

Children's wellbeing living in high-density environments

Children living in NSW high-density developments without play spaces face significant risks to their physical, mental, and social wellbeing due to a lack of safe areas for movement, nature connection, and peer interaction.

Impacts on Wellbeing

- **Physical Health:** Restricted movement leads to lower physical activity levels, impairing development in balance, sensory integration, motor skills, and overall fitness.
- **Mental and Emotional Health:** The absence of natural environments and outdoor play increases stress, anxiety, and psychological distress, while cramped indoor living and urban noise pollution often cause sleep disturbances.
- **Social and Cognitive Growth:** Limited interaction with peers and nature diminishes social skill-building, emotional resilience, attention spans, and creative development.

Environmental and Structural Challenges

- **Unsuitable Architecture:** Many high-rises are built for single adults or couples, featuring dangerous balconies, unmonitored concrete courtyards, and traffic hazards right at the front door.
- **Restrictive Strata Rules:** Common areas in apartment complexes frequently discourage or outright ban children's recreational activities.
- **Isolation and Transience:** Families often view high-density living without proper infrastructure as a temporary compromise rather than a permanent home, weakening community stability.

Urban Research on Rooftop Communal Open Space

Urban research and child-wellbeing experts state that rooftop communal open spaces are generally a poor substitute for ground-level play areas. While better than no space at all, standard residential rooftops are heavily compromised as functional child environments due to significant structural, microclimate, and social barriers.

1. Microclimate and Environmental Harshness

Rooftops are highly exposed environments that suffer from intense wind tunnels and severe sun exposure.

- **Extreme Heat:** Rooftop surfaces get significantly hotter than ground spaces. Metal, concrete, and synthetic play turf can reach temperatures capable of causing skin burns during Sydney summers.
- **Lack of Shade:** Incorporating mature shade trees on rooftops is structurally restricted due to soil depth and weight constraints on the building slab.
- **Wind Hazards:** High-altitude wind speeds can make spontaneous play uncomfortable or entirely unsafe for young children trying to balance or ride small toys.

2. The Safety Paradox and Lack of Spontaneity

For a child to benefit from a play space, it needs to foster independent mobility and spontaneous movement. Rooftops create a rigid psychological barrier for parents:

- **The "Fortress" Design:** Due to obvious fall hazards, building codes necessitate strict safety standards, such as 2.4m solid glass or concrete perimeter barriers. This eliminates a child's visual connection to the surrounding neighbourhood and nature, leading to an institutionalised feel.
- **No Spontaneous Access:** A child on the 3rd floor cannot independently run out to play on a 10th-floor rooftop. They must rely on an adult to take them up via an elevator, effectively eliminating "spontaneous outdoor play" and reducing physical activity to highly structured, chaperoned time blocks.

3. Competing Demands and Social Friction

Rooftops in high-density developments are rarely built *for* children; they are marketed as "lifestyle amenities" for single adults and down-sizing couples.

- **Design Mismatch:** Most rooftops prioritize BBQ zones, fire pits, yoga spaces, or cocktail lounges. Active children running, shouting, or kicking balls directly conflict with adult residents looking for quiet relaxation.
- **Strata Intervention:** Because rooftops are shared property, [University of Queensland research highlights](#) that owners' corporations frequently leverage private strata by-laws to ban scooters, balls, and active recreational play in rooftop common areas to protect adult amenities.

Why Current Policies Often Fail Children

Researchers point out a major policy loophole being **Strata By-Laws**.

While NSW planning policy might require a developer to build a landscaped communal green space, the *Strata Schemes Management Act* allows private owners' corporations to pass by-laws that ban children from playing, riding scooters, or kicking balls in those common areas. Consequently, even when the physical policy works, the social governance of apartments often restricts child wellbeing.

The **Transport Oriented Development (TOD) SEPP** itself does not contain any specific parts, clauses, or explicit text that plan for children.

The TOD policy—which is implemented as Chapter 5 of the [State Environmental Planning Policy \(Housing\) 2021](#)—is strictly a macro-planning instrument. Its provisions focus almost entirely on density mechanics: setting a blanket **6-storey (22-24 metre) height limit**, a **2.5:1 Floor Space Ratio (FSR)**, and a **mandatory 2% affordable housing contribution** within 400 metres of designated transit stations.

Children and family-specific infrastructure are omitted from the legal text of the SEPP. However, the wider TOD framework accounts for children in two indirect ways:

1. Mandatory Application of the Apartment Design Guide (ADG)

The TOD SEPP explicitly states that it does not replace the design quality requirements of NSW planning law. Any high-density apartment block built under the TOD program **must still comply with the standard NSW Apartment Design Guide (ADG)**.

Therefore, any protection of child wellbeing in a TOD development relies entirely on the few existing rules in the ADG:

- **Objective 3D-1 (Communal Open Space):** Mandates that if a development includes spaces for children, they must be contained, safe, and overlooked by apartments for natural surveillance.

- **Objective 4E (Private Open Space and Balconies):** Outlines that balconies must be safe for children (non-climbable balustrades).

2. The \$300 Million "Parks for People" Funding (Program Level)

While the statutory text of the SEPP lacks child-friendly planning clauses, the NSW Government recognised that piling high-density apartments around train stations without green space would harm community health.

The NSW Government committed **\$520 million** to the Transport Oriented Development (TOD) program, with **\$300 million** of that budget explicitly allocated to the [Parks for People](#) initiative to deliver major public open spaces.

The NSW \$520 million Transport Oriented Development (TOD) Infrastructure Fund **excludes Tier 2 TOD precincts (e.g. Ku-ring-gai TOD)**. Instead, that money is exclusively reserved for state-led, **Tier 1 Accelerated Precincts**. This infrastructure package explicitly targets the delivery of:

- New, high-quality **public playgrounds**.
- Open **green spaces and parks** within the growing TOD Accelerated Precincts.
- Innovative **urban squares** to support active play and community wellbeing.

The Policy Gap Criticised by Experts

Urban planning experts frequently point out that by leaving "child friendliness" out of the core TOD SEPP clauses, the policy risks repeating past mistakes. Because the SEPP fast-tracks standard residential flat buildings without mandating larger multi-bedroom unit mixes or internal play areas, critics argue it relies too heavily on public councils and state-funded parks to fix the lack of play space on the actual private title.

Ku-ring-gai TOD State Significant Developments

The **Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI)** has been assessing and determining a wave of State Significant Development (SSD) applications under the [NSW Transport Oriented Development \(TOD\) program](#) in the **Ku-ring-gai LGA** (covering Roseville, Lindfield, Killara, and Gordon).

A review of the active and recently determined SSD proposals on the [NSW Planning Portal](#) shows that **no major developers have included dedicated internal play spaces, child-care facilities, or targeted children's infrastructure** within their private site plans.

Instead, the developers rely entirely on **compliance with the basic NSW Apartment Design Guide (ADG)** (e.g., standard secure balconies and general communal rooftop areas) and **external public parks** to fulfill the recreation needs of children for example:

1. Aqualand Prestige (Roseville Precinct)

- **The Projects:** [SSD-77829461 \(Larkin St & Pockley Ave\)](#) and [SSD-77825469 \(Pockley Ave\)](#).
- **The Strategy for Children:** Public submissions filed on the Planning Portal highlight that Aqualand's designs feature standard communal rooftops rather than spaces customized for active play. In response to community pushback regarding the lack of on-site children's infrastructure, the developer's official planning response noted that **the site is within 300 metres of the existing public Blue Gum Reserve**, deferring child recreation to the surrounding neighbourhood public space. (The **Blue Gum Reserve** is a 14.4 to 17-hectare protected urban nature reserve managed primarily as a critical ecological bushland corridor. It is a steep gully and an untouched ecosystem).

2. CPDM Pty Ltd (Lindfield Precinct)

- **The Project:** [SSD-78493518 \(2-8 Highgate Road, Lindfield\)](#).
- **The Strategy for Children** The developer's layout prioritises maximise apartment yield and general landscaped setbacks rather than child-specific common domains.

3. Lateral Consulting Group & Willow Tree Planning (Gordon Precinct)

- **The Projects:** [SSD applications near Balfour Street](#) and [Burgoyne Street / Pearson Avenue](#).
- **The Strategy for Children:** These high-density proposals rely on the close proximity of local infrastructure, citing that they **enable young families to live near existing primary schools** and support networks. However, the design text details general "communal open space" to satisfy state criteria rather than dedicated, age-appropriate play facilities.

Summary of the Planning Friction

Because the TOD SEPP was intentionally designed by the NSW Government to fast-track standard residential flat blocks, it **does not legally require developers to build physical playgrounds or child playrooms** on their property. Consequently, developers in Ku-ring-gai are planning for the *presence* of families (by engineering 2 or 3-bedroom unit options to satisfy local council mix requirements) but are leaving the *active well-being infrastructure* to be managed by Ku-ring-gai Council's public parks and playgrounds.

Ku-ring-gai Council has planned for only one small park in the TOD on Bent Street and Newark Crescent Lindfield.

NSW Research Papers addressing wellbeing of children living in high density

Several key research papers and insights from Australian universities address the experiences and wellbeing of children living in high-density environments in New South Wales:

1. City Futures Research Centre (University of New South Wales)

- **The Paper/Project:** [Planning for the Inclusion of Families with Children in High-Density Housing & Planning for the Inclusion of Families with Children in Apartments](#)
- **Key Finding:** Dr Sophie-May Kerr details that despite 1 in 4 apartments in Greater Sydney being home to families with children, higher-density developments fail to meet family needs regarding size, design, and infrastructure. The research emphasises that a **"struggle to find suitable apartments"** and the accompanying challenges cause high-density spaces to be viewed as a temporary transition rather than long-term homes, which directly impacts community resilience and a child's sense of permanent belonging.

2. Macquarie University & University of Sydney

- **The Paper:** *Health and Wellbeing in Higher Density Living: Insights from Northern Sydney Residents* (The Highs and Lows Project, published in *Cities & Health*)
- **Key Finding:** Lead author Dr Josephine Chau and her team utilised citizen science to study nine local councils across Northern Sydney. The study established that while density can be highly liveable when well-designed, **isolation, safety hazards, and lack of shared spaces** or natural light serve as severe barriers to overall wellbeing. For households with children, a major determining factor for health was immediate proximity to functional play infrastructure: **"residents valued... access to playgrounds and communal green space."**

3. University of Technology Sydney (UTS)

- **The Study/Article:** *Out of the Box: The Hidden Impacts of Urban Consolidation and Apartment Living on Households with Children* & [Wanted: Family-Friendly Apartments](#)
- **Key Finding:** Looking closely at the Sydney landscape, researchers noted that market-driven housing policies prioritise high-density configurations that marginalise children's liveability. They point out that a lack of ground-level outdoor common areas results in **"suppressed spontaneous outdoor play."** Furthermore, the lack of space for children to sleep, play, and study inside apartments adds compounding mental stress to the household.

4. Healthy Higher Density Living Collaborative Project

- **The Paper:** [Healthy Higher Density Living: A Review of the Literature](#)
- **Key Finding:** A major joint review conducted by **UTS, the University of Sydney, and UNSW** (in partnership with Landcom) highlighted the multi-layered impacts of vertical living. It emphasised how structural factors like building design, restrictive strata rules, and a systemic lack of common play space operate together to restrict children's independent mobility and physical activity.

Henry Halloran Research Trust Research Study – Sydney University

Lucy Band's research study, published under the University of Sydney's [Martin Payne Practitioner in Residence Program](#), is titled "Implementing wellbeing outcomes into the NSW planning system: A new pro-social narrative".

As a social planner and Director of Social Strategy at Ethos Urban, Band's study targets the structural disconnect between high-level wellbeing frameworks and actual built outcomes in New South Wales.

Core Findings & Focus Areas

- **The Legislative Gap:** A primary takeaway from her study is that the **Environmental Planning and Assessment (EP&A) Act** (the backbone of NSW planning laws) **does not explicitly use the term "wellbeing."** Without a clear statutory mandate to improve social or community wellbeing, planners face systemic barriers when trying to enforce positive health or social outcomes during development assessments.
- **Measuring vs. Shifting the Narrative:** Band evaluates Australia's federal [Measuring What Matters \(MWM\) Framework](#). She highlights that it represents a **"weaker" form of implementation** because it tracks indicators rather than legally shifting the economic narrative or replacing growth objectives.
- **The "Supply vs. Wellbeing" Dilemma:** The study tackles the modern housing crisis, addressing how housing supply and resident wellbeing are often framed as opposing forces. She argues that mechanisms like the *Apartment Design Guide (ADG)* exist to protect baseline conditions, but systematic changes are required to integrate wellbeing metrics directly into how infrastructure is funded, measured, and built.
- **Systemic Policy Alignment:** Rather than leaving tools and definitions as standalone, non-binding documents (like the *NSW Draft Wellbeing Budget*), the research recommends embedding legally binding duties for public bodies to deliver, measure, and track community health outcomes, drawing a structural comparison to frameworks used in places like Wales.

Policy Recommendations: Embedding Legally Binding Duties

Band advocates for moving past simple metrics and creating a framework where public authorities have a statutory responsibility to consider community health.

- **The Welsh Well-being of Future Generations Act Model:** Her research proposes a model similar to legislation in Wales, which obligates public bodies to think about the long-term impact of their decisions. She suggests embedding a legally binding **wellbeing duty** directly into the NSW planning system.
- **Overhauling Objects of the EP&A Act:** She recommends explicitly inserting "the promotion of community and individual wellbeing" into Section 1.3 (the Objects) of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*. This would elevate social health to the same legislative priority as economic growth and environmental sustainability.
- **Moving Beyond "Baselines":** Band critiques the trend where wellbeing tools exist only as non-binding, high-level frameworks (like the *NSW Draft Wellbeing Budget*). She argues that without integrating these directly into local government infrastructure funding models and development assessment criteria, they will continue to fail at the delivery stage.

The Connection to the NSW Apartment Design Guide (ADG)

Band's work highlights a critical tension within the *State Environmental Planning Policy (Housing) 2021* and the accompanying ADG when dealing with high-density growth:

- **The "Supply vs. Wellbeing" Dilemma:** In the face of aggressive state-led density rollouts—like the Transport Oriented Development (TOD) program—the ADG is frequently treated as a checklist of restrictions that slow down supply. Band argues that density and wellbeing should not be viewed as competing forces; rather, the ADG protects the bare *minimum* baseline for health (such as solar access and natural ventilation).
- **The Limitations of the ADG:** While the ADG enforces strict minimums for apartment sizes and communal open spaces, Band notes that it operates primarily to *prevent harm* rather than to *foster pro-social design*. It cannot mandate the wider neighbourhood connectivity, accessible public green networks (like the *Parks for People* initiatives), or the social infrastructure required to prevent isolation in high-density areas.
- **Pro-Social Narrative Overhauls:** Her study suggests that instead of viewing the ADG as a regulatory hurdle to bypass for the sake of housing volume, planning policy needs to wrap the ADG within a broader local framework. This framework would link private apartment designs directly with publicly funded regional open space and community infrastructure.

In her research, Lucy Band suggests that even without immediate changes to state-level laws, local councils in New South Wales can take immediate action to implement a **"wellbeing duty" locally**.

By shifting their internal processes from a strict compliance checklist to a proactive, health-first strategy, local governments can use existing frameworks to prioritise community health. Band proposes that councils implement this local duty through several key mechanisms:

1. Rewriting Community Participation Plans (CPPs)

Under the NSW planning system, every council must maintain a Community Participation Plan. Band suggests that councils use these documents to establish a local mandate for social health:

- **Shifting the Focus:** Instead of treating public exhibition as an administrative box-ticking exercise, CPPs should be rewritten to actively measure how a development impacts a neighbourhood's social cohesion.

- **Pro-Social Co-Design:** Rather than simply asking the public for objections, councils would be required to engage residents in early co-design processes to establish what social infrastructure (such as community spaces or shared gardens) a high-density area actually needs.

Note: The NSW Government recently introduced sweeping structural updates to how public consultation works by implementing a single, mandatory Statewide Community Participation Plan (CPP) and in abolishing local council's CPP's.

This major statewide shift perfectly underscores the **"Supply vs. Wellbeing" dilemma** highlighted in Lucy Band's University of Sydney research.

By removing localised notification requirements to speed up housing delivery, the state framework restricts a community's ability to provide feedback on immediate neighbourhood changes. This makes Band's alternative recommendation—where councils use their **Local Environmental Plan (LEP) Aims and Development Control Plans (DCPs)** to mandate pro-social, pro-health baseline rules upfront—even more critical for local governments wanting to protect liveability as these fast-tracked developments roll out.

2. Upgrading Local Environmental Plans (LEPs)

While councils cannot single-handedly change the state's overarching planning laws, they *do* control the "Aims" section of their own Local Environmental Plans:

- **Setting Local Intent:** Councils can explicitly insert "the protection and promotion of community wellbeing" as a core overarching objective of their LEP.
- **Legal Weight in Assessment:** When wellbeing is explicitly listed as a core objective of the LEP, council planners gain the legal leverage required to reject or demand amendments to developments that threaten public health, isolation, or community access to green space.

3. Broadening Development Control Plans (DCPs)

While State Environmental Planning Policies (like the Apartment Design Guide) lock in baseline metrics for individual buildings, councils can use their local DCPs to focus on the broader community context:

- **The "Beyond the Building" Mandate:** Local DCPs can be updated to include strict "pro-social" guidelines. This includes mandating safe, active street fronts, continuous shade canopies, or public spaces that actively encourage human interaction and combat urban isolation.
- **Proactive Integration:** This prevents situations where a high-density development meets its indoor baseline metrics but fails to integrate with the surrounding neighbourhood.

4. Directing Developer Contributions to "Social Infrastructure"

A local wellbeing duty fundamentally changes how developer contributions (Section 7.11 and 7.12 funds) are spent. Rather than focusing infrastructure funding strictly on civil engineering projects like widening roads or managing stormwater pipes, a council acting under a wellbeing duty explicitly prioritizes **social infrastructure**. This means shifting budgets directly toward walkable green corridors, multi-generational play spaces, and multi-purpose community hubs.

Lack of Federal Definition of wellbeing for children or people living in high density environments

There is no official Australian Federal definition that specifically combines or defines wellbeing *exclusively* for children or people living in high-density environments.

Instead, the Federal Government maintains separate, broader frameworks: one track defines **child wellbeing universally** across all settings, while **high-density urban environments** are regulated and evaluated at the state and local levels rather than through federal statutory definitions.

The federal approach handles these concepts through distinct frameworks:

1. How the Federal Government Defines Child Wellbeing

Rather than factoring in urban density directly, Federal frameworks focus on an "ecological" approach to child development, which looks at how a child interacts with their immediate family, school, and physical environment. Key federal frameworks include:

- **The Early Years Strategy 2024–2034:** Orchestrated by the Department of Social Services, its Outcomes Framework monitors child wellbeing across holistic, non-geographic domains like being safe, healthy, connected, and having material basics (which includes access to appropriate housing).
- **The Measuring What Matters Framework:** Australia's [first national wellbeing framework](#) tracks 50 indicators across themes like health, security, and sustainability. While it measures overall housing and green space access, it does not feature an exclusive high-density sub-definition for children.
- **National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy:** This initiative takes a rights-based approach to ensure children from birth to 12 years grow up in supportive community environments, but it applies universally across regional, rural, and urban areas.

2. How High-Density Wellbeing is Managed

Because constitutional responsibility for urban planning, zoning, and high-density development sits with **State and Territory Governments**, density-specific design and liveability mandates are not federally defined:

- **State Planning Policies:** In jurisdictions like New South Wales, the connection between high density and wellbeing is governed by frameworks like the *Apartment Design Guide (ADG)* and the *Transport Oriented Development (TOD)* programs. These mandate minimum requirements for communal open space, solar access, natural ventilation, and deep soil zones specifically to protect resident health.
- **Peak Research Frameworks:** Organisations like the [Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth \(ARACY\)](#) utilise "The Nest" framework. While independent of statutory density definitions, it evaluates how a child's physical environment (including clean air, noise, and access to green spaces) shapes their holistic health.

Notes prepared by Friends of Ku-ring-gai Environment Inc. (FOKE)

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