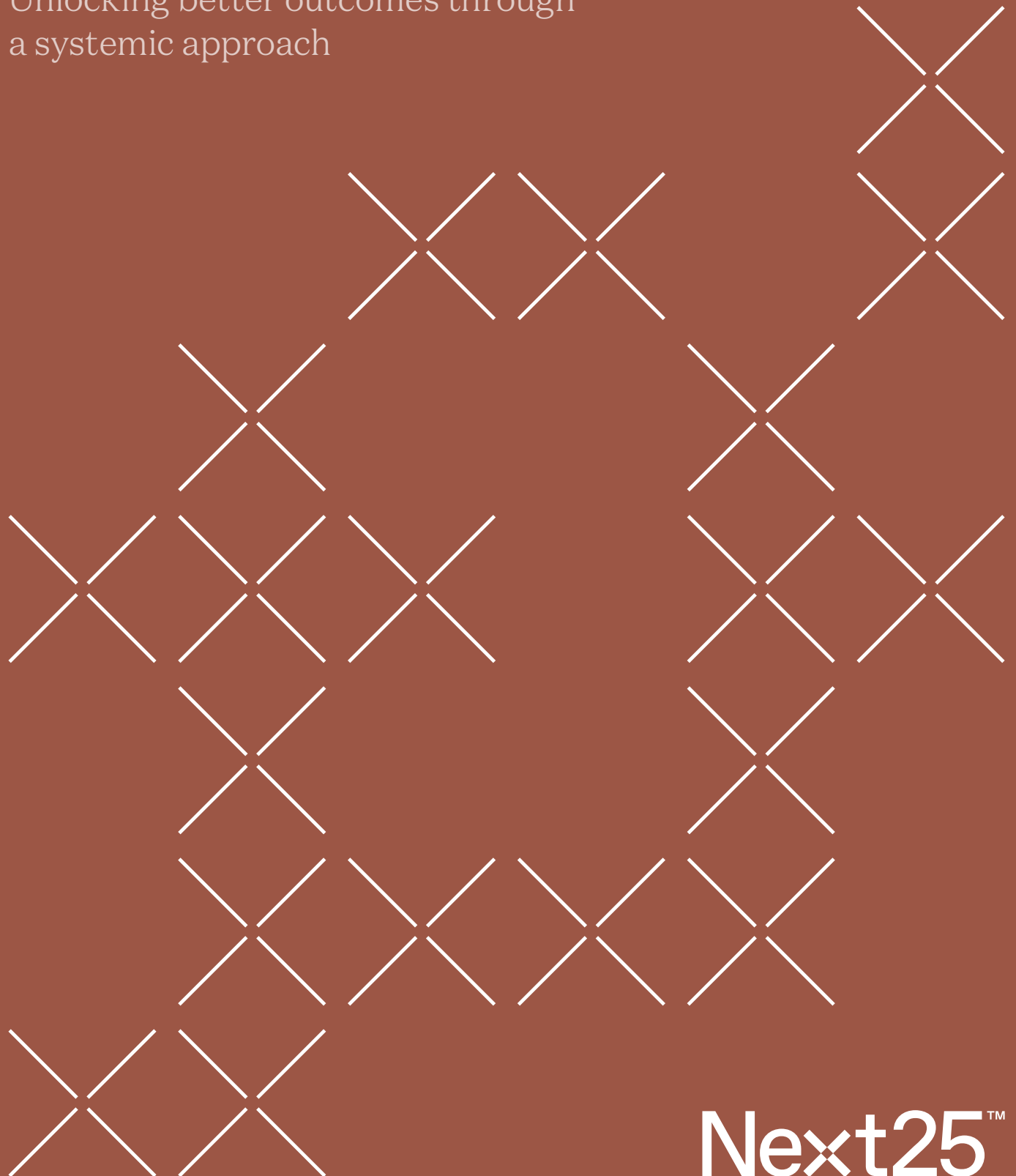


# The Role of Constructive Discussion in Sydney's Housing System:

Unlocking better outcomes through a systemic approach



**Next25™**

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## Acknowledgement of Country

Next25 acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

For more information see [next25.org.au/constructive-discussion](https://next25.org.au/constructive-discussion).

If you have any questions or comments about this research, please email Next25 CEO Chloë Spackman, [chloe@next25.org.au](mailto:chloe@next25.org.au).

# 1. Constructive Discussion is essential for creating the future Australia wants

Our ability to discuss contested issues is key to creating the future Australia wants. However, research by independent think-and-do tank Next25 shows that Australia struggles to talk constructively about national issues. Opposing perspectives and deepening political divides are stifling our ability to work toward common goals and overcome complex challenges. But it doesn't have to be this way. We can move the needle on Australia's biggest issues by improving the way we talk about them.

For over a decade, Next25 has been committed to ensuring that Australia has what it takes to make the future its people want. In 2021, a nationally representative social research study and discussions with over 50 leaders and decision-makers led Next25 to a critical conclusion: that unlocking our ability to constructively discuss complex and contested national issues is a key lever to improve Australia's performance towards a flourishing future.

Along with other research and engagement Next25 has undertaken to further explore this lever, Next25 and a team of transdisciplinary researchers from the UTS TD School and the Institute for Sustainable Futures have been collaborating on the issue of Constructive Discussion in Australia and recently took a closer look at Sydney's housing system through the lens of Constructive Discussion, identifying core issues and uncovering opportunities for improvement. One of those papers, [Constructive Discussion and City-Making: discursive dynamics and opportunities to influence housing outcomes in Sydney, Australia](#) forms the basis of this report, with links to the full research and accompanying webinar provided in the column to the right.

The research conducted by Next25 and UTS demonstrates the potential for Constructive Discussion to transform how our cities and societies operate. Potential Constructive Discussion frameworks (as explored in both the research paper that provides the basis for this report and another collaborative paper with UTS TD School: "[Constructive Discussion: Conceptualising a Framework for Productive Communication Across Personal, Conversational, Institutional and Cultural Spheres](#)") offer practical tools for tackling complex issues like Sydney's housing crisis by fostering inclusive, productive dialogues among diverse stakeholders. By creating structured spaces for these discussions, Constructive Discussion helps clarify shared goals and manage conflicts, ensuring that housing development decisions balance economic growth with community well-being.

## More information



[Watch the Webinar: Constructive Discussion and the Housing Challenge](#)

["Constructive Discussion: Conceptualising a Framework for Productive Communication Across Personal, Conversational, Institutional and Cultural Spheres"](#) explores a range of relevant concepts that can be drawn upon to enable constructive discussion across four spheres: personal, conversational, institutional, and cultural.

["Constructive Discussion and City-Making: discursive dynamics and opportunities to influence housing outcomes in Sydney, Australia"](#) delves into the opportunities to influence housing outcomes in Sydney based on interviews with a cross-section of stakeholders in the Sydney housing ecosystem.

## 2. What is “Constructive Discussion”

Constructive Discussion has a ripple effect across all levels of society. The ability to engage in difficult conversations, listen to opposing views, and communicate empathetically is vital—not just for policymakers but for all people.

There is no one definition for Constructive Discussion. However, through Next25’s research, two working definitions have emerged:

1 The first definition emphasises pragmatism, describing “Constructive Discussion as **communication that is of useful and beneficial purpose, creating an environment where decision-making better reflects the shared view of the public interest with respect to the common good**”. This definition highlights the power of Constructive Discussion in effectively addressing societal challenges.

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2 The second definition focuses on exploration and reflexivity, framing it as “**a communicative activity and process where people have the space and opportunity to share perspectives and explore differences in a reflexive, productive manner.**” This perspective prioritises understanding and unpacking underlying values, beliefs, and norms over immediate decision-making.

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Our intention is that these complementary definitions allow us to be non-prescriptive, offering a useful springboard to explore what constructive discussion is and how it can be put into practice.

# 3. Sydney's housing system as a case study

The need to better manage cities has become urgent, and Sydney, as one of the world's least affordable cities for housing (Gurran et al., 2022), has become the centre of Australia's housing debate.

Over the past two decades, housing costs and homelessness have risen sharply, while housing affordability, homeownership rates among young people, and the government's provision of social housing have all declined (Morris, 2023; Kohler, 2023). By exploring how Constructive Discussion can improve housing outcomes in Sydney, this case study aims to identify opportunities for creating more resilient housing systems.

The research undertaken by Next25 and the UTS TD School seeks to answer two key questions:

- 1 To what extent can Constructive Discussion be used to explain the dynamics of governance and decision-making on the topic of housing in Sydney?
- 2 How might we design and test interventions in Sydney that can (i) provide opportunities for Constructive Discussion and (ii) make productive contributions to resolving Sydney's housing crises?

Research participants came from a variety of sectors, including business, government, media, academia, urban planning, politics, and community organisations. All participants were selected based on their connection to, and ability to influence, the Sydney housing system.

The research was designed using a small-scale, qualitative approach that allowed for in-depth and thoughtful interviews to unpack perspectives from diverse stakeholders.

For more details on the research methodology, refer to [Section 2.1 of the research paper](#).

# 4. Key findings: unpacking the issues

The research found that Constructive Discussion was a useful concept that sparked in-depth conversations about housing outcomes in Sydney. All participants agreed the current system is inadequate. Five key themes emerged, providing insights into why this might be the case and raising important questions about how housing is governed in Australia.

## Key findings:

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1. There is a lack of clear vision and social contract
2. Housing is treated as an asset class
3. Structural and process issues exist in the planning system
4. There are challenges in Australia's representative democracy
5. Media has an influence on housing perceptions

These themes are explored in further detail below.

## 4. Key findings: unpacking the issues

### 1. Purpose: Australia lacks a clear vision and social contract about housing

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Participants highlighted that housing discussions in Sydney, NSW, and Australia lack clear goals, leading to confusion about the government's role and how housing is managed. Key concerns raised by participants include:

- The current system is seen as focused on private land development, with little regard for long-term or public benefits.
- The fragmented structure of the government limits its ability to manage social issues and growing inequalities.
- The lack of social aspiration in housing is viewed as a result of historical neglect, not intentional planning.

“We need to go back to like the theory around what is government, really? In essence. And what role do they play? Because the world has shifted. And I don't know that politics have shifted, in the way they run themselves.”

– Research Participant, Public Service

### 2. Discourse: a policy discourse that treats housing as an asset class has emerged to fill the void

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Participants observed that without a clear social contract, housing in Australia is increasingly treated as an asset class focused on private wealth creation rather than well-being. Participants raised two major concerns about this approach:

1. It justifies the government's minimal role in providing social outcomes, such as safe housing or shelters.
2. It contributes to growing inequalities, with homeownership deepening the wealth divide in Australian society.

“That's the number one way that housing is portrayed in this state – it's all about wealth. You've either got it or you haven't; you know, it's all about haves and have nots. We need to put that to one side and start talking about the specific issues of housing, not housing as equals wealth, which is where we're totally at the moment.”

– Research Participant, Journalist

### 3. Issues of structures, tools, and institutional norms: poor housing outcomes are enabled by a lack of constructive discussion in the design and processes of the planning system

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Participants highlighted that poor housing outcomes are tied to a lack of Constructive Discussion within the planning system's design and processes. Issues pointed out by participants included:

- The formal planning system is seen as resistant to change and dominated by a focus on development over social goals.
- Local governments, while empowered to control development, aren't able to address larger-scale issues, like housing as a social right.
- State governments responsible for social housing are viewed as lacking clarity and accountability in delivering social outcomes.
- The planning system is seen as biased toward the privileged, with power imbalances leaving the most vulnerable without a voice.
- The prevalence of jargon and complexity often excludes the public from engaging in conversations about housing and the planning system.

“When we go back and think about affordable housing as a topic, the way we define it currently is very much embedded into the state and environmental planning policies... [it] talks about proportions of affordable housing that can be delivered and how you regulate it based on income brackets and things like that. And that's not the language every day person uses.”

– Research Participant, Public Service

### 4. Broader challenges in Australia's representative democracy resist change and reform

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Participants highlighted broader challenges in Australia's political system that create structural barriers to Constructive Discussion and hinder meaningful reform. Many noted that:

- Not all stakeholders in housing, particularly renters and marginalised groups, are adequately represented in decision-making forums.
- While new community groups like Sydney YIMBY are advocating for underrepresented voices, broader engagement with groups beyond homeowners is needed.
- The disparity in power allocated between levels of government creates a disconnect between universal goals and local management.
- Short-term political cycles are seen as a major obstacle, making it difficult to enable long-term housing reforms.
- Some politicians are seen as focusing more on maintaining power within their parties than on delivering socially beneficial housing outcomes.

“To create systemic change, which is what needs to happen, and is slowly starting to happen with the housing sector, you have to accept that you can't – you can't just operate at a micro level to make substantial change.”

– Research Participant, Private Sector



### 5. Social experiences and narratives: specific actors tend to reproduce the status quo

Participants pointed to the media's influence on the national housing debate and in shaping policy priorities. The media is widely viewed as having a harmful effect on public perceptions of housing, with participants saying that:

- The media is seen as fuelling certain behaviours in the property market that put pressure on the government to maintain its focus on housing as an asset.
- Irresponsible journalism contributes to housing market fluctuations and blurs the line between news and advertising.
- Housing is a frequent topic in the news, but discussions are not seen to be driving meaningful change.
- Coverage often lacks specialist voices, such as planners, engineers, or architects, which prevents a more nuanced and informed public dialogue about housing issues.

These five themes reflect the workings of the Sydney housing system, with planning and governance shaped by both government policies and land use systems. Figure 1 below shows how these five discursive themes impact the quality of discussion on housing and, in turn, its planning and governance. It highlights how changes in the system happen in non-linear ways, with the risk that old patterns are repeated instead of new approaches emerging.

For more detail on the themes identified in the interviews, refer to [Section 3.1.1 of the research paper](#).

“Now housing is in the news every day, it's a national topic, which is a great thing that everyone is talking about it, but I think we need more people to understand that in order to change it properly, you need the system to work effectively.”

– Research Participant,  
Public Service

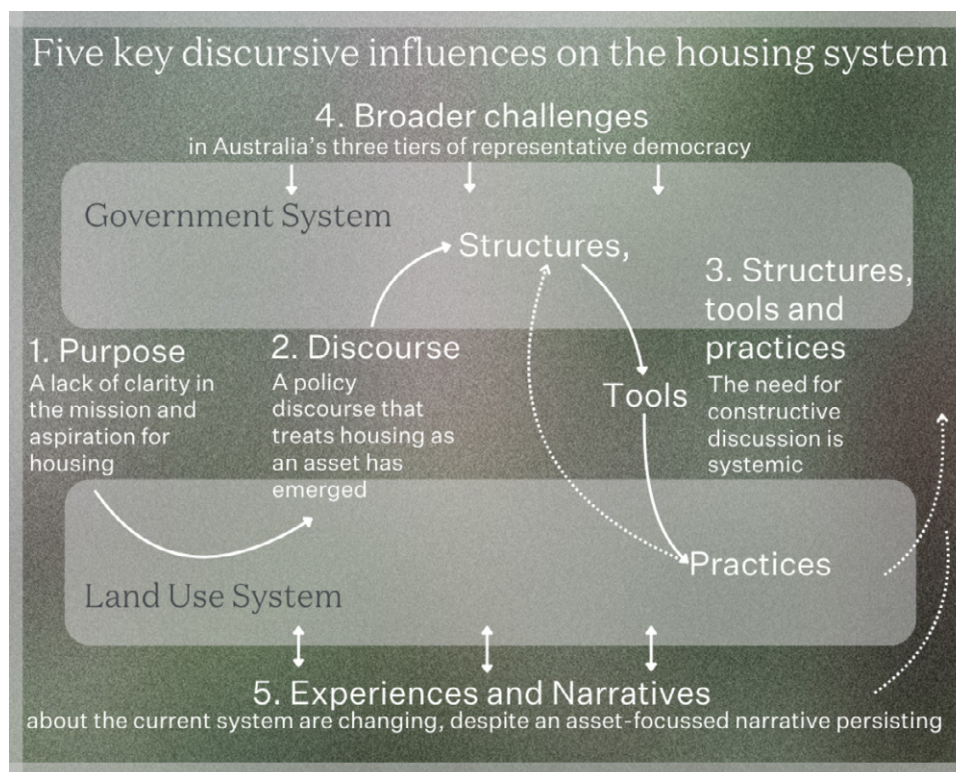


Figure 1:

A systems-level map highlighting the multiple interacting elements shaping our current housing system

Credit: Samuel Wearne et al, 2024

# 5. Key findings: potential opportunities for improvement

While discussions with participants painted a complex picture of the current system, they also generated a series of suggestions and aspirations for how things might be improved. The table below summarises the 26 ideas that emerged:

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## Clarify big picture issues and visions about the future

- Define the ‘common entitlement’ that every Australian citizen should be afforded (on housing and other issues)

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## Use specific narrative interventions and strategies

- Reframe ‘ageing’ as part of the housing solution and societal challenge
- Clarify fears and realities about density and development
- Support and maintain political pressure that represents younger generations and non-homeowners

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## Create forums for deliberative exchange, reflexivity, and learning

- Revitalise forums for debate and hold urban planning focused events
- Build a culture of urban literacy and cross-sector dialogue to support planning for the long term good
- Improve general education about urban planning and the planning system

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## Enhance state-government power in decision-making

- Let decision-making on hotly contested issues in state government be done by committees, not the government
- Encourage state government representatives to use infrastructure grants for housing/development in their electorate

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## Demonstrate normative dynamics and futures through specific sites and testcases

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- Focus on large-scale state-led and state-funded redevelopments to demonstrate the benefits of more equitable and dense urban futures that use integrated and holistic planning

## 5. Key findings: potential opportunities for improvement

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### Use specific and targeted actions to enhance representative politics and decision-making

- Utilise deliberative democracy and new forums (e.g., Citizen Juries, New Democracy Movement) to enable representative viewpoints in decision-making.
- Reform taxation, policy settings, and address short-term political cycles to reduce housing speculation and support long-term planning.
- Improve representation in the planning process by recording demographic data, empowering residents and renters, and simplifying the current system through representative panels.
- Address value capture from rezoning and promote inclusive co-design of large-scale planning and zoning through tools like design charettes.

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### Train individuals

- Provide training to media and urban planning experts to improve the depth of public discussion.
- Train politicians on how to shift into ministerial roles, and train public sector employees on conflict management, how to deal with stakeholders and how to think about efficiency in the system.

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### Focus on the media to shift its influence on the housing market

- Ensure the media (continues) to get a diversity of viewpoints to contribute to the public discourse.
- Address perverse incentives and performances that sees media outlets use news reporting to market and drive a culture of speculation in real estate.
- Promote an uptick in 'solutions-based journalism' in Australia.

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For the full list of potential interventions, refer to [Section 3.2 of the research paper](#).

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# 6. Implications and real-world applications

Next25 and UTS' work to better understand and improve Constructive Discussion has the potential to drive collaboration and help Australia overcome complex issues. The below discussion demonstrates how Constructive Discussion can have a positive impact at a policy, community and individual level.

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## On a policy level

Constructive Discussion can support progress and inclusivity. For example, the framework can inform new housing policies that prioritise affordability and sustainability, moving beyond the current paradigm that often treats housing as a commodity rather than a public good. By involving a diverse range of stakeholders in these discussions, policymakers can design interventions that address the root causes of housing inequality, such as restrictive zoning laws or the commodification of real estate.

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## On a community level

Constructive Discussion can empower local groups to take ownership of housing debates and advocate for their needs more effectively. For instance, community organisations that adopt the Constructive Discussion framework can engage in more meaningful dialogues with policymakers, developers, and other stakeholders, potentially influencing the direction of urban development projects. By fostering mutual understanding and collaboration, Constructive Discussion can help reduce the "us versus them" mentality that often characterises housing debates

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## At the individual level

the Constructive Discussion framework promotes behavioural shifts by encouraging people to engage in open, respectful dialogues about contentious issues like housing. It challenges individuals to move beyond entrenched positions and consider the broader societal implications of their personal housing preferences or investments. As more people engage in these constructive discussions, a cultural shift toward collective problem-solving and shared responsibility is likely to emerge, influencing behaviours in ways that promote long-term sustainability and equity in housing systems.

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# 7. What's Next?

Next25 is committed to ensuring Australia has what it takes to create the future its people want. This project and collaboration with UTS demonstrate the potential of a systemic approach to influencing housing policy and other complex and contested challenges Australia faces.

The broader implications of the Constructive Discussion framework extend beyond housing and urban development. At its core, Constructive Discussion promotes democratic innovation, aiming to rebuild trust in governance by creating more participatory and transparent processes. This research highlights that when Constructive Discussion is applied in areas such as housing, it not only addresses the specific issue at hand but also strengthens the overall democratic fabric. The framework's emphasis on collaboration, inclusivity, and purpose-driven dialogue challenges the adversarial and fragmented nature of current political and social debates, paving the way for more holistic solutions.

This research highlights that Constructive Discussion is a transformative tool capable of addressing one of Australia's most urgent challenges. Constructive Discussion empowers individuals, communities, and policymakers to move beyond entrenched positions, discover shared objectives, and co-create solutions that address the root causes of our housing challenges. By promoting a culture of shared responsibility and purposeful dialogue, this approach helps shift the focus from conflict to cooperation, creating a future that better serves the needs of all people in Australia.

In 2023, Next25's report, "**Contested Spaces: Australia, the Referendum, and Constructive Discussion**", investigated Australians' experiences of discussing another nationally contested issue—the Referendum on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. The report shares key barriers and enablers to constructive discussions and features four areas of guidance for improving the quality of our discussions.

Next25 also practices Constructive Discussion in our work to restore trust in government through our two initiatives, **Leadership** and **Improving Democracy: Transforming Parliament for Women**. These programs work with federal, state, and territory MPs to transform political systems by reconnecting parliamentarians to their values and harnessing their power, not only as individuals in the political system but also as individuals who can work collectively to improve the system for all.

In 2025, we have a new Research Fellow and Project Manager working jointly between Next25 and UTS to manage our collaboration on Constructive Discussion, conducting further research and engagement on this challenge, and creating, testing and implementing interventions to improve how we talk about housing and other complex and contested issues.

To stay updated on this work, subscribe to [Next25's newsletter](#) or follow us on [LinkedIn](#).

If you believe in the value of this approach, please consider supporting Next25 by donating to help drive the next phase of this essential work. If you would like to ask questions about donating and request further information, don't hesitate to contact our Director of Finance, Paula Steyer, at [paula@next25.org.au](mailto:paula@next25.org.au).

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# Think future. Act today.

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