

3. EFFECTS OF INFILL HOUSING ON NEIGHBOURS

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PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is:

- To inform the Council on the outcome of a Council sponsored survey in 2002 concerning the effects of infill development on resident neighbours.
- To recommend, through the Regulatory and Consents Committee, that the City Plan Team assesses whether there is sufficient grounds in the findings of the report to justify any changes to the City Plan's rules applying to the Living 1, 2 and 3 Zones.

BACKGROUND

The effects of infill development on neighbourhoods, particularly in the Living 1 and 2 Zones, has been a source of public concern in Christchurch over the past decade. Following the Council's decisions on the City Plan in 1999, when tougher rules on minimum site size were imposed, the amount of infill development has fallen away, with a concomitant increase in peripheral development. Nevertheless, 493 consents for unit development in Living 1, 2 and 3 Zones were issued in the July 2002 - June 2003 12 month period, which was nearly 80 per cent of the total number of units for the City. Therefore the effects on neighbourhoods can still be significant.

In early 2002 the Council engaged Lincoln University to undertake research into the effects of infill development on neighbouring properties. This work was subsequently carried out by Ms Suzanne Vallance, a Masters student at Lincoln who undertook the work as her thesis and made available her findings in the latter part of 2003. The research arose from an earlier study by the Council in 1999 into the role of townhouses in meeting housing needs.

Research of this nature is important for the following reasons:

- The City Plan promotes urban consolidation, so we can expect infill development to continue under this policy.
- Infill continues to be the preferred choice of what is likely to be a growing segment of the housing market (smaller households) as borne out by the townhouse survey.
- The response to this survey is applicable to other residential zones (eg L4) as well as to gauging the impact of housing extensions in the suburban L1 and L2 zones.
- Some of the assumptions underlying concepts such as 'consolidation' and 'smart growth' can be revisited.
- Possible improvements to the City Plan and other methods can be identified.
- This and other surveys will have an important input into the Long Term Council Community Plan.

This survey was one of three research projects aimed at assessing the attitudes of the community towards various types of residential development. The other two were the Townhouse Survey, and the Greenfield Subdivisions Survey, the results of which are likely to be reported to Council in May 2004.

METHODOLOGY

The research consisted of a postal survey to around 800 occupiers living in properties adjacent or near to recent infill development in the L1, L2 and L3 Zones. The response rate was 34 percent which is statistically reliable, and about average for a survey of this type. The survey was preceded by an interview with 21 property owners.

Suzanne will be at the meeting to explain the methodology in more detail if required, including some limitations of the method.

RESULTS

The results of the survey were conclusive in a number of respects. Firstly, a significant number of residents are experiencing negative impacts on their privacy, and loss of sunlight. This is most likely to happen when the infill comprises two or three storey attached townhouses/apartments, associated with the Living 2 and 3 Zones respectively.

Secondly, there is a genuine concern about the poor quality of construction in some of the infill developments (note: The research was undertaken prior to the release of the Hunn Report on the weather tightness of buildings). The fear held by residents is that such housing will degenerate quickly and affect the amenity of the wider neighbourhood. Thirdly, there is strong concern expressed at the loss of character buildings and greenery, to be replaced by what one respondent described as "dead things - buildings and walls". As noted by the author, the very qualities that make up the 'Garden City' image which are being lost in the suburbs are those which are highlighted by real estate marketers in promoting new peripheral subdivisions.

Finally, the survey raises some significant questions over community and social outcomes. Increased density (and other concepts such as mixed uses) are often promoted as ways of increasing community interaction often associated with 'traditional' neighbourhoods. This does not appear to be happening through intensification in Christchurch to date, and there is strong evidence emerging from this survey that 'community spirit', and neighbourhoods, had suffered. This is a subject where more targeted research is needed.

We need to be careful not to draw blanket conclusions from the research. There is still a substantial number of people who are either neutral, or who would not agree with the above points. As indicated in the Townhouse Survey, there are likely to be people who already reside in infill dwellings who do not consider that the changes taking place are undesirable. Nevertheless, there are enough pointers to encourage the Council to look closely at the quality and effects of infill development occurring around the City. Some steps have already been taken (design guides for the L3 and L4 Zone) but these cannot address the underlying problems which mainly relate to the City Plan and a lack of comprehensive planning. For example, in relation to the latter point, residents concerns about traffic may be lessened through street calming.

CONCLUSIONS

The growth strategy as set out in the City Plan attempts to slow the outward spread of urban development, and broaden housing choice, by encouraging higher residential densities in selected parts of the City. The strategy is consistent with accepted international practice in planned urban centres, and has been accepted as a sound principle by the Environment Court. However, objectives and policies are only of value if they produce good outcomes through their implementation.

This survey has highlighted public concern about the effects certain kinds of development are having on neighbourhoods, communities and the image of Christchurch as a 'Garden City'. There is no suggestion that 'all infill is bad', but there are matters that need to be addressed about the way in which intensification is occurring, ie policies and objectives are being implemented on the ground.

Another conclusion, set out in the report, is that simply manipulating the built environment will not necessarily provide a more sustainable city. Other initiatives that encourage a sense of community need to be part of the package.

Infill and redevelopment are an integral part of sustainable urban development and there are many examples in Christchurch where it has been successful but this research suggests that more can be done to avoid the negative impacts affecting many people.

Staff

Recommendation: That the City Plan Team, once the Plan is operative, give priority to assessing the adequacy of rules and other methods applicable in the Living 1, 2 and 3 Zones in avoiding or mitigating adverse effects highlighted by this research in accordance with the Council's resolution on this matter.

Chairman's

Recommendation: That the officer's recommendation be supported.