

Shaping Up '06

District Plan Effectiveness Report

INTRODUCTION

The Wellington City District Plan is the primary document that manages land use and development in Wellington.

How successfully does it achieve its objectives?

To ensure the integrity of our policy development process, and as part of our Resource Management Act (RMA) responsibilities, we have carried out a two-year study into the effectiveness of the District Plan's built environment chapters.

This publication provides a summary of the study's findings. The five areas it covers are: urban growth and development, urban design and residential amenity, heritage protection, noise environment, and mixed use.

A study into the Plan's natural environment chapters will begin this year, and a second *Shaping Up* report will be issued at the end of that study prior to a full review of the District Plan, which is due in 2010.

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Urban Growth &



POPULATION & HOUSING GROWTH

We discovered that:

- Wellington's population in 2001 was 163,812 people. The population growth rate for 1996–2001 was 3.7%, compared with 3.3% nationally.
- Growth has generally intensified within the existing urban limits.
- Between 1996 and 2001, almost 60% of the city's population growth occurred in the central city. This growth has been matched by a large increase in inner city residential units.
- Te Aro, Lambton, Thorndon and Mt Cook had the strongest growth in housing, which were mainly town houses or apartments. Churton Park also experienced strong growth, but the predominant type was single dwelling.
- Subdivision is occurring throughout the city. Between July 2000 and December 2005, the Council processed almost 1800 subdivision applications in residential and rural areas.

Development

The **District Plan** currently seeks to encourage new urban development in the existing urban area, and to restrict development in the rural area to preserve the rural character. Therefore, we wanted to understand how the city is growing, and where.

LAND USE ZONING

Of Wellington's 24,649 hectares, just 8% of land is zoned for urban activities and buildings. By comparison, 92% is classified as land where stricter controls are imposed to limit buildings and other activities in order to preserve a certain character or the natural environment i.e. 'Rural Area', 'Open Space' or 'Conservation Area'.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Regarding the nature and extent of development occurring in the rural environment, we learned that:

- Just 28 new building consents were processed in the period 2000–2004 (less than 0.5% of all new dwellings).
- More than 130 resource consents were processed for rural area activities and buildings between July 2000 and Dec 2005. Many of these were for residential dwellings in areas that are expected to be rezoned for residential use anyway (i.e. in the northern suburbs).
- Most of these consents had conditions attached to control the effects of the buildings or activities, e.g. natural colour building materials, low reflective surfaces, earthworks management plans.

HIGHLIGHTS

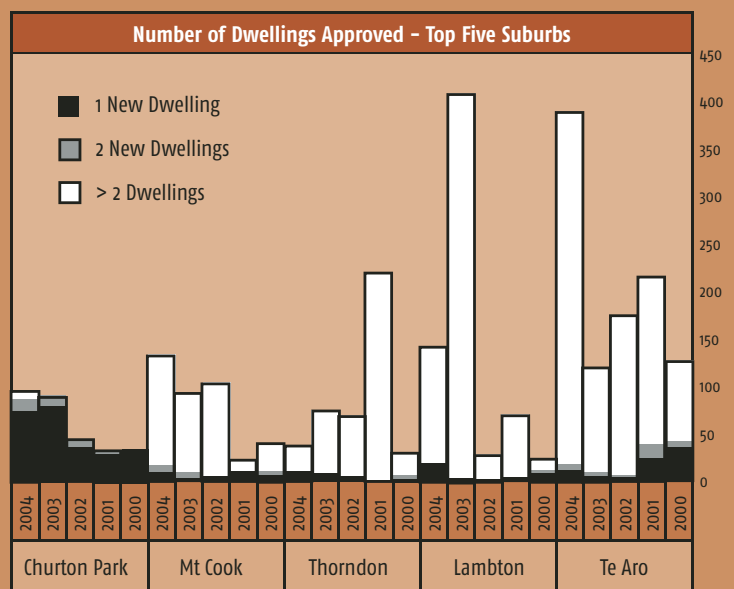
The District Plan's policies to promote residential intensification and a contained city are working effectively.

There is enough land zoned for residential use to cope with future population growth.

Most new growth will continue to occur in the central city, with some new growth in the northern suburbs, (i.e. Churton Park, Grenada).

CURRENT FOCUS

Residential infill is happening in most suburbs. We have begun a research project to better understand the effects of residential infill on the character of existing suburbs.



Urban Design &



CENTRAL AREA DESIGN GUIDES

A new planning approach was adopted for the central city in the current Plan. This approach focused on the design and appearance of new buildings (and additions and alterations to existing buildings), rather than having rigid bulk and location requirements. Building proposals are therefore assessed against the relevant Central Area design guide.

We studied a selection of buildings to test the design guides' effectiveness in achieving good design outcomes:

- Of the 20 developments assessed, 60% were regarded as better than average and, of those, 35% were rated as good or exemplary.
- As 40% of the buildings studied did not obtain favourable design assessments, significant improvements need to be made to improve the process and consistency of positive outcomes. Reasons for the unfavourable outcomes include the fact that some guideline content is out-of-date with current development trends, and the level of regulation imposed (a 'controlled activity') is not strong enough to enforce appropriate design changes.
- Nevertheless, the design guides have had an overall positive influence on urban design quality compared with the likely results of not having guidelines in place.

Residential Amenity



The **District Plan** seeks to maintain residential amenity, and to enhance the design of new buildings. Since the use of design guides was new for the current Plan (rather than having strict controls), we wanted to assess how effective they have been in achieving good design outcomes.

SUBURBAN CENTRE DESIGN GUIDES

Resource consents for work in the Thorndon Character Area and the Newtown Suburban Centre Character Area were studied to examine their effectiveness in helping to retain the character of these shopping areas.

For the five Thorndon consents processed between July 2000 and Dec 2004, there was clear evidence that the applicant had taken steps to comply with the design guide. Consent was granted in all cases.

Some 20 consents were processed in Newtown in the same period. The buildings here are more diverse than in Thorndon, and as a result there were some difficulties applying the design guides to 'modern' buildings (e.g. a 1950s concrete block building or a petrol station) compared with early 19th Century buildings.

HIGHLIGHTS

The District Plan's approach to managing residential amenity concerns, protecting character areas, and enhancing urban design in the central city is appropriate. In some areas, it is working very well.

In particular, the specific rules adopted in Mt Victoria and Thorndon to protect their pre-1930s character appear to be effective.

The Thorndon Suburban Centre guidelines have been effective in improving proposed building designs.

ISSUES

The Central Area Design Guide process and guidelines need to be refined to promote a higher standard of urban design.

Minor changes are needed to the Newtown Suburban Centre Design Guide so it better encompasses a wide variety of building designs.

CURRENT FOCUS

A review of the policies and rules guiding development in the central city is currently underway, including a revision of all Central Area Design Guides. The Plan change is likely to be notified in the second half of 2006.

The Council notified a Plan change (Dec 2005) to protect the residential areas of Newtown, Mt Cook and Berhampore with rules similar to those for Mt Victoria and Thorndon.

The Council also notified a Plan change (Dec 2005) to the Newtown Suburban Centre Character Area to encompass a wider variety of building designs and extend the character area.



RESIDENTIAL AMENITY

The majority of the bulk and location rules (e.g. boundary setbacks, building height, site coverage, sunlight access angles) are designed to protect residential amenity.

The three most common reasons for a residential project to require a resource consent are because the work breaches sunlight access angles, covers too much of the site or is built too close to a boundary. Wellington's hilly topography is a contributing factor to this, but often landowners want to maximise the value of their property either by house additions, subdivision or the construction of additional dwellings.

For these types of consents, the effects of the proposed building work (e.g. loss of privacy and sunlight) are largely confined to immediate neighbours and, generally, only they would be asked to give their approval to the work. In this regard, the rules are effective in ensuring that those directly affected are given the opportunity to be involved.

Residential Area Bulk and Location Statistics (July 2000–December 2005)

| Description | No. of times permitted activity rule was breached | As a proportion of all permitted activity breaches in the Plan |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Front Yards – Inner Residential Zone | 43 | 0.47 |
| Front Yards – Outer Residential Zone | 177 | 1.93 |
| Side and Rear Yards – All Zones | 822 | 8.97 |
| Site Coverage – Inner Residential Zone | 92 | 1.00 |
| Site Coverage – Outer Residential Zone | 977 | 10.66 |
| Building Height – Inner Residential Zone | 32 | 0.35 |
| Building Height – Outer Residential Zone | 232 | 2.53 |
| Sunlight Access – All Zones | 2027 | 22.12 |

PRE-1930s RESIDENTIAL CHARACTER AREAS

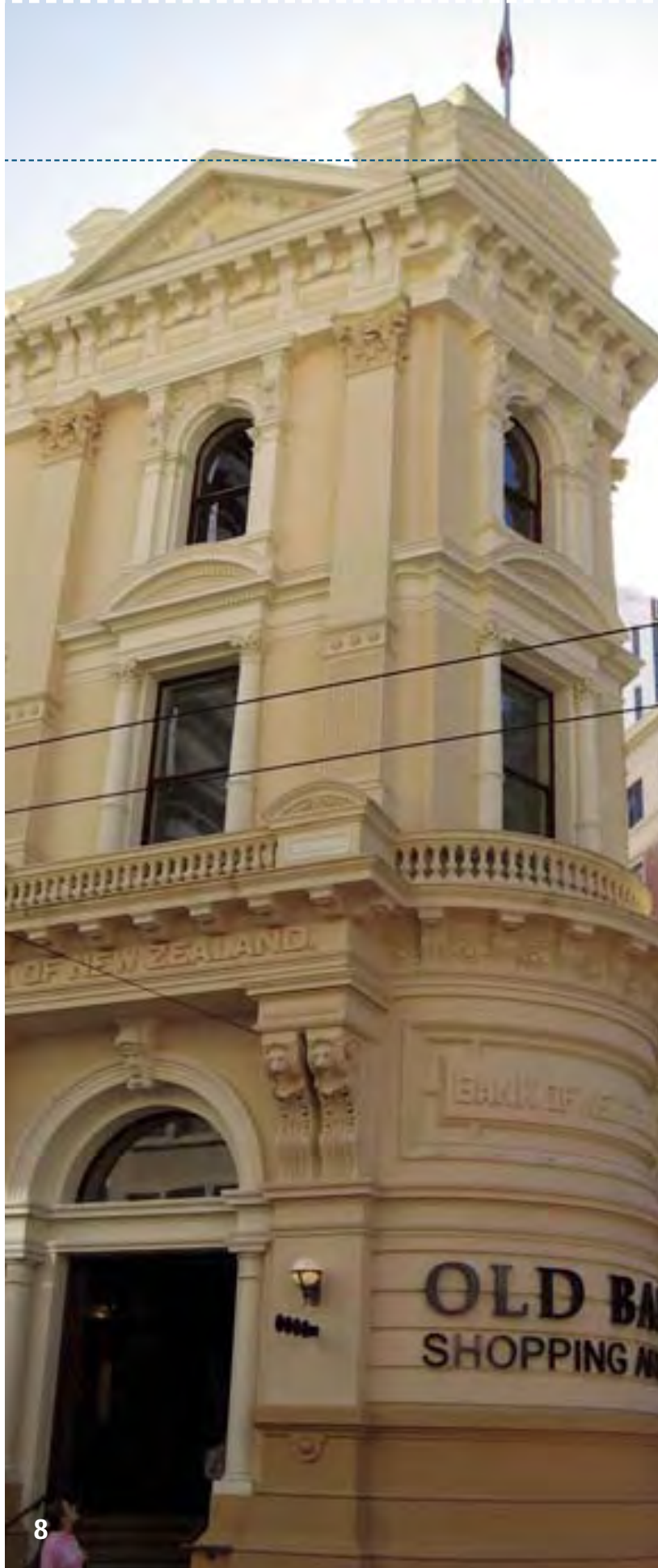
In Mt Victoria and Thorndon, special rules apply to protect the pre-1930s character of the houses. Because of growing interest in protecting other residential areas in this way, we wanted to know whether these additional character-based rules were effective.

We found that:

- Only nine resource consent applications were approved to partially demolish or remove buildings from Mt Victoria and Thorndon over a three-year period. However, there have been no applications to demolish pre-1930s buildings in the Thorndon Character Area (a smaller, more defined character area within Thorndon).
- Multi-unit developments in character areas are controlled to ensure they are well designed and respect the area's character. A study of 16 multi-unit developments in Mt Victoria and Thorndon found that:
 - 8 were exemplary
 - 4 were good
 - 3 were poor to marginal
 - Consent was declined for 1, which was not built.
- The design guidelines and rules are helping to achieve the desired character outcomes, but some improvements are needed to achieve more consistent outcomes. Pre-application consultation on proposals is consistently taking place and resulting in positive changes to building design at an early stage. A wide range of design-related conditions was also placed on resource consents for multi-units. A correlation was found between the 'poor to marginal' developments and the absence of a skilled professional architect/designer on the project or incomplete information in the consent application.



Heritage Protection



BUILT HERITAGE

Monitoring of the city's built heritage showed that the Council has taken appropriate steps to identify and list items for protection.

Our study showed that:

- 731 heritage items are listed for protection
- Since June 2000, 45 listed heritage buildings have undergone earthquake-strengthening work. The Council has given \$490,000 in grants to assist with this work.
- There are 166 heritage trees listed. Council staff respond to numerous calls about trees each month, but only four resource consents have been processed in four years relating to the heritage tree rule.

The rules of the Plan have been less than effective, however, in protecting listed items from inappropriate development. This was confirmed in a review of 55 resource consents for work on heritage buildings. Changes are needed to improve outcomes for listed buildings. The main barrier to achieving positive outcomes appears to be the 'controlled activity' rule, which requires the Council to approve a consent application and limits the scope of any conditions that the Council may wish to impose to protect heritage values.



The **District Plan** seeks to maintain and enhance the city's heritage – including sites of significance to Maori – to provide continuity with the past. We wanted to assess how effective the Plan has been in protecting listed heritage items from inappropriate development.

PROTECTION OF MAORI HERITAGE & VALUES

The Plan strongly encourages consultation with tangata whenua for any activity requiring a resource consent on or near a site with Maori values.

Our monitoring revealed that:

- No consents for work on Maori sites of significance had been applied for during the research period.
- Between July 2000 and June 2004, there were 62 resource consents for activities in the Maori Precincts. Consultation with Maori occurred in most, but not all, applications.
- Some examples of how Maori values have been protected include:
 - Consent conditions outlining the process to be followed if artefacts are discovered.
 - Placement of a plaque or artwork symbolising the tangata whenua history and association with the site.
 - Blessings or ceremonies to open a new building.
 - Covenants on land to restrict building within some parts of a site.

HIGHLIGHTS

731 heritage items are listed in the Plan for protection.

\$490,000 has been given in grants since June 2000 to encourage heritage building owners to strengthen the buildings to meet earthquake standards rather than demolish them.

The requirement for applicants to consult with Maori for works in Maori Precincts was met in most cases.

ISSUES

A study of consents for work on heritage buildings showed that the heritage rules should be strengthened to ensure better protection of heritage values.

CURRENT FOCUS

The heritage chapter has been reviewed and substantially revised, partly in response to these findings, but also to implement the 2005 Heritage Policy and an amendment to the RMA. A Plan change was notified in May 2006.

The Wellington Tenth Trust is developing a GIS model of sites of significance, which is expected to provide more detailed information about the extent of each site. This information will be included in the Plan when it is finalised.

Noise Environment



NUMBER AND TYPE OF NOISE COMPLAINTS

Complaints from the Council's noise database since 1999 show:

- A slow but steady rise in the number of complaints.
- About 25% of all complaints relate to noise in the central city.
- Complaints about stereo noise are the most significant concern (ranging from 68% to 76% of all complaints). Entertainment venues are the second highest category. Interestingly, complaints about other noise sources have dropped (e.g. alarms, construction noise).
- Complaints about noise from the Wellington airport occur about once a month on average. These complaints are typically about aircraft movement and engine running activities.

MONITORING NOISE LEVELS ACROSS THE CITY

Two noise level studies have been completed in the past five years. One study measured the noise levels in the central city and the other in residential areas.

Central Area Noise Survey

Due to the increase in complaints about central area noise over a number of years, it was decided to monitor the noise levels to better understand the problem. The increase in complaints correlates to the significant increase of people living in the central city.



The **District Plan** seeks to achieve an improvement in the noise environment throughout the city. In order to assess how effective it has been, we looked at the level of noise complaints, and measured noise levels in different parts of the city.

It was found that:

- The noise levels are significantly higher than the upper range of noise levels recommended for reasonable residential conditions.
- An important feature of inner city noise was the persistence of these high levels throughout the day and night, reflecting the range of activities that occur at night, e.g. entertainment venues.

Residential Area Noise Survey

Some 30 residential sites around Wellington were tested for their ambient noise levels. It was found that:

Night time noise was found to be half as loud (10dBA) as daytime levels. This justifies the need for the current Plan provisions, which set lower noise limits between 10pm–7am.

There was little difference in average sound levels between 'Inner Residential Area' and 'Outer Residential Area'. The Plan currently specifies a 10dBA difference in daytime noise limits between the two zones. In light of this, some change to these rules is likely.

There were only minor differences between weekday and weekend noise results, suggesting there is no longer a need for a stricter noise threshold for Sundays.

Comparing these results with an earlier 1990s survey shows that the noise environment has remained much the same.

So while a significant improvement has not been achieved as anticipated, the noise environment has not degraded either.

HIGHLIGHTS

Residential noise levels have remained the same over the past 10 years.

ISSUES

There has been a slow but steady increase in noise complaints over the past five years, many of these occurring in the central city.

Most central city complaints are about stereo noise and entertainment venues.

CURRENT FOCUS

The Plan was amended in June 2004 to deal with central city noise concerns. The main approach was to require better insulation of buildings against external noise. Some other minor amendments to the central city noise rules will also be made as part of the proposed Central Area Plan change in 2006.

Mixed use



PROMOTING MIXED USE

The mixed-use concept is expressed in the Plan in two ways: first, by allowing some non-residential uses in residential areas and, second, through permitting any land use in suburban centres and the central city, provided certain environmental standards are met.

Through our study, we wanted to see whether a greater degree of mixed-use development had occurred.

NON-RESIDENTIAL ACTIVITIES IN RESIDENTIAL AREAS

Resource consents for non-residential activities (processed between July 2000 and June 2005) included cafes, childcare centres and specialty shops or services.

These non-residential activities typically had the approval of affected parties, and were subject to an exhaustive list of conditions to ensure they did not reduce residential amenity.

COMPLAINTS ABOUT NON-RESIDENTIAL ACTIVITIES IN RESIDENTIAL AREAS

All 'environmental' complaints to the Council over a three-year period were analysed. It was found that only a small proportion involved concerns about non-residential activities. The biggest concern was businesses operating from home, causing problems with noise, lack of parking, congestion and visual effects.



The **District Plan** seeks to encourage a mix of land uses and activities to promote the sustainable management of resources (i.e. people working, shopping and playing in areas close to home).

LAND USE SURVEY IN THE CENTRAL CITY AREA

The Council surveyed an area surrounding Cuba Street (Cuba Precinct) to see whether the mixed-use policy was facilitating a mix of land uses. A similar study of this area was carried out in 1988 so a repeat allowed comparisons to be made.

Key findings include that:

- The Cuba Street Retail Core has remained intact and been strengthened over the past 20 years.
- The most significant change from the 1988 study to the 2005 study is the increase in apartments especially in the north Cuba area (from Ghuznee to Wakefield Streets).
- There has been a slight shift of manufacturing from the north to the south of the area, probably as a result of growth of apartments in the north.

DISTRICT PLAN CHANGES TO EXTEND SUBURBAN CENTRES OR THE CENTRAL AREA

We wanted to assess whether activities typically found in suburban centres and the central city were expanding into residential areas, potentially affecting their residential amenity.

In a review of all Plan changes, it appears that only one (Plan Change 34 – minor amendments) proposed to rezone two small areas of land from a residential zoning to a suburban centre zoning. On this basis, there appears to be little or no pressure on residential areas generated by either the central area or suburban centres.

HIGHLIGHTS

The District Plan has facilitated a greater degree of mixed-use development.

The Cuba Street Retail Core has remained intact and been strengthened over the past 20 years.

▶▶ *Input into the District Plan*

There are two opportunities this year to provide specific feedback to the Council on two of the issues covered in this report. A proposed Plan change on the heritage provisions in the Plan is currently open for submissions until 3 July. See the Council website for more information:

<http://www.Wellington.govt.nz/plans/district/planchanges/planchange43.html>

The Council will also be seeking submissions on the revised 'Central Area' provisions. This Plan change will cover a wide range of central city issues, including the quality of building design. We expect this Plan change to be notified for public submissions in August 2006.

▶▶ *Your Thoughts . . .*

What do you think of the information presented in this District Plan effectiveness report? Do you think we have covered the main issues affecting the built environment? Are there other areas of the District Plan that we should research?

We'd like to know as your feedback may be useful for the second stage of our monitoring programme on the natural environment.

Please send your comments to:

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