



MEDIUM-DENSITY HOUSING RESEARCH FORUM



Event summary and next steps

On 16 March, BRANZ hosted a forum for building and construction industry stakeholders on its medium-density housing research programme.

The forum was an opportunity to share insights from the research with representatives from both government and the building sector and get feedback on the applicability of the research recommendations and solutions.

External and internal researchers presented their findings on consumer experiences and perceptions of MDH, and the typology's technical and consenting issues.

The presentations were followed by workshops to identify ways in which the findings could be adopted and applied. They provided attendees with an opportunity to offer their own thoughts on the research and how it can make a difference.

Community acceptance of medium-density housing

The presentations on community acceptance of medium-density housing were given by Dr Natalie Allen from the Urban Advisory, Dr Simon Opit from Massey's SHORE research centre and BRANZ social scientist, Orin Lockyer.

The overarching message was that, while the public generally favours standalone housing, there appears to be growing acceptance of MDH as a viable housing option. Nevertheless, the presenters made it clear that obstacles to community acceptance remain.

Another key message was the importance of understanding the trade-offs people make when deciding where to live. These include choices associated with both the dwelling itself and its location.

Workshop discussions centred on the importance of MDH 'liveability' - broadly defined as comfort and satisfaction - as a means to change commonly-held perceptions that MDH is substandard.

While MDH is often presented as a solution to the limited supply of buildable land in metropolitan areas, high-profile news stories of technical issues means it can be perceived as poor quality. Because such dwellings are seldom more affordable than standalone housing, workshop participants felt that the general public continues to perceive that MDH is both inferior and expensive.

Participants said that the industry leaders still face the challenge of how to build quality MDH that is affordable for most people. Accordingly, it was agreed that optimisation of user experience, including physical, psychological and socio-cultural factors, is worthy of further investigation.

Workshop participants further pointed out that perceptions of liveability are also relative to the links between residential buildings and the communities in which they are situated. It was felt that good urban design that enables social connectivity within and outside of residential buildings can shape overall perceptions of housing quality.

Technical issues with medium-density housing

The presentations on technical issues were given by Michael Nuth, Kevin Frank and David Carradine of BRANZ and Kevin Whiting of Winstone Wallboards Ltd. They looked at the common problems that building professionals report, and included fire safety, weathertightness failure, acoustics and structural issues.

Workshop participants generally acknowledged that quality remains a problem in MDH construction. There was general agreement that common technical problems are a symptom of broader policy problems rather than independent issues, for example:

- The need for greater integration and collaboration between building professions
- Problems with how building consent authorities (BCAs) enforce the Building Code
- Negative behaviours in the industry associated with the impact of joint and several liability
- Limited accountability within the Licensed Building Practitioner Scheme.

There was consensus that, while BRANZ has done well to identify these problems through its MDH programme, work remained to ensure that they are being addressed. Key recommendations included:

- Educating clients about the potential impact of their procurement decisions, using a risk matrix to detail possible outcomes of different procurement strategies
- Considering ways in which design management could be improved to ensure greater collaboration between building professions (e.g. making BIM mandatory in construction projects that require input from multiple building disciplines)
- Allowing designers more opportunity to prove alternative solutions during the consenting process
- The introduction of more acceptable solutions within the Building Code if BCAs remain reluctant to approve alternative solutions because of concerns about liability
- Consideration of introducing proportional liability as an alternative to joint and several liability
- Reform of the Licensed Building Practitioner Scheme to ensure greater accountability amongst building professionals
- Reforming the education of builders and designers to address the lack of capability throughout the sector.

Workshop participants noted that fire safety issues continue to be amongst the most difficult to resolve during MDH projects. The integration of fire safety requirements with other Building Code requirements was also identified as an issue because meeting fire safety requirements can often cause compliance issues in other areas. It was broadly felt that having clear solutions and guidance (for example, on how to assess engineering judgements, and whole-building-life management) would improve the situation.

There was positive feedback on the BRANZ guidelines for constructing multi-storey light timber framed buildings. Participants suggested the guide could help develop a shared understanding between designers (engineers) and consent officials on the issues that require consideration for these buildings.

Consenting issues in medium-density housing

Verney Ryan from Beacon Pathway and Associate Professor Dr Morten Gjerd from the Wellington School of Architecture gave the presentations on consenting issues research.

Two main issues were discussed in the following workshop: risk and liability in the sector and the proposal of creating a medium-density housing centre of excellence.

Concerns about the negative impact of joint and several liability mirrored those discussed at the technical issues workshop. A key concern was that fear of liability drives conservative decision-making within BCAs and a reluctance to approve innovative designs beyond those prescribed in the Building Code. It was felt that this incentivises design professionals to meet the needs of BCAs ahead of clients and that it unnecessarily prolongs consent timeframes, resulting in project delays and additional costs.

In a similar vein to feedback received during the technical issues workshop, participants recommended that work be undertaken to look at the potential benefits of transitioning from joint and several liability to proportional liability. As opposed to joint and several liability where any one party can be held 100 percent liable for any leaky home damage (last person standing), it was held that proportional liability could enable parties be held liable in proportion to their fault in damage, as determined through a judicial process. Workshop participants voiced strong interest in research investigating the potential impact of such a scheme in New Zealand.

Participants within the consenting issues workshop also felt that the need for guidance on how to design and construct quality MDH is as strong as ever. During discussions, workshop participants proposed that an independent centre of excellence could be established to advise on MDH best practice. The centre could illustrate examples of MDH that successfully promote the health and wellbeing of residents alongside instances of sound construction practices.

Next steps

Despite the looming threat of COVID-19, there was an excellent turn-out of stakeholders at the forum and discussions were lively.

The key message from participants was that BRANZ can do more to promote high-quality MDH.

How to address the negative impact of joint and several liability and shift to a liability scheme that is fairer on all parties was one area where BRANZ could assist the industry to tackle persistent technical and consent-related issues.

There was also broad agreement that MDH research on enhancing liveability or 'wellbeing' would be a logical next step for BRANZ – to better address concerns that such dwellings are substandard and lead to poor social outcomes.

Accordingly, MDH research in the context of urban design may help the industry look beyond the 'bricks and mortar' of this typology to consider new benchmarks for quality design, construction and social performance.

The organisers of the MDH research forum are considering this feedback and how it can be incorporated into future programmes of work. We will update industry as we progress.