

Shelter NSW Submission

Bellingen Shire Local Strategic Planning Statement

Introduction

Shelter NSW writes in support of the draft Local Strategic Planning Statement for the Bellingen Shire.

As the state's peak body for housing policy advocacy, we commend its vision for future land uses that align with our vision of a secure home for all. We consider the priorities and actions outlined in the document as appropriate responses to the issues it seeks to address. They also reflect views of the community that Shelter staff heard when conducting consultation sessions in the region in 2019.

The purpose of this submission is to acknowledge the local housing issues in the Bellingen Shire and comment on the proposed priorities and actions. In all cases, we support the strategies presented so we do not recommend any changes. We otherwise invite council to partner with Shelter NSW in achieving its aims through our advocacy to other levels of government.

Our understanding of the local context and housing issues

Shelter NSW believes that local plans should reflect a local understanding of issues and their context. While we have had historical engagement with the Bellingen Shire community, we are ultimately a Sydney-based organisation. We therefore want to first acknowledge the issues and contextual factors described in the draft LSPS before providing feedback on specific priorities and actions.

Beginning with the local context, the LSPS gives the impression that planning in the Bellingen Shire is strongly shaped by its natural environment and limited population growth. In the first instance, it is unique that less than one percent of the Shire's land use is for residential purposes, primarily in the three main towns of Bellingen, Dorrigo and Urunga. We understand as such that much of the community derives its sense of local identity from the area's natural environment.

The other main contextual factor is that population growth will be effectively zero over the next 25 years. There appear to be two trends driving this outcome: a rise in migration that will offset a fall in natural change and an increase in older households relative to an outflow of young people. The LSPS identifies a lack of job opportunities as the key driver of these trends which in turn shapes the three main housing issues of supply, diversity and affordability.

On supply, the LSPS contrasts a growth target of 200 new homes with the 8,450 in neighboring Coffs Harbour. It attributes this difference to job-creating infrastructure such as the Coffs Harbour Airport and Southern Cross University. In Bellingen, the River District Hospital and the region's natural assets may provide future opportunities in the health and social care as well as tourism industries. There may also be opportunities arising out of the construction of the Coffs Harbour Bypass. However, past expectations of growth in housing demand have not materialised, as appears to have been the case with the previous plans for greenfield housing supply that were incorporated into the 2010 LEP.



On diversity, the draft LSPS emphasises a previously-identified need for smaller and more accessible dwellings. These homes are required to accommodate an ageing population comprised of single person households and couples. Bellingen’s Local Housing Strategy, adopted in January 2020, responds to this need by encouraging infill development in existing town centres.

On affordability, the draft LSPS notes this as being a key threat to the social fabric of the local community. Although it does not quantify the issue, it reports that lower-income communities and other marginalised groups are being pushed out of the local area. This is a particular concern in relation to Bellingen’s artists and volunteers as they are key contributors to the local culture.

In light of these issues and contextual factors, we at Shelter NSW appreciate the vision articulated by the draft LSPS. We understand that the Bellingen Shire, through its land use planning, wants to create opportunities for housing supply and employment in ways that enhance its natural and social diversity. Equally, we recognise that the LSPS is closely allied to the Local Housing Strategy, both of which will inform changes to development controls and infrastructure investments.

Our comments on the proposed priorities and actions

Planning Priority 2

Identify infrastructure constraints and opportunities that will enable desired development

We support this priority. In general, Shelter NSW subscribes to the principle that infrastructure investments should drive and support housing development rather than follow it. Failures to sequence growth in this way undermine strategies aimed at enabling infill development and erode public support for density done well.

The stated actions to give effect to this priority—to complete Infrastructure Planning Studies and allocate funding to projects identified by those investigations—are best practice. Without being local to the area, Shelter is otherwise not in a position to comment on specific infrastructure opportunities. It is appropriate as such that the planned study will identify local infrastructure needs that may be catalytic for development.

Planning Priority 4

Provide the necessary infrastructure for people to lead active lives within their communities

We support this priority. Active transport links between housing and centres of employment and services promote physical activity and alleviate road congestion. As such, they are important enablers of health and productivity in both urban and regional communities. This priority is an appropriate complement as such to the Shire’s focus on supporting infill development.

The proposed action to give effect to this priority is to review the Developer Contribution Plan which is appropriate in principle. However, given the limited prospects for market-led housing growth discussed throughout the LSPS, funding for such infrastructure may not be forthcoming. It may be appropriate as such to consider upfront funding mechanisms depending on council resources.

Planning Priority 6

Meet most of the housing needs of the community through well designed infill housing

We support this priority. Shelter NSW advocates a balanced approach to development that avoids the two extremes of detached dwelling houses located at the edge of town and towers crammed into the centre. The themes identified as part of the consultation sessions for Bellingen’s Local Housing Strategy articulate a well-designed middle ground with more diverse housing options.

The stated action to achieve this priority—to implement the Bellingen Shire Local Housing Strategy—is well-advanced of where council needs to be given that a strategic land use plan would normally precede a detailed housing strategy. The preparation of such a strategy is a frequent recommendation in most of Shelter NSW’s other LSPS submissions. While we have not reviewed the 65 actions contained in that strategy, we support the selection reprinted in the LSPS.

Appropriate actions under that strategy include reviewing planning controls to enable more diverse dwellings types and smaller homes. We note in this respect that there is a generous and well-located extent of general residential zones in Bellingen, Dorrigo and Urunga that currently permit most types of residential development. Since there are no floor space limits and a universal 10m height limit, minimum lot sizes and development controls might therefore be an area in which to focus.

Other actions such as providing affordable housing on government owned sites and investigating potential partnerships are similarly appropriate. Providing access to low-cost land is the single biggest lever with which governments can support affordable housing, especially in low-growth areas where value capture mechanisms are less viable. It is therefore highly valuable to identify these assets on a central register, coordinate their use with other agencies and partner with non-profit organisations to develop them.

Planning Priority 11

Work with proponents to advance projects that are consistent with narratives for each centre

We support this priority. The strategic priority maps provided for Bellingen, Dorrigo and Urunga are valuable visual references with which to plan desired land use outcomes in each centre. This precinct scale approach to strategic planning is an appropriate way to give effect to the other priorities previously discussed.

Thank you

Shelter NSW appreciates the opportunity to comment on future land use planning in the Bellingen Shire. We hope that our comments support Council in pursuing its intended priorities. If there is any way in which Shelter NSW can assist Council to achieve its aims through our broader advocacy, please contact us at admin@shelternsw.org.au.

Best wishes,

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Shelter NSW