



ACT
Government

Residential Courtyard Walls, Front Fences and Gates

Advisory Note 18

Territory Planning Authority
August 2026

Introduction to advisory notes

Advisory notes provide guidance on how particular processes in the ACT planning system will typically occur, how elements of the system work and how considerations will typically be made. These will typically be technical in nature and may cover anything from steps in an assessment and decision-making process to interpreting elements of the statutory planning documents.

Advisory notes in combination with process maps, guides and factsheets, seek to support all stakeholders to better understand and interact with the planning system.

Advisory notes are for the use of all stakeholders, including the development industry when preparing a development proposal or progressing a proposal through the assessment and approvals process, or the general community when commenting on applications and interacting with the planning system.

Advisory notes are prepared by the Territory Planning Authority to cover elements of the *Planning Act 2023* only. These are not intended to cover other processes, such as Building Approvals under the *Building Act 2004*.

Advisory notes may be updated or added to from time to time.

Version history

Version number	Approved by	Date
1.0	A/g Senior Manager, Decisions Team, Statutory Planning Division, CED	05/08/2026

Glossary

building line	Building line means a line drawn parallel to any front boundary along the front face of a building or through the point on a building closest to the front boundary. A terrace, landing, porch, balcony, deck, or verandah that is more than 1.5 metres above finished ground level or is covered by a roof is deemed to be part of the building. A fence, courtyard wall or retaining wall is not deemed to be part of the building for the purpose of setting the building line.
front boundary	means any boundary of a block adjacent to a public road, public reserve, or public pedestrian way.
private open space	means an outdoor area within a block useable for outdoor living activities, and may include balconies, terraces or decks but does not include any area required to be provided for the parking of motor vehicles and any common driveways and common vehicle manoeuvring areas.

Advisory Note 18: Residential Courtyard Walls, Front Fences and Gates

This Advisory Note provides guidance on achieving acceptable planning outcomes for courtyard walls, fences and gates on residential blocks, particularly along front boundaries to streets, public open space and Territory land.

Background

Development applications (DAs) for residential development may include proposals for courtyard walls, fences and gates, particularly along front boundaries to streets, public open space or Territory land. These elements may form part of a new development proposal or be introduced or modified through subsequent applications, such as an amendment application.

In all cases, front boundary fencing and courtyard walls play an important role in shaping the interface between private development and the public realm. Their design can have a significant influence on streetscape character, visual amenity, and the ability to achieve passive surveillance of public areas, which are key planning considerations in residential zones.

When assessing development proposals, the Territory Planning Authority (the Authority) will consider whether courtyard walls, fences and gates achieve acceptable planning outcomes, including:

- maintaining the open, landscaped character of residential areas
- supporting passive surveillance and safety
- integrating with the built form and landscape setting of the site
- avoiding dominant or visually intrusive structures along the frontage

Changes to fencing, courtyard walls or gates, whether within a new application or as part of a revised proposal, such as increases in height, extension across a larger portion of the frontage, or a shift from transparent to solid construction, can materially alter the relationship between a development and the public realm.

Proposals that result in a more enclosed, visually prominent or less permeable frontage may conflict with desired planning outcomes relating to streetscape amenity and public interface.

Accordingly, the Authority will assess whether the design and configuration of courtyard walls, fences and gates:

- are consistent with the intended streetscape outcome for the area, and
- maintain an appropriate balance between privacy for occupants and openness to the public domain

Where a proposal does not achieve these outcomes, it may not be supported.

Front fences in the ACT

The ACT has had a policy in place for many years of not allowing front fences with the intent to retain the 'garden city' character of Canberra. The aim of this policy is that front boundaries have the majority of the front yard visually integrated with the streetscape or adjacent open space to provide passive surveillance and promote connection with the community.

While front fences are generally not permitted forward of the building line, Technical Specification 18.1 for Residential Zones provides guidance on limited circumstances where fences or walls may be permitted in this location. These include where the outcome is established through an estate development plan or subdivision design application, permitted by a relevant district policy, designed as a compliant courtyard wall (See Technical Specification 18.2 for Residential Zones), or qualifies as exempt development.

For multi-unit housing, fencing forward of the building line may be considered where it meets specific design criteria, including setbacks, height limits, transparency, articulation and landscaping.

This Advisory Note supplements these provisions by providing guidance on how proposals will be assessed against broader planning outcomes, including streetscape consistency, visual amenity and passive surveillance. Meeting Technical Specification 18.1 for Residential Zones does not, of itself, ensure a proposal will be supported. The Authority will consider whether the overall design achieves the intended balance between privacy and openness and contributes positively to the public domain.

Generally, a block fronting a public road, public reserve or public pedestrian way may not be fenced forward of the building line on any of the front boundaries. Instead, a courtyard wall may be constructed.

Common boundary fences, including residential side fences between two privately leased properties, can be exempt where the fence complies with the *Planning (Exempt Development) Regulation 2023*.

Common boundary fences can be constructed up to 2.3m above natural ground level but must be located behind the front building line.

What is the difference between a fence and a courtyard wall?

A fence is typically a solid or transparent structure that encloses an area to provide a secure space for children or animals, to prevent intrusion or to mark a property boundary. A fence is used to delineate private open space from public space, for visual screening and privacy, and may also provide amelioration of noise from adjacent sources, depending on the material.

A courtyard wall allows for privacy for part of a dwelling or for partial enclosure of an open space area in front of a dwelling. A courtyard wall is constructed of brick, block, or stonework and may have feature panels that use another material, namely timber or metal.

Courtyard walls generally cannot extend the entire length of the block (50-70% depending on block size) and also need to be set back from the front boundary at a minimum of 50% (at least half) of the minimum front setback. This setback allows for vegetation to be planted between the front boundary and the courtyard wall.

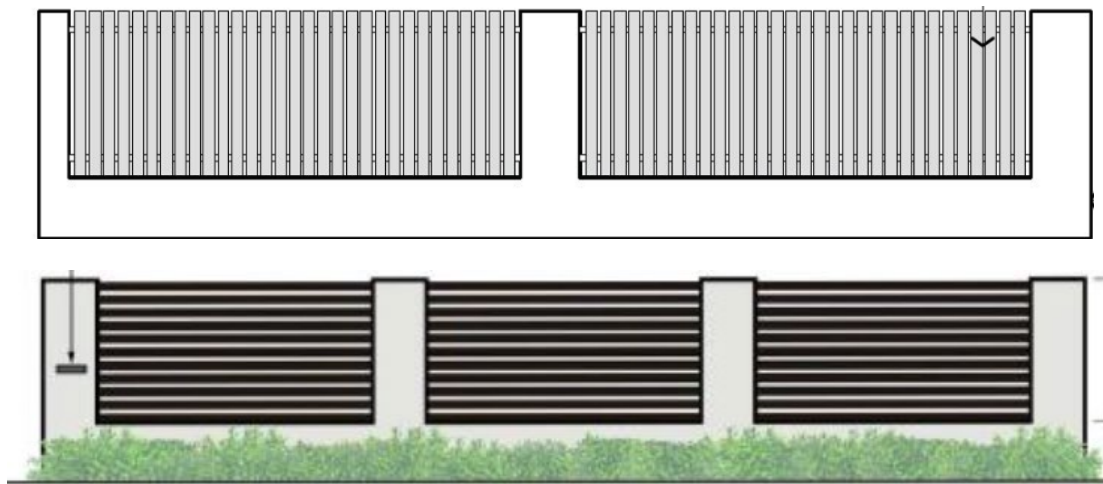
Generally, a courtyard wall can be a maximum height of 1.8m above datum ground level (DGL), unless otherwise prescribed in a [single dwelling district declaration](#).

For single dwelling housing exempt development, front fences and freestanding walls are generally not permitted forward of the building line, except for certain limited circumstances which are listed in the [Single Dwelling Housing Development Control](#).

Similar controls are also reflected in section 1.48 of the [Planning \(Exempt Development\) Regulation 2023](#) as a stand-alone exemption criterion for fences and freestanding walls. This includes both boundary fences and any other fences or walls forward of the building line.

Minor departures to the front setback requirement for a courtyard wall can be considered through the [exemption declaration](#) pathway.

Some examples of courtyard walls



Considerations

When assessing development proposals for courtyard walls, fences and gates along front boundaries, the Territory Planning Authority will consider whether the proposal achieves appropriate planning outcomes having regard to the following:

Streetscape and public interface:

- The extent to which the proposal maintains a visually open frontage that is consistent with the suburban character and the established streetscape.
- Whether fencing, walls or gates avoid creating a continuous solid barrier or visually dominant edge along the street or public domain.
- The contribution of the proposal to an active and legible interface with the street, public open space or Territory land.

Visibility and passive surveillance:

- Whether the design enables clear views between the dwelling and the public realm, supporting passive surveillance and safety.
- The degree to which fencing and gates incorporate transparent or semi-transparent elements rather than fully solid construction.
- Whether the proposal avoids reducing visibility to streets, pedestrian paths and open space.

Height and visual impact:

- Whether the height of fencing or courtyard walls is appropriate to its context, including:
 - up to 1.8m where privacy or enclosure is justified
 - reduced heights (generally around 1.5m) where facing streets or public spaces to minimise visual impact
- The extent to which height contributes to, or detracts from, streetscape amenity and openness, consistent with acceptable built form outcomes for residential areas.

Extent, siting and relationship to the building:

- Whether fencing or courtyard walls are appropriately located relative to the building line, including:
 - avoiding fencing forward of the building line unless forming part of a courtyard wall arrangement or approved design outcome
- The extent to which fencing:
 - avoids enclosing the full frontage
 - is limited in length and incorporates breaks or transitions
- Whether walls and fences return to the building line, clearly defining a private area without creating a fully enclosed frontage.

Design quality and articulation:

- The degree to which fencing and courtyard walls are articulated, avoiding long, uninterrupted or uniform boundary treatments.
- Whether the design incorporates variation in materials, textures, colours or patterning to reduce visual bulk.
- The extent to which fencing and gates are visually secondary to the dwelling and integrated with the overall architectural design.

Materials and transparency:

- The use of high-quality, durable materials that complement the dwelling and surrounding development.
- Whether materials contribute to visual permeability, including the use of slats, openings or lightweight upper elements.
- Avoidance of visually heavy or continuous solid materials where these would detract from the streetscape.

Landscape integration:

- The extent to which fencing and courtyard walls are integrated with front garden planting and landscaping, including hedges and shrubs.
- Whether landscaping is used to soften built elements and reinforce the garden character of the area.

- Provision of planting between the wall or fence and the boundary where appropriate, consistent with courtyard wall outcomes.

Gates and access:

- Whether gates are consistent in design, height and transparency with the associated fence or wall.
- The extent to which gates maintain visibility into the site and avoid a fortified or defensive appearance.
- Whether access arrangements maintain safe sightlines for pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles.

Interfaces with public open space and Territory land:

- Where a boundary adjoins public open space, pedestrian paths or Territory land:
 - the degree of transparency and reduced height to support safety and amenity
 - integration with landscaping and the broader public domain
- Whether the proposal maintains a positive and safe interface between private development and public areas.

Extent of frontage

Proposals for fencing, gates or courtyard walls forward of the building line that extend across a substantial portion, or the full width, of the frontage are generally not supported due to their potential to create a visually dominant and enclosed streetscape outcome. However, the Authority recognises that in limited and site-specific circumstances, such outcomes may be acceptable where it can be clearly demonstrated that the proposal achieves the underlying intent of the Territory Plan, particularly that courtyard walls and fences do not have an adverse impact on the streetscape. These situations are considered exceptions, rather than common or expected outcomes, and require a high level of design resolution and supporting evidence.

Diplomatic boundary fencing and security

Proposals for boundary fencing, walls and gates associated with a chancellery and/or a diplomatic residence operate within a distinct planning and design context. It is recognised these developments can require a higher level of security, identity and design quality. While residential planning provisions emphasise openness and permeability, diplomatic developments must balance these outcomes with the combined objectives of security, design excellence and landscape integration.

Got questions?

If you have any queries, please contact the DA Gateway team at:

Email: planningenquiries@act.gov.au

Online: <https://services.accesscanberra.act.gov.au/s/forms/land-planning-and-building-enquiry>

Phone: 02 6205 2888