YIMBY MELBOURNE

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RESEARCH NOTE

There is no planner supply shortage

The number of planners Australia-wide has increased dramatically over the past 30 years, but key outcomes have only worsened. Instead of focusing solely on planner supply, we must also consider planner demand.

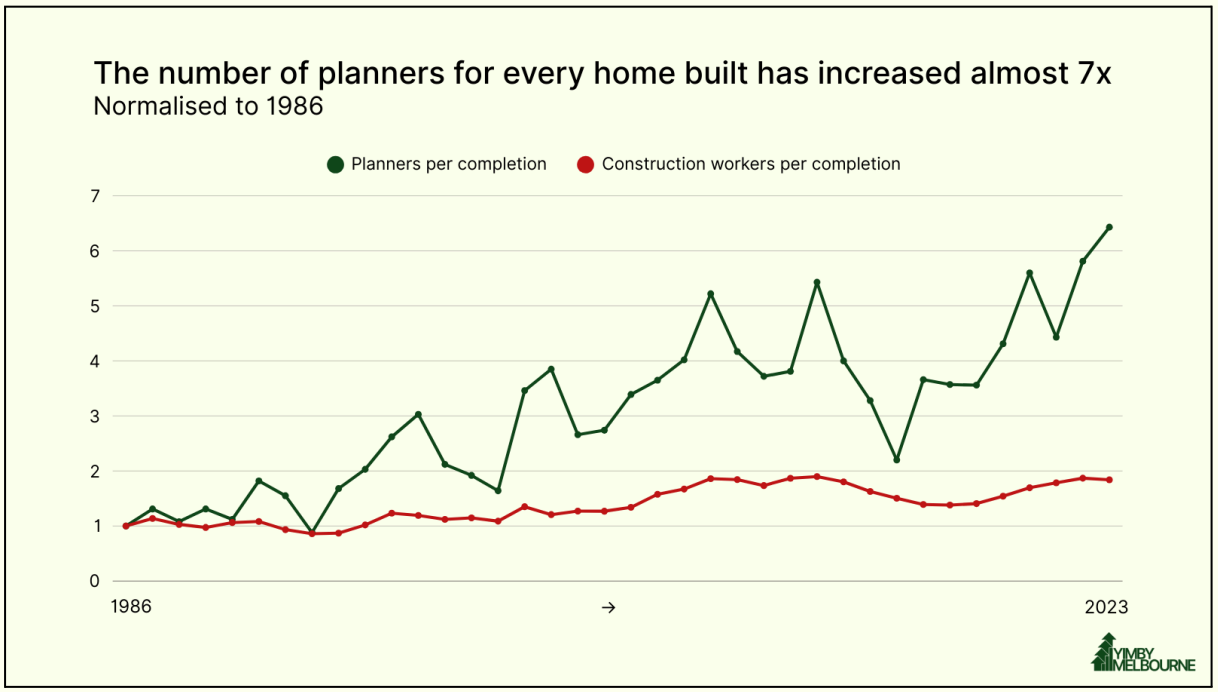
Lead researchers: William Oliver & Jonathan O'Brien, YIMBY Melbourne

Executive summary

- Planning peak bodies have declared an emergency planner shortage, and stated that the only viable solution is to increase planner supply[1]
- In 1986, Australia built 54 homes for every practicing planner
- In 2025, that number has dropped to fewer than nine homes per planner
- This large reduction in planner output has accompanied an enormous increase in planner supply, with the number of practicing planners increasing much faster than housing costs over the same time period
- In 1999, it took 55 days to get a permit for 10 dwellings
- In 2023, it took 371 days to get a permit for 10 dwellings
- To solve this complex problem, we must examine not only planner supply, but also planner demand

[1] Chris Herde, *Planning Institute of Australia finds shortage of town planners is at 'critical' point*, The Australian, 29 April 2025

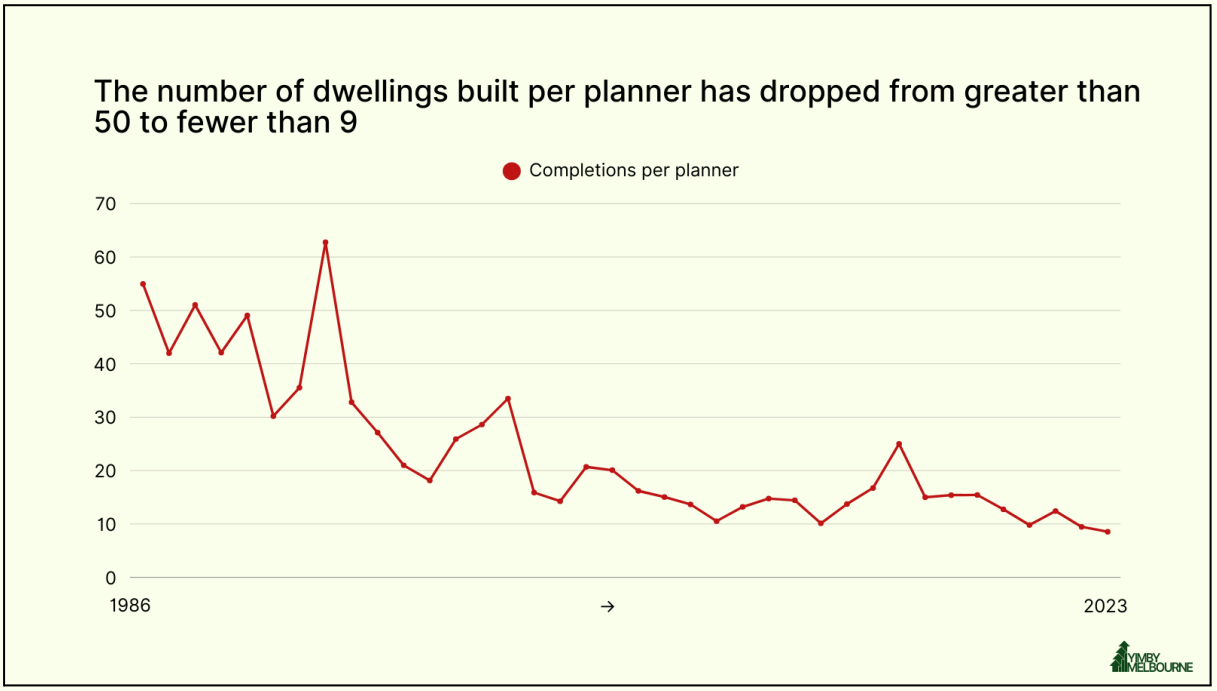
There are more planners than ever, and they are less productive than ever



Over the past 40 years, the number of practicing planners per home built has increased almost sevenfold. This can be compared to the construction sector, where we have seen a much smaller increase in the number of workers per home built.

The construction sector productivity collapse has been covered extensively by both the Productivity Commission and the Committee for Economic Development Australia.[2] But little attention has been paid to the much more rapid decline in planning sector outputs.

[2] Productivity Commission, *Housing construction productivity: Can we fix it*, 16 February 2025; CEDA, *Size Matters: Why Construction Productivity is so Weak*, 27 May 2025

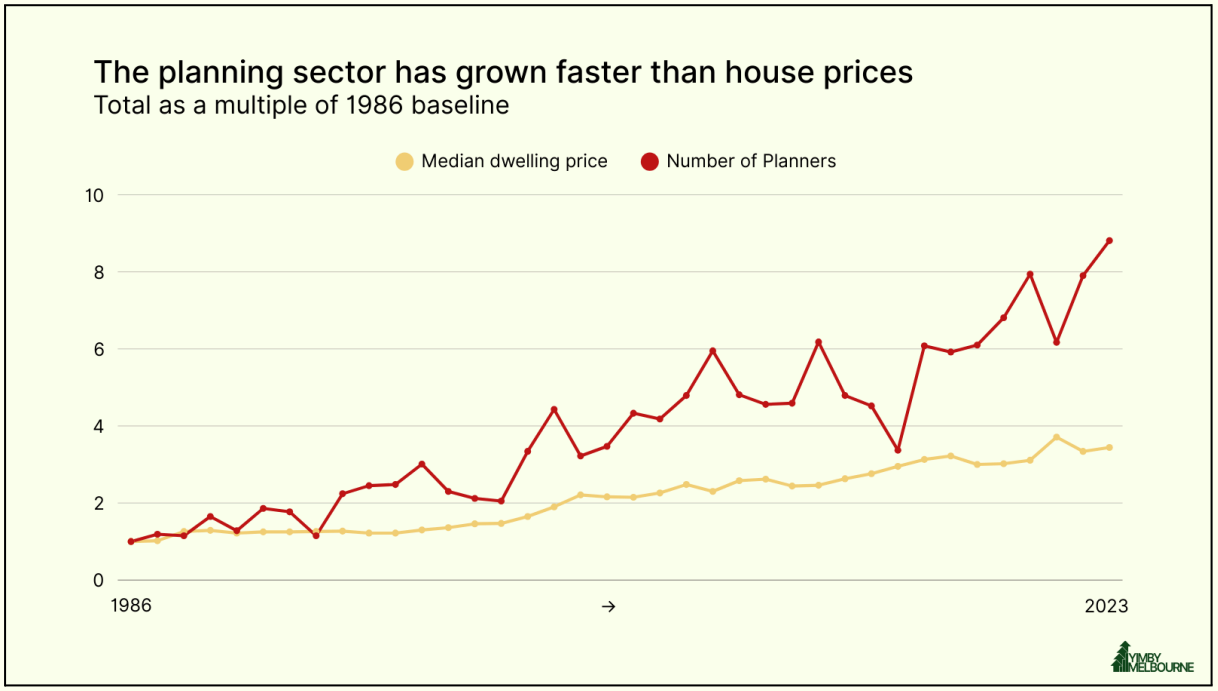


In 1986, for every practicing planner, Australia built around 54 homes. Now, we build fewer than nine homes per planner. A planner 40 years ago was on average responsible for the development of six times the number of homes per year than a planner working today.

The material complexity of projects has certainly increased over previous decades, particularly as we build dwellings to higher minimum standards. Minimum energy efficiency standards have increased from 3–4 Nationwide House Energy Rating Scheme (NatHERS) stars in 2003 to 7 stars in 2025.[3]

As higher building standards may require a greater number of construction workers per dwelling, more complex planning controls may indeed require planners to undertake more in-depth assessments. But an increase in material complexity should be expected to impact construction output to an equal or greater degree than planner output. Given that the number of homes built per planner has collapsed relative to homes built per construction worker, it is unlikely that increased material complexity explains the reduction in planner output.

[3] CSIRO *It's in the stars! How scientists figure out your home's energy rating*, 30 September 2021; *National Construction Code*



There are almost nine times as many total planners today as there were in 1986. But they each are responsible for less construction than ever before in the sector's history.[4] To understand why, we need to move beyond simplistic discussions of planner supply, and focus on planner demand.

[4] It is worth noting that some number of dwellings approved do not go on to be built. But there is little reason to believe that planners in the modern era are each approving a significantly larger number of non-completed dwellings than historically. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we assume that the flow of planning approvals through to dwelling completions has not changed meaningfully over the sample period.

Planner demand has outstripped planner supply

Peak planning bodies call for supply, supply, supply.[5] But this is a simplistic view of what is a very complex problem of both planner supply *and* planner demand.

The demand for planners has mainly increased not through an increase in construction output and project delivery, but through an increase in regulatory process and complexity. This can be demonstrated through case studies of timelines, costs, and delivery outcomes, as well as inter-jurisdictional comparison.

Timelines matter: it takes seven times longer to get a housing permit in Victoria today than it did in 1999

In 1999, the majority of permit applications in Victoria were decided within the 60-day statutory timeframe:

> evidence suggested that an application to erect signage usually took around 15 days to process whereas a medium-density housing proposal for 10 units took around 55 days due to the high degree of community consultation required.[6]

By 2022, a 10-dwelling permit timeline had blown out to a median 371 days.[7]

[5] Planning Institute of Australia, *Urban planner shortage a hidden risk to Australia's housing future, new survey shows*, April 2025
[6] Auditor-General of Victoria, *Performance Audit Report No. 62 - Land use and development in Victoria: The State's planning system*, 1999
[7] Department of Transport and Planning, *Planning permit activity reporting*

Today, there are nine times as many planners as there were in the 80s—and yet permits take seven times as long. This represents a marked increase in planner demand, outstripping planner supply.

Road delivery has slowed dramatically, with costs per kilometre surging

Major projects lack oldschool urgency:

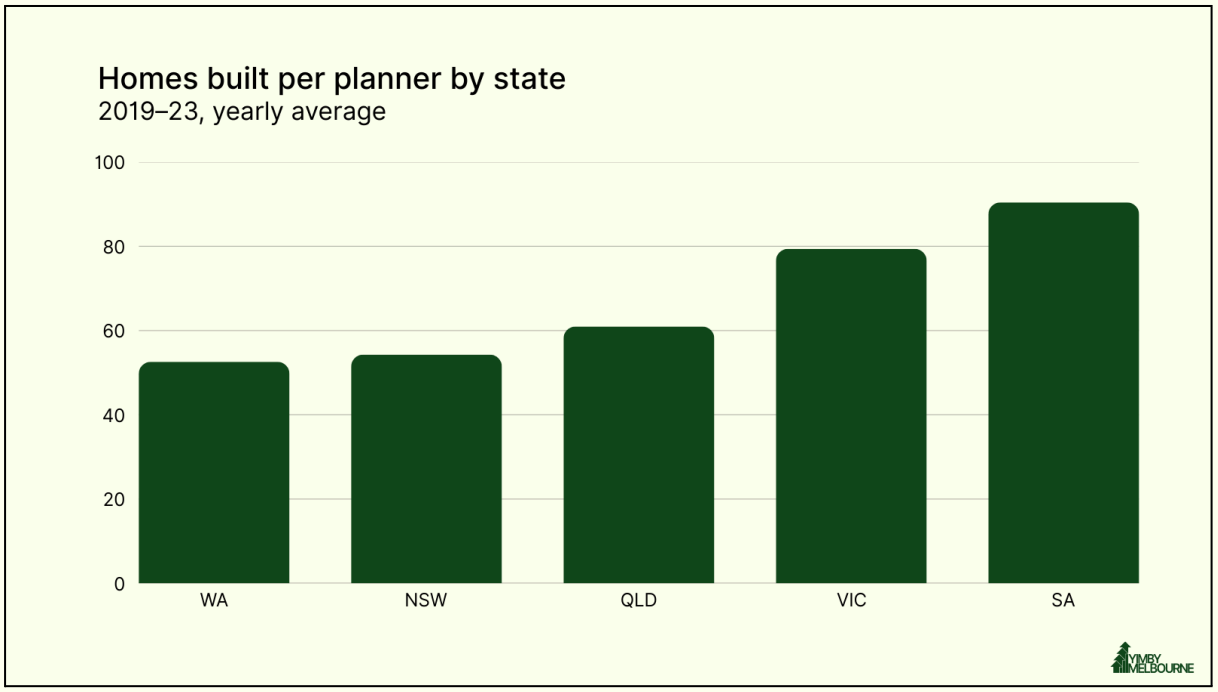
- We duplicated 300km of Hume Highway over 30 years (1965-94), at an average rate of 10km/yr
- The 26km Geelong ring road was built over 8 years (2006-13), at an average rate of 3.25km/yr

Smaller projects also take longer:

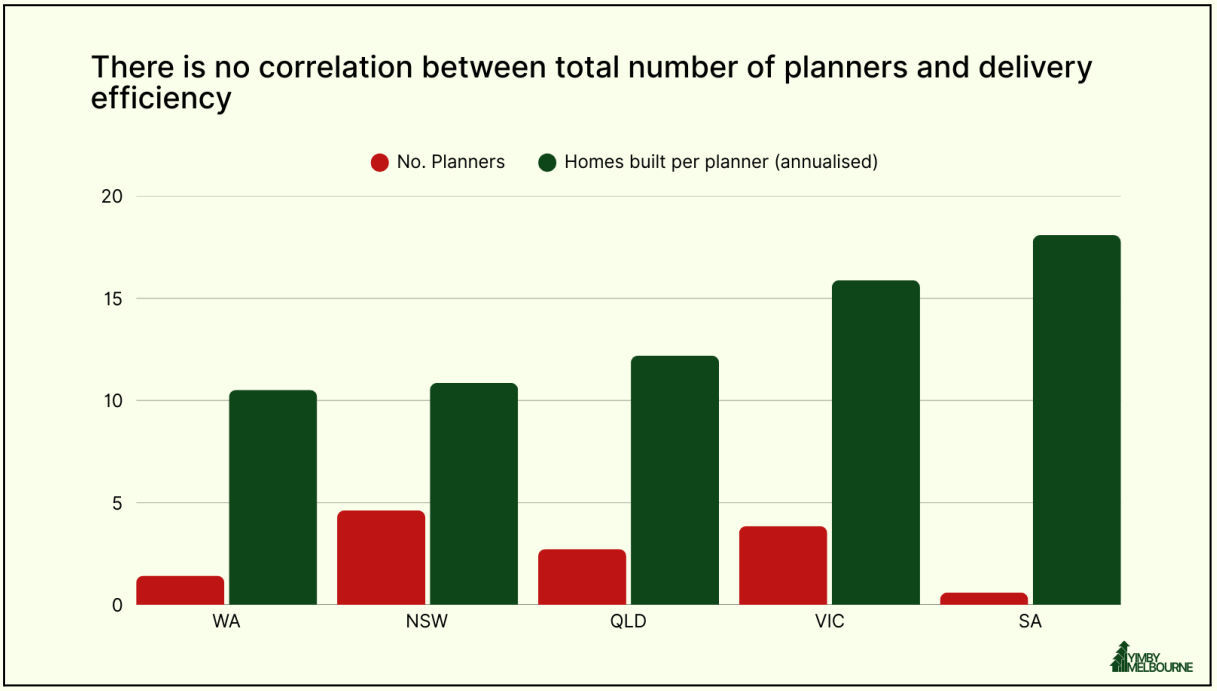
- 1982: Seymour bypass (9km) – ~$9.5m/km
- 2011: Tarcutta bypass (7km) – ~$29m/km

While there is no reason to believe that these delays and cost blowouts are solely attributable to outsized planner demand, it should be clear that a massive forty-year increase in planner supply has accompanied a decline in the speed and efficiency of infrastructure outcomes, as well as housing outcomes.

Jurisdictional differences indicate that the issue is planner demand rather than planner supply



Different jurisdictions have different levels of planner demand. This is demonstrated by a lack of correlation between the total number of planners in a given jurisdiction and the number of dwellings delivered.



New South Wales (NSW) has the highest overall number of planners, but they each deliver very few homes. If NSW planners were as productive as their South Australian counterparts, Australia's most expensive state would build an additional 33,403 homes per year.

The efficiency of South Australian planners is likely at least in part explained by a planning system underpinned by a high level of codification, requiring very little in the way of discretionary process.[8] The South Australian system is frequently well-benchmarked in cross-jurisdictional reviews, indicating that a system that enables higher levels of planner productivity is one that also provides a better user experience.[9]

[8] YIMBY Melbourne, *Submission to the Inquiry into Victoria Planning Provisions amendments VC257, VC267 and VC274*, April 2025
[9] Business Council of Australia, *Regulation Rumble: An Australian Jurisdictional Planning Scorecard*, September 2024

Conclusion: meaningful reform should examine planner demand, as well as planner supply

Despite enormous increases in the total number of planners in Australia over 40 years, planner demand has continued to outstrip planner supply.

This increased demand is reflected most strongly in the 85% reduction in dwelling completions per planning practitioner. Case studies also demonstrate that many planning projects and processes are lengthier today than in the past, increasing planner demand through requirement for each planner to spend more time and effort per dwelling, project, or approval.

Peak planning bodies should consider this brief survey of the evidence as a counterweight to their 'supply, supply, supply' rhetoric regarding the so-called planner shortage. It is clear that planner demand plays a significant role in the profession's ongoing omnicrisis, and these bodies should consider the evidence accordingly to form a more balanced view of the issues at hand.

Data

All data sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.