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Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning

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Dear Sir/Madam,

Better Apartments – Draft Design Standards - Submission

████████████████████ is an ESD consultancy that works with many different developers and architects, on projects throughout the Melbourne metropolitan area – and beyond. As such, we have extensive experience in the consideration of ESD elements for apartment buildings, and play a role in seeking better outcomes in many of the different elements covered in the Better Apartments – Draft Design Standards.

██████ supports, in principle, the intent of the Standards. In our experience, there are certainly apartment projects that fail to provide a good level of amenity for residents, and that fall short of any reasonable definition of “good design”.

We consider, however, that any standards need to be able to function practically, and meet the sought-after outcomes whilst still enabling apartment development to occur so that affordable and adequate numbers of dwellings can be constructed in Melbourne.

In our submission, we emphasise that we support many of the proposed standards; however there are some which we consider require change/further review. These matters are outlined below:

Building Setback

The building setback requirements are considered excessive, and will prevent development occurring on many sites that would otherwise be regarded as suitable for apartment development. As the purpose/objective of this standard is to enable an adequate amount of daylight and privacy, we consider that the standards should focus foremost on daylight and privacy outcomes, and not on building setbacks. Where inadequate setbacks are a cause of inadequate daylight, for example, then the setback would need to be increased to ensure adequate daylight is provided. However, we consider that a blanket building setback requirement will overly constrain the ability for sites to accommodate an apartment development. Indeed, the setback requirements are more restrictive at the lower levels than for a large, three-level single dwelling.

Room Depth

While the standard dealing with adequate provision of daylight should provide good daylight outcomes, we are concerned that there is no option, when apartments may just fall short of the standard, to demonstrate via daylight modelling that an adequate level of daylight is being achieved. We consider that the Room Depth standard should definitely be linked to a performance-based (modelling) assessment as a fall-back to enable design teams to demonstrate alternative means of compliance.

This standard does not consider window size, which together with the maximum apartment depth of 8 metres, means that some designs could be unreasonably constrained, even though they could provide adequate daylight (such as in corner apartments). A minimum window size should be implemented in the standard that works to provide the desired outcome, based on the depth of apartments deemed to be acceptable.

████████████████████ compliance issue we wish to highlight, based on our experience, is that most apartment
████████████████████ are unable to achieve full daylight compliance across the entire development. This is why

sustainability assessment tools such as Green Star and BESS require a high percentage, but not all apartments to comply with daylight requirements. It acknowledges the reality of apartment developments; that full compliance is too difficult to achieve, and too onerous.

Energy Efficiency

We support the objective to ensure that new apartments are energy efficient. However, the focus only on maximum cooling loads is not necessarily the best approach to ensuring an energy-efficient outcome. Because Melbourne (and Victoria) is primarily a “heating climate”, this standard could drive apartment designs that work well on a hot summer day, yet therefore demand high levels of energy consumption between Autumn and Spring. We suggest that as well as the cooling load requirement, a heating load requirement also needs to be considered.

The same concern we raised in relation to daylight, for all apartments to meet the standard, also applies to energy efficiency. In our experience, even if apartments are generally achieving high energy rating results, there may be a small number of apartments in the development that cannot achieve a high rating. This is why the Building Regulations, for apartments, require an average, and a minimum energy rating. And even if the “bar is raised” through the Better Apartments Standards, an averaging/minimum performance approach should still be adopted to reflect the reality of apartment buildings. For each dwelling to have to meet a high standard is considered too onerous.

Natural Ventilation

The objective of this standard is appropriate. Whether this is achievable for many apartment developments is doubtful. This standard may be very difficult to comply with, as it appears to be predicated on apartment buildings having a very high proportion of corner apartments or dual aspect to allow for true cross flow ventilation. Where the site does not lend itself to such a design solution, the achievement of this standard may drive a very in-efficient building form, leading to an increase in building costs.

Water Management

The objective of this standard refers to the collection and use of greywater. In our experience, the regulatory environment makes the use of greywater an extremely complex initiative, and one that can often lead to on-going and costly monitoring, testing and reporting regimes. Until a cost-effective and practical approach to using greywater in apartment buildings has been devised, we consider that the standard would be best limited to collection and use of rainwater.

Please note that greywater is defined as the relatively clean waste water from baths, sinks, washing machines and other kitchen appliances.

Implementation

There are a number of important considerations relating to the implementation of Better Apartments. It is uncertain whether only apartments which comply with 100% of the standards may be approved. If this is the case, very few projects will be approved as the standards “set a very high bar”. Relating to this, we wonder whether the application of all standards together (as opposed to individual standards being reviewed in isolation) has been considered. Has the Better Apartments team examined how achievable it is to meet all the standards simultaneously? And as mentioned previously, there is a clear need for applicants to have access to a performance-based or alternative solution option to address the objective of a standard, if the standard itself cannot be met. Daylight and ventilation considerations in particular are noted in this regard.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

