

## Higher density development in Sydney: public perceptions and policy awareness

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**Abstract:** Australian cities are facing a number of challenges, including a significant growth in population, a growing housing affordability crisis, a greater concern for environmental issues (such as climate change), and shortfalls in transport and other urban infrastructure. In response to these challenges the promotion of a higher density built form has come to represent an urban planning orthodoxy promoted via metropolitan strategies across the country. Despite the dominance of the higher density ideal within policy rhetoric, its virtues remain the subject of significant debate. To date this debate has been played out in academic and policy circles, with limited recognition of the knowledge and perceptions of such policies held by the general public. Debate around public perceptions of higher density housing has been constrained within the not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) discourse which works to position public opposition to higher density housing as either an illegitimate and selfish form of localised protest or a valid example of urban citizenship and democracy. This paper takes a step back from these localised debates around the value of higher density housing to explore public opinions of higher density housing at the metropolitan scale, focusing on Sydney. Drawing on a survey administered across the Sydney metropolitan area this paper explores the extent to which the public is aware of policies at state and local levels which promote higher density development, the extent to which the public supports some of the underlying principles of higher density housing (such as sustainability, affordability and reduced urban sprawl) and the impact of higher density developments on their suburb.

### Introduction: urban policy and public opposition

Urban consolidation and increasing urban densities has become a central mantra of strategic planning over the past 30 years or so (Randolph, 2006; Forster, 2006). As a planning paradigm increasing densities has been promoted as one possible solution to a suite of urban challenges, including urban sprawl and Greenfield development, climate change, population growth and increase infrastructure costs. Nevertheless, these supposed benefits of increase urban density have been critiqued and challenged by academics, practitioners and the public at large (Ruming et al., 2012; Searle, 2010; Bunker et al., 2005). For example, Randolph and Troy (2008) question the extent to which higher density environment improve environmental sustainability. Further, Buys and Miller (2012) note that higher density housing is often not viewed as a long-term housing option, especially for families with children.

Despite a push for increased density within strategic planning policy and claims from some industry groups that Australian's have embraced medium and high density housing (Urbis, 2013), Australia remains dominated by separate houses, with higher density dwellings<sup>1</sup> accounting for only 23.5% of dwellings in 2011. A slightly higher rate is recorded for NSW with 29.5% in 2011, while across the Sydney Urban Centre/Locality (UCL) 40.6% of dwellings were of a higher density form – the largest proportion of any city across Australia<sup>2</sup> (ABS, 2012, cat. 2001.0). Between 2006 and 2011 the number of higher density dwellings increased by 16,280, while the proportion of dwellings remained relatively constant (40.7% in 2006) (ABS, 2007, cat. 2001.0).

The urban consolidation agenda is a central premise of metropolitan strategic plans covering all Australia's capital cities (Ruming et al., 2013). At the time fieldwork was conducted, the *Metropolitan Plan for Sydney 2036* (NSWDOP, 2010) was the current strategic planning document for Sydney. Under the *Metropolitan Plan* 770,000 new homes were to be developed to 2036, with at least 70% being located in existing suburbs, while 80% of all new homes would be within walking distance to existing or planned 'centres' (NSWDOP, 2010, p.6-7). Under the *Metropolitan Plan* subregional strategies were developed which clearly stated dwelling (as well as employment) targets.

With a change of State government following the March 2011 election a new round of planning was initiated with the development of the *Draft Metropolitan Strategy for Sydney to 2031* (NSWDoPI, 2013a) and broader planning system reform (NSWDoPI, 2013b). Despite some efforts to distance current planning reforms and strategic planning policy from previous efforts, a number of important parallels remain. In terms of housing the *Draft Metropolitan Strategy* established an 'ambitious' target

<sup>1</sup> Defined by joining ABS categories of 'Semi-detached, row or terrace house, townhouse' and 'Semi-detached, row or terrace house, townhouse'

<sup>2</sup> Gold Coast SLA4: 37.5%; Melbourne UCL: 28.4%; Adelaide UCL: 24.3%; Brisbane UCL: 21.8%; Perth SUA: 21.5%; Newcastle UCL: 19.7%; Hobart SUA: 17.9% (ABS, 2012, cat. 2001.0).

of 'at least 545,000 new houses across Sydney by 2031'. (p.7). The *Draft Strategy* also mobilises dwelling targets via subregional strategies and, for the first time, sets set minimum housing targets for 2021. Despite initial statements that the proportion of new development contains in existing urban areas would be reduced to around 50% (Nicholls and Moore, SMH, 8/2/2011), the *Discussion* paper framing the *Draft Strategy* claims "Most new housing still needs to be in existing urban areas to contain the spread of the city's urban footprint..." (NSWDoPI, 2012a, p.13)

The use of dwelling (and by extension density) targets have become a central aspect of metropolitan planning in Sydney. The use of targets as strategic planning tools has received considerable debate within academic planning circles. In their submission to the *Draft Metropolitan Strategy for Sydney to 2031*, Pinnegar and Randolph (2013) frame targets as 'the antithesis of what citywide, city shaping strategic framework[s] [should] look like' (p. 3). Despite seeking a provide certainty (to both the market and local communities), according to Searle and Bunker (2010), the use of targets are overly prescriptive strategic planning tools which potentially constrain future development in defined locations. While viewed as a central policy lever, little research exists to test the extent to which such targets are acknowledged or supported by the broader public.

New high density development has often acted as a trigger for local concern and the formation of community oppositions groups (Searle, 2007). Cook et al. (2013, p. 130) claim "that more compact forms has given rise to a new, distinctly suburban contestation over strategic planning goals". Often identified as 'not-in-my-backyard' (NIMBY) groups, such local opposition seeks to resist increased density on the basis that new development will increase demand on local infrastructure, increase traffic and reduce car parking, potentially reduce house prices, introduce new groups into established communities and change the reputation of an area (Dovey et al., 2009; Ruming et al., 2012). The scale of community resistance is often directly proportional to the size of development (Cook et al., 2012). Such resistance has also been opposed on the basis of planning processes, where residents (and some councils) resist a planning process which is seen to remove or ignore local provisions and concerns, in favour of broad and unresponsive planning strategies and targets (Ruming, 2013). More nuanced analyses position local opposition as legitimate and valuable expressions of local and regional democracy which are essential in shaping the urban environment (Wolsink, 2006). Whether seen as the expression of unjustifiable self-interest or the legitimate expression of democracy, resident action groups often come to represent the 'face' of public debate over higher density construction, often in response to individual and very controversial developments.

Rather than responding to the extreme and high profile cases of local opposition to high density housing, the purpose of this paper is to explore the underlying opinions of higher density housing across Sydney. In particular this paper:

- Explores Sydney residents' opinion over the need and value of high density housing;
- Unpacks the level of policy knowledge surrounding higher density development (particularly dwelling targets);
- Traces resident opinions over the supposed benefits of higher density housing; and,
- In drawing these elements together, develops a typology of residents based on the policy knowledge and opinions of higher density housing at both metropolitan and suburb scales.

The findings of this paper not only add to understandings of community opinion and opposition to higher density housing, but also provide insights for metropolitan strategic planning and suggest ways in which community beliefs and perceptions might be better engaged in the planning process.

## Methods

This paper is based on a random online survey of Sydney residents undertake in October 2011. Addresses were purchased from a commercial database company. Invitation letters which directed residents to the online survey were sent to residents across Sydney. Addresses were selected via a random number generator. In total 10,754 surveys were administered<sup>3</sup>. In total 721 surveys were completed giving a response rate of 6.7%. Although the response rate was low, it was not unexpected given that the survey was administered a random fashion and not directly linked to any particular development or policy. The survey was divided into 4 sections: perceptions of higher density development across Sydney; higher density development in your suburb; community resistance to higher density development; and, demographic information. The remainder of the paper explores resident perception of higher density development and policy knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> The purchased database proved highly unreliable. 15,000 invitations were initially send out of which 4,246 were returned to sender, primary due to incomplete addresses, giving a total sample of 10,754.

### Higher density housing across Sydney

Resident perception of higher density development across Sydney was mixed, with almost equal proportions of residents supporting higher density development as those opposing it (Figure 1). Across the sample, 37.8% of residents surveyed felt as the current density of Sydney was too high, while 47.7% disagreed that the current density of Sydney was too low. In contrast, 38.8% of residents surveyed disagreed that Sydney’s density was too high and 28.1% agreed that the current density was too low. When it comes to perceptions over higher density housing, resident opinions and expectations are polarised. Similar divisions are observed when the sample residents were asked whether they supported higher density housing and whether they believed the density needed to increase. At one end of the spectrum there is a group of residents who support higher density housing (40.0%) and who believe the density of Sydney should be increased (44.9%). This is countered by residents who did not support higher density across Sydney (49.8%) and who disagreed that there was a need to increase the density of Sydney (46.5%). Across the sample, there was a slightly higher proportion of residents who opposed increased density than those who supported it. Both the level of opposition to higher density development and the divisive nature of opinion over the need for higher density development represent significant policy challenges for strategic planning and housing provision.

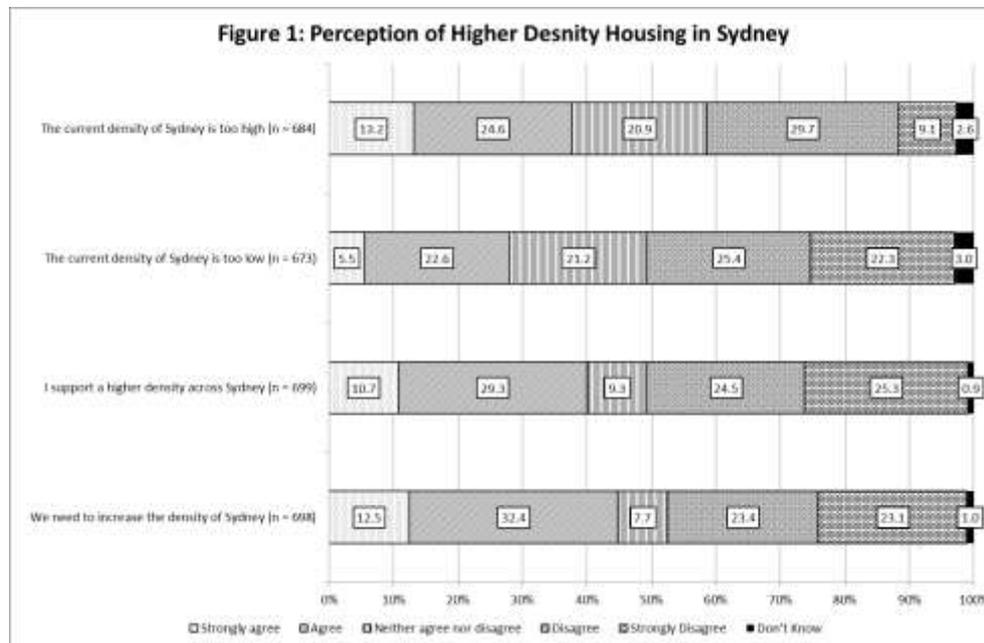


Figure 1: Perception of Higher Density Housing in Sydney

Although opinion over the level and need for higher density development was mixed, the survey revealed the fact that the majority of residents were unaware of the policy frameworks which were promoting higher density development (Figure 2). Of the residents surveyed, 40.1% of residents claimed to have some knowledge of state government policies promoting higher density development, while a similar proportion (39.4%) claim to be aware of similar policies operating at the local government level. The fact that less than half of residents were aware of policy frameworks promoting higher density development represents a challenge for urban policy. Increased promotion of strategic planning and housing/development policy represents one possible response to resident opposition to higher density housing. This challenge is most apparent when residents were asked about their knowledge of the *Metropolitan Plan for Sydney*. Less than a quarter of residents surveyed were aware of the *Metropolitan Plan* (23.9%). As the main strategic document directing the spatial growth of Sydney, the lack of public knowledge is a concern, particularly as a central spatial vision promoted by the *Metropolitan Plan* is one of consolidated higher density development around a set of identified centres and nodes. What becomes clear is the fact that the majority of residents surveyed are unaware whether they live in locations that have been targeted for increased density. Thus, in most cases, opposition or support of higher density development (as outlined in Figure 1) does not appear to rest on knowledge of policy frameworks that may or may not promote density in their neighbourhood. This finding supports research which suggests that the community only becomes involved in urban policy (be it plan creation or development opposition) at a very localised scale, where policy is played out on their ‘turf’ (Gibson, 2005).

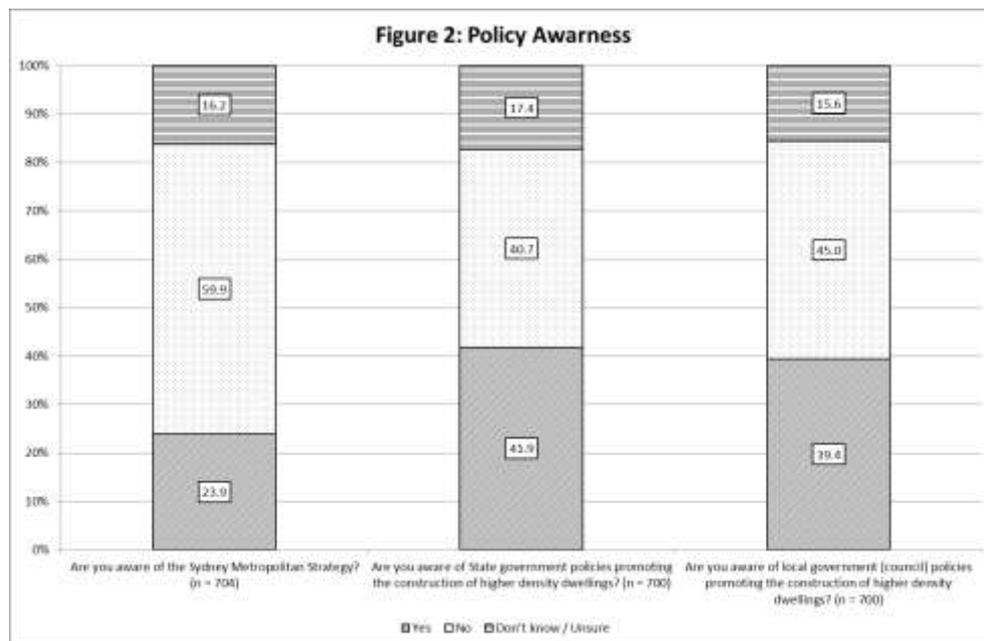


Figure 2: Policy Awareness

Although most residents were unaware of the *Metropolitan Plan*, the survey revealed a level of support for one of its central components – housing targets. While a number of authors have critiqued the use of dwelling targets as simplistic policy leavers which fail to recognise and respond to local conditions, planning frameworks and broader economic conditions (Pinnegar and Randolph, 2013; Searle and Bunker 2010), their presence remains a central aspect of strategic planning. In the case of Sydney dwelling targets are published at the sub-regional level, then allocated to individual local government areas. In short, the dwelling targets embedded with in metropolitan planning are operationalised by local planning instruments. At the metropolitan level 60.5% of residents supported the implementation dwelling targets (only 24.9% opposed metropolitan level targets). At the suburb scale support for targets was also high with 51.8% (33.2% opposed suburb level targets) (Figure 3). At this level, residents appear to support dwelling targets as a central component of metropolitan planning in Sydney as a tool for directing future development.

While residents appear to support the use of dwelling targets as a tool for directing development across Sydney, an important disjuncture is observed between the figures (the targets) used within strategic planning policy and those identified as appropriate by residents. When asked to identify the proportion of dwellings that should be constructed as higher density developments, the majority of residents identified levels well below targets outlined with strategic planning policy. The *Metropolitan Plan* identifies that 70% of new dwellings should be constructed in existing residential locations (NSWDoPI, 2010), while more recent strategic planning policy introduced by the current Coalition State Government have suggested an initial revised the target of around 50% (Nicholls and Moore, SMH, 8/2/2011). While it is recognised that not all development occurring in existing areas need be in the form of higher density development, in order to meet dwelling targets established by the state government, a significant proportion of this new development needs to increase dwelling density. Almost one-in-three (29.3%) residents surveyed indicated that the percentage of dwellings developed in the form of higher density housing should be less than 10%. Compared to the 70% target promoted under the *Metropolitan Plan*, only 8.9% of residents believe 70% or more of development should be in the form of higher density development. Support increases only slightly when compared to the initial conservative targets put forward by the current government, with only 17.9% of residents believing that 50% or more of new dwellings should be of higher density. This disjuncture is not surprising given the lack of policy knowledge discussed above. Resident support for higher density development targets appear to rest on the assumption that such targets *limit* rather than *promote* higher densities.

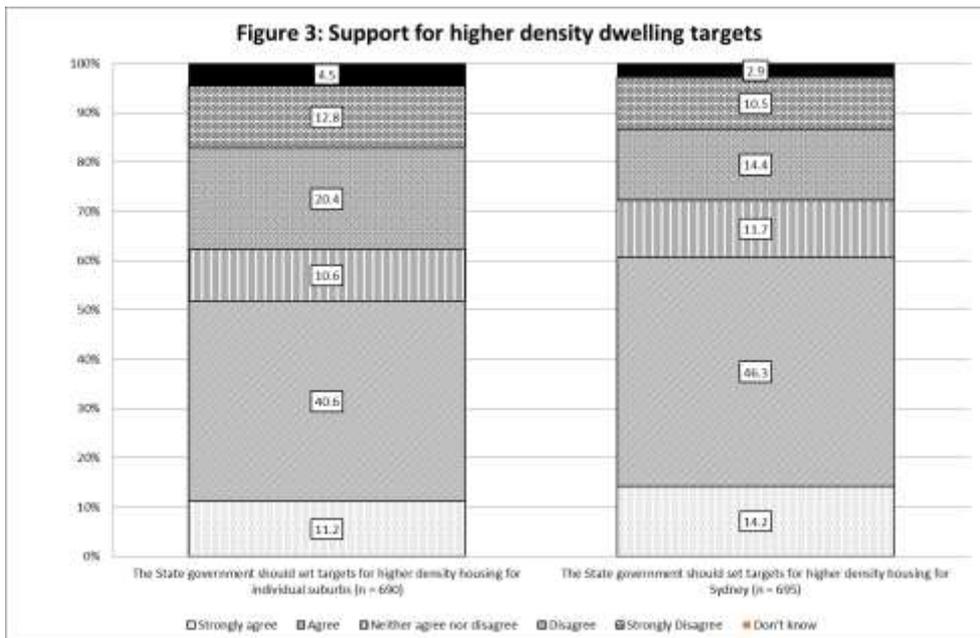


Figure 3: Support for higher density dwelling targets

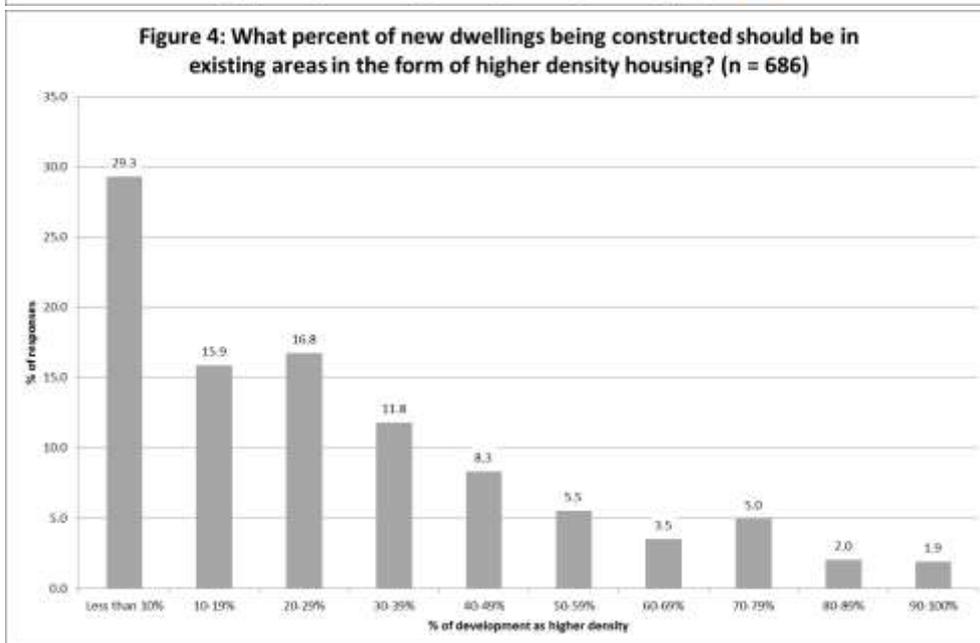
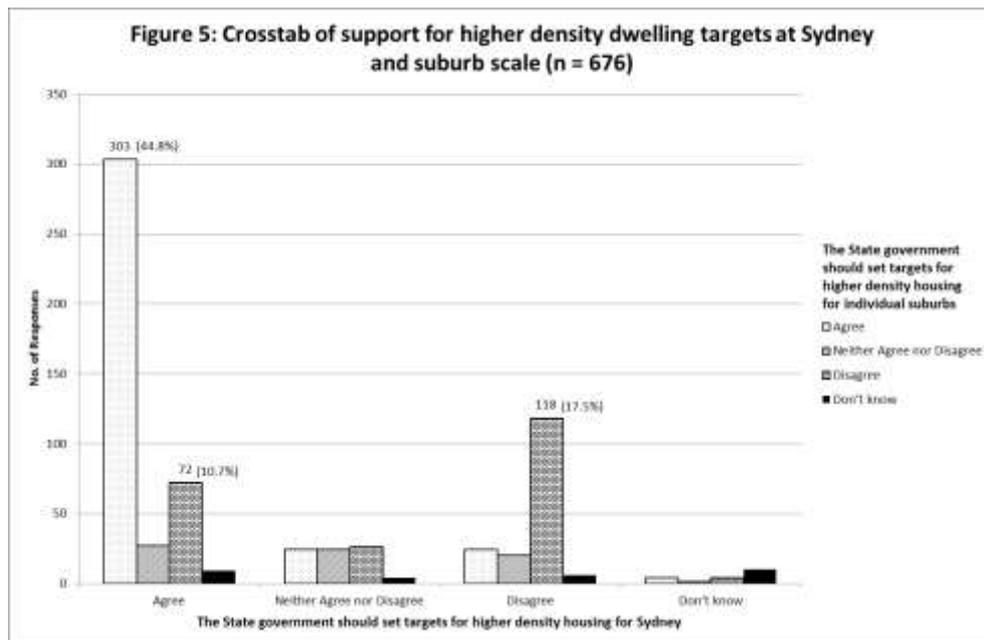


Figure 4: Percent of new dwellings that should be higher density

There is a strong correlation between support and opposition of higher density dwelling targets at metropolitan and suburb scales<sup>4</sup>. When examining the support or opposition for higher density dwelling targets across scales, three groupings of residents become apparent: residents who support higher density targets at both metropolitan and suburb levels (303 respondents, 44.8%), residents who oppose targets at both metropolitan and suburb levels (118 respondents, 17.5%) and residents who support metropolitan targets but oppose suburb level targets (72 responses, 10.7%) (Figure 5). In terms of policy knowledge, some differences are observed between these groups. Overall, residents who opposed targets at both the metropolitan and suburb scales claimed to be more aware of relevant policies at all scales compared to those supported targets at both scales (Table 1). For example, 50.0% of residents who opposed targets at both scales were aware of relevant state government policies compared 42.5% of residents who supported targets at both scales. The difference is even greater at the local scale – 47.5% of those oppose both sets of targets being aware of local council policies, compared to 36.9% of those who support targets at both scales. For each type of policy, residents who support metropolitan targets but oppose suburb level targets, sit between these positions. These findings suggest that residents who oppose targets for higher density developments are more engaged with and aware of policy frameworks than those who support the use of targets. It is also possible that this group has had more experience of localised higher density development. Nevertheless, support for targets does not, in itself, equate to support for high-density development.

<sup>4</sup> Pearson Correlation = 0.556, significant at 0.001 level [2-tailed]



**Figure 5: Relationship between support for metropolitan and suburban targets**

Important differences are also observed exploring the profiles residents in each group (Appendix 1). Residents who support targets at both metropolitan and suburb levels are more likely to support higher density development compared those who oppose the use of targets at both scales. For example, residents who support both sets of targets: are more likely to agree that we need to increase the density of Sydney (63.4% vs. 13.6%); support higher density across Sydney (58.1% vs. 12.7%); more likely to support higher density development in their suburb (45.9% vs. 6.8%); less likely to join a community groups opposing higher density developments (27.4% vs. 63.5%); less likely to suggest that higher density development decreases the value of surrounding properties (32.8% vs. 68.7%); and, more likely to support higher density targets (53.4% believe higher density housing should account for more than 30% of new development vs. 12.1%). These residents are also more likely to live in a flat (25.7% vs. 17.0%).

	Support Sydney / Support Suburb			
	n	Yes	No	Don't know
Aware of State government policies	299	127 (42.5%)	130 (43.5%)	42 (14.0%)
Aware of Metropolitan Strategy	300	73 (24.3%)	191 (63.6%)	36 (12.0%)
Aware of local government policies	298	110 (36.9%)	145 (48.7%)	43 (14.4%)
	Support Sydney / Oppose Suburb			
	n	Yes	No	Don't know
Aware of State government policies	71	34 (47.9%)	25 (35.2%)	12 (16.9%)
Aware of Metropolitan Strategy	72	20 (27.8%)	40 (55.6%)	12 (16.7%)
Aware of local government policies	72	31 (43.1%)	25 (34.7%)	16 (22.2%)
	Oppose Sydney / Oppose Suburb			
	n	Yes	No	Don't know
Aware of State government policies	118	59 (50%)	45 (38.1%)	14 (11.8%)
Aware of Metropolitan Strategy	118	34 (28.8%)	67 (56.8%)	17 (14.4%)
Aware of local government policies	118	56 (47.5%)	53 (44.9%)	9 (7.6%)

**Table 1: Support for targets and policy knowledge**

Beyond the relationship between support for targets at a metropolitan and suburban scale, the relationship between support for dwelling targets and resident support for higher density housing at different scales provides some important insights to residents' support and opposition to higher density development across Sydney. When comparing support for higher density targets at the metropolitan level and support for higher density development across Sydney, three main groups of residents are observed: *staunch opponents* (residents who oppose both higher density targets and higher density developments [140 responses, 20.4%]); *supporters* (residents who support both metropolitan level targets and increased density across Sydney [223 responses, 32.5%]); and those in between these extremes, *ambivalent opponents* (a relatively large proportion of residents [153 responses, 22.3%] support metropolitan level targets but oppose higher density developments) (Figure 6).

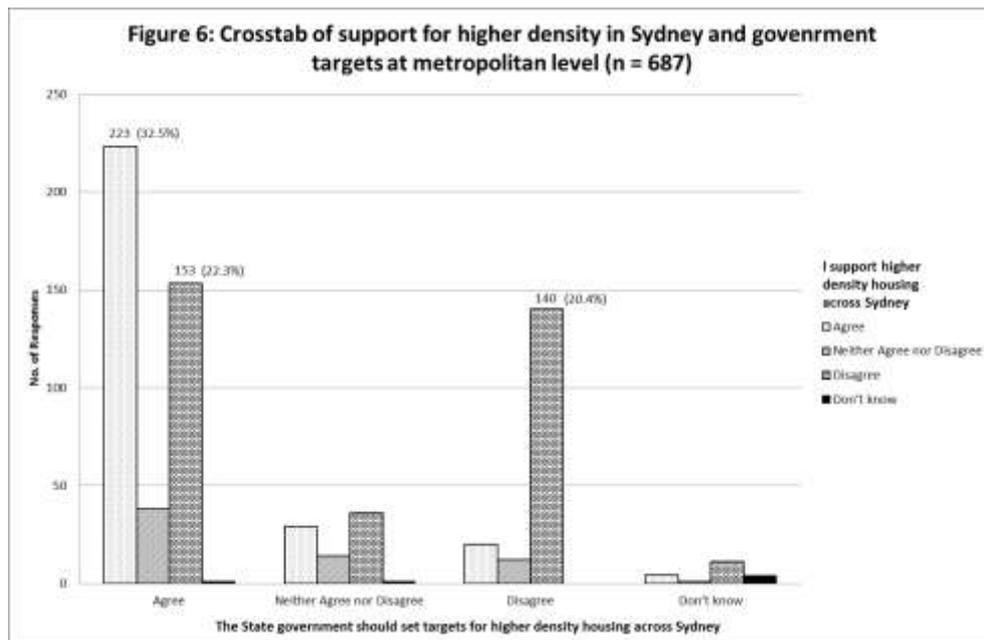


Figure 6: Relationship between support for higher housing and targets across Sydney

In terms of policy knowledge surrounding metropolitan planning and related development policy, *supporters* tended to have the greatest knowledge, especially at the higher levels of policy (state policies or the *Metropolitan Strategy*) (Table 2). In contrast, *staunch opponents* were more aware of local government policies directing higher density housing compared to resident who supported higher density. The position of these two groups is relatively clear – support targets as means providing higher density dwellings or oppose targets as tools for providing higher density housing. The profiles of *supporters* and *staunch opponents* (Appendix 2) highlight a series of important difference between these groups. Compared to *supporters*, *staunch opponents* were much less likely to agree that we need to increase the density of Sydney (2.9% vs. 96.4%); much more likely to join a local community group opposing higher density development (72.1% vs. 14.8%); more likely to suggest that higher density housing reduces the price of surrounding dwellings (65.2% vs. 24.5%); more likely to identify desired higher density dwelling targets of below 30% (89.1% vs. 28.0%); more likely to live in separate houses (60.7% vs. 49.3%); more likely to be aged over 55 years (64.7% vs 58.5%); and have a lower household income (35.2% vs 26.1% with household incomes of less than \$50,000 p.a. and 17.1% vs. 23.4% with household incomes of more than \$150,000 p.a.).

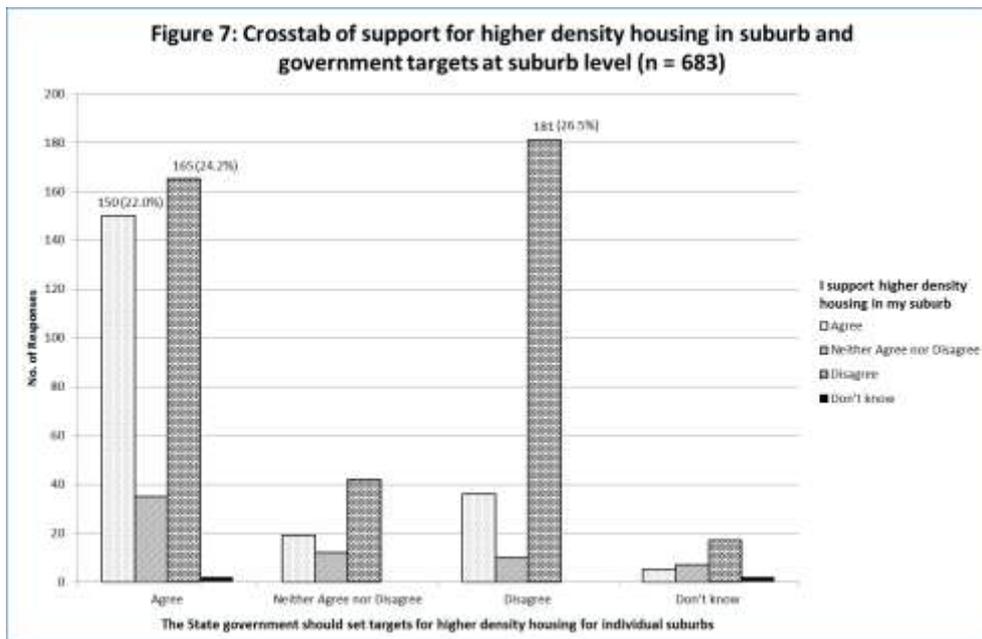
	Support metro targets / Support higher density development across Sydney			
	n	Yes	No	Don't know
Aware of State government policies	217	105 (48.4%)	85 (39.2%)	27 (12.4%)
Aware of Metropolitan Strategy	218	63 (28.9%)	122 (56.0%)	33 (15.1%)
Aware of local government policies	217	85 (39.2%)	97 (44.7%)	35 (16.1%)
	Support metro targets / Oppose higher density development across Sydney			
	n	Yes	No	Don't know
Aware of State government policies	149	55 (36.9%)	67 (45.0%)	27 (18.1%)
Aware of Metropolitan Strategy	150	26 (17.3%)	107 (71.3%)	17 (11.3%)
Aware of local government policies	148	55 (37.2%)	69 (46.6%)	24 (16.2%)
	Oppose metro targets / Oppose higher density development across Sydney			
	n	Yes	No	Don't know
Aware of State government policies	138	53 (38.4%)	60 (43.5%)	25 (18.1%)
Aware of Metropolitan Strategy	139	33 (23.7%)	85 (61.2%)	21 (15.1%)
Aware of local government policies	138	58 (42.0%)	67 (48.6%)	13 (9.4%)

Table 2: Support for targets/higher density development and policy knowledge at metropolitan level

*Ambivalent opponents* are most likely to identify dwelling targets at the metropolitan level as a means of *limiting* higher density development rather than *promoting* it. This position is contrasted to *staunch opponents* who are more likely to be aware that the targets are tools for *promoting* rather than *limiting* density. This position is supported by the fact that *ambivalent opponents* are least aware of policies framing higher density development at all scales. While the proportion of *ambivalent opponents* aware of state and local government policies is only slight lower than that of *staunch opponents* and *supporters*, the major difference relates to knowledge of the *Metropolitan Plan*. Only 17.3% of

*ambivalent opponents* were aware of the *Metropolitan Plan*, compared to 23.7% of *staunch opponents* and 28.9% of *supporters*. This finding is important as the *Metropolitan Plan* is the policy that most clearly articulates future dwelling projects and targets. The fact that *ambivalent opponents* are less aware of the *Metropolitan Plan* supports the claim that they are more likely to see targets and a means of limiting development (hence their support for targets). In terms of the profile of *ambivalent opponents* (Appendix 2), for most of the variables they are located between *supporters* and *staunch opponents*, all be it much closer to the characteristics of the later (little support for high density housing [10.5%]; likely to join local community groups [54.9%]; belief higher density decreases property values [45.6%]; high preference for proportion of new high density development to be below 30% [80.7%]; high rate of separate houses [59.5%]). These findings tend to support existing research that suggests that opposition to unwanted land uses is highly localised, with opponents more likely to be aware of local policies framing planning and development of higher density dwellings.

At the suburb level, a similar trend is observed to that present at the metropolitan scale with three main groups of residents identifiable. At the suburb level support for higher density development is less than that observed at the metropolitan scale (30.7% compared to 40.0% [Figure 1]). This finding is consistent with much of the literature on community opposition that identifies the propensity for residents to increase their opposition as developments have a greater potential to impact on their daily life. Thus, while there might be broad support for the need to increase density, there is a lower level of acceptance that this increase in density should occur in one's own suburb. The decreased support for density at the suburb level also leads to a shift in the size and make-up of each of the three main resident groups, again referred to as *supporters*, *ambivalent opponents* and *staunch opponents*. At the suburb scale 150 *supporters* who supported both dwelling targets and higher density development were identified (22.0% of responses). This represents a fall in the proportion of *supporters* from 32.5% at the metropolitan scale (or 73 fewer respondents). In contrast, the proportion of both *ambivalent* (support targets but oppose development) and *staunch opponents* (oppose both targets and development) increased at the suburb level compared to the metropolitan scale, with 165 (24.2% of respondents – an increase of 1.9%) and 181 (26.5% of respondents – an increase of 6.1%) respectively (Figure 7).



**Figure 7:** Relationship between support for higher housing and targets at suburb level

In terms of policy knowledge, at the suburb scale an interesting reversal of policy knowledge is observed. While at the metropolitan scale *supporters* have the highest proportion of respondents who claim to be aware of state government policies promoting higher density development and the *Metropolitan Plan* (Table 2), at the suburb scale this reversed with more *staunch opponents* claiming to be aware of state government policies (46.1% vs. 44.3%), the *Metropolitan Plan* (26.5% vs. 25.5%) and local government policies (44.8% vs. 30.9%) compared to *supporters* (Table 3). While the level of difference between the groups is minor in some cases, these findings suggest that as targets and development move from the metropolitan scale to the suburb scale, a number of residents who have some knowledge of policy framing planning and development in Sydney have moved from being *supporters* at the metropolitan scale to *staunch opponents* at the suburb scale. In terms of policy awareness, *ambivalent opponents* at the suburb level have lower levels of knowledge of state

planning policy and the *Metropolitan Plan* compared to the other groups, while knowledge of local government policies sits in between (Table 3). Nevertheless, each of these levels has increased compared to the metropolitan scale suggesting that some *supporters* at the metropolitan scale have also become *ambivalent opponents* at the suburb scale.

**Table 3: Support for targets/higher density development and policy knowledge at suburb level**

	Support suburb targets / Support higher			
	n	Yes	No	Don't know
Aware of State government policies	149	66 (44.3%)	62 (41.6%)	21 (14.1%)
Aware of Metropolitan Strategy	149	38 (25.5%)	89 (59.7%)	22 (14.8%)
Aware of local government policies	149	46 (30.9%)	80 (53.7%)	23 (15.4%)
	Support suburb targets / Oppose higher			
	n	Yes	No	Don't know
Aware of State government policies	162	61 (37.6%)	76 (46.9%)	25 (15.4%)
Aware of Metropolitan Strategy	163	32 (19.6%)	111 (68.1%)	20 (12.3%)
Aware of local government policies	160	67 (41.9%)	72 (45.0%)	21 (13.1%)
	Oppose suburb targets / Oppose higher			
	n	Yes	No	Don't know
Aware of State government policies	180	83 (46.1%)	72 (40.0%)	25 (13.9%)
Aware of Metropolitan Strategy	181	48 (26.5%)	103 (56.9%)	30 (16.6%)
Aware of local government policies	181	81 (44.8%)	78 (43.1%)	22 (12.2%)

In terms of profiles, a number of important differences are observed between these groups of residents (Appendix 3). However, in support of the claim that there has been a movement from *supporter* at the metropolitan level to *opponents* at the suburb scale, for most variables the differences between groups has reduced (although some are still quite large). Some important observations include:

- The proportion of *supporters* at the suburb scale likely to join a local community group has decreased (from 14.8% to 9.3%). Suggesting, unsurprisingly, that supporters at the local scale are the least likely to engage in more formalised community opposition. While, alternatively, residents who support targets and density at a metropolitan area but not at the suburban level are more likely to engage in local community groups opposed to construction.
- Interestingly, more *ambivalent opponents* and *staunch opponents* at the suburban scale agree that the density of Sydney needs to increase compared to the same groupings at the metropolitan level (9.9% vs. 2.9% for *staunch opponents* and 27.9% vs. 10.5% for *ambivalent opponents*). This is again due to the movement of *supporters* of targets and density at the metropolitan scale to *opponents* at the local scale. The number of *ambivalent and staunch opponents* increased by 12 and 41 respondents respectively.
- Further, and somewhat counter to expectations, as a group both *ambivalent* and *staunch opponents* at the suburb level are less likely to join a local community group to oppose higher density compared to similar groups at a metropolitan level (*ambivalent*: 50.9% vs. 54.9%; *staunch*: 66.9% vs 72.1%). While the proportions are still high, these figures have reduced as *opponents* willing to join community groups have been diluted by *supporters* at a metropolitan level who are much less likely to engage in community opposition to density. In terms of NIMBY literature, this suggests that those most likely to engage in local activism are those who oppose higher density development at *both* a metropolitan and suburban level.

## Conclusion

Dwelling targets and higher density development remain a central planning instruments and objectives in strategic planning in NSW (NSWDoPI, 2013a), and this paper has traced public awareness of urban policy promoting higher density development, the support for policy levels used to facilitate higher densities – dwelling targets – and support for the supposed benefits of higher urban densities. Overall, residents surveyed illustrated a relatively low level of policy awareness. This represents an ongoing challenge to urban policy which increasingly centres on community consultation. This has contemporary relevance in the case of strategic planning in NSW, which has a new emphasis on up-front community consultation as a means of informing local planning visions (NSWDoPI, 2013b). Beyond this low level of policy knowledge, awareness of policy and support for higher density was extremely mixed, with fairly even proportions of residents who support higher density housing, support the use of targets and who agree with the claims made about the benefits of higher density housing – although slightly more did oppose higher density housing than support it. A further important observation, is that even for residents who claim to support the use of dwelling targets, identified preferred targets were well below current policy settings of around 70% of dwellings in existing areas. This suggests (along with the low level of knowledge of planning policy, particularly the *Metropolitan*

*Plan*) that support for targets across the sample rests on the assumption that target work to *limit* rather than *promote* higher densities.

However, a series of important divisions were apparent when comparing support for higher density housing and support for housing targets. At both the metropolitan and suburb levels three main groups of residents were identified:

- *Supporters* – those who support both higher density targets and dwellings targets
- *Ambivalent opponents* – those who oppose higher density housing but support dwelling targets
- *Staunch opponents* – those who oppose both higher densities and dwelling targets

Overall, *supporters* are those most likely to support higher density housing, least likely to join community groups opposing higher density development, and have lower levels of policy knowledge. For the most part *staunch opponents* represent the opposite characteristics – they are aware that dwellings targets are used to promote higher density developments and oppose them. Two further important observations are apparent. The first relates to *ambivalent supporters* who generally oppose higher density development, but more explicitly identify targets and a means for limiting such development. This is the expression of a clear lack of knowledge or misunderstanding of prevailing planning policy. The second important observation is the tendency of *supporters* at the metropolitan level to become *ambivalent* and *staunch opponents* at the suburb level. This finding supports existing literature on community opposition or NIMBY movements which suggest that opposition increases at the local level. However, this equally complicates simplistic NIMBY assumptions that simply resist local construction. From this survey those most likely to oppose higher density development are those who oppose its development at both metropolitan and suburb levels and who oppose the policy levels used to implement it.

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Appendix 1: Profiles – Support/opposition of targets at metropolitan and suburb levels

	Support Sydney / Support Suburb					
	n	Agree			Disagree	
We need to increase the density of Sydney	301	192 (63.4%)			94 (31.0%)	
I support a higher density across Sydney	299	176 (58.1%)			97 (32.0%)	
I support a higher density in my suburb	298	139 (45.9%)			126 (41.6%)	
I join a local community group to oppose higher density housing	295	83 (27.4%)			145 (47.9%)	
	n	Increase			Decrease	
Impact of higher density dwelling on house price	298	99 (32.2%)			98 (32.8%)	
	n	0-30%	30-60%		60-100%	
Percent of new dwellings as high density	294	137 (46.6%)	99 (33.7%)		58 (19.7%)	
	n	Separate /detached	Semi-detached (Terrace/ Villa / Townhouse)	Flat in 1-3 storey block	Flat in 4 or more storey block	
Dwelling Type	293	162 (53.5%)	53 (17.5%)	47 (15.5%)	31 (10.2%)	
	n	34 or younger	35 - 54		55 or older	
Age	291	20 (6.9%)	98 (33.7%)		173 (59.5%)	
	n	Less than \$50000	\$50001-\$100000	\$100001-\$150000	\$150001-\$200000	More than \$200000
Household Income	258	68 (26.4%)	94 (36.4%)	43 (16.7%)	27 (10.5%)	26 (10.1%)
	Support Sydney / Oppose Suburb					
	n	Agree			Disagree	
We need to increase the density of Sydney	70	29 (40.3%)			37 (51.4%)	
I support a higher density across Sydney	71	24 (33.3%)			43 (59.7%)	
I support a higher density in my suburb	71	18 (25.0%)			43 (59.7%)	
I join a local community group to oppose higher density housing	70	37 (51.4%)			14 (19.4%)	
	n	Increase			Decrease	
Impact of higher density dwelling on house price	71	15 (21.1%)			30 (42.3%)	
	n	0-30%	30-60%		60-100%	
Percent of new dwellings as high density	69	48 (69.6%)	14 (20.3%)		7 (10.1%)	
	n	Separate /detached	Semi-detached (Terrace/ Villa / Townhouse)	Flat in 1-3 storey block	Flat in 4 or more storey block	
Dwelling Type	70	44 (61.1%)	13 (18.1%)	10 (13.9%)	3 (4.2%)	
	n	34 or younger	35 - 54		55 or older	
Age	70	1 (1.4%)	28 (40%)		41 (58.6%)	
	n	Less than \$50000	\$50001-\$100000	\$100001-\$150000	\$150001-\$200000	More than \$200000
Household Income	58	12 (20.7%)	22 (37.9%)	11 (19.0%)	5 (8.6%)	8 (13.7%)
	Oppose Sydney / Oppose Suburb					
	n	Agree			Disagree	
We need to increase the density of Sydney	118	16 (13.6%)			94 (79.9%)	
I support a higher density across Sydney	118	15 (12.7%)			96 (81.4%)	
I support a higher density in my suburb	118	8 (6.8%)			106 (89.8%)	
I join a local community group to oppose higher density housing	115	77 (65.3%)			13 (11.0%)	
	n	Increase			Decrease	
Impact of higher density dwelling on house price	115	17 (14.8%)			79 (68.7%)	
	n	0-30%	30-60%		60-100%	
Percent of new dwellings as high density	115	101 (87.8%)	12 (10.4%)		2 (1.7%)	
	n	Separate /detached	Semi-detached (Terrace/ Villa / Townhouse)	Flat in 1-3 storey block	Flat in 4 or more storey block	
Dwelling Type	112	74 (62.7%)	18 (15.3%)	16 (13.6%)	4 (3.4%)	
	n	34 or younger	35 - 54		55 or older	
Age	113	5 (4.4%)	38 (33.6%)		70 (60.9%)	
	n	Less than \$50000	\$50001-\$100000	\$100001-\$150000	\$150001-\$200000	More than \$200000
Household Income	90	25 (27.8%)	29 (32.2%)	16 (17.8%)	14 (15.5%)	6 (6.7%)

Appendix 2: Profiles – Support/Opposition of targets and higher density development across Sydney

	Support metro targets / Support higher density housing across Sydney					
	n	Agree			Disagree	
We need to increase the density of Sydney	223	215 (96.4%)			3 (1.3%)	
I join a local community group to oppose higher density housing	219	33 (14.8%)			141 (63.5%)	
	n	Increase			Decrease	
Impact of higher density dwelling on house price	220	81 (36.8%)			54 (24.5%)	
	n	0-30%	30-60%		60-100%	
Percent of new dwellings as high density	211	59 (28.0%)	89 (42.2%)		63 (29.9%)	
Dwelling Type	n	Separate /detached	Semi-detached (Terrace/ Villa / Townhouse)	Flat in 1-3 storey block	Flat in 4 or more storey block	
	213	110 (49.3%)	42 (18.8%)	34 (15.2%)	27 (12.1%)	
Age	n	34 or younger	35 - 54		55 or older	
	212	15 (7.1%)	73 (34.4%)		124 (58.5%)	
Household Income	n	Less than \$50000	\$50001-\$100000	\$100001-\$150000	\$150001-\$200000	More than \$200000
	184	48 (26.1%)	65 (35.3%)	34 (18.5%)	20 (10.9%)	23 (12.5%)
	Support metro targets / Oppose higher density housing across Sydney					
	n	Agree			Disagree	
We need to increase the density of Sydney	152	16 (10.5%)			132 (86.3%)	
I join a local community group to oppose higher density housing	145	84 (54.9%)			20 (13.1%)	
	n	Increase			Decrease	
Impact of higher density dwelling on house price	149	32 (21.5%)			68 (45.6%)	
	n	0-30%	30-60%		60-100%	
Percent of new dwellings as high density	150	121 (80.7%)	26 (17.3%)		3 (2.0%)	
Dwelling Type	n	Separate /detached	Semi-detached (Terrace/ Villa / Townhouse)	Flat in 1-3 storey block	Flat in 4 or more storey block	
	147	91 (59.5%)	21 (13.7%)	25 (16.3%)	10 (6.5%)	
Age	n	34 or younger	35 - 54		55 or older	
	146	6 (4.1%)	54 (36.3%)		87 (59.6%)	
Household Income	n	Less than \$50000	\$50001-\$100000	\$100001-\$150000	\$150001-\$200000	More than \$200000
	118	29 (24.6%)	49 (41.5%)	18 (15.3%)	11 (9.3%)	11 (9.3%)
	Oppose metro targets / Oppose higher density housing across Sydney					
	n	Agree			Disagree	
We need to increase the density of Sydney	140	4 (2.9%)			132 (94.3%)	
I join a local community group to oppose higher density housing	135	101 (72.1%)			12 (8.6%)	
	n	Increase			Decrease	
Impact of higher density dwelling on house price	138	23 (17.0%)			90 (65.2%)	
	n	0-30%	30-60%		60-100%	
Percent of new dwellings as high density	138	123 (89.1%)	13 (9.4%)		2 (1.4%)	
Dwelling Type	n	Separate /detached	Semi-detached (Terrace/ Villa / Townhouse)	Flat in 1-3 storey block	Flat in 4 or more storey block	
	135	85 (60.7%)	25 (17.9%)	20 (14.3%)	5 (3.6%)	
Age	n	34 or younger	35 - 54		55 or older	
	136	10 (7.4%)	38 (27.9%)		88 (64.7%)	
Household Income	n	Less than \$50000	\$50001-\$100000	\$100001-\$150000	\$150001-\$200000	More than \$200000
	105	37 (35.2%)	30 (28.6%)	20 (19.0%)	12 (11.4%)	6 (5.7%)

Appendix 3: Profiles – Support/Opposition of targets and higher density development at suburb level

	Support Suburb Target / Support Higher Density in Suburb					
	n	Agree			Disagree	
We need to increase the density of Sydney	147	132 (88.0%)			9 (6.0%)	
I support a higher density across Sydney	149	130 (86.7%)			12 (8.0%)	
I join a local community group to oppose higher density housing	148	14 (9.3%)			110 (73.3%)	
Impact of higher density dwelling on house price	n	Increase			Decrease	
	147	53 (36.1%)			35 (23.8%)	
Percent of new dwellings as high density	n	0-30%	30-60%		60-100%	
	144	40 (27.8%)	61 (42.4%)		43 (29.9%)	
Dwelling Type	n	Separate /detached	Semi-detached (Terrace/ Villa / Townhouse)	Flat in 1-3 storey block	Flat in 4 or more storey block	
	144	74 (49.3%)	29 (19.3%)	19 (12.7%)	22 (14.7%)	
Age	n	34 or younger	35 - 54		55 or older	
	144	12 (8.3%)	43 (29.9%)		89 (61.8%)	
Household Income	n	Less than \$50000	\$50001-\$100000	\$100001-\$150000	\$150001-\$200000	More than \$200000
	135	31 (23.0%)	54 (40.0%)	23 (17.0%)	12 (8.9%)	15 (11.1%)
	Support Suburb Target / Oppose Higher Density in Suburb					
	n	Agree			Disagree	
We need to increase the density of Sydney	163	46 (27.9%)			109 (66.1%)	
I support a higher density across Sydney	162	36 (21.8%)			109 (66.1%)	
I join a local community group to oppose higher density housing	161	84 (50.9%)			33 (20.0%)	
Impact of higher density dwelling on house price	n	Increase			Decrease	
	163	39 (23.9%)			78 (47.9%)	
Percent of new dwellings as high density	n	0-30%	30-60%		60-100%	
	163	115 (70.6%)	38 (23.3%)		10 (6.1%)	
Dwelling Type	n	Separate /detached	Semi-detached (Terrace/ Villa / Townhouse)	Flat in 1-3 storey block	Flat in 4 or more storey block	
	161	88 (53.3%)	31 (18.8%)	34 (20.6%)	8 (4.8%)	
Age	n	34 or younger	35 - 54		55 or older	
	159	15 (9.4%)	58 (36.5%)		86 (54.1%)	
Household Income	n	Less than \$50000	\$50001-\$100000	\$100001-\$150000	\$150001-\$200000	More than \$200000
	134	38 (28.4%)	44 (32.8%)	26 (19.4%)	13 (9.7%)	13 (9.7%)
	Oppose Suburb Target / Oppose Higher Density in Suburb					
	n	Agree			Disagree	
We need to increase the density of Sydney	177	18 (9.9%)			145 (80.1%)	
I support a higher density across Sydney	179	14 (7.7%)			153 (84.5%)	
I join a local community group to oppose higher density housing	175	121 (66.9%)			15 (8.3%)	
Impact of higher density dwelling on house price	n	Increase			Decrease	
	177	31 (17.5%)			109 (61.6%)	
Percent of new dwellings as high density	n	0-30%	30-60%		60-100%	
	176	156 (88.6%)	17 (9.7%)		3 (1.7%)	
Dwelling Type	n	Separate /detached	Semi-detached (Terrace/ Villa / Townhouse)	Flat in 1-3 storey block	Flat in 4 or more storey block	
	172	111 (61.3%)	29 (16.0%)	25 (13.8%)	7 (3.9%)	
Age	n	34 or younger	35 - 54		55 or older	
	174	7 (4.0%)	60 (34.5%)		107 (61.5%)	
Household Income	n	Less than \$50000	\$50001-\$100000	\$100001-\$150000	\$150001-\$200000	More than \$200000
	138	35 (25.4%)	49 (35.5%)	32 (23.2%)	14 (10.1%)	8 (5.8%)