

## Indoor Environment Quality Building design for a sustainable future

Improving the indoor environment quality at home and in the workplace will generally enhance well-being and reduce the likelihood of ill-health. Through the implementation of passive design principles, good indoor environment quality also leads to energy savings due to reduced energy demands for heating, cooling and artificial lighting.

This fact sheet recommends ways to improve indoor environment qualities through informed building design and product and materials choices.

### What's included in this fact sheet:

- Why is good Indoor Environment Quality so important?
- What defines Indoor Environment Quality?
- Design criteria for improved Indoor Environment Quality:
  - Daylight
  - Ventilation
  - Thermal comfort
  - External views
  - Product choice
  - Internal noise levels
- Balancing Indoor Environment Qualities
- Where can I find out more?
- Mandatory Requirements
- Council's Best Practice Standard.

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## Why is good Indoor Environment Quality so important?

Australians spend on average 90 percent of their time indoors. And with indoor environments having a direct impact on our wellbeing and our health, it is important to ensure a good indoor environment quality in both our homes and offices. In fact, the CSIRO has estimated that the cost of poor internal air quality in Australia may be as high as \$12 billion per year due to mental and physical ill-health and lost production.

Those most at risk are people with weak immune systems, including children and the elderly. While most will only ever experience medium health effects such as headaches or tiredness, others may suffer more serious health effects due to “sick” buildings. On the other hand, studies also show that an enhanced indoor environment quality in offices can be linked to staff’s improved work performance and reduced sick leave.

Council’s experience shows that good indoor environment quality has become an important criteria for not only those who are developing their own homes but also for savvy developers, who understand today’s market demands.

## What defines Indoor Environment Quality?

The quality of an indoor environment (e.g. a room) is commonly defined through the following main factors:

- Light – does the room receive enough daylight throughout the day and is comfortable artificial lighting provided for all other times?
- External views – does the room allow for distant views that provide a connection to the external environment?
- Air quality – does indoor air contain sufficient levels of oxygen and acceptable levels of pollutants from internal or external sources?
- Ventilation – can the room be sufficiently ventilated (preferably naturally but where this is impractical, mechanically) and provide occupants with quality fresh air?
- Thermal comfort – is the room sufficiently insulated, shaded and conditioned to ensure comfortable temperatures throughout the year?
- Noise – is the room sufficiently insulated from external noise sources and does it minimise internal reverberation and noise levels?
- Occupant control – are occupants able to control their environment, e.g. through the opening and closing of windows and blinds and operating heating and cooling services?
- Materials – do the chosen building materials and finishes have low levels of Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC) and other hazardous components?

If you were able to answer all questions with 'yes', the room that you were referring to provides high indoor environment qualities.

## **Ventilation**

Whether via natural or mechanical means, Council recommends substantially exceeding minimum requirements for window opening sizes and air exchange rates under the Building Code of Australia.

In homes, the most effective ventilation is achieved through natural cross ventilation. The ideal layout features openable windows located in opposite walls, which creates a breeze path to let in fresh air and flush out stale air. Note that cross ventilation can be achieved through various façade openings, be it standard windows, operable skylights or even small solid doors.

In office buildings, air change effectiveness is important to ensure good quality air. Carbon dioxide levels should be regularly controlled to ensure a healthy and productive work environment. In smaller offices, natural ventilation is also a great way to save energy and cater for individual's differing comfort needs.

*Council recommends carefully considering all aspects of good indoor environment quality during a project's early design stage. Experience shows that early design decisions make the greatest impact on future occupant's wellbeing and only expensive technologies and product choices can recoup early mistakes.*

## **Thermal comfort**

Thermal comfort describes the temperature and humidity range in which humans feel comfortable. This range can fluctuate by many degrees and percentages, depending on activity levels, clothing, annual seasons and personal preferences.

Environmentally sustainable buildings provide thermal comfort levels with little reliance on mechanical heating and cooling systems. This is commonly achieved through sensible orientation, good insulation, effective ventilation and flexible external shading. In order to respond to changing weather conditions throughout the year and different user patterns, occupants should be provided with sensible controls of both active and passive systems to ensure good thermal comfort.

## **Product choice**

Many materials used in the fit-out and construction of homes and commercial buildings contain Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC) which pose serious health risks to building occupants. VOC's are found in many common construction materials however alternative low / no VOC products are available on the market including: paints, coatings, sealants, carpets and press wood products (e.g. cabinetry and furniture). Council recommends the early commitment to low / no VOC construction materials.

## **External views**

The provision of long distance views and a visual connection to the outdoors commonly increases wellbeing for building occupants. In office buildings, views can reduce eyestrain for computer workers; in residential buildings views provide a sense of connectivity. Due to statutory planning provisions, the balance between sufficient external views and limiting the overlooking into neighbouring properties needs to be carefully considered.

## **Internal noise levels**

Excessive noise generated by neighbours, traffic and hard surfaces that reflect internal sounds (echo) can impact occupant's amenity and employee's productivity. In order to ensure comfortable noise levels, Council recommends considering the inclusion of acoustic insulation to internal and external walls, doubleglazing to windows, landscaping that buffers traffic noise and a good balance of internal hard and soft finishes.

## **Daylight**

In order to achieve high quality daylight levels, Council recommends substantially exceeding minimum requirements for daylight under the Building Code of Australia.

Good access to natural light is essential to occupant wellbeing and employee performance. Daylight is vital for body functions, gives us a sense of time and place and connects us to our environment. Therefore, habitable rooms with 'borrowed light' should be avoided.

Daylight is the combination of direct and indirect (reflected) sunlight. Therefore, on an overcast day, south facing windows will receive just as much daylight as north facing windows. High level windows will throw daylight deep into rooms, that's why they are particularly useful for deep floor plans.

It is also worth noting that the provision of daylight in living and working spaces reduces energy consumption. This is due to a reduction in the use of air-conditioning, associated with the heat generated by artificial lighting. However, in office environments, daylight has to be carefully balanced with possible glare as this strains our eyes.

## **Balancing Indoor Environment Qualities**

Designing for a high indoor environment quality can be challenging as all criteria need to be addressed while some may even contradict each other. Windows in particular need to be carefully designed - they influence access to daylight and ventilation, create heat gains in summer and losses in winter and provide a visual and acoustic connection to our immediate environment.

Another example is the choice of internal finishes. They not only impact on internal sound quality but also influence a room's thermal comfort, light reflectivity and air quality.

It is therefore important to understand and carefully balance individual design and product choices upon the benefits and disadvantage for different indoor environment quality criteria. If in doubt, we recommend talking to a sustainability expert and focusing on a project's key indoor environment quality goals.

## **Mandatory Requirements and Council's Best Practice Standard**

### Environmental Sustainable Design (ESD) Principles

There are two levels of compliance when it comes to ESD principles – mandatory and best practice.

**Mandatory Requirements** You must meet Australian Standards and the Building Code of Australia (BCA) requirements for thermal comfort, ventilation, daylight and energy efficiency.

**Council's Best Practice Standard** Provide a healthy and comfortable indoor environment that reduces energy consumption and reliance on building services:

- For the provision of sufficient daylight, habitable rooms of single-aspect apartments should be limited in depth to 8 metres from a window.
- The average daylight factor for 90% of the habitable floor area should achieve 1.0% for living areas and 0.5% for bedrooms. A daylight modelling report for large scale developments may be required.
- Living rooms and private open spaces for at least 70% of apartments in a development should receive a minimum of three hours direct sunlight between 9am and 3pm in mid winter. This can be demonstrated through section drawings.
- Size windows at 20% of a room's floor area to balance access to daylight, heat loss in winter and solar heat gains throughout the year.
- Limit the number of single-aspect apartments with a southerly aspect (SW-SE) to a maximum of 10% of the total apartments proposed.
- Limit the number of apartments with internal bedrooms to a maximum of 10% of the total apartments proposed.
- At least 60% of a development's apartments should be naturally cross ventilated.
- Courtyards in multi storey buildings should be a maximum of four storeys in height to ensure adequate daylight access to the open space and apartments. Internal courtyard dimensions should not lead to the requirement of screening in regard to overlooking.
- Consider acoustic impacts when designing for a natural ventilation strategy.

- Install appropriate external shading devices which respond to different facade orientations.

Developments, which seek to vary from these best practice standards, must demonstrate how indoor environment qualities can be satisfactorily achieved.

### **Where can I find out more?**

Technical Manual Passive Design Your Home [www.yourhome.gov.au](http://www.yourhome.gov.au)

Residential Flat Design Code New South Wales Department of Planning and Infrastructure  
[www.planning.nsw.gov.au](http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au)

Technical Manuals on: Natural Ventilation Systems Thermal Mass Sustainability Victoria  
[www.resourcesmart.vic.gov.au](http://www.resourcesmart.vic.gov.au)

The Sun Can Help LJ Hooker Sustainability [www.liveability.com.au](http://www.liveability.com.au)

Healthy Product Database Ecospecifier [www.ecospecifier.com.au](http://www.ecospecifier.com.au)

GECA (Good Environmental Choice Australia) [www.geca.org.au](http://www.geca.org.au)

Best Practice IEQ Guidelines Green Building Council of Australia (Download the applicable rating tool). [www.gbca.org.au](http://www.gbca.org.au)

Other Fact Sheets in this series are also available to provide guidance on the 10 Key Sustainable Building Categories. For further information on Indoor Environment Quality, consider the Fact Sheets entitled:

- Energy Efficiency
- Building Materials
- Urban Ecology

This fact sheet is not designed to replace project specific advice from building design and sustainability professionals, Council does not take responsibility for any issues that may occur due to the facts and guidance provided in this fact sheet.