

Specialist Disability Accommodation Fund

What makes a high-quality Specialist Disability Accommodation property

A discussion with three SDA providers on the characteristics that support participant wellbeing and drive long-term returns for investors

By Jacob Edwards, SDA Fund Manager, Australian Unity

Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA) plays a vital role in supporting the wellbeing of Australians living with disability. Today's SDA sector houses more than 17,500 Australians, and that figure is rapidly rising. By 2025, it is expected that up to 30,000 Australians will rely on Specialist Disability Accommodation.

Backed by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), SDA accommodation is designed for Australians with high support needs, including those with low mobility, genetic or acquired medical conditions, chronic disease, or mental illness. These people not only have unique living needs that standard housing cannot provide for; they are too often excluded from housing markets due to financial barriers.

For investors, SDA has also emerged as a highly attractive property asset class. It's an opportunity for Australians to partner in the delivery of high-quality social infrastructure

that supports the long-term wellbeing of NDIS participants while providing a consistent income stream, with rental returns guaranteed by the NDIS. In just five years, it has become a \$2.5 billion asset class.

When investing in SDA, it is vital to understand what separates high quality properties from lower quality properties, and how this might impact both participant wellbeing and returns.

As manager of Australian Unity's SDA fund, I recently discussed this question with our leading SDA partners, Justin Nix, CEO of Guardian Living, Astrid Timmers, Managing Director of Ability Housing, and Greg Johnson, CEO of Youngcare. Below are their perspectives on the characteristics of high-quality SDA assets.





Justin Nix, CEO of Guardian Living.

“Delivering high quality SDA involves a very holistic and carefully planned approach”

Safety and design features that go above the SDA Design Standard.

Justin Nix, CEO of Guardian Living says high quality dwellings should never compromise safety for occupants, especially when it comes to fire safety.

“Delivering high quality SDA involves a very holistic and carefully planned approach,” Nix explains. “Low quality SDA with less amenities or compromised safety will lead to greater vacancy risk.”

“It’s true that minimum building code requirements currently allow some SDA developments to be compliant without safety features such as fire suppression and detection, particularly for sole occupancy apartments and villas. Assets with fire suppression and detection features demonstrate that the supplier truly has the participant’s wellbeing at heart, rather than mere compliance.” said Mr Nix.

Astrid Timmers, Managing Director of Ability Housing agrees with Mr Nix on fire safety, pointing to several additional features found in high quality SDA.

“Specific design features of high-quality SDA include toilets with plumbing configurations that leave room for all types of wheelchairs, height-adjustable bathroom cabinets, discreet staff areas and National Construction Council approved fire safety systems.” Timmers says.

Dignity of risk is also a key factor in the design of high quality SDA. Linked closely to wellbeing, it refers to the right of individuals to make their own choices independently and take their own risks in order to learn and grow, regardless of whether they live with a disability.

Greg Johnson, CEO of Youngcare mentions high quality SDA design balances participant safety with independence.

“When supporting NDIS participants either as an SDA supplier, SIL provider or family member, it’s important to understand when it is right to step in to prevent unnecessary risks, and when not to.”

“The aim is not to run the lives of participants, but to help them live the best life they can safely,” Mr Johnson explains.

Location a key driver of participant wellbeing

A vital factor in high quality SDA assets is its proximity to community facilities.

“The overriding requirement is for ease of access and proximity to all community amenities,” Ms Timmers explains, “so that people can interact easily with the community for all work, living and entertainment-related choices.”

Mr Nix agrees that community connection is critical to the wellbeing of all Australians, not just those with disability.

“Whether or not you have a disability, most of us want to live in a location that enable us to access community services safely and independently. Proximity to shopping centres, cafes, medical facilities, public transport, entertainment and recreation facilities achieve this.”



Astrid Timmers, Managing Director of Ability Housing.

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Effective collaboration with Supported Independent Living (SIL) providers is paramount

Greg Johnson says separation of SDA housing services and SIL care services ultimately give the tenant greater security of tenure in their accommodation.

“Separation of bed and care means the tenant can raise any issue with their care without being concerned that their tenancy could be put at risk.”

According to Ms Timmers, while separation is important, high-quality SDA enables SDA suppliers to work collaboratively with SIL care providers.



Greg Johnson, CEO of Youngcare “The aim is not to run the lives of participants, but to help them live the best life they can safely”

“Value alignment between SIL and SDA providers is essential to support effective working relationships, for the benefit of the participant. It’s important that both SIL and SDA are not only committed to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, and exceeding the NDIS Quality & Safeguard requirements, but have robust audit processes,” says Ms Timmers.

SDA is a sector we at Australian Unity are proud to invest in. We are committed to developing the highest quality assets in attractive locations across the nation; with design features that keep participants both as safe and as independent as possible.

With a focus on community wellbeing and in partnership with SDA providers, SIL providers and NDIS participants, our focus is on helping Australians with disability enjoy the best quality-of-life, while delivering consistent returns for investor

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