

Plan Change 23 – Visitor Accommodation and Residential Amenity in the High Density Residential Zone

**Discussion Paper on Residential Coherence
Hill Young Cooper Ltd
28 April 2008**

Introduction

This paper has been prepared to assist with the investigations associated with the role of visitor accommodation developments in the residential zones of the Queenstown Lakes District.

A key driver of this project is the extent to which the current residential zones are protecting residential coherence and whether the mixing of visitor accommodation and residential developments, as is possible under the QLDC District Plan, is conducive - in the long run - to promoting sustainable residential areas.

Operative policies in the Partially Operative District Plan emphasis the role of the residential zones of the district in providing for a stable residential environment. For example Policy 3.1 refers to the need:

To protect and enhance the cohesion of residential activity and the sense of community and well being obtained from residential neighbours.

In relation to Queenstown residential zones, the following statements are made:

7.2.3 To provide for non-residential activities in residential areas providing they meet residential amenity standards and do not disrupt residential cohesion

7.2.4 To ensure the scale and extent of any new Visitor Accommodation in the residential areas does not compromise residential amenity values.

In Wanaka, the words “social wellbeing” are added to the policy relating to non-residential activities.

The explanation and reasons reinforce the importance of stability in providing liveable neighbourhoods for residents:

"The effect on community cohesion and hence wellbeing, arises from the removal of permanent residents as much as from the visual disruption and loss of amenity caused by the establishment of these (non-residential) activities".

The approach of the QLDC District Plan at the policy level is similar to that of other plans. Christchurch City District Plan seeks to retain the dominance of residential activities in

residential areas. In particular this Plan recognises the adverse effect on residential coherence of a residential site being left with no residential neighbours, for example.

While it is acknowledged that in Queenstown and Wanaka there has been a history of holiday and second homes which has meant that residential areas are often only partly occupied during the year, with a scattering of permanent residents in neighbourhoods that can sometimes be largely empty, this pattern is changing as a larger population becomes established in the district. There is also a significant difference between an occasionally used holiday home and a permanently used visitor accommodation development in terms of impacts on feelings of residential coherence.

Currently the QLDC District Plan defines visitor accommodation as a form of residential development, whereby the principle difference between the two forms of development is perceived to be the length of stay (i.e. temporary / transient versus permanent). It can be questioned whether this classification of visitor accommodation as a non-commercial activity is correct.

The potential impact of visitor accommodation on residential coherence is recognised by the Plan in relation to suburban areas - the low density residential zone - but not in relation to the higher density zones.

Experience since the Plan was prepared and visitor accommodation units have been extensively developed in the HDRZ in the Queenstown area suggest that the differences between temporary and permanent forms of residential development are more profound and have a particular affect on residential coherence in higher density zones.

In Wanaka there is a larger representation of holiday and second homes that means that permanent residents are more accepting of large number of houses that are only temporarily occupied. However consultation on the Issues and Options paper identified that there is concern that development trends will see overtime, increasingly larger and more intensive visitor accommodation developments. Thus, it is reasonable to say that for Wanaka, for the meantime, residential coherence means something different to Queenstown. The concept is perhaps more associated with the look and feel of the place – its more spread out, suburban pattern. However as the settlement develops, it likely that residential coherence will take on a meaning closer to that associated with other more built up areas.

Defining residential coherence

There are no accepted definitions of residential coherence. As is explained in the Queenstown Lakes District Plan, generally the term is used to mean an intact neighbourhood that is not eroded by non-residential activities.

Residential coherence can be seen as one aspect of what makes a socially sustainable community. For example the following UK discussion of social sustainability¹ notes that a number of physical elements support or foster a healthy social environment, along with equitable access to services and facilities:

Literature on the wider concepts around ideas of social sustainability (such as social, capital, social cohesion and social exclusion), indicates that the following dimensions are ... likely to be significant in helping to sustain local communities and neighbourhoods:

- *Interaction in the community/social networks.*
- *Community participation.*
- *Pride/sense of place*
- *Community stability*
- *Security (crime).*

The physical dimensions of stability, sense of place and safety are therefore important aspects of residential coherence. These dimensions strongly relate to people knowing who lives next door, and who do not experience a constant flow of strangers (such as tourists or visitors). In neighbourhoods where informal contact between residents who know each other is high, streets tend to be safer and people are happier with their surroundings. Networks are also stronger.

To be effective, stability needs to be provided at both the site and neighbourhood level. It is not just the neighbouring site which is important to feelings of coherence; people also need to feel that they are part of a wider neighbourhood that is stable and liveable.

Relevant physical factors that contribute to coherence and liveability include:

- Some sense of “boundedness” or edges to the neighbourhood, whether these be formed by topography or busy main roads, and where there is some common focus, such as orientation to a view or proximity to an open space. This helps to create a sense of place, - a neighbourhood with some sense of identity and legibility to it
- A domestic built form whereby each unit has its own sense of address, even if it is part of a larger complex, such as front doors and porches orientated to streets, and where individuality is expressed through varying adornments, landscaping and paint

¹ WHAT IS ‘SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY’, AND HOW DO OUR EXISTING URBAN FORMS PERFORM IN NURTURING IT?, Glen Bramley, Professor of Urban Studies, School of the Built Environment, Heriot Watt University,

finishes, and there is access to open space (both private gardens as well as public reserves), as well as daylight and sunlight. These factors also help to promote identity, informal interaction and safety - "eyes on the street".

In summary, residential coherence can be defined as being made up of the following elements:

- Stability – where the rate and scale of the incursion of non-residential activities is limited so that the majority of residents have other permanent residents as neighbours (owner occupiers or longer term renters)
- Character – more domestic forms of development prevail, even if they are at a higher density, and where there are clear signs of permanent occupation, with an integration of the built and open spaces (gardens, trees and open spaces)
- Identity – there is a sense of containment to the neighbourhood, such as not being cut in two by a busy main road, and where there is some sense of common identity in terms of relationship to views, open spaces and orientation which offer reasonable access to daylight and sunlight.

In relation to the suburban, lower density zones of the District, these attributes are usually clearly visible, and it is easier to judge the effect of visitor accommodation on residential coherence. The usual issues for visitor accommodation are scale and intensity, with the more difficult issue being the incremental effect of gradual changes tilting the balance away from stability. In this regard, the Issues and Options paper suggested some sort of threshold on the extent of visitor accommodation within low density areas. In Wanaka, this threshold would need to recognise the already mixed nature of the settlement, with the interspersed holiday and second homes with permanent homes being an accepted feature.

The high density residential zone in the Queenstown area presents a much more complex picture. Visitor accommodation is more prominent and it is harder to see a loss of residential coherence, given that the zone encourages a change of character towards more intensive building formats. Obviously in the context of the Higher Density Residential Zone, the change to the density and scale of development is to be expected, and across the zone stand-alone houses will be replaced by town houses, terrace houses and apartment type complexes. While building forms will change, this does not mean that residents will seek a less coherent residential environment. In fact, if anything a more cohesive environment needs to be offered to attract permanent residents to more intensive living environments.

Higher density residential zones are a common feature of many urban district plans. When first proposed such zones were generally seen to offer choice to homeowners and renters, whereby people wishing to locate close to activities and in housing forms

that required less maintenance would be willing to accept a more inner city lifestyle with a greater mix and flux of activities. Essentially there was perceived to be a trade off where the disbenefits of living close to other people and other activities would be off set by the benefits of the proximity to more “vibrant” areas. A mixing of visitor accommodation and permanent residential development was consistent with this view.

Experience from Queenstown, as well as larger metropolitan areas suggests that higher density residential environments are likely to be much more sensitive to the disbenefits of close living than first thought, particularly for residents looking for permanent residential opportunities. Numerous surveys of residents of more intensive inner city neighbourhoods have shown that the benefits of close proximity to services can be quickly outweighed by the impacts of poor design, particularly a lack of green space, limited private outdoor space, conflicts over parking, maintenance and noise and high levels of churn in the development (people not staying for long).

A 2005 report on the Social Implications of Intensive Housing² prepared for the Auckland Regional Council reviewed a number of surveys of resident's attitudes to living in intensive developments. The report noted the following:

"When asked to consider what aspects residents liked and disliked about the development they were in, the overall balance of responses was about equal in terms of positive and negative responses.

The most common positive responses ranked in order were:

- 1. Location – access to services.*
- 2. Safety and security.*
- 3. Community identity and cohesion.*
- 4. Lifestyle – low maintenance.*

The most common negative responses ranked in order were:

- 1. Noise.*
- 2. Parking – especially for visitors.*
- 3. Design and amenity.*
- 4. Privacy.*

In a smaller settlement like Queenstown and Wanaka, the benefits of more intensive housing being close to services is only marginal, compared to the benefits that are experienced in a larger metropolitan district. Equally the benefit derived from a sense of community was typically associated with larger purpose built developments that offered some form of shared amenity (e.g. pool).

It can be reasonably claimed that the inter mixing of visitor accommodation with residential development tends to reduce the benefits and increase the disbenefits listed, as viewed from the residents perspective. Community cohesion is reduced, noise and parking issues tend to increase and there is a reduced feeling of safety. Along these lines, the Issues and Options Paper for PC23 and feedback to it identified the following

² Social Implications of Intensive Housing in the Auckland Region, Synchro Consulting and Hill Young Cooper Ltd.

factors in terms of residential cohesion and the potential impact of visitor accommodation on cohesion:

- loss of neighbours/residential feel – feeling of not being in a stable neighbourhood and uncertainty about where the area is “headed” if there is a constant expansion of visitor accommodation developments
- Reduced sense of safety from more strangers about, not knowing neighbours, large number of empty units during off peak times leading to a sense of isolation.
- The loss of a domestic feeling to the built form. Larger building masses with a uniform appearance tend to dominate. The individuality created by owners or long term renters adding features to their houses or gardens is lost as complexes are managed by the same organisation and occupiers stay for only a few nights.

In a high density setting, these effects have a particularly corrosive effect on residential coherence.

It is apparent from many cities that the more successful higher density residential areas are ones that strongly display the characteristics set out above – that is, they are an identifiable pocket or area where there is a sense that residential uses are and will predominate into the future and there is close association with high quality open spaces helping to off set the greater proximity to neighbours. As just one example, in the Auckland CBD, residential pockets around Emily Place (an inner city green space) and parts of the waterfront have prospered as stable residential areas despite the influx of larger apartments developments aimed at the rental / investor market that have created unsettled conditions in many other parts of the CBD.

As demand rises for more intensive residential living arrangements (partly in response to changing demographics, increased housing and transport costs and changing lifestyles) it will be very important that quality intensive living environments are offered for residents.

Measuring and identifying residential coherence

While any discussion of residential coherence is subjective and a matter of judgement, the project requires the identification of those parts of the HDRZ that are likely to offer stable residential areas with a high degree of coherence.

The above factors that contribute towards residential coherence could be measured by a number of indicators. These indicators could include:

- Stability – the % of owner occupiers with a neighbourhood and the % of units or sites already devoted to visitor accommodation developments.
- Built form / character – the extent to which the current character of the area presents a non-domestic appearance as referenced by a character study.

- Neighbourhood identity – whether the neighbourhood offers features which will attract permanent residents such as not being on a main road, traffic speeds and volumes are controlled by the road layout and there is a relationship to open space, views and adequate levels of sunlight and daylight.

Conclusion

Residential coherence is recognized in the QLDC District Plan as an important element of what makes a sustainable residential environment. Coherence includes the principles of stability, identity and character.

Subsequent sections of the project will look at the issue of residential coherence in terms of the high and low density residential zones:

- In relation to the HRDZ, the main question is whether the zone needs to be subdivided into different activity areas to better protect residential coherence, given the prevalence of visitor accommodation through the zone. To address this, the structure of the HDRZ is analyzed to identify the different neighbourhood pockets within the zone, and then to identify if there are neighbourhood pockets that should be retained for residential use because they still have the ability to offer a sustainable, coherent residential environment.
- In relation to the LDRZ, the issue is more one of compatible scale and intensity and whether there needs to be some sort of threshold or cap on the amount of visitor accommodation in a neighbourhood.