Friday 10 October 2019
Rae James (Ms)

By email to: npsurbandevelopment@mfe.govt.nz

To: Ministry of Housing & Urban Development/Ministry for the Environment

Submission: Proposed National Policy Statement on Urban Development (NPS-UD)
with reference specifically to Q7/Q8/Q11 in the consultation document.

**Preliminary Comment:** I have chosen to provide this submission by email rather than using the consultation questionnaire which is designed to produce a pre-determined set of outcomes. I found most of the questions “loaded” and biased in intent.

**AIMS OF THE NPS**

- **Make housing more affordable and reduce car dependency by increasing residential density in areas near city centres and transport corridors** (‘making room for growth’ and ‘removing unnecessary restrictions on development’, p8);
- **Change the focus from the needs/wishes of existing residents to those of possible future residents and developers** (p29 & 35-36);
- **‘Allow growth up and out’** (p14);
- **But (according to the document) to do the above while still creating ‘high-quality, liveable cities that contribute to the well-being of people and the natural environment’** (p14).

**My comment:** These aims look good, but from my experience the last often loses to the first three. These “one size fits all” proposals will have negative impacts in Christchurch, depending on how prescriptive they are, and whether or not they take into account existing amenity, liveability and viability of adjacent residential properties and communities in our “Garden City”.

The possibilities range from (i) **encouraging** local councils to change their District Plans to facilitate higher density through to (ii) **imposing** rules that all Councils must follow.

These proposals also remove the ability of established existing residents to retain fundamental high quality liveable enclaves within the city. The problems that will arise are especially re “blue sky access”, “ground level sightlines and vistas beyond the 2.3m wall”, and viable relatively long-term neighbourhood relationships, all of which I have seen eroded in the recent changes within the Christchurch inner city. These, the presumably unintended consequences of the imposed (Brownlee) intensification requirements in the Christchurch Central City residential areas (requiring a minimum of one dwelling for every 200m² to achieve the goal of 50 households per hectare) include:

(i) less variety in size and type of dwelling
(ii) fewer families and long-term residents because of the limitation on types of dwellings and/or lack of outdoor space
(iii) fewer trees or vegie gardens (destruction of “The Garden City”)
(iv) proliferation of short-term accommodation, primarily AirBnB and
(v) a consequential reduction in number of permanent residents in some neighbourhoods
(vi) development of alternative use options for former “residential dwellings”
Whatever changes are made under this NPS – Urban Development document, I strongly urge
government to take these consequences into account because I know what happens when the
cohesion of an inner-city neighbourhood amenity is destroyed by “market drivers” rather than
“social drivers”.

**URBAN AMENITY** pages 26-29; (see also discussion re intensification, pages 35-37)

One of the proposals is to change how urban amenity values are defined—a shift from the status quo
and a focus on the amenity, happiness and wellbeing of current residents to the potential future benefits
to people who don’t live there yet and the wider community (p 26, 28-29 & 35-36).

**My comment:** Many developers are driven by short term market opportunities rather than long
term social cohesion. If ‘amenity’ and ‘liveability’ are compromised for current residents, it’s likely
they will be compromised for new residents as well. The proposal document seems to assume
that current residents in the targeted areas are all wealthy and that, by implication, their current
“amenity” and requirements for “liveability” are prejudicial to the interests of the theoretical
future inner-city resident.

This is far from the truth … the socio-economic-demographic mix that is already achieved in our
own inner-city neighbourhood is what these proposals is almost certain to destroy. Urban amenity
and coherence only align when there is cohesion between the needs of current and future users
enabled by the application of planning rules that ensure amenity in an agreed, lived-experience
framework.

**REDUCING OR REMOVING HEIGHT & RECESSION PLANE RULES** (pages 42-45)

Pages 42-45 of the NPS look at how higher density could be achieved by reducing or completely removing
rules that ‘constrain urban development’.

**My comments:**

Central Christchurch has already undergone major changes in these rules and
regulations (some of them completely imposed ie without consultation, in the post-
earthquake era). A lot of individual households have now made new investment
decisions based on their understanding of the new CCR (Central City Residential)
regulations; to change them again brings another whole round of uncertainty and new
economic risk to what have often been quite brave “good of the community” choices
to stay, box on, and commit to inner city recovery. While the NPS’s directive to
increase housing density in the inner city “brownfields” is perhaps laudable, especially
if it reduces encroachment on “greenfields” beyond the city limits, this should be
done within a planning framework that preserves or enhances current building height
and recession plane rules.

If height and recession plane rules are relaxed further or removed, an existing resident could lose
their access to “blue skies” sun and/or privacy in their garden or even in parts of their house. New
residents could end up with little or no choice of housing type and therefore experience the same
disadvantages. Christchurch central city residents already have experienced the effects of
intensification. Some of the new inner-city residential builds are compromised in the same way and
have been slow to sell, as a consequence, in existing neighbourhoods. To work well, intensification
must be well designed, taking the above into account. This is possible in new developments but is
difficult when such new development intrudes beside existing dwellings.

This is even more important in Christchurch where so many houses/dwellings/places to live were
broken in the earthquakes. There is no point in talking about increasing urban density if land that
used to have houses on it, and is now Central City Residential zoned, is progressively allowed to
be used for “other uses” – churches, carparks, hotels, social service hubs, private medical facilities,
professional rooms, short term accommodation. The NPS must ensure that it regulates to protect
“residential land” for residential purposes, thereby increasing the number of dwellings, increasing density and building neighbourhood coherence.

I strongly disagree with the statements in the “one-size fits all” NPS document about height and height-to-boundary rules. My reasons are:

(i) In Christchurch, access to sunlight on your property is perhaps the most important aspect for continued enjoyment of your own property. Christchurch’s winter is long – and its spring can often be cold. The ability to see blue (even if cold) skies from within your own home property is vital.

(ii) ‘detached housing’ is the norm in most of Christchurch (mainly in the suburbs, but also in the central city), which the NPS acknowledges may need to be protected by height-to-boundary (recession plane) rules.

(iii) in post-quake Christchurch, more sun and light between buildings, a greater feeling of safety, and a more human scale with detached housing is preferred, as shown by the number of homes that have been repaired/reinstated to that preference.

(iv) Residential land-use in Christchurch is not being optimised because former land containing dwellings is not being retained for that purpose – rather it is being redesignated by stealth for “more cost effective” commercial use options, thus further undermining neighbourhood cohesion.

Our District Plan does include a network of height limits (significantly increased in some areas from what was allowed before 2015), giving plenty of scope for increases in density. Removing or relaxing these height limits further will disadvantage inner-city residents and discourage people from wanting to live in the inner city.

I reiterate:

(1) limits on height and maintaining height-to-boundary (recession plane) rules are absolutely vital for protecting the amenity, liveability and cohesion of residential areas in central Christchurch — much more so than for any of the other proposals in this NPS and

(2) although other potential changes listed in the document (regarding site coverage, property size, outdoor space) also could have a negative effect on amenity, the effects would be less than those associated with height and recession planes—taken together, the other changes would give plenty of scope for increasing density.

(3) intrusions into residential land use for commercial and/or wider community services must be rigorously regulated if increased urban density and neighbourhood coherence is to be a realistic aim of the NPS – Urban Development for Christchurch.

These height and recession plane and land use rules should NOT be relaxed or removed by the NPS – Urban Development. Regulations that preserve existing residential land use in Christchurch for residential dwelling purposes should be retained and reinforced.

ZONE DESCRIPTIONS (pages 33-34)

My comment: The rules, standards and assessment criteria in the current district plans (which have much greater impact than the objectives/policies) often do not support what is envisioned by the objectives and policies. The proposed approach looks much more detailed than similar policy-level statements in the current Christchurch District Plan (residential amenity and diverse dwelling types to attract a variety of residents, for example).

Unless Zone descriptions are clearly worded and supported by very clear rules, with more teeth than the ‘restricted discretionary’ or ‘discretionary’ rules have, including an enhanced requirement for notification of proposals to neighbours and the neighbourhood, developers usually find ways to work around them via so-called “minor” departures re height, recession planes, car parks, land use variances, etc.
It's unclear just how much latitude local Councils would have to develop Zones where the worst effects of intensification could be mitigated. How much power will local authorities have to retain undiluted neighbourhoods and hubs of residency? My own experience suggests that cost considerations (rather than amenity and neighbourhood cohesion values) tend to prevail. That is why a “one size fits all” solution will not work in Christchurch, even if the new proposals will alleviate some of Auckland’s problems.

It is worth noting that urban rules were successfully invoked to stop the reclassification of the S38 demolished Cranmer Court residential complex into a church use. The Majestic Church has taken the more appropriate pathway of using ex-warehouse land; the Cranmer Gardens residential development is slowly arising out of the rubble. However, the same cannot be said for the multiple (much more) affordable housing options further up the road now used for commercial purposes by the Casino, nor the previous multiple dwellings on land now occupied by the new central city Salvation Army Citadel with its two “lip-service” flats.

INTENSIFICATION/HIGH DENSITY AREAS (pages 19-20 and 35-39)

Some proposals are targeted at ‘major urban centres (Auckland, Hamilton, Tauranga, Wellington, Christchurch, Queenstown’: p19). Other proposals would apply to all local authorities.

In urban centres, the NPS would require ‘higher-density’ or ‘high-density’ housing near city centres and mass transit systems. Crucially, two options are given (p37).

**My comments:** The “one-size fits all” NPS solution to High Density and Intensification is, perhaps, a solution for an Auckland problem. It is highly inappropriate for Christchurch. It is too intense and will disrupt the fabric of the city. At least the Descriptive option can give the local council some discretion. (And I will not presume to know what is best for other “major urban centres”.)

The current Christchurch District Plan aims for 50 dwellings/hectare in high density areas, which is where the “Gerry Brownlee - one dwelling for every 200m$^2$” idea came from. Those of us who live in the Central City have already experienced the unintended consequences of intensification of this level within an existing inner-city neighbourhood. 60 residential unit/hectare is inappropriate across at least half of The Garden City.

If ‘frequent public transport’ means a strip 800m wide on each side of the main high-frequency bus corridors (Orbiter, Blue, Yellow, Orange, Purple bus routes), most of central Christchurch would be subjected to high density developments under the Prescriptive approach. This option fails to recognise that bus stops and corridors are very different from railway corridors and stations (which do not exist within most of Christchurch) in that they can and do change according to changing needs and are therefore poor predictors of where high-density developments should be concentrated.

The Christchurch City Council should have the authority to decide where high- or higher-density living should be encouraged or required. The Descriptive approach (P6C Option1) presents that opportunity and obviates the “one size fits all” prescriptive option.

**Acknowledgement:**

I acknowledge the work of members of the Victoria Neighbourhood Association, and of my partner, David Chambers, in providing research material which has informed this submission. Nevertheless, these are also my views and they are strongly held.

**Please contact me if you wish to discuss anything arising from this submission.**

Rae James (Ms)