to affordable home purchase and private rental.



Affordable Housing

Our remit: What should the Federal Government do to improve access to affordable home purchase and private rental?

Housing is a fundamental need and a basic human right, yet so many people in Australia struggle to find a safe and affordable place to call home. The lack of affordable housing is a crisis that affects people of all ages, and backgrounds, and its impacts are far-reaching and long-lasting. Homelessness and housing insecurity can lead to poor mental and physical health and reduced economic and educational opportunities. The need for affordable housing (whether for rental or purchase) is undeniable. In Australia, the housing crisis is a critical challenge that demands immediate attention and action.

The Canberra Forum dissected, interrogated, discussed and synthesised salient housing issues, informed by leading industry representatives, relevant literature and each other.

In order to support these investigations, the Forum identified fundamental principles that both informed and guided our findings and recommendations.

The philosophical basis for affordable housing stems from the belief that safe and affordable housing is a basic human right. This right is grounded in the view that individuals should be able to live in safe, healthy and affordable homes, regardless of their income or social status. The Canberra Forum regarded affordable housing policies as essential tools for reducing inequality and promoting social justice. These policies aim to ensure that everyone can access adequate housing as a fundamental prerequisite for a dignified and fulfilling life.

The Canberra Forum identified three philosophical principles to help frame the national debate and inform policy. First, the principle of social justice supports the argument that access to affordable housing is a basic human right, therefore, policymakers have a moral obligation to ensure everyone has access to safe, healthy, and affordable homes.

Secondly, the principle of distributive justice¹ supports the view that affordable housing policies must prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as low-income households and people with disabilities.

Finally, the principle of equity supports the argument that affordable housing policies should reduce inequality and promote social inclusion by ensuring everyone can access adequate housing that meets their needs and aspirations.

¹ In simple terms, distributive justice is the perceived fairness of an allocation, ie. giving people a 'fair share' of available benefits and resource

The evidence that influenced us

Australia is in the grip of a housing crisis.

Supply of dwellings is falling well short of demand; our population is growing; property prices continue to rise; social housing has declined dramatically; construction companies are under pressure; rental costs continue to rise steeply; increasing numbers of people are homeless, living in cars, tents and caravans; housing starts have plummeted; housing completions have dropped ...

All these indicators are heading in the wrong direction.

What's already happening.

The scope of this topic is significant and it is not possible to detail every initiative underway. The Federal Government has announced a range of measures in the latest budget improve the affordability of housing and help ease the housing affordability crisis including. These are:

- The Government is enabling an additional \$2 billion in investment for more social and affordable rental housing by increasing the guaranteed liabilities of the National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation (NHFIC).
- incentives to increase the supply of rental housing by improving taxation arrangements for investments in build-to-rent accommodation.
- increasing the maximum rates of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 15 per cent at a cost of \$2.7 billion over five years.
- Expanding eligibility for the Home Guarantee Scheme to help people into home ownership.
- From July 1, the First Home Guarantee and Regional First Home Buyer Guarantee eligibility will be expanded.
- The Government is providing an extra \$67.5 million to states and territories, through the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement in 2023–24, to help tackle homelessness. This funding will assist homelessness services as the Government works to develop a new National Housing and Homelessness Plan.
- The \$10 billion Housing Australia Future Fund to support the delivery of 30,000 social and affordable homes over 5 years.
- A National Housing Accord, setting out a shared ambition to build one million new, well-located homes over five years from 2024.
- An additional \$350 million over five years from 2024–25 to support funding of 10,000 affordable homes under the Accord.
- Widening the remit of the National Housing Infrastructure Facility, making up to \$575 million available to invest immediately in social and affordable rental homes.
- The Help to Buy program, which will reduce the cost of buying a home.

National Cabinet has taken decisions to develop reforms to increase housing supply and affordability and put renters' rights front and centre.

In our view, these initiatives are welcome, but not sufficient to address the scale of the problem.

Our Housing Future

Our Vision

The Australian dream is reimagined – housing is a human right. Housing is viewed as a home first and as an investment second. The houses we build need to be functional, well built, fit for purpose and sustainable.

The result? Everyone has stable, safe and secure housing which enables them to easily connect with their community, school and opportunities for work.

Outcomes

An increased focus on housing is a precondition to realising the below aspirations:

- People feel safe in their homes
- Vibrant Communities can develop.
- People are content and healthy
- People can easily connect to services, work and educational facilities
- Dignity

To achieve this vision and these outcomes, policies and approaches of Government need to:

Respect the human right (UN human rights article 25) that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of [themselves] and of [their] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond [their] control.

Understand that when people have good quality housing their quality of life improves (such as their health and ability to gain and maintain stable employment in turn requiring less need for social assistance payments and long-term Government support).

Recognise that an investment in time, money and policy in social housing improves peoples' lives and reduces future burden on Government.

Discussion: How to move forward on improving access to affordable home purchase and private rental

Further action is needed in four key areas to holistically address the problem of affordable housing:

1. Increased investment in and improvement of social, public and low-cost housing
2. Long term infrastructure and workforce planning for our cities in line with population growth expectations
3. Addressing taxation inequality
4. Rental innovations

1. Increased investment in and improvement of social, public and low-cost housing

We want the Government to:

- Build more high quality social and public housing.
- Provide more funding and/or financial guarantees for social housing.
- Provide more incentives to industry/ developers to invest in quality low-cost housing making it financially attractive to investors.

We recognise that none of this is new, the Federal Government is planning investment in many of these things as part of the 2023/24 budget. However achieving sufficient housing outcomes will require more Federal funding that is contingent on outcomes, organisation, leadership and also consistent policies - underpinned by strong collaboration and shared responsibility across jurisdictions.

2. Long-term infrastructure and workforce planning for our cities

Without a holistic long-term approach to planning our cities and regions, we end up in the situation we are now, where we have a crisis of supply, affordability and appropriateness of housing. We set ourselves up to continue to fail our society when we can't match the availability of houses to the growth of the population.

Historically, housing has been created as we needed it, without significant or consistent holistic planning. This approach is no longer adequate to provide good housing outcomes for people that align with trends in immigration, population growth and other areas of Government planning.

Australia needs a holistic, long-term approach to planning our cities and regional areas for infrastructure and housing. We see some opportunity to streamline the development process.

Given that one of the issues holding back housing supply is skills and workforce, Government should support and prioritise the expansion of the construction workforce through skills training, workforce development and immigration.

3. Taxation and inequality

In line with our vision and principles, taxation systems that affect and pertain to housing need to promote equity, fairness and wellbeing.

Although there was a wide spectrum of views in the Canberra Forum about this issue, there was general agreement that Governments should consider tax reforms that reduce inequality and distortions in the system whilst seeking to ensure that there isn't a negative impact on housing supply.

Additionally, Governments should consider a better targeting of negative gearing, capital gains tax & stamp duty.

Systemic issues with the tax system are a foundational cause of social inequality, which we are seeing play out through rising homelessness, rental affordability, rental stress and cost of living pressure. Addressing these issues is a primary means to effect change in housing policy.

Adjusting the balance of investment incentives that currently increase inequity in access to housing and redirecting public money into public housing will reshape the housing landscape and the availability of housing to individuals over investors and corporations.

We think Government should introduce taxation and inequality policies in a gradual manner. For example, any reforms to negative gearing should not negatively affect supply. Efforts to change the narrative of the purpose of housing as being a social good rather than investment concern will also support reform.



4. Rental Innovations

Not everyone can afford nor wants to buy into the housing market. In line with our vision and principles, we want rental housing to be a long-term, attractive, viable alternative to home purchase. We want to see more homes available to rent. We also want to ensure housing quality is pursued, including energy efficiency, health aspects and social / community building.

The Federal Government can and should take a lead role to constrain rent increases, offer security of tenure and reward long-term tenants. In support of increasing rental supply, we propose Government should:² -

- Repurpose/access unused office buildings for possible residential rental development.
- Build to Rent programs – offer incentives to developers to produce rental properties for long term use.
- Employer (tax) incentives to provide housing (as part of salary package) to employees.
- Incentivise conversion of short-term rental to longer term residential tenancies.
- Rent to Buy scheme – revisit failings/challenges of past programs and improve for use in public and private housing. Sales proceeds would have to be purposed for further property investment.
- Enhance renters' rights, ability to sublet, modify rentals

Where relevant, to support the pursuit of rental reform, the Federal Government should consider best practice legislation at the national level. The Federal Government should incentivise adoption by the states of the legislation through the Commonwealth/ State Housing Agreement.³

Home ownership (aka the Great Australian Dream) has often eclipsed rentals with the latter being viewed as a default for those who could not afford home purchase. A reconceptualization, repositioning and innovation of rentals would go a long way to address the current dearth of rental supply.

² We know that some of these actions may be happening in some jurisdictions to a greater or lesser degree.

³ For this recommendation, we take our inspiration from the Australian Consumer Law – where State & Territory laws mirror Commonwealth Law.

Our Recommended Way Forward

We see three significant challenges facing Governments in pursuing the ideas we have outlined in this report that need to be addressed to enable housing reform to progress:

1. Budgetary & fiscal pressures
2. Lack of social licence or perceived lack of social licence for change
3. Coordination across levels of Governments

We discuss our suggested solutions to challenges 2 and 3 below.

Building a social licence for change

We need to increase the breadth of the understanding of the issue, acknowledge the current system is not working and together build social licence for the changes that need to be made to address this issue in the long term.

To this end we would recommend that Governments-

- Reconceptualise housing as a human right
- Improve knowledge in the community of facts and the data relating to the housing crisis
- Establish a National Deliberative Body on Housing Reform

Reconceptualise housing as a human right

As we outline in our vision for housing, we need to view housing as a basic human right not a wealth creation tool. We need to make renting a goal in and of itself, positioning it as a long-term viable option.

Government should lead a National public awareness campaign that seeks to change views on renting (safe, viable, affordable housing choice). This campaign should be underpinned by the data but also tell individual stories about experiences with housing stress.

To assist in achieving this outcome we would recommend that Governments raise awareness about the facts by publishing data on housing affordability and low-income housing stress more regularly and broadly (see below).

Improve knowledge of the data/ facts

We need to gather and publish data about the extent of the housing affordability problem more regularly and broadly. This will help us to:

- Increase public awareness about the problem, highlight the magnitude of the problem, and assist with good evidence-based policy development

- Track progress to verify that programs are delivering & to enable them to be adapted in a timely way. This will support healthy competition between the states/territories & facilitate learning and ultimately better outcomes

To achieve this, Governments should look at establishing an online digital collaboration space for data access and analytics to better understand the problem.

Establish a National Deliberative Body on Housing Reform

At the present time, we understand that there is not a way for all players to come together to discuss policy and desired outcomes collaboratively.

We recommend the establishment of a standing national multidisciplinary deliberative body inspired by the process and work of the Canberra Forum. The body should have a long-term view (ie continuity of policy, population growth) and model best practice collaboration. Having all the players around the one table, will assist in making long lasting policy and change.

The national body should be comprised of lived and living experience (public and social housing tenants, renters), investors, developers, State and Federal politicians, Government agencies and housing stakeholders to develop collaborative strategies and collective action.

This group will provide the technical insight and make recommendations for the changes that need to be implemented and assist to broaden discussions with people who are directly impacted.

If established, it should tackle a range of issues:

- Provide national vision on housing and clarity on desired outcomes
- Look at how to maximise performance of the states.
 - Incentivising for outcomes with a reporting mandate
 - Measuring performance / progress
- Consider how to increase transparency and accountability of the system
- Consider difficult taxation reform options in depth.

The body should be created to exist beyond political cycles to ensure a consistency of vision for housing and sustainability of policy directions. It should be a strong, independent and autonomous advisory committee, not influenced by the current Government as to avoid politically influenced decisions and abandonment between changes of Governments.

Better Coordination, better outcomes

All levels of Government policy needs to complement, support, and reinforce one another. The Canberra forum sees the lack of coordination between State/Territory and Federal Governments as one key problem to delivering affordable housing. To divert a homelessness crisis and severe national shortage of affordable housing, Federal funding needs to be used as effectively and efficiently as soon as possible.

As a consequence, the Canberra Forum recommends that the Federal Government takes a leadership role nationally in the area of affordable housing. To ensure that Federal funds are spent effectively in the pursuit of affordable housing, we recommend that funding to States, Territories and Local Councils is contingent on meeting affordable housing KPIs.

These KPIs need to be set and evaluated by a Federal bi-partisan/apolitical body which is independent of the Government of the day, that monitors the effectiveness of funding in delivering social and affordable housing. We propose that the standing deliberative body outlined earlier play this role.

Right now is the time to align all levels of Government to advocate for 'brave changes' and start conversations with State/Territory & Local Governments to ensure housing policies are designed and delivered for best practice and outcomes.



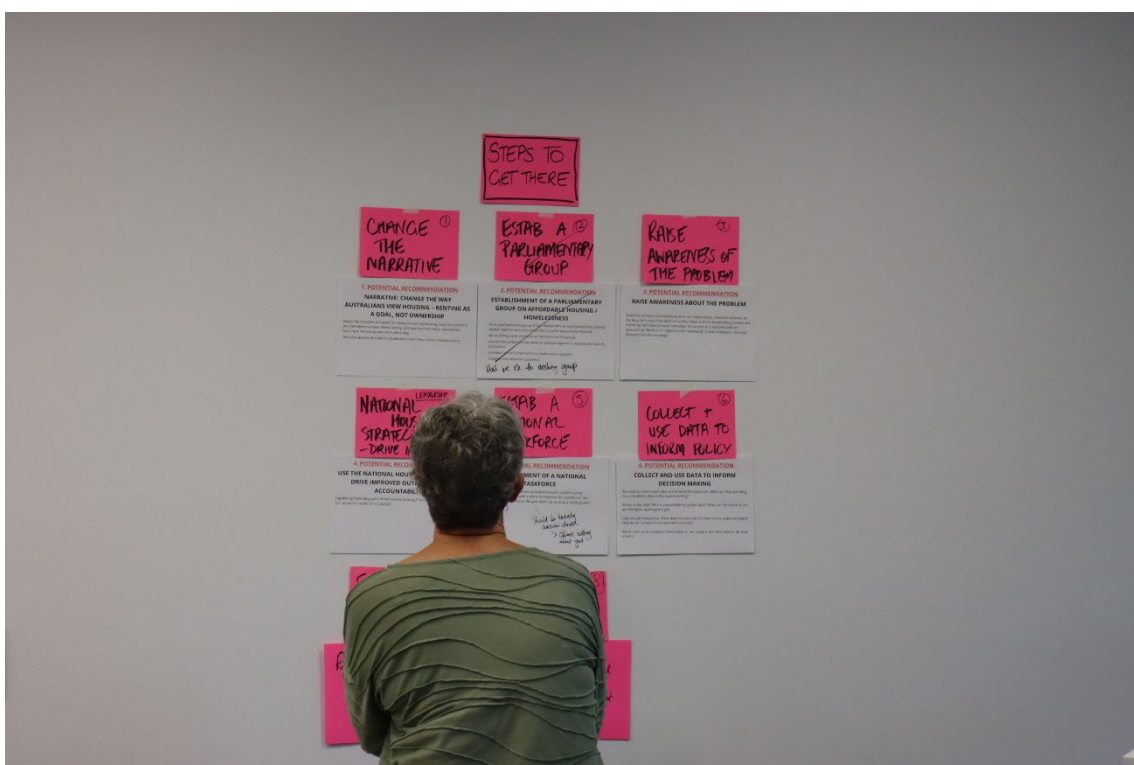
Recommendations to Alicia

We ask Alicia to do the following:

- **Undertake efforts in parliament and caucus** to ensure that housing is recognised and reconceptualised as a human right.
- **Advocate for bringing together a multidisciplinary group** – a national deliberative body to build social licence for change.
- **Sharing our report** and hence the views of the Canberran community– as per her commitment to this process.

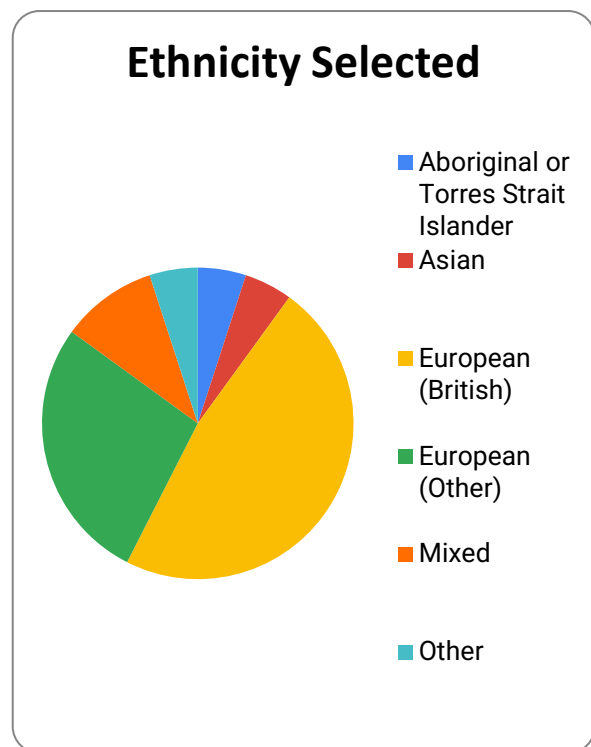
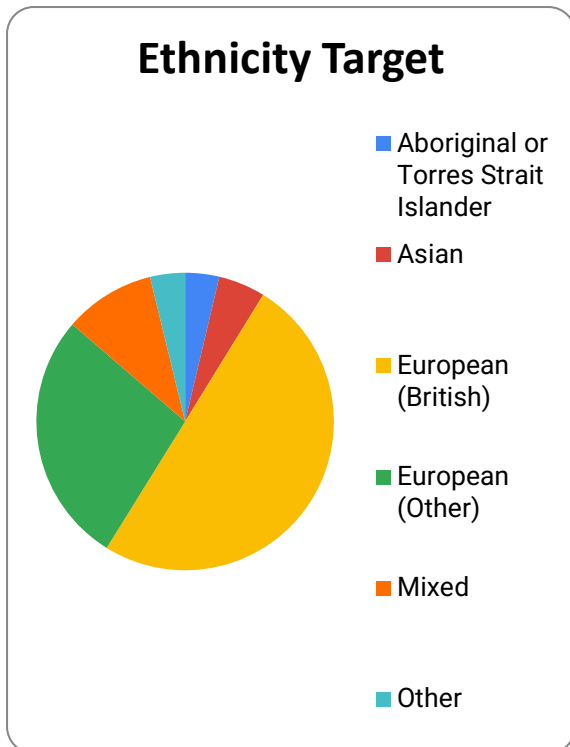
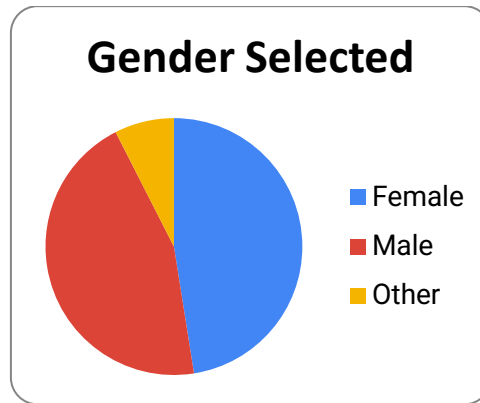
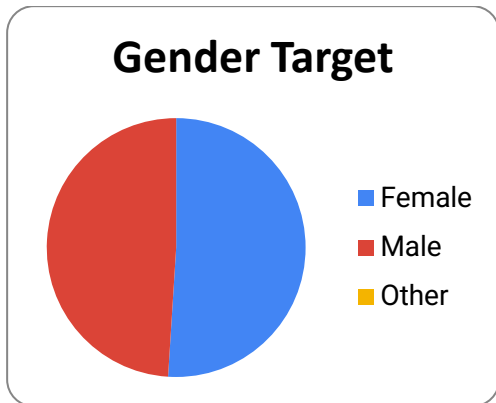
We propose the following principles guide housing policy development:

- Achieves an immediate outcome to address the urgent problem while representing an investment in the future
- Ensures everyone benefits in an equitable way
- Enable people to have choice
- Supports groups in most need
- Enables change and reform
- Regulates industry to ensure quality of housing

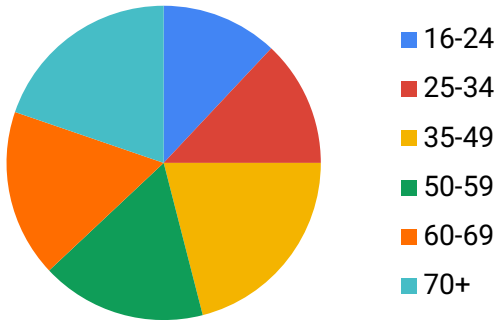


Appendix 1: Recruitment Overview of the Canberra Forum

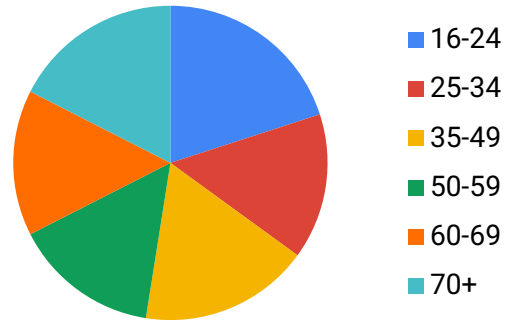
The below graphs show the target recruitment demographics for the participants in The Canberra Forum, versus the selected.



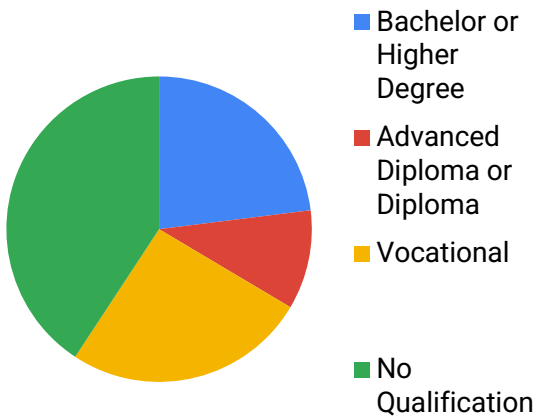
Age Target



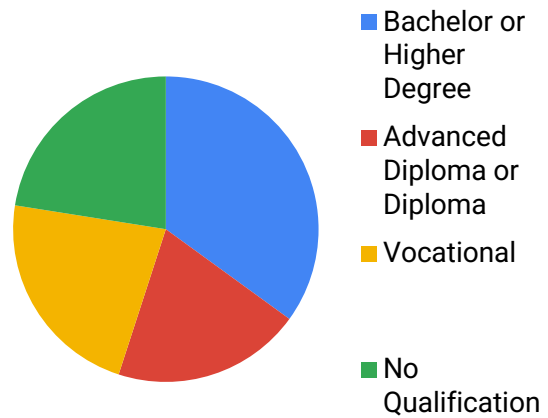
Age Selected



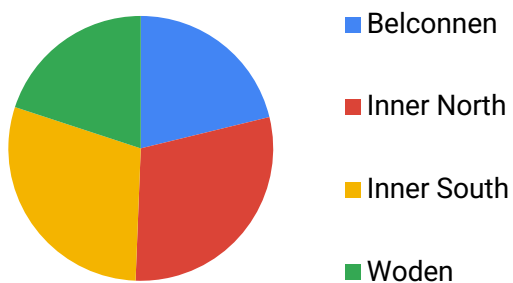
Education Target



Education Selected



Location Target



Location Selected

