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Red Tape and Delay: NSW Housing Approval System Drags Down Progress

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Australia's housing supply crisis continues to be hampered by excessive red tape, outdated council frameworks, and state governments too cautious to enact bold reform. Shaun Carter, director of architecture firm Carter Williamson, is just one of many professionals caught in this bureaucratic spiral. After more than two and a half years trying to gain approval for a single home in Sydney's Annandale suburb, Carter is still tangled in delays. The drawn-out process reveals the inefficiencies choking Australia's ability to meet growing housing demand.

Carter spent a full year preparing a development application for Inner West Council, only for it to be refused after a further nine months of waiting. It then took an additional seven months just to escalate the matter for independent review. His experience underscores how councils and approval bodies, often operating with sluggish responsiveness and unclear guidelines, stand in the way of practical development. “It’s become easier to build a high-rise apartment block than a single home,” Carter remarked. In a country crying out for more housing, that contradiction should be a red flag to policymakers.

Instead of cutting through red tape, state governments are recycling decades-old planning mechanisms and touting them as progress. Recent policies by state premiers aim to appear decisive but instead double down on risk-averse tactics that avoid the bold reforms needed to streamline approval times and cut costs for homeowners and builders. Local council remain empowered to block projects with vague objections, while state agencies, despite making housing promises, often pass the buck or remain paralysed by consultation fatigue. With an election always around the corner, tough but necessary deregulation is kicked down the road.



Australia needs a faster, more accountable planning system. The market can respond to demand, but only if government bodies get out of the way. What’s required is leadership willing to confront inertia, not simply shuffle policies with cosmetic appeal. Homeownership is slipping further out of reach for younger generations not because we lack land or building materials, but because policy keeps getting stuck in an endless process. If bureaucratic inertia remains unchallenged, stories like Shaun Carter’s will no longer be exceptional; they’ll be the norm.