

# Introduction

Multi-unit housing is a common feature in our neighbourhoods offering more housing choice and helping meet the needs of a growing population. To support Ōtautahi Christchurch continue to be a great place to live, this technical design guide has been developed to ensure new townhouses and apartments work well for residents, neighbours, and the wider community.

## Purpose of the guidance

The Christchurch District Plan encourages high quality residential environments through policy and objectives, and rules and design principles specifically for multi-unit housing.

The main purpose of this guidance is:

*to help developers, designers and planners understand the District Plan's aims through identifying good design practices and solutions for known and anticipated design challenges.*

It also aims to:

- Make the design and resource consent process smoother, including more consistent and efficient, reducing delays and expense.
- Be a practical and relevant tool that supports conversations between applicants and the Council.
- Be a publicly available resource that helps to raise awareness of good design and its benefits for residents and neighbourhoods.
- Inspire ideas and approaches to townhouses and apartments that will make them desirable places to live for a wide range of residents.

## Design priorities

This guidance focuses on known and anticipated issues for medium- and high-density multi-unit housing development in Ōtautahi, rather than more comprehensive 'best practice' that can be sought elsewhere. The design priorities of the guidance are as follows:

1. Engagement with the street and on-site communal spaces.
2. Good legibility for sense of ownership and safety.
3. Well-considered built form with visual interest to break up building bulk.
4. High-quality amenity from well-located outdoor living areas, trees and planting.
5. Avoidance of the visually-dominating effects of cars, parking and garages.
6. Integration of adequate space for bins, cycle storage and lighting.
7. Balance of the purpose and effects of windows, doors and boundary treatments.
8. Practical solutions as part of a holistic and sustainable approach to addressing design issues.

# Background

This technical guidance is informed by the recurring design challenges identified in the day-to-day assessment of resource consents and through the monitoring of completed, built developments.

It has been developed through a multidisciplinary approach, with technical expertise and input from within the Council, and is also informed by policy, best practice and review of other relevant guidance (refer below).

As it has been developed on a topic-by-topic basis, each section includes the date of its most recent review. The first suite of design guidance was released in October 2025.

## District Plan context

The District Plan enables multi-unit development and greater residential intensification in and around the Central City and most suburban centres, giving effect to the National Policy Statement on Urban Development 2020. In addition, there are other residential zones (including, but not limited to, Residential Medium Density ‘RMD’ and Suburban Density Transition ‘RSDT’) where multi-unit developments are anticipated. This provides for an increased supply of housing and choice, with the objective of achieving high-quality residential environments (District Plan objectives 14A.2.1/14.2.1 and 14A.2.5/14.2.4).

## Residential Design Principles

One of the main urban design-related matters of discretion within the District Plan for multi-unit housing developments are the ‘Residential Design Principles’. These can be found in:

- **14A.11.1** for residential zones within or close to centres **Medium Density Residential Zone (MRZ)** and **High Density Residential Zone (HRZ)**; and
- **14.15.1** for residential zones outside of centres **Residential Suburban (RS)**, **Residential Suburban Density Transition (RSDT)** and **Residential Medium Density (RMD)** zones.

While both RDP sets address similar matters, 14A.11.1 *Principle 1: Site layout* is the main difference. This principle highlights the importance of a well-considered site layout, while the first principle under 14.15.1 is ‘c. *City context and character*’ which relates to anticipated built form.

Both sets of Residential Design Principles are referred to in this guidance.

## Useful references

Design guidance developed elsewhere within Aotearoa may also be helpful for inspiration and general advice. These include:

- Ministry for the Environment’s *National Medium Density Design Guide*
- Auckland Council’s *Auckland Design Manual* (online at [www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz/](http://www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz/))
- Kainga Ora’s *Tāone Ora Urban Design Guidelines*



General design guides

# How to use this guidance

This guidance can be read as a complete document or as individual sections.

The structure of this guidance includes one pre-guidance chapter and three numbered chapters, which broadly align with the development design process.

The chapters are:

**Sites, context and housing types** – a high-level summary of typical development site types and multi-unit housing typologies, and the benefits of site and context analysis to inform site layout and design.

**1.0 Arranging the site** – spatial considerations of a development's site layout and function, including building orientation, access, parking, landscape, communal open space, services and safety.

**2.0 Street to front door** – addresses a development's impact on the street and/or adjacent communal spaces, including approach and access to entrances and front doors.

**3.0 The building(s)** – considers the overall appearance of building(s), and the functionality and amenity of internal layout and private open spaces.

Each section within the numbered guidance chapters covers a particular design goal over a double-page spread. Refer to page 8 for a sample spread and key.

While the guidance sets out good design practice and solutions for known and anticipated design challenges, there will be multiple other ways of achieving the design goals.

**Appendix A: Design goals relationship to Residential Design Principles (RDP)** sets out a table linking guidance sections to the relevant Principles.

## Common terms

There are a number of design-related terms commonly referred to throughout the guidance and not defined in the District Plan (unless indicated below). They include:

- **Multi-unit housing:** A group of three or more residential units on the same site, e.g. townhouses or apartments.
- **'Smaller' development:** Typically, up to 9 units.
- **'Larger' development:** 10+ units.

Also (in alphabetical order):

- **Accessway:** Route for pedestrians, cycles and/or vehicle movement (also see '**Shared accessway**').
- **Boundary treatment:** The means of enclosure used to demarcate and/or define private and public areas which can include fencing, walls or planting.
- **Chicane:** Alternate build-outs within an accessway to create an S-shaped line of travel to slow traffic.
- **Density:** Number of building/s in relation to land area, often referred to as 'x dwelling(s) per hectare'.
- **Habitable room:** Refer to DP definition.
- **Human scale:** Refer to DP definition.
- **Legibility:** The ability for a place to be understood, where residents and visitors can easily orient themselves without signage.
- **On-lot:** Within a private title.
- **Passive surveillance:** The ability of individuals to observe their surroundings naturally (a principle of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)).
- **Sense of ownership:** Clearly defined or implied relationship with an owner/unit.
- **Shared accessway:** Shared space 'driveway' for all users, designed to slow traffic for pedestrian safety.
- **Threshold:** Visual or physical separation, or 'buffer', demarcating two spaces, activities or uses.



Sample double-page spread layout, with key below.

## Key to guidance section layout

- Design goal:** What the guidance section sets out to achieve.
- Design goal summary:** A brief description of the key issues that the section addresses. It includes an extract from the key Residential Design Principle's wording.
- Reference box:** States the key and other relevant Residential Design Principles, related design goals and useful references (e.g. existing Council information, NZ Standards, etc).
- Design expectations:** Sets out how a development proposal can address the design goal and achieve the relevant Residential Design Principles.
- Supporting diagram(s):** Illustrates the design expectations.
- Examples of good outcomes for the design goal:** Images of developments that achieve the design goal. Annotations include colour-coded references to relevant Residential Design Principles.
- Common issues and improvements:** Demonstrates potential improvements to common issues that better address the design goal.
- Chapter and design goal title:** Includes chapter colour for ease of reference.
- Date of last update and revision number.**
- Colour coding for the Residential Design Principles.**