

Missing Middle Housing Reform

Snapshot



ACT
Government

Planning for more housing choice in Canberra

Canberra is growing quickly. By 2050 we expect nearly 700,000 people to call our city home. Because of this growth, it's estimated that there will be a need for 30,000 new homes in the next five years.

Meeting this goal isn't just about expanding the city and building more houses – it's about making sure new homes that get built include a variety of housing choice. With limited undeveloped greenfield land, we need to make better use of our existing suburbs and plan for a more compact, efficient and sustainable Canberra.

Currently, new homes in Canberra are mostly single houses or high-density apartment buildings. This leaves a 'gap' in the housing market - typically referred to as 'missing middle' housing - with potential for more low and medium density housing options.

In Canberra, missing middle housing includes:

- > dual or tri-occupancies (2 or 3 houses on one block),
- > townhouses and terrace homes
- > low-rise apartments.

This isn't a new concept for Canberra – we already have some great examples of this type of housing in some of our oldest (as well as newest) suburbs. But we need to make sure that more Canberrans across the whole city have access to a range of housing options. While we have pockets where middle housing occurs, there isn't enough and it's not available in all suburbs. Providing more housing options can help meet the needs of our diverse and growing population.



Missing Middle Housing Reforms

The ACT Government is responding to the demand for greater housing choice by reforms to our planning system, including changes to the Territory Plan through a Major Plan Amendment, and a new Missing Middle Housing Design Guide:

- > **The Missing Middle Housing Design Guide** will provide best practice guidance for creating well-designed homes that respect local character and contribute positively to our streets and neighbourhoods
- > **Updates to the Territory Plan** removes barriers in the planning system and allows more housing options (including more townhouses, terraces, and duplexes) in residential areas. These changes will make it easier to build well-designed, sustainable homes in our existing suburbs.

The reforms have been developed with local architects, designers and technical experts to balance the needs of new and existing residents, aiming to supply more well-designed, sustainable housing in existing residential areas while maintaining Canberra's unique amenity and suburban character.

Major Plan Amendment to the Territory Plan

The Territory Plan focuses on delivering high-quality buildings for residents while encouraging new design and planning ideas.

The changes to the Territory Plan include updates to key policies and supporting documents including the Residential Zones and Subdivision Policy and associated technical specifications. Key changes that enable more missing middle housing includes:

- > More housing options permitted in RZ1 and RZ2 Residential Zones
- > Subdivision of RZ1 residential blocks permitted
- > Consolidation of RZ1 residential blocks permitted

Importantly the Territory Plan retains:

- > 45% site coverage for multi-units in RZ1 and RZ2 Residential Zones
- > Maximum building heights
- > Principle Private Open Space (PPOS) specifications

By allowing more and different types of homes across Canberra, the Missing Middle Housing Reforms will:

- > **Provide more housing choices for Canberrans** including opportunities for multi-generational living, to age in place, and first home buyers
- > **Remove barriers** to make it easier for people to build and purchase different types of homes
- > **Allow people to live in the communities they love** with housing that meets their needs at different life stages
- > **Revitalise** our older suburbs by adding new homes which make a positive contribution to the street and suburb
- > **Limit urban sprawl and increase the availability of land and housing** in our existing urban footprint
- > **Support vibrant and walkable neighbourhoods.**

- > Setbacks and solar building envelopes for single dwellings
- > Minimum dwelling sizes on one-bedroom dwellings and two-bedroom dwellings
- > Cross ventilation specifications, and
- > Tree planting specifications

These changes will enable well-designed, low-rise sustainable and comfortable homes that blend into our existing suburbs without too much change to the character of these areas, helping individuals, couples and families to find homes in existing suburbs, and making it easier for older Canberrans to stay in their communities as they age.

The reforms help the planning system to quickly respond to population growth and market demand, reducing the need for new housing in undeveloped areas and creating a more compact and efficient city.

Residential zones in Canberra

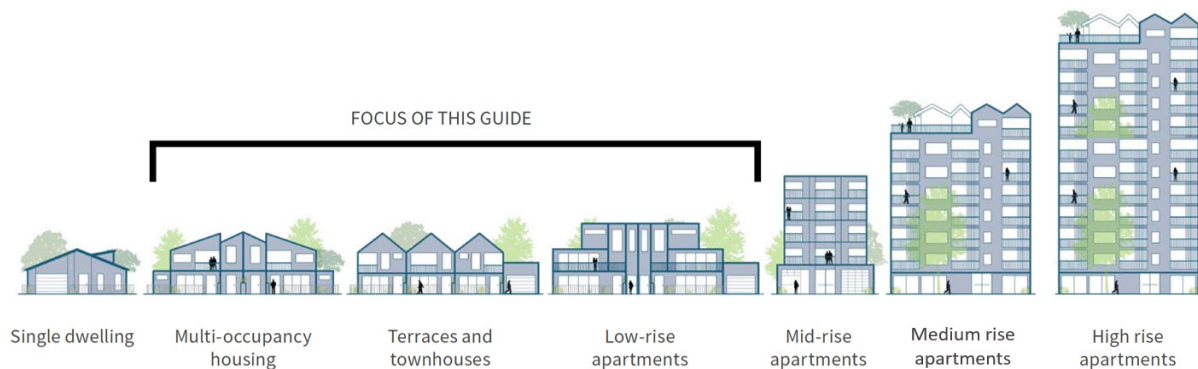
Most land in the ACT suitable for buildings (urban land) is zoned for residential use, or RZ, meaning it is land for housing (including houses and multi-units). RZ1 the 'Suburban Zone', makes up 79.7% of Canberra's residential land, and has typically included mainly single houses. RZ2, the 'Suburban Core', (around 12.9% of the city's residential land) is usually located closer to local shops or services and allows for a greater mix of single houses and denser housing. RZ3, RZ4 and RZ5 zones allow higher medium density buildings (like apartments).



The Missing Middle Housing Design Guide

The Missing Middle Housing Design Guide (the Guide) is a new addition to the existing suite of design guidance documents that help create better buildings and public spaces across our city. Based on key Design Principles, the document provides guidance on how to achieve best practice design outcomes for new ‘missing middle’ homes to be built in existing suburbs by:

- > supporting building different types of ‘missing middle’ housing in a way that fits well with existing neighbourhood context and character
- > encouraging sustainable building practices, efficient land use and minimal negative impact on the natural environment
- > promoting designs that deliver lively, safe and walkable communities.



The Guide explains what good design for different housing types looks like and encourages new ideas for developing low-rise ‘missing middle’ housing - assisting design professionals, builders and landowners in achieving well designed missing middle housing projects. The Guide focuses on buildings that are of a height and scale that feels comfortable for pedestrians and residents (‘human scale’ development), designs that protect and enhance street character and verge trees, and ensuring that denser housing developments don’t impact negatively on neighbours.

The main features of the Missing Middle Housing Design Guide are to:

- > encourage new housing types like multi-occupancies, townhouses, terraces and low-rise apartment buildings that blend into existing neighbourhoods
- > help the community, landowners and developers understand and apply the Territory Plan's assessment requirements when planning for new buildings in Canberra's suburbs
- > offer guidance on how to achieve best practice outcomes in sustainable buildings and liveable communities
- > show how change can happen in existing suburbs while protecting and improving street character through good design.

Changes to the ACT Design Guide Suite

As part of the ACT Government's Missing Middle Housing Reforms and because of the introduction of the MMHDG, several updates have been made to the suite of existing ACT Design Guides (Housing Design Guide, Urban Design Guide, City Centre Urban Design Guide and Biodiversity Sensitive urban Design Guide). These changes ensure the guides remain aligned with the revised planning framework and support the delivery of diverse, well-designed housing and development outcomes across Canberra.

Key updates include:

> Clarification of Design Guide Triggers

The reforms establish clearer triggers for when each design guide applies. This improves transparency and usability for proponents, designers and decision-makers by outlining which guide(s) are relevant based on development type, scale and context. The revised triggers help streamline application processes and ensure the appropriate design guidance is applied consistently across different housing proposals.

> Rebranding of the Housing Design Guide to the Apartment Design Guide

The existing Housing Design Guide has been renamed and rebranded as the Apartment Design Guide. This change reflects its refined focus on apartment-style developments and distinguishes it more clearly from the newly introduced MMHDG. The renaming improves clarity within the suite and better communicates the intended scope of each document.

> Removal of duplicated Territory Plan Assessment Outcomes

References to Territory Plan assessment outcomes have been removed from the design guides. This change reinforces the role of the guides as advisory and design-focused documents rather than statutory assessment tools. Assessment requirements remain within the Territory Plan, simplifying the regulatory framework and reducing duplication.

The Territory Plan – how does it work

When someone is looking to design a new building in Canberra they need to show that they have considered the requirements and guidance of the ACT's planning documents including:

- > The Territory Plan
- > Technical Specifications
- > Design Guides.

The Territory Plan is a legislative document that includes District Policies, Zone Policies and Policies for Subdivision and Leasing. The documents within the Plan include desired built outcomes and specific requirements for new developments. New developments must demonstrate that they are consistent with the assessment outcomes and meet the mandatory assessment requirements:

- > District Policies include desired policy outcomes and assessment outcomes and requirements for new developments in each specific district
- > Zone Policies list the types of developments and uses that can be built in specific zones, the policy outcomes for different zones as well as the relevant assessment outcomes and requirements.

New developments also need to consider other documents to ensure the best built outcome for our city. These include technical specifications and design guides:

- > Technical specifications provide more clarity about the expectations for new developments in particular areas, including for elements like building height and density. They are not 'rules', but rather give detailed guidance about the community and Territory Planning Authority's expectations for that area
- > Design guides offer guidance on how to achieve the assessment outcomes required by the District and Zone Policies for new developments. The guides use clear writing, images and diagrams to demonstrate best practice approaches and examples of good design. The guides must be considered and responded to when seeking development approval. Current design guides include the:
 - > Missing Middle Housing Design Guide
 - > Apartment Design Guide (formerly Housing Design Guide)
 - > Urban Design Guide
 - > Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide
 - > City Centre Urban Design Guide



Territory Plan updates to support Missing Middle Housing

Major Plan Amendment 04 (MPA 04) introduces a series of updates to the ACT Territory Plan to better enable “missing middle” housing—such as townhouses, terraces, and low rise apartments—while maintaining neighbourhood character and improving clarity in the planning system.

The reforms **simplify and modernise the planning policy**. Across multiple parts of the Territory Plan, policy outcomes have been confirmed as high level objectives rather than detailed assessment rules. This better differentiates the desired outcomes to be achieved in each zone.

A new **Missing Middle Housing Design Guide** has been introduced to support better housing design, while the existing Housing Design Guide has been refocused and rebranded as the **Apartment Design Guide**. This ensures clearer guidance for different housing types and improves the quality of future development.

In the **Residential Zones Policy**, the reforms better differentiate each residential zone by refining their names and intended outcomes. This helps ensure that the right types of housing are delivered in the right locations. The changes expand housing choice by:

- > Allowing co-housing in RZ1 zoned areas,
- > Enabling well-designed apartments in RZ1 zoned areas, and
- > Removing minimum block size thresholds that previously limited secondary residences and co-housing.

Other updates include **standardising site coverage requirements**, including broad adjustments to **building height requirements** across most residential zones. Building height will now be primarily managed by storey limits, allowing better proportional design without constraining internal building heights.

Assessment outcomes have been retained to ensure impacts to **streetscape character, design quality, and impacts on the public domain** continue to be considered through the DA assessment process. Some minor updates have been made to consider the impacts from parking, particularly street parking.

Importantly, the reforms shift away from rigid controls such as fixed dwelling limits and minimum block sizes for redevelopment. Instead, development capacity will be guided by design quality and performance standards, supported by updated technical specifications and density targets.

In the **Subdivision Policy**, barriers to subdividing and consolidating blocks - particularly in RZ1 areas - have been reduced. Subdivision can now occur without first building a dwelling, provided minimum block sizes are met. The changes also introduce clearer requirements to ensure subdivision outcomes are practical and minimise impacts such as poorly designed battle-axe blocks.

Finally, updates to the **Territory Plan Dictionary** improve clarity and consistency by refining key definitions, including attic design, private open space, and housing types.

Overall, these changes streamline the planning system, remove unnecessary barriers, and support a broader mix of well-designed housing options across Canberra - helping deliver more choice while protecting the qualities people value in their neighbourhoods.



Technical Specifications changes to support Missing Middle Housing

To support the Missing Middle Housing reforms, updates to key planning specifications for subdivision and residential development have been made. These changes aim to enable more diverse housing options while maintaining neighbourhood character, improving design quality, and enhancing environmental outcomes.

Subdivision specifications have been refined to allow for greater housing diversity. This includes reducing minimum block sizes across residential zones and setting clearer controls for how blocks can be subdivided - particularly in existing low-density areas such as RZ1. While permitted in the Territory Plan, new specifications discourage battle-axe block layouts and minimise the visual impact of driveways, helping protect streetscape character. Guidance is also introduced to encourage block consolidations in more suitable areas, such as at the end of sections, and to manage the extent of development in heritage areas, alongside clarifications to ensure certain requirements apply only to large estate-style subdivisions.

Residential development standards have also been modernised to better support multi-unit and medium-density housing. In lower-density zones (RZ1 and RZ2), updated specifications outline maximum desired housing density while allowing more flexibility in design. Private open space specifications have been reduced and made more adaptable, with a clearer approach to how private, shared, and communal spaces can contribute to liveability.

Building design specifications have been updated to support better outcomes across all residential zones. This includes revised height limits (in metres). This seeks to create a smoother transition between different residential zones, along with more flexible building envelopes and setbacks. Solar access and overshadowing specifications have been strengthened to better protect neighbours' living areas, open space, and rooftop solar systems. At the same time, privacy and building separation requirements are clarified to ensure appropriate spacing between new missing middle homes.

The reforms also introduce greater flexibility in dwelling design, including smaller minimum sizes for some homes and removal of certain constraints like maximum building depth. Landscaping and environmental performance are a stronger focus, with increased tree planting and canopy coverage requirements in many cases, alongside measures to discourage artificial turf.

Finally, parking, fencing, and storage provisions are being updated to better reflect contemporary housing needs, while new and expanded heritage provisions ensure important character and values are retained.

Overall, these updates are designed to make it easier to deliver well-designed, sustainable “missing middle” housing—while maintaining the qualities that residents value in their neighbourhoods.

Canberra House Pattern Book

The ACT Government is developing a 'Canberra House Pattern Book' of endorsed building designs that can be used to guide the creation of new housing across the city.

Facilitated through a design competition, the Canberra House Pattern Book will harness design talent and innovation from the national design community to develop patterns that are liveable, buildable, adaptable and responsive to the unique climate, character and Country of the ACT.

The Canberra House Pattern Book will be a useful resource for developers, architects, planners, government, and the community. It will contain designs and guidelines supporting the construction of more high-quality, sustainable housing responding to the design objectives and guidance of the Missing Middle Housing Design Guide. The collection of designs will be for low to mid-rise missing middle housing of up to two storeys.

The pattern book designs will be compatible with Modern Methods of Construction (MMC), supporting flexible, performance-based designs that promote buildability, adaptability and efficient delivery without prescribing specific construction systems.





**More
homes,**
more
choices.
Built
for your
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