

Whitehorse Housing Strategy: State of Play Report

Whitehorse City Council

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Cover image is of Box Hill with the Melbourne CBD in the background, courtesy of Shutterstock.

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1. Introduction

The City of Whitehorse is located centrally in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. At the time of the 2021 census, Whitehorse was home to 71,521 dwellings and 169,346 people, who live in a municipality of contrasts.

Whitehorse's largest centre, Box Hill, has been recognised as a key metropolitan activity centre for many decades and has seen accelerating growth in recent years. This has been spurred on by the alignment of the Suburban Rail Loop, which will run north-south through the municipality with stations in Box Hill and Burwood. The SRL will intersect with the Belgrave/Lilydale line that runs east-west connecting with other key centres in Whitehorse, notably Blackburn, Nunawading and Mitcham.

Outside of these major centres, however, Whitehorse is characterised by suburban neighbourhoods known for their leafy character. Despite increasing quantities of infill medium density housing, these suburban areas are still predominantly detached houses (65% of all dwellings at the last census). The Whitehorse Housing Strategy (2014) (the Housing Strategy) sought to respond to these contrasting elements. This paper provides an overview of the Housing Strategy and associated planning changes and an overview of the housing growth and changes that have occurred in Whitehorse since that time.

It also describes the evolution of State Government policy in relation to planning for housing which has, and continues to have, an influence on opportunities for local governments to design and implement local planning policy.

As Council contemplates renewing its Housing Strategy, at this point in time there is still uncertainty about whether the approach taken in the previous strategy will continue to receive support from a State Government for which planning to increase housing supply has emerged as the singular priority over all other planning outcomes.



Source: Whitehorse City Council

2. The Housing Strategy: change areas and neighbourhood character

The Housing Strategy was prepared at a time of transition for planning in Victoria. A new planning strategy *Plan Melbourne* was released by the State Government in May of 2014, having been exhibited in draft form in October 2013. This appeared amidst the implementation of new residential zones, which had been released in July 2013 with a direction to councils to implement them within 12 months. This was the context in which Whitehorse finalised its Housing Strategy (in April 2014) and applied the new residential zones and neighbourhood character provisions (in October 2014, through Amendment C160).

The resulting planning provisions – which still form the core of Council’s approach to planning for housing – follow the guidance provided by the State Government at the time. The Whitehorse Planning Scheme delineates different levels of change (Figure 1):

- Substantial change areas, which are described as accommodating “townhouses, units, apartments and shop-top dwellings.”
- Natural change areas, which are expected to “comprise low and medium density housing in the form of detached dwellings, semi-detached dwellings, townhouses and units.”
- Limited change areas which will “comprise detached dwellings and where appropriate, units and semi-detached dwellings.”

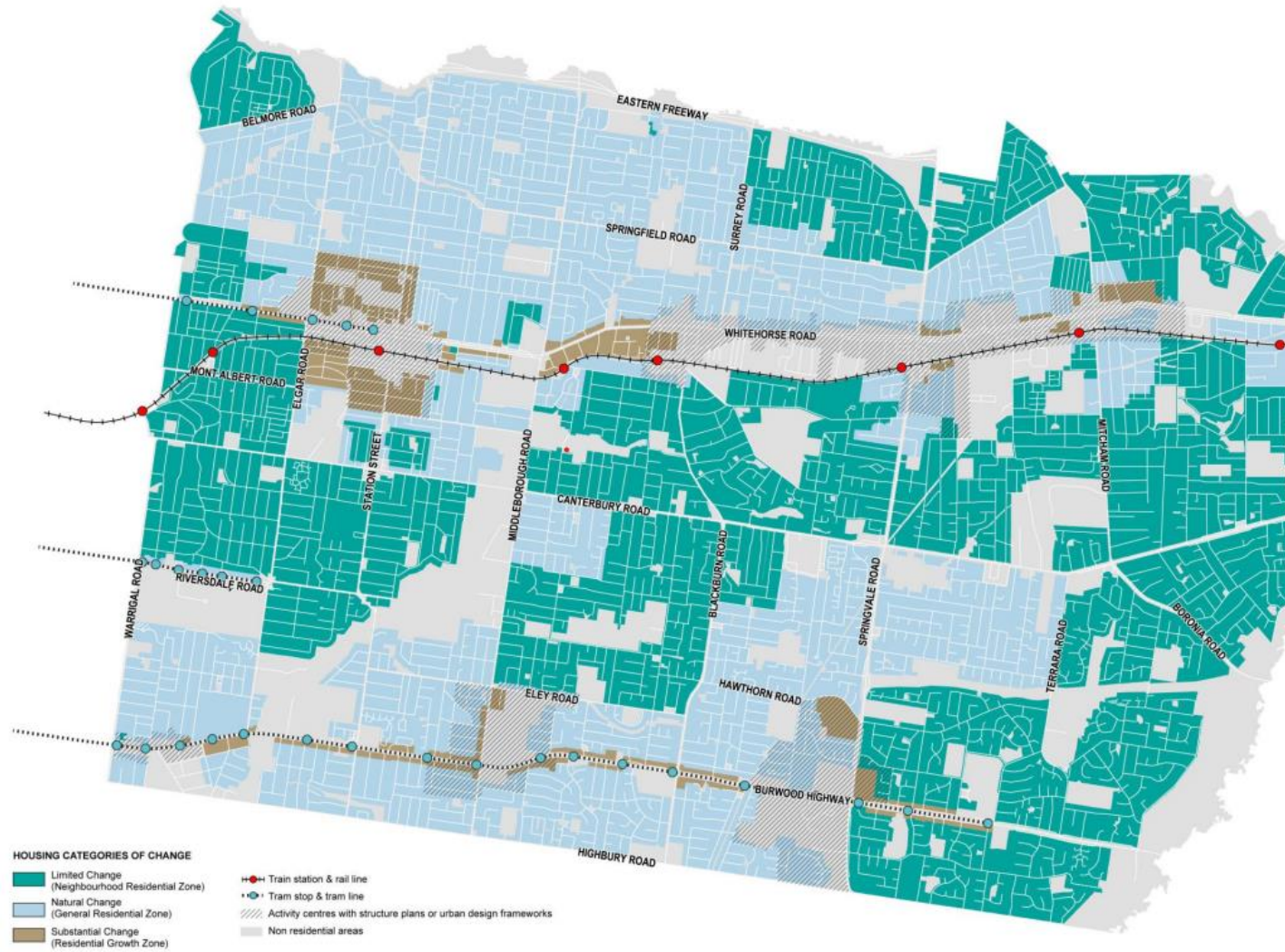
The Housing Strategy was informed by a neighbourhood character study. This study identified three broad character types (garden suburban, bush suburban, and bush environment) and a total of 27 specific precincts which were reflected in the planning scheme through a combination of local policy and schedules to the residential zones.

The landscape character and environmental values of these areas are also afforded additional protections in Whitehorse through the application of a Significant Landscape Overlays across most residential areas.

This character focussed approach was supplemented by planning for key activity centres including identification of opportunities for housing near services and transport. Box Hill was a Metropolitan Activity Centre in *Plan Melbourne* – consistent with a long history as one of the primary activity centres in eastern Melbourne. Council adopted a structure plan for Box Hill in 2007. In addition, the planning scheme identified 60 neighbourhood centres as well as 4 larger centres for which structure plans or urban design frameworks have been prepared and reflected in the scheme. These activity centres are recognised in the planning scheme in a Strategic Framework Plan at cl 02.04 of the scheme.

This approach for planning in Whitehorse – directing growth to activity centres and managing change in suburban locations based on character – reflects the directions of State policy at the time and was broadly consistent with the planning approaches of other councils. However, Whitehorse is notable for the strength of its application of this approach. Box Hill has long been one of the highest order centres in the State Government hierarchy outside the CBD and has been identified for dramatic change. At the same time, the character-based planning framework outside of its activity centres is particularly strong, with an emphasis on protection of trees and the garden character of Whitehorse’s suburbs.

Figure 1: Change Areas, Whitehorse Housing Strategy (2014)



Source: Whitehorse City Council (2014), Housing Strategy

3. Planning policy from 2014 to 2023

Following the change of government in late 2014, Plan Melbourne was revised as Plan Melbourne 2017-2050 in March 2017. Plan Melbourne 2017-2050 did not fundamentally disturb the basic approach to planning for housing. The 20-minute neighbourhood concept – which emphasised planning for communities where daily needs were within a 20 minute walk, cycle or public transport ride – was retained as a central organising idea. Similarly, the high-level activity centre hierarchy was largely unchanged, especially with regards to Whitehorse. However, the updated plan included stronger commitments to urban greening and cooling than its predecessor and emphasised the need for this to be recognised in residential development standards (see text box). Arguably, this directing provided great support for planning policies already in place in Whitehorse.

The announcement of the Suburban Rail Loop in August 2018 reinforced the longstanding primacy of Box Hill as a metropolitan activity centre and elevated the importance of the Burwood activity centre which will also host a new SRL station.

For the most part, gradual changes in the planning settings after 2014 did not call into question the validity or sustainability of Whitehorse’s approach to planning for housing. However, a tension gradually developed during this period with a shift in guidance about the application of core residential zones. Revisions to the practice notes and zone settings shifted the expectations of typical built form in the zones towards more intense outcomes, as shown in Table 1, with an example of guidance on housing development typologies in Figure 2.

The expectation in the mid-tier General Residential Zone, for example, shifted from “single dwellings and some medium density housing” with town houses in “limited circumstances” to instead contemplating three storey development.

This occurred without revisiting the strategic work that Whitehorse and other councils had used to apply the zones. While it is unclear if the changed guidance materially affected outcomes on the ground, these changes gradually increased the potential for tension between the housing framework and character policy settings (applied on the basis of the state’s 2013 advice) and the allowable forms under the zones.



Extract from *Plan Melbourne 2017-2050* on urban greening and cooling

A number of local councils are already promoting urban greening through actions such as developing urban forest strategies.

Greening must be integrated into planning frameworks and balanced with safety risk priorities. Too often, trees and greening are an afterthought in the planning and design of urban areas. In some cases, such as along transport corridors, concerns about the safety risks presented by trees can result in tree pruning and removal or the limitation of new plantings. In other cases, such as in established areas, tree canopy is lost through the process of replacing single dwellings and multi-dwelling redevelopment.

Residential development provisions must be updated to mitigate against the loss of tree canopy cover and permeable surfaces because of urban intensification.¹




Source: Whitehorse City Council

¹ *Plan Melbourne 2017-2050* (Victorian State Government, March 2017), p. 119.

Table 1: Shifting guidance for the application of the key residential zones between 2013 and 2023

Zone	PPN 72 (December 2013) “What sort of housing can be expected?”	PPN 91 (July 2023, current) “Role and application”
Neighbourhood Residential	Single dwellings and dual occupancies under some circumstances.	Applied to areas where there is no anticipated change to the predominantly single and double storey character. Also, to areas that have been identified as having specific neighbourhood, heritage, environmental or landscape character values, that distinguish the land from other parts of the municipality or surrounding area.
General Residential	Single dwellings and some medium density housing. A mixture of single dwellings, dual occupancies with some villa units and in limited circumstances town houses, where appropriate.	Applied to areas where housing development of three storeys exists or is planned for in locations offering good access to services and transport. Principle 4 is: “The General Residential Zone should be applied to areas where housing development of three storeys exists or is planned for. It is inappropriate to apply the General Residential Zone to areas where a planning authority seeks to respect the existing single and double storey character of an area.”
Residential Growth	Medium density housing. A mixture of townhouses and apartments with underground car parking.	Applied to areas suitable for housing diversity and housing at increased densities in locations offering good access to services, jobs and public transport, and to provide a transition between areas of more intensive use and development such as activity centres and other residential areas.

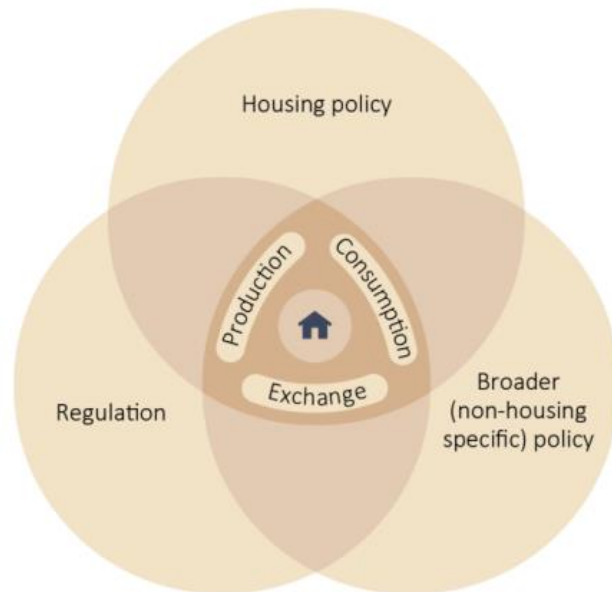
Figure 2: State Government housing guidance in 2013 (Planning Practice Note 78)

	MUZ	RGZ	GRZ	NRZ	TZ	LDRZ
	MIXED USE ZONE	RESIDENTIAL GROWTH ZONE	GENERAL RESIDENTIAL ZONE	NEIGHBOURHOOD RESIDENTIAL ZONE	TOWNSHIP ZONE	LOW DENSITY RESIDENTIAL ZONE
						
WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE ZONE?	Enables new housing and jobs growth in mixed use areas.	Enables new housing growth and diversity.	Respect and preserve urban character while enabling moderate housing growth and housing diversity.	Restricts housing growth in areas identified for urban preservation.	Provides for residential and other uses in small towns. Enables moderate housing growth.	Enables low density housing.
WHERE WILL IT BE USED?	In areas with a mix of residential and non-residential development. In local neighbourhood centres undergoing renewal and around train stations, where appropriate.	In appropriate locations near activity areas, train stations and other areas suitable for increased housing activity.	In most residential areas where moderate growth and diversity of housing is provided, it is consistent with existing neighbourhood character.	In areas where single dwellings prevail and change is not identified, such as areas of recognised neighbourhood character or environmental or landscape significance.	In townships.	On the fringe of urban areas and townships where sewerage may not be available.
DOES RESCODE APPLY?	Yes (up to and including 4 storeys)	Yes (up to and including 4 storeys)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
WHAT SORT OF HOUSING CAN BE EXPECTED?	High and medium density housing A mixture of townhouses and apartment style housing up to three storeys, and higher where appropriate.	Medium density housing A mixture of townhouses and apartments with underground car parking.	Single dwellings and some medium density housing A mixture of single dwellings, dual occupancies with some villa units and in limited circumstances town houses, where appropriate.	Single dwellings and dual occupancies under some circumstances	Single dwellings and some medium density housing A mixture of single dwellings, dual occupancies, villa units and town houses.	Single dwellings
DOES THE ZONE SET A MAXIMUM BUILDING HEIGHT FOR HOUSING?	No But a maximum building height can be specified.	Yes, 13.5 metres But a higher or lower maximum building height can be set by a council.	Yes, 9 metres But a higher or lower maximum building height can be set by a council.	Yes, 8 metres mandatory Can be varied by council with approval from the Minister for Planning.	Yes, 9 metres But a higher or lower maximum building height can be set by a council.	No
CAN A PERMIT BE GRANTED TO EXCEED THE MAXIMUM BUILDING HEIGHT?	Yes When approved by a council.	Yes Except when a higher or lower maximum building height has been set which cannot be exceeded.	Yes Except when a higher or lower maximum building height has been set which cannot be exceeded.	No Except when a higher or lower maximum building height has been set which cannot be exceeded.	Yes Except when a higher or lower maximum building height has been set which cannot be exceeded.	No
IS A STRUCTURE PLAN OR DESIGN FRAMEWORK REQUIRED FOR THE ZONE TO BE APPLIED?	No The preferred future use of land and built form may be specified if necessary.	No The preferred future built form may be specified if necessary.	No	No	No	No

4. Have housing outcomes aligned with the ambition of the Housing Strategy?

In broad terms, the objectives of the Housing Strategy were to: direct housing growth to preferred locations, diversify the housing stock, improve design outcomes, and increase the supply of social and affordable housing. Assessing the effectiveness of the Housing Strategy in achieving these objectives is complicated by the fact that there are a range of influences on housing outcomes, many of which are outside the control of councils (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Components of the housing system



Source: National Supply and Affordability Council (2024), State of the Housing System, p13.

However, analysis of planning permit data and changes in dwellings between census periods still provide useful insights into whether recent housing growth and change was aligned with the aspirations of the Housing Strategy.

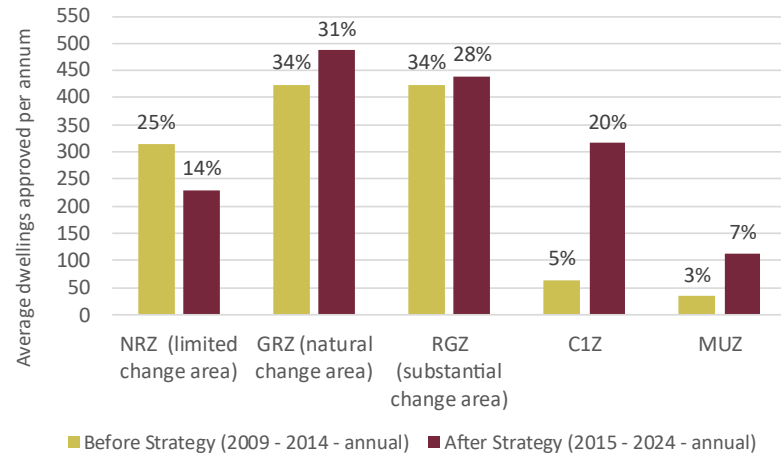
Location and type of housing approved (pre- vs post-strategy)

The Housing Strategy sought to increase *growth* primarily in and around activity centres and increase the *diversity* of dwellings. Analysis of the location and density of housing in approved planning permits before and after 2014 shows noticeable shifts in the location and density of housing approvals that broadly align with the Housing Strategy's objectives.

Overall, growth has shifted away from Limited Change Areas. Dwellings approved in Limited Change Areas declined significantly following the Housing Strategy's introduction, both in number per annum and as a share of total approvals. These dropped from an average of 315 dwellings approved per year before the Housing Strategy to 229 per year after, and from 25% of all dwellings approved pre-strategy to 14% in the ten years that followed.

In both Natural and Substantial Change Areas the number of dwellings approved per annum increased between the two time periods, despite their share of total approved dwellings declining (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Approved dwellings by Change Area, per annum and share, pre- and post-strategy



Source: SGS Economics and Planning (2025), using City of Whitehorse (2025), Planning permit approvals for dwellings 2009 to 2024.

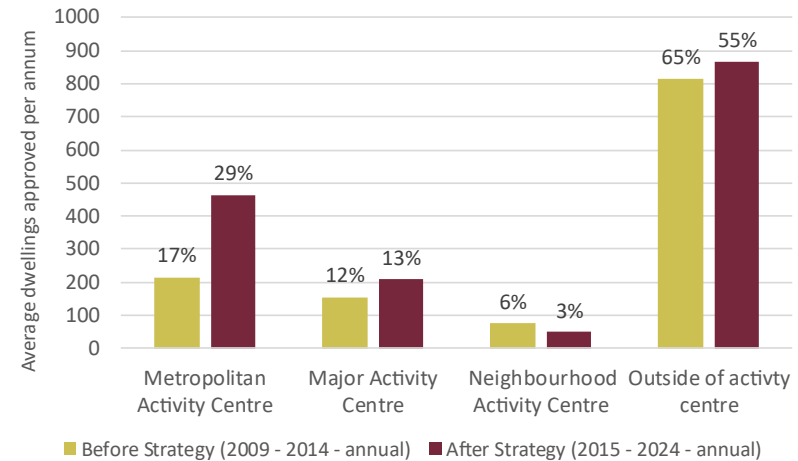
This declining growth in Limited Change Areas contrasts with the corresponding increase in dwellings approved in commercially-zoned areas.

In areas zoned as C1Z, approved dwellings surged after 2014, with the average annual number of dwellings approved each year increasing fivefold (from 63 to 316) and its share of total approvals quadrupling from 5% of all approved dwellings before the Housing Strategy to nearly 20% after. This rapid growth reflects the strategic application of the C1Z to the core of activity centres, the zone’s more flexible building height controls, and the concentration of apartment development within the Box Hill Metropolitan Activity Centre.

Approved dwellings also increased in the MUZ, from 33 to 113 per annum (or from 3% to 7% of total approved dwellings), noting that this increase in permit activity reflects the application of the MUZ in the Box Hill Metropolitan Activity Centre and Burwood East–Tally Ho Major Activity Centre. It is noted that the impact of this increase is likely overstated, as it includes significant residential developments (such as the China Bar site) that have not been constructed.

Areas designated for Substantial Change (RGZ) and Natural Change (GRZ) maintained a relatively stable pace of growth across both periods, with only modest changes in both absolute and relative terms.

Figure 5: Approved dwellings by Activity Centres, per annum and share, pre- and post-strategy



Source: SGS Economics and Planning (2025), using City of Whitehorse (2025), Planning permit approvals for dwellings 2009 to 2024.

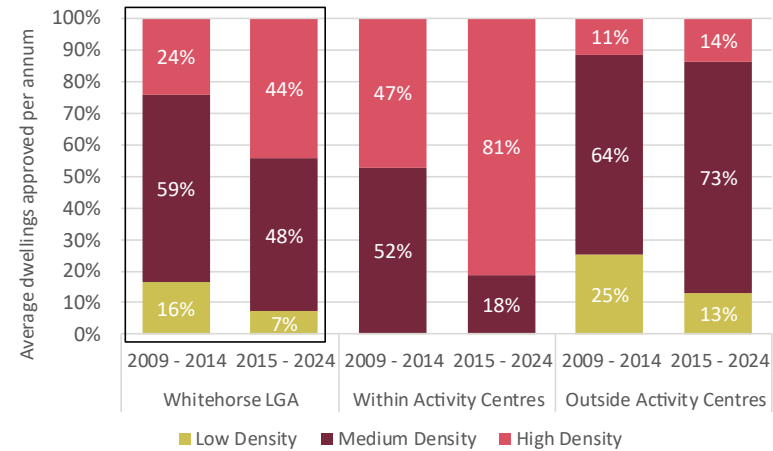
Dwelling approvals also suggest that the profile of housing in the municipality has been diversifying in line with the Housing Strategy’s ambitions. Within activity centres, this change is characterised by an increase in approvals for high density development (apartments of three or more storeys). In areas beyond activity centres, there has been a shift away from low density dwellings (separate, detached dwellings) towards medium density housing (units, townhouses to 3 storeys and apartments to two storeys).

Across all of Whitehorse, average annual dwelling approvals pre- and post-Strategy showed a decline in low density dwellings from 207 to 114, a moderate decrease in medium density dwellings (749 to 738), and a substantial increase in high density dwelling approvals (303 to 686).

The rapid increase in the number of high-density dwellings approved is reflected in a corresponding increase in the *proportion* of approved dwellings, rising from 24% to 44% of all permitted dwellings. This is largely related to approved permits within activity centres. In these centres, high density approvals rose from 47% to 81% of all dwellings permitted over the two periods (Figure 6).

There was a concurrent decline in the share of approvals for medium density housing across the municipality despite increases in total terms. However, the share of medium density approvals outside of activity centres increased from 64% to 73%.

Figure 6: Approved dwellings by density, per annum total and share, 2009 to 2014 and 2015 to 2024



Source: SGS Economics and Planning (2025), using City of Whitehorse (2025), Planning permit approvals for dwellings 2009 to 2024.

Constructed dwellings

Although shifts in planning approvals are evidence of a positive market response to Council’s policy aspiration, approvals take some time to translate into completed dwellings, and some permits may never be constructed. Analysis of ABS census data provides insights into the number of dwellings that have been built.

At the municipal level, the Census data shows that in the period following the adoption of the Housing Strategy (and the associated planning scheme changes) the pace of housing growth exceeded the official State Government *Victoria in the Future* projections from 2012 (Figure 7). At the most recent Census in 2021, the total number of

dwellings in the City of Whitehorse exceeded those projections by 6,124 with a total of 72,310 dwellings.

Between 2014 and 2023, the *Victoria in Future* projections have been updated 3 times – in 2016, 2019 and 2023. Each update has resulted in an upward revision of the expected number of dwellings in the City of Whitehorse, with the VIF 2023 forecasting a continuation of the 2016 to 2021 growth trajectory. However, analysis of building permit data since 2021 (blue dotted line) points to a slight shift in the growth trajectory, hinting at a possible slowdown in growth in more recent years.

The market conditions for housing delivery have deteriorated considerably in the years following the COVID pandemic. The feasibility of housing projects has been impacted by a combination of factors: significant increases in building costs, higher interest rates, fewer foreign investors and changes to taxes and charges.² As a result of these changes projects that might have been feasible pre-COVID may no longer ‘stack up’.

While current market conditions are challenging, they also reflect the ‘normal’ progress of housing market cycles where conditions oscillate over the medium to longer term. Some commentators have suggested a there could be an improvement in the market conditions for apartments in 2026.³

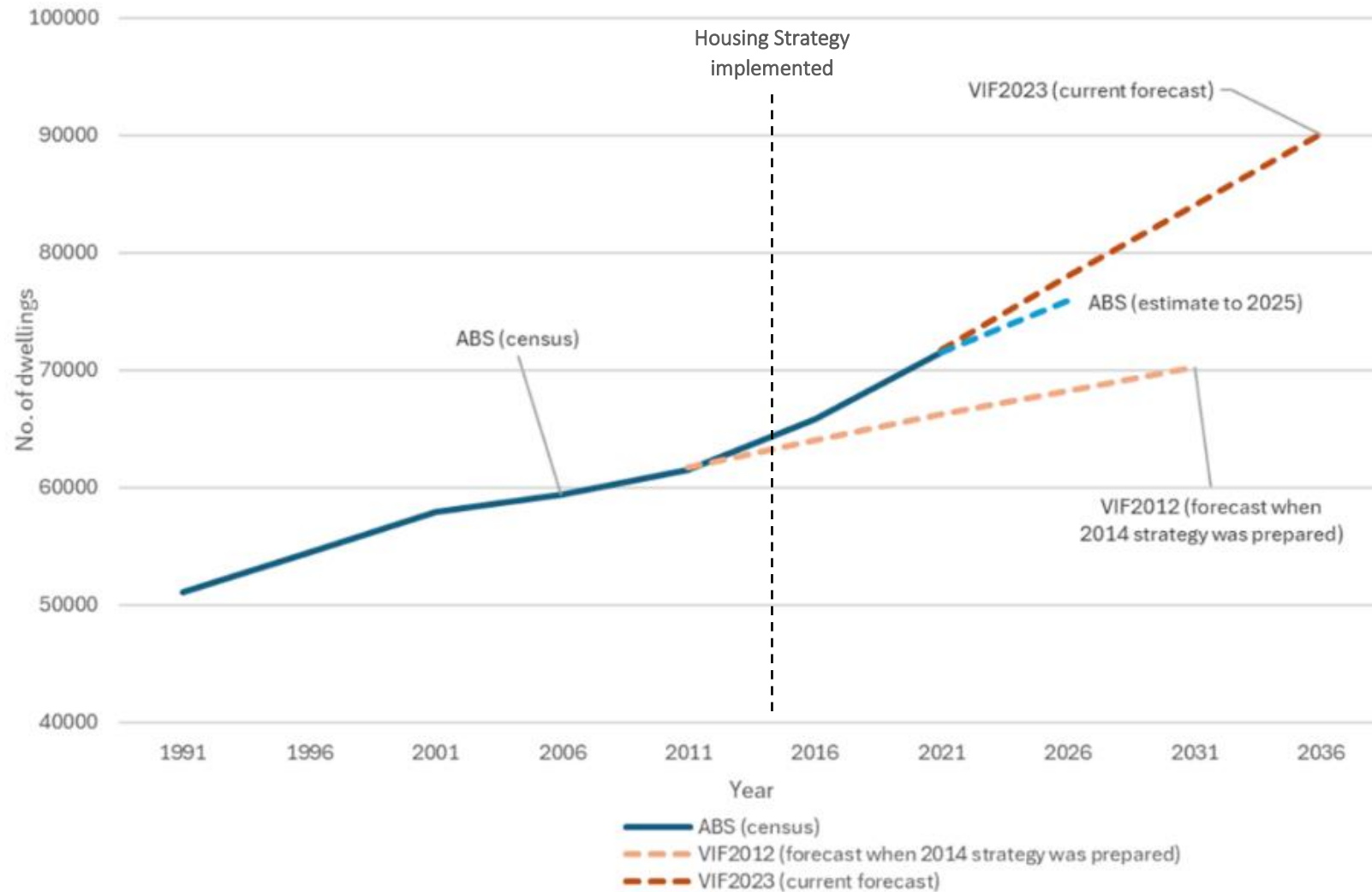


Source: Whitehorse City Council

² These matters are explored in CKC (2025) *Housing Supply Market Advice* (prepared for Whitehorse City Council).

³ CKC (2025) *Melbourne apartment market to ‘accelerate from next year’* (<https://charterkc.com.au/melbourne-apartment-market-to-accelerate-from-next-year/>)

Figure 7: Total dwellings, City of Whitehorse, 1991 to 2036



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (multiple years), Total dwellings

Housing affordability and need for rental assistance

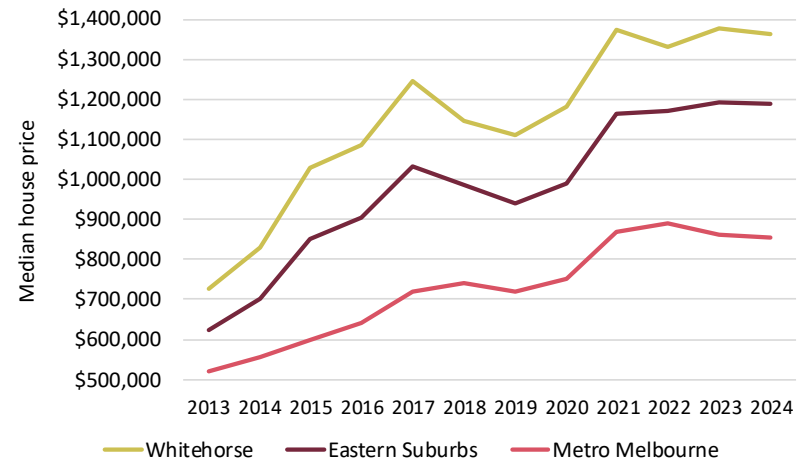
While the discussion above points to an alignment between housing trends and the ambitions of the Housing Strategy, trends in housing affordability tell a different story.

Since 2014 house prices along with rents have both continued to rise. House prices across Whitehorse have been more volatile than the metropolitan average. Median house prices surged 69% between 2013 and 2017 (compared with 38% across Greater Melbourne), fell 12% by 2019, then rose 24%, compared to steadier metro trends as shown in Figure 8.

Since COVID-19, rents in Whitehorse have risen sharply, consistent with metropolitan trends, leading to a significant decline in rental affordability (Figure 9). Median rents have continued to remain above the metropolitan average.

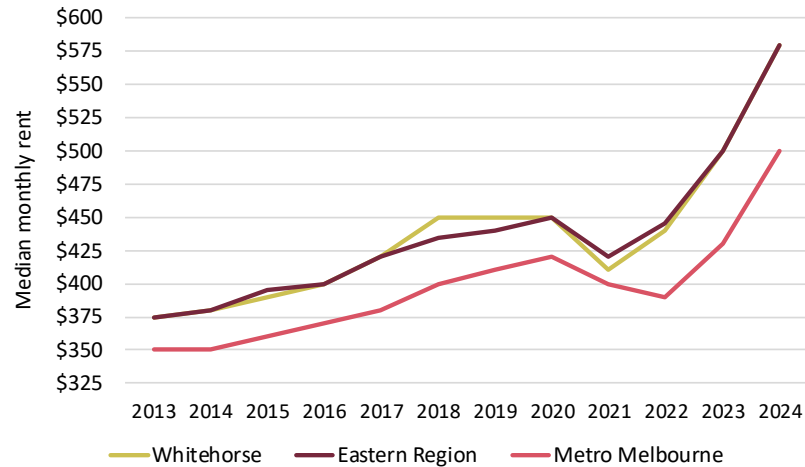
Rising rents have led to a growing number of households experiencing rental stress and requiring housing assistance at a rate exceeding population growth. In 2021 an estimated 8,500 households in Whitehorse were in need of some form of housing assistance to avoid rental stress, representing 12.5% of all households (**Table 2**). By 2036, need is forecast to increase by a further 2,900 households to a total of 11,400. This figure may be conservative given underreporting of homelessness in the ABS Census.

Figure 8: Median house prices, 2013 to 2024



Source: Department of Transport and Planning (2025), <https://www.land.vic.gov.au/valuations/resources-and-reports/property-sales-statistics>. Eastern suburbs include Knox, Manningham, Maroondah, Monash, Whitehorse, and Yarra Ranges.

Figure 9: Median rents, Whitehorse and Metropolitan Melbourne, 2013 to 2024



Source: Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/rental-report>

While demand is increasing, the supply of social housing (comprising both State owned (public) and Community Housing Provider owned housing as reported by ABS) in Whitehorse has declined in both absolute and relative terms. Between the 2016 and 2021 Census periods, there was a net loss of 73 public and community housing dwellings, noting that more recent social housing developments are not captured in this data.

Shifts in prices and rents does not imply that the Housing Strategy has been ineffective. There has been a shift in housing supply towards smaller and more diverse dwellings (as suggested in Figure 6 above) which are typically sold and let at more affordable prices. Without this shift, affordability in Whitehorse may have worsened even further.

Table 2: Affordable housing demand by income group, City of Whitehorse, 2021 to 2036

	Total affordable housing demand (2021)	Total affordable housing demand (2036)	Total change
Very low income	5,300	6,500	1,200
Low income	2,100	3,100	1,000
Moderate income	1,100	1,800	700
Total SAH* needs households	8,500	11,400	2,900
%age of total households	12.5%	13.6%	1.1%

Source: SGS Economics and Planning (2024); Victoria in Future (2023), Population and household forecasts to 2036. *SAH refers to social and affordable housing

Table 3: Total public and community housing, City of Whitehorse, 2011, 2016 and 2021

Social housing types	2011	2021	Change 2011-21	% Change 2011-21
Public housing	1,128	1,062	-66	-6%
Community housing	358	348	-10	-3%
Total*	1,488	1,415	-73	-5%

Source: ABS Census (2011, 2021) * Totals do not add due to random adjustments by the ABS for confidentiality.

5. Planning as a barrier to housing supply? A shifting in the housing policy landscape

While the period from 2014 to 2023 was characterised by gradual changes in the broad policy landscape in Victoria, the period since 2023 can be characterised as a period of more dramatic change. The release of the Victoria’s Housing Statement (*Victoria’s Housing Statement, The Decade Ahead – 2024 -2034*) in September 2023 foreshadowed initiatives aimed at “reforming Victoria’s planning system to boost housing supply in every corner of the state.” These included:

- New facilitated approval streams for significant residential development provided through the Development Facilitation Program.
- New planning controls around activity centres.
- New and more permissive provisions for second dwellings.
- Increased use of deemed to comply provisions.
- Legislative reform to implement the Red Tape Commissioner’s recommendations regarding the planning system.

The subsequent *Plan for Victoria* (the Plan), released in February 2025, has “Housing for all Victorians” as one of its five pillars. Its key action under this pillar was to identify new housing targets for “realisable development capacity” with Whitehorse’s target being 76,500 dwellings by 2051; representing capacity equivalent to the existing number of dwellings (at 76,000 in 2025).

The Plan’s discussion of activity centres is consistent with those previously identified in Whitehorse, but it considers these centres primarily in the context of their role as centres for housing supply. It identifies ten priority precincts, which include Whitehorse’s two Suburban Rail Loop Precincts. The Plan also includes a list of activity centres for which the State Government will take the lead for planning, which in Whitehorse includes “Blackburn station, Nunawading Station, and Mitcham Station.”



These documents appear to reflect a broader view that planning is a significant barrier to housing supply and that more permissive controls are required to increase housing supply and, in turn, improve housing affordability. This perspective has been the subject of debate, with a key critique being that a more permissive development context reduces the ability for local councils to direct housing growth to preferred locations and pro-actively plan for the required supporting infrastructure. It is also apparent that the focus on increasing housing supply has meant previous planning priorities – neighbourhood character, urban tree canopy cover, 20-minute neighbourhoods, and public participation – have been reduced in importance.

Although the guidance from the State Government on the preparation of housing strategies has not yet formally changed, the official Practice Notes on planning for housing will almost certainly be updated to reduce or remove the role of neighbourhood character assessment in the development of local government housing strategies.

These changes are already apparent in the introduction of the new higher-growth Housing Choice and Transport Zone, the increased standardisation of planning provisions relating to housing, and the introduction of various special fast-tracked assessment pathways for particular types of planning permit applications.

The State Government’s reforms have been complex and have rolled out in multiple successive waves. However, they can be summarised as generally making the provisions more permissive, and constraining both the decision-making powers of local government, and the opportunities for input by the local community (see text box). These changes have included the removal of much of the local customisation of residential zones that was central to the implementation of the Housing Strategy.



Source: Whitehorse City Council

Since its Housing Statement in 2023, the Victorian State Government has gazetted a series of changes to housing provisions (See Figure 10 for an example). These have dramatically altered the approach to planning for housing, in that:

- **They considerably narrow the scope of relevant considerations when assessing housing.** The changes to residential development provisions, for example, drastically narrow the regard that can be had to local policy, site context, and neighbourhood character when making decisions.
- **They reduce local customisation.** This is partly a result of the abovementioned narrowing of discretion, but the removal of localised schedules to zones also reduces the extent to which quantitative development standards can be altered to reflect local circumstances.
- **They reduce objector notice and review rights.** The increased use of deemed to comply provisions, and broadening of notice and review provisions more generally, considerably reduced the scope for third party involvement in the system, especially at the appeal stage.
- **They make development standards more permissive.** The revised residential standards include envelopes allowing higher buildings close to boundaries, for example, and the Housing Choice and Transport Zone, when applied in Whitehorse, will allow higher built forms than previously permissible.
- **They shift decision-making power to the Minister.** While the overwhelming majority of decisions on residential development proposals are still made by local government – albeit within constrained parameters as noted above – some of the pathways for significant development have been made by the Minister for Planning as the responsible authority.

Other special tools used by Whitehorse, such as the Significant Landscape Overlays, remain in place. The future of Significant Landscape Overlay 9 (SLO9) is currently uncertain given its interim status, although other overlays are permanent. However, the increased codification and permissiveness in the standard statewide planning provisions may lead to conflict between the expectations raised by the State provisions compared to those of Whitehorse.

At the same time, outcomes that previously featured strongly as a shared priority for both local and State Government – including protection of character and urban forest – are now subordinate to housing supply.

Figure 10: NRZ Schedule 1 – Bush Environment pre- (Left) and post- (Right) amendment VC255

Requirements of Clause 54 and Clause 55		
	Standard	Requirement
Minimum street setback	A3 and B6	None specified
Site coverage	A5 and B8	Maximum 40%
Permeability	A6 and B9	Minimum 40%
Landscaping	B13	Provision of at least two canopy trees per dwelling that have the potential of reaching a minimum mature height of 12 metres. At least one of those trees should be in the secluded private open space of the dwelling. The species of canopy trees should be native, preferably indigenous.
Side and rear setbacks	A10 and B17	A new building not within 200mm of a boundary should be set back from side and rear boundaries 1.2 metres, plus 0.3 metres for every height over 3.6 metres up to 6.9 metres, plus 1 metre for every metre over 6.9 metres.
Walls on boundaries	A11 and B18	No walls to be constructed on boundaries.
Private open space	A17	A dwelling should have private open space consisting of an area of 80 square metres or 20 per cent of the area of the lot, whichever is the lesser, but not less than 40 square metres. At least one part of the private open space should consist of secluded private open space with a minimum area of 35 square metres and a minimum dimension of 5 metres and convenient access from a living room. It cannot include a balcony or roof top terrace.

Requirements of Clause 54 and Clause 55		
	Standard	Requirement
Minimum street setback	A2-1	None specified
	B2-1	None specified
Site coverage	A2-5	None specified
	B2-5	None specified
Private open space	A3-2	None specified
	B3-5	None specified
Front fence height	A2-7 and B2-8	A front fence within 3 metres of a street should not exceed 1 metre in 'other streets'. None specified for streets in Road Zone Categories 1 and 2.

WHITEHORSE PLANNING SCHEME		
	Standard	Requirement
	B28	A dwelling or residential building should have private open space consisting of an area of 40 square metres, with one part of the private open space at the side or rear of the dwelling or residential building within a minimum area of 35 square metres, a minimum dimension of 5 metres and convenient access from a living room. It cannot include a balcony or roof top terrace.

6. A new generation of housing strategy, with new challenges

The Housing Strategy was a response to the planning policy settings and growth challenges of the time. This Housing Strategy, as implemented through the Whitehorse Planning Scheme, appears to have performed well: housing supply in Whitehorse between 2011 and 2021 exceeded official growth forecasts, and the location and type of housing growth aligned with Council's policy aspirations. Although Council's approach has given considerable weight to neighbourhood character and landscape qualities, this review suggests that this has not been detrimental to housing supply.

Against this background it is notable that the State Government's recent focus on increasing housing supply via liberalised and streamlined planning settings represents a very different approach to that of the Housing Strategy. The State policy agenda is seeking to increase development capacity throughout much of Melbourne's established areas through new zones and revised development provisions. The potential risks or disbenefits of this approach – more dispersed housing growth, impacts on character, and on canopy tree cover – are increasingly viewed as secondary considerations by State Government.

Challenges for Whitehorse's new housing strategy

Developing a new housing strategy in this new context presents clear challenges for Council.

Housing affordability remains a pressing issue, consistent with trends across the state. The State Government's focus on increasing supply is

one response to this issue, and many of the State Government's reforms will flow through to Whitehorse's planning framework through the standard statewide provisions. Assuming the resulting increases in housing capacity do not significantly reduce housing costs, Whitehorse will be left with a similar challenge to that it faced in 2014: how to make significant inroads into housing affordability at a local level when this is a national and even international challenge.

At the same time, this environment will constrain Council's ability to act upon the other local priorities with regards to housing. There have already been changes that reduce the level of protection for tree canopy and landscape outcomes under the standard statewide residential development provisions. Whitehorse's Significant Landscape Overlays provide some measure of protection from the impacts of these changes, but it is unclear how they will operate alongside more permissive codified residential development provisions. The future status of SLO9 is currently unknown given its temporary status. If efforts to make it permanent are unsuccessful, this could challenge Council's ability to maintain urban tree canopy even as the risks to human health of extreme weather events make these protections even more important.

More generally, the new housing strategy will need to be developed with an awareness of the State Government's narrowing focus on capacity and supply at the expense of other outcomes including character, contextual response, heritage, landscape and environmental outcomes (such as habitat and urban cooling). Implementation actions that involve new character-based controls, whether through policy or

provisions such as the Neighbourhood Character Overlay, are likely to face high barriers in terms of their strategic justification.

The State Government's approach is likely to encourage more growth away from the centres identified in the current Housing Strategy. If this does occur it may increase the challenge of providing infrastructure and community facilities for these new residents.

In preparing the new strategy, Council needs to respond to the State Government's current priorities and work within the constraints that they set regarding the operation of planning provisions. At the moment these are tightly constrained.

How can Council respond?

Despite these challenges, there remain areas that Council can influence.

Council still has the opportunity to outline a clear vision for Whitehorse in the Municipal Planning Strategy. This section at the start of the planning scheme is intended to outline the overall strategic direction for the municipality. A strong vision of desired outcomes can serve to anchor subsequent planning changes.

There is still the potential for councils to use additional overlays to identify and protect areas with special qualities, including matters such as character and landscape attributes. While as mentioned it is likely that there will be challenges in applying new controls of this type in the immediate future – and as mentioned some of Council's existing overlays may be questioned – Council's previous strategic work has provided a strong basis for such protections.

There is also a strong role for advocacy by Whitehorse, other councils, and the community more generally, for a more expansive and nuanced approach to planning. While the State Government's directions appear

to be moving forward unabated, the conception of other planning objectives as a barrier to housing supply should be challenged.

The performance of the Housing Strategy over the last decade suggests it is too simplistic to assume that these outcomes must be traded against each other. There is every reason to believe that further increases in capacity can be achieved through improvement of planning tools without sacrificing some of the key objectives of the earlier Housing Strategy, such as liveability.

In developing a new housing strategy Council should not become fixated on the limitation of the current policy environment, which may be subject to further shifts and changes once the impacts of the reforms become apparent 'on the ground'. Rather, it should continue to identify a clear vision for the preferred housing outcomes in the municipality and develop the evidence-base for benefits of pursuing this vision in response to the directives of recent state policy.



Source: Whitehorse City Council

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